

# A *Vision* for Inverness

**Supplementary Planning Guidelines : October 1997**  
(Inverness, Culloden & Ardersier Local Plan : April 1994)



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## **1. Background**

- 1.1 At the Highland Council meeting on 3 April 1997 it was agreed that the Planning Service would prepare an Issues Paper covering :-
- a the present and future role of Inverness in the Highland economy
  - the future pattern of development and traffic in and around Inverness
- 1.2 It was considered that such a discussion would help to provide a context within which a subsequent meeting of the Council could determine the then current planning applications for an Eastgate Extension and a new Millburn Road foodstore. It was noted that the applicants for these proposals were entitled to have their proposals determined in accordance with the policies in the relevant Local Plan, adopted by the Highland Regional Council in April 1994, unless material circumstances indicated otherwise.

## **2. Outline**

- 2.1 Inverness as a town performs a number of functions. It is the retail, business, educational and social centre on a daily basis for its immediate population. It provides facilities on a less frequent basis for the wider Highland population even extending to the Western Isles and to Moray. A third function is as a gateway to the Highlands for national and international visitors.
- 2.2 Investment by the public and private sectors in Inverness must be seen as complementary to investment programmes elsewhere in the Highlands. The Vision for Inverness seeks to acknowledge that there are opportunities available for partnership funding for major proposals that are not available to many other communities in the Highlands. Such opportunities must be maximised so that important proposals can be implemented whilst the Council strives to tackle disadvantage wherever and however it arises across its area.
- 2.3 This paper and the accompanying presentation are in three parts :-
- a the Role of Inverness – a Regional Centre
  - a Master Plan for Inverness
  - Inverness Central Area – Developing the Vision
- 2.4 The Vision encompasses implementation of proposals which in whole or part have already been worked up by this Council or its predecessor. However, there is a need to go much further and well into the next century so that opportunities can be grasped. If the contents of this paper secure a measure of Members' support then the details will have to be developed further at Member and officer level and across Services. Nevertheless in the immediate future, there is a necessity to avoid physical development which might close down options.

### 3. The Role of Inverness – A Regional Centre

- 3.1 The Highlands stand pre-eminent among the natural *regions* of Scotland. Their distinctive identity has been forged out of the rugged terrain, unique cultural history and particular economic mainsprings. The area's remoteness, population sparsity and inadequate communications infrastructure have tended to restrict opportunity and prosperity. These circumstances engendered a pattern of small local centres capable of offering only a limited range and quality of services to customers. As a result, people and spending power have traditionally haemorrhaged furth of the Highlands.
- 3.2 Inverness, the Highland *capital* and its largest community, has always provided the widest range of services and facilities. Over time, the town has built up a set of more specialised functions which cater for and benefit the wider area, extending and complementing those in smaller localities. Consolidation of this role is vital. Without a strong Inverness, monies and related job opportunities will be lost to more southerly regional centres, notably Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the mail-order trade (which together took over 17% of retail spending from the Highlands in 1988). As these cities continue to diversify and adapt their economies and attractions, so the drawing power of Inverness needs to be reinforced. Equally, Inverness must respond to the ambitions of and physical improvement in neighbouring sub-regional centres such as Elgin and Perth. These external competitive pressures are an important strategic policy consideration.
- 3.3 The forces behind this regional service role are primarily *locational*. Inverness occupies a strategic position in the geography and transport systems of the Highlands where the Great Glen and the Moray Firth converge. It is a natural gateway and transport interchange point for road, rail, sea and air services. Communication routes link the Northern and Western Highlands with Moray and Grampian to the east, as well as with Central Scotland and destinations beyond to the south. Although Muir of Ord can fairly claim to lie at the centre of the Highland road network in terms of distances from all other parts, when allowance is made for the distribution of people on the ground, Inverness is the single most *accessible* service place for the Highland population as a whole.
- 3.4 This position has strengthened dramatically during the last 25 years. Journey times by road to and from Inverness have shrunk by up to 40% as the A9 and other strategic route improvements have been completed during that period. Car ownership in the Highlands measured by households with one or more car increased from 57% to 69% between 1971-91. These trends have widened the town's sphere of influence as the main focus for business and commerce - in the same way as they have improved the operational efficiency of other naturally advantaged areas such as the deep water harbour facilities of the Cromarty Firth and major fishery ports of the north and west. Private investment and economic activity have followed, based on commercial assessment of the potential market.

Inverness has become uniquely placed as a focus for many kinds of activity – shopping, business, administration, a wide range of specialist and professional services, culture/media, medicine, education, recreation and tourism. These have brought a number of benefits :-

- the town caters for a wide variety of *multi-purpose* trips (eg. shopping, theatre/cinema, football, Aquadome etc).
- considerable improvements to the range and quality of services available to people (eg. between discount and fashionable shops etc).
- it provides access to higher order services/facilities for all Highlanders (eg. new opportunities not previously available such as Marks and Spencer).

- spending power is drawn in from beyond the boundaries of the Highland Council area eg. custom from Moray and the Isles.

These functions support an employment base estimated to contain more than 25,000 jobs, a third of the Highland total. Analysis of commuting patterns from the 1991 Census shows the degree to which employment in Inverness directly supports a substantial proportion of the population who live in neighbouring areas. More than 40% of Nairn's resident workforce is employed outwith that Area, whilst the proportion of commuters rises to more than two thirds in parts of the Black Isle. There is already a very high degree of *interdependence* between Inverness and the wider Inner Moray Firth sub-region.

- 3.6 These patterns need to be seen in the context of wider social and economic trends. Specifically in shopping, the last 25 years have witnessed marked reductions in the numbers of small family businesses serving the daily needs of very localised catchments, in favour of car-based weekly or monthly one-stop food shopping. Rural shops have declined in numbers. However, modern supermarket facilities have spread across most of the Highlands in recent years, with some 16 stores of 1000+ m<sup>2</sup> (10,000+ ft<sup>2</sup>) floorspace opened or granted planning permission outwith Inverness. In 1988, 58% of all Highland shoppers were already purchasing their food in supermarkets, whilst a further 30% bought part of their food from these outlets. Some 4% of households did most of their shopping in single village shops, predominantly in the remotest communities. Special measures are necessary to support such businesses, but the overall pattern of food shopping is reverting back towards greater 'local' self-sufficiency as supermarkets continue to be developed at the sub-regional level.
- 3.7 Comparison shopping has increasingly become a 'leisure' activity, ranging from edge-of-town warehouse sites specialising in 'white', 'brown' and bulky goods, to the clothing<sup>1</sup> department store sectors which remain as highly differentiated, branded, fashion-driven, town centre businesses. Shopping surveys undertaken by the Regional Council Planning Department during 1988-89 showed that whilst the proportion of total retail spending in Inverness had increased since 1971, sales in all but one other shopping centre (Nairn) had also grown. Inverness retains its pre-eminence for comparison goods with stores there taking 54% of all such expenditure in Highland and it continues to attract prestigious companies (most recently, Debenhams), a role which other centres could never reasonably expect to emulate. Their focus should be to offer a mix of basic household items, together with specialist outlets and distinctive local service. A number of these secondary shopping centres are presently the subject of environmental improvements and other town centre initiatives.
- 3.8 At the regional scale, Inverness has been a focus for population and labourforce growth since Census records began in 1801. Whilst the Highlands as a whole suffered serious depopulation between 1851-1971, the resurgence of the last 25-30 years has resulted in one of the highest sustained population growth rates in Scotland. A 20% increase in residents during 1971-91, together with the growth in tourist spending over that same period, have contributed significantly to business performance in most parts of the Highlands. In place of its once "problem" image, the area is now perceived as one with real economic prospects, offering high environmental standards and a good quality of life. This revival has meant that a wide swathe of Highland communities (including many on the west coast) have grown faster than the 15% achieved by the town of Inverness between 1971-91. Depopulation remains a problem elsewhere, of course, and the Council still needs to focus its finite resources with particular emphasis on the remoter and most fragile communities. Greater *convergence* in economic terms is also evident in the comparable rates of year on year unemployment for the Inverness journey to work area and those for the Highlands as a whole.

- 3.9 Government estimates show continuing albeit less pronounced, population growth for Highland, with the latest *projection* suggesting that 203,800 persons in 1991 will rise to 218,500 by the year 2011 (+7%). While the Registrar-General no longer provides forecasts for the former District areas, it is anticipated that all except Caithness will experience a net gain in their populations. Inverness Area is expected to grow from 64,700 persons in 1995 to more than 72,000 by 2011. Of greater significance in relation to future shopping requirements, per capita expenditure on comparison goods has been projected to increase by more than 4% per annum in real terms. Accordingly, there are strong demographic and economic underpinnings in place for further retail development in Inverness.
- 3.10 As the former Planning Authority, Highland Regional Council debated the future strategic role of Inverness during the late-1980's. Among Members' concerns at that time were that :-
- the town's growth was being achieved at the expense of development in other communities.
  - the extent of capital spending from within the Council's limited overall resources.
  - continued expansion would eventually undermine its setting and attractive qualities as a place in which to stay or visit.
- 3.11 Major planning studies were conducted in 1988-89 with the Council formulating a Long Term Strategy as the basis for the Inverness Local Plan. This looked in considerable detail at the scope for limiting further development in the Inverness area and dispersing this to other parts of the Highlands, specifically to the ring of communities lying between Nairn and Tain. These investigations concluded that the *dispersal* option would:-
- be much more expensive in infrastructure terms.
  - cumulatively give rise to significantly more adverse environmental impact.
  - create problems, particularly among the vulnerable and least affluent, from attempted social reconstruction on such a scale.
  - be less sustainable, doubling the length of the average journey to work trip and generating much higher levels of travel between functions scattered among many small centres.
  - through planned overspill of population, be disruptive and resisted by many smaller 'host' communities.
  - be strongly opposed by the housebuilders, making it confrontational and likely to be contested through the planning appeals system.
  - result in the loss of some business and service opportunities to the Highlands altogether, weakening and debilitating the whole area.
- 3.12 The assessment showed that considerable levels of house-building were already taking place in other communities around the Inner Moray Firth (over 3000 new dwellings between 1986-95), demonstrating the synergy between these localities and established centres of employment including Inverness. Members recognised that their strategy should seek to steer the private sector rather than to ignore the market and risk inevitable disinvestment. Nevertheless, the properly planned growth of Inverness required more than a steady stream of housing developments and modern community facilities. Funding was required for certain essential infrastructure projects, notably Inverness Mains Drainage and the Southern Distributor Road. Moreover, it required a strong sense of vision and a concern for environmental excellence to fashion the town in a form which would maintain and enhance its qualities as a place in which to live, visit and do business. Several key Local Plan policies were adopted as a result :-
- ❖ *"A strong centre is vital to the Highlands and the Council's objective will be to enable Inverness to expand and consolidate its functions accordingly."*[1.1.1]

- ❖ *"The Council will allocate land, encourage economic development and seek to deliver services in line with the key forecasts (outlined in the Plan)."* [1.2.1]
- ❖ *"In order to compete effectively with Regional shopping centres elsewhere in Scotland, Inverness could benefit from additional modern retail floorspace, upgraded town centre amenities and facilities, and further measures to manage traffic and provide convenient carparking."* [1.4.9].
- ❖ *"The Council supports improvements to the wider transport infrastructure of the area, which are needed to sustain business and social development."* [1.4.16]
- ❖ *"The Council will endeavour to ensure that the principal infrastructure networks and installations keep pace with population trends, the needs of economic development and rising environmental standards. In certain cases, this will require major capital allocation from Government."* [1.4.17]

## **4. A Master Plan for Inverness**

### **INVERNESS PAST**

- 4.1 People have occupied the Inverness area for thousands of years, attracted by its sheltered coastal location, defensive strongpoints and river fording opportunities. As a port and as a market centre, the Burgh passed through turbulent times before its industrialisation accompanied by the coming of the canal, railway and (later) airstrip. Intensive building in and around the current town centre followed, together with the setting out of a framework of urban parks and civic institutions. The early twentieth century brought road improvements and the first suburban development enveloping farms, small country estates and once freestanding communities such as Clachnaharry and Culcabock.
- 4.2 Even in the early 1970's Inverness still showed a traditional 'star' pattern, with tightly clustered development served by a radial road network. All traffic at this time was channelled through the town centre, including :-

- heavy goods and through traffic using the three trunk routes – A9, A96, and A82.
- cross-town local journeys, notably involving the rapidly developing Longman Trading Estate.
- shopping, leisure or business journeys to the town centre itself.

Victorian streets designed in the age of the horse were carrying traffic volumes in the order of 17,000 vehicles per day. Shoppers on the High Street vied for space on the narrow footpaths with service vehicles and moving traffic with all the accompanying dangers, discomforts and frustrations. The physical extent of the town was still reasonably compact and contained on flat ground, much of it still within a kilometre of the centre, a comfortable walk or short bus ride from the outermost localities. Independent traders dominated the central shopping area with some multiples but no supermarkets. However, the face of the town was already undergoing a transformation, some would say disfigurement, by systematic redevelopment of shops, offices, hotels and other facilities in prominent locations. There were no 'edge or out-of-town' facilities as such, with the arrangement of secondary shopping areas such as the Crown and recreational areas such as the Bught still essentially as the Victorians had bequeathed them.



## INVERNESS PRESENT

- 4.3 In the last twenty five years, Inverness has undergone an unprecedented scale and degree of change. The greatest manifestation of this has been the spread of housing out to 2-3 kilometres from the town centre. In addition to acquiring a 'belt' of new developments stretching from Raigmore round to Holm, building has shifted across the Canal well up the slopes overlooking the town to form Kinmylies/Scorguie (population of 7000). At the same time, to the east, the promotion of Culloden as a dormitory 'new town' by the former Inverness County Council has led to the creation since 1971 of one of the largest communities in the Highlands, containing more than 4300 dwellings and a population of 10-11,000 persons. Speculative development during the early 1990's high above the town at Milton of Leys has so far failed to deliver its promise although the network of infrastructure is likely to be influential in the longer term.
- 4.4 Elsewhere, major retail developments have resulted in substantial remodelling of the town centre, notably the Eastgate CDA, together with 'edge of town centre' supermarkets at Rose St. and Tomnahurich St., plus substantial decentralisation to the Inshes and Telford Retail Parks and the start of major commercial developments at West Seafield. Shopping floorspace in the town grew by 75% between 1971-86 alone. Extensive land reclamation and servicing has released over 130 ha. of ground for traditional industrial estate purposes at the Longman and the Carse. Inverness's first Business Park at Beechwood is close to being fully developed. A wide range of social and cultural facilities have proceeded, including building new community secondary schools at Charleston and Culloden, redevelopment of Raigmore Hospital, Eden Court theatre, Queens Park stadium/sports hall and, most recently, construction of the Inverness Caledonian Thistle stadium and the Aquadome.
- 4.5 New road infrastructure has enabled most of this development to take place. Foremost among these schemes was reconstruction of the A9 to achieve bypassing of the town – the busiest sections of this route now carry 27,000 vehicles per day at peak times between the Longman and Raigmore junctions. Building of the Inner Relief Road in 1989 finally allowed pedestrianisation of the High St and replaced the infamous 'magic roundabout' of one way streets around the town centre. Peak traffic loadings of over 24,000 vpd. are already recorded on this vital cross-town artery. The consequence has been serious congestion on linking routes, notably Kenneth Street and Telford Street. On the periphery, the previous Council was instrumental in opening up land west of the Canal by construction of the General Booth Rd distributor linking the A82 and A862 routes. A major road system was also developed at Culloden, notably in the B9006 reconstruction at Westhill and building of the Smithton distributor and Tower Rd. which formed the skeleton of this new community.
- 4.6 Proposals for a Southern Distributor Road running from the A9 at Inshes, on the eastern approaches to the town, around the southern outskirts of Inverness before connecting onto the A82 by Tomnahurich, were first drawn up in the 1960's. The connection onto A9 was financed as a result of the Inshes shopping development by the Co-op and two sections linking Dores Road - Stratherrick Road and Perth Rd – Old Edinburgh Rd have been built so far. Further progress has been jeopardised by recent Local Authority spending restrictions. Nevertheless, traffic levels have already reached 9000 vpd on incomplete legs of this route. Serious delays on the A96 immediately east of Inverness are now experienced at peak hours where the Scottish Office has followed a policy of developer-led reconstruction.

There has been no equivalent investment in other forms of transport. Privatisation of public transport services has created uncertainties, particularly regarding development of long overdue interchange facilities, whilst the town would also benefit from more sensible tourist bus setdown and holding arrangements. Bus companies have made some use of the A9 improvements and the Skye Bridge link to shorten journey times to Inverness. The passenger rail services have changed little in number over the past decade although there has been a

modest reduction in journey times. Sprinter units have limited passenger accommodation and almost no space for cycles. Major investments continue to be made at Dalcross airport which currently offers extensive service connections through London and Amsterdam. Whilst the Canal has become mainly a recreational waterway, Inverness Harbour continues to develop its traffic, lay down and ship-handling facilities requiring progressively deeper water channel approaches and berthing.

- 4.8 Against total provision of a little more than 2000 spaces, a shortfall of at least 500 public car parking spaces continues to exist in the centre of Inverness. This, of course, is a statement dependent upon whether the Council wishes the private car for work and shopping to penetrate the centre of Inverness as opposed to enhancing public transport, perhaps with new forms of vehicles, and developing park and ride. Both are considered further in Section 5.

## INVERNESS FUTURE

- 4.9 Looking forward over the next twenty years, the Highland Council has inherited a long range statutory Local Plan for the Inverness/Culloden area which provides the existing context for determining development applications. This is founded on forecasts of substantial additional employment, population and housing needs. For example, the number of residents in the immediate Burgh/Culloden area will have increased to approximately 60,000 people by 2016. More than 6700 new dwellings, ranging from affordable rented to executive style provision, will be required. Corresponding economic and cultural developments will augment the attractiveness of Inverness. This will stimulate still greater demands on the transportation system over and above the national projection for a 24-40% increase in traffic volumes during the next 20 years.
- 4.10 The Local Plan needs to reconcile these pressures for development and increased personal mobility with a regard for improved environmental conditions and heritage safeguards. Certain fundamental principles should be acknowledged in taking Inverness forward.
- ❖ Inverness is A TOWN IN THE HIGHLANDS. Visitors will normally have come long distances, often through rugged inhospitable terrain. Entry points on the main approaches need to convey a sense of welcome on arrival, offer good vantage points over the town and its setting and provide information about the area and its facilities – the A82 and A96 are particularly deficient in this respect.
  - ❖ From a local perspective, Inverness is A TOWN SET IN THE COUNTRY. It should enjoy shelter and containment, with built-up edges that do not run over the bounding hills and ridgelines. Opportunities should also be provided for citizens to access the surrounding countryside, as well as conserving important heritage sites and catering for extensive recreational requirements such as golf. The Local Plan adopts a 'finger' plan or 'green wedge' approach, seeking to bring permanent open space/landscape corridors into the town, helping to separate individual built-up areas and incompatible land uses. Six different wedges are identified for Inverness, including for example the golf course and other leisure facilities developed recently at Castle Heather. Other initiatives include 'greening up' the edges of town, the Countryside Around Towns programme, formation of development "setbacks" on the main approach roads and extensive treeplanting programmes.
  - ❖ To function properly, Inverness requires a coherent town structure based on meeting everyday human needs - A TOWN OF NEIGHBOURHOODS AND DISTRICTS. The Plan envisages a number of major new peripheral developments located at Inshes, Milton of Leys, Culduthel/Slackbuie, Ness Castle/Ness-Side and Charleston, each containing between 500-1500 new dwellings and supporting community facilities. These new localities must be designed on sustainable principles to be as self-contained as possible.

They are intended to incorporate a range of house types, choice of job opportunities, core community facilities including a primary school, shop and hall, local park and play facilities, together with public transport links with the town. Their dimensions and scale are intended to encourage access on foot or cycle, whilst their detailed layout should be along 'environmental area' lines where vehicle penetration and speeds are carefully controlled. These basic principles are equally applicable to the older built-up areas of Inverness which should be assessed for restructuring and improvements as far as practicable. This will allow for any emerging deficiencies in housing, social infrastructure, environment or traffic to be addressed, and for the promotion of suitable 'brownfield' development opportunities. The Local Plan also promotes the development/consolidation of District centres and related job opportunities at Inshes, Culduthel/Slackbuie, Ness Side, Charleston and Culloden.

- ❖ Inverness must continue to be **A STRONG AND INNOVATIVE ECONOMIC CENTRE**. In part, this entails looking after traditional functions and industries deriving from the natural resources and skills of the area. These include specialist activities, those adding local value and 'bread and butter' service outlets. Equally the town must catch the 'new wave' of footloose information and technology-based businesses which aspire to the Highland credentials of a clean environment, skilled labourforce, quality infrastructure, and local dynamism. The Local Plan envisages a fundamental shift towards knowledge based enterprises requiring high amenity 'park' locations. Land comprising the A96 Corridor on the eastern edge of the town is allocated for business, industry and 'campus' type activity. Subject to detailed master-planning, this 100 ha development offers the right combination of sufficient size in a high quality setting, with proximity to the Raigmore interchange, town road network and upgraded Dalcross Airport.
- ❖ Inverness should be **IN TOUCH WITH ITS SETTING INCLUDING THE SEA**. The town lacks a major informal public open space, capable of serving both visitors and the growing population living on its eastern flanks. Potential exists to give Inverness a decent pair of 'lungs' with the development of a Country Park or similar asset. There is scope for a major open space corridor wrapping round the A96 technology campus providing an extensive recreational buffer for Culloden residents. It would link from there across into Longman Bay which, with the relocation of the waste disposal site, salt store and travelling people, should be developed for leisure activities as a links or 'common' and local nature reserve. This is a chance for Inverness to make something at long last of its sea frontage rather than continuing to turn its back on the Firth. Although principally an open green area, there are opportunities for a nucleus of hotel/visitor/interpretation facilities at the northern 'Gateway' site off the Longman roundabout. Such a complex would build on the benefits of a new sewerage system with scope for low key water sports, as well as bird and dolphin watching. Extension of the road connection under the Kessock Bridge and associated reclamation will also enable continued development of Inverness Harbour towards deeper water facilities. The assets of disused river wharfage and Muirtown Basin could provide a focus for sailing and other leisure uses. Both the river and canal already serve as major green corridors linking through the centre of town, into areas with scope for further enhancement of visitor/recreational facilities at the Bught, Whin Park and Torvean.
- ❖ Inverness must continue to perform **AS AN EFFECTIVE TRANSPORT NODE** if it is to deliver all its other functions and activities. Much of the development potential set out in the Local Plan depends upon completing the basic road network, and in particular the remaining phases of the Southern Distributor Road. This would secure a modern high capacity link from the A9 to A82. First and foremost, such a route would take pressure off the most heavily trafficked cross-town roads such as Castle St, Kenneth St and the Inner Relief Road by catering for traffic from existing residential areas and destinations such as Raigmore Hospital. It would also accommodate an element of bypass-able

through traffic heading to and from the A82. There would be an appreciable time saving on the journey from Kinmylies to the Raigmore interchange. Finally, it is an absolute pre-requisite for the opening up of new development areas around the southern edge of the town, such as Ness Castle. Phases III and IV would complete the route as far as the Dores Rd at a cost of £3.5m. However, a further £10m. would be required to cross the River Ness and connect onto the A82 at Tomnahurich, with the prospect of other expenditure needed to complete a segregated crossing of the Canal at this point. Government expenditure restrictions continue to cause difficulties for the Council in prioritising these works. Alternative ways of financing must be examined. For much of the Highlands, schemes are restricted to traditional S.94 consent perhaps with EU support. In the case of the SDR, a number of alternative possibilities present themselves. The Council could explore :-

- developer-led funding under S.50 or similar Agreements.
- supplementary funding from the LEC or Trunk Roads authority.
- a PFI scheme.
- some combination of the above for different phases, or the entire route.

Other key links and pressure points on the town road network as identified in the Local Plan require prioritising. However, there is also recognition overall that we cannot build enough road capacity to allow another 20 years of unrestrained car use. Demand-management principles will need to be applied sooner or later. Detailed investigation of journey requirements, alternative modes, route capacities and costs will be necessary to fix on the most appropriate combination of measures for Inverness. Future Government policy in matters such as fuel taxation, the treatment of private car parking facilities as a taxable expense, and public transport subsidies could have a marked effect on existing travel patterns. Options open to the Council might include the development of 'park and ride' schemes on major routes at the edge of town, designed for use principally by commuters and tourists. There are various experimental 'road pricing' schemes in operation around the world, and a range of comprehensive parking regimes intended to promote particular patterns and levels of use. Shuttle bus services can provide flexible mass transport, whilst light rail transit systems could utilise the existing network infrastructure, possibly linking towns between Easter Ross and Nairn with a series of simple halts within Inverness and connecting directly to the four principal work locations at the Carse, the town centre, the Longman and the A96 corridor. Elsewhere in the town, pedestrianisation of important public spaces, extensive calming and slowing of traffic within residential areas are likely to become the norm. For local journeys, the emphasis should be on facilitating walking and cycling with priority routes, shelters, signing and other aids.

## **5. Inverness Central Area – Developing the Vision**

- 5.1 Inverness town centre has the most varied land use, the highest land values and most intensive development in the Highlands. Reinforcement of THE TOWN AS A REGIONAL CENTRE means addressing the interaction of its many functions – as a civic centre, as a place for multi-purpose trips to access shopping, business and entertainment, as a visitor amenity and as an interesting place in which to live. This drive to maximise town centre vitality is the key element in the recent proposed redrafting of NPPG8 policy by the Secretary of State and also in his published draft guidance on Transport and Planning. The submission of private sector development proposals totaling investment in excess of £100m. demonstrates that the private sector believes that prospects are healthy. Nevertheless, maintaining the correct scale, balance and arrangement of town centre uses requires the local knowledge and overall responsibilities of the Council to work in partnership with commercial

and community interests. The Council must always have the confidence to negotiate the best possible package from incoming businesses to secure that wider interest and not almost automatically accept the first submission.

- 5.2 Eastgate extension and the former cattle mart is the prime redevelopment opportunity identified in the Local Plan but there are a number of other areas in the centre where properties are recognised as being in poor condition and underutilised. Other opportunities may arise from shifting certain activities, notably the scope for relocation of the bus and railway stations into a combined facility. If planning permission were to be granted to Safeway at Millburn Road, it would leave a surplus building in a key location at Rose St. A significant change in the centre of retail gravity is happening as the principal shopping magnets are drawn into new developments on the eastern side of the town centre. This means that a number of existing prime 'pitches' and already marginal shopping frontages on the western side will be disadvantaged. Compensatory action is needed – one option is a riverside tourism/cultural/entertainment focus (see below).
- 5.3 Another major problem of existing town centre properties is the underuse of upper floors. In addition to the rental income foregone, this contributes to neglected building maintenance and the feeling of the centre 'closing down' at night. It misses an opportunity to create specialised housing and visitor accommodation at the heart of the community as is the pattern in many European cities. Provision of parking space for the motor car can be a sticking point in schemes to convert or redevelop town centre housing but the success of the recent Queensgate project and contemporary innovations in Edinburgh such as the first "car-free" development, car-sharing and neighbourhood car pool arrangements, show the directions which might be taken.
- 5.4 Transport systems should serve the town centre, not dominate it. The primary purpose of the town centre is as A MEETING PLACE FOR PEOPLE. An efficient transport system needs to bring people to the centre, with public transport penetrating along designated routes, whilst short-stay carparking is held to the margins. There remains a need to develop an interceptor car park on the western side of the town centre. Private cars need to be routed around rather than through the central area. One solution could be to engineer a new road leading from Millburn Rd across what is presently railway ground before connecting onto the Inner Relief Rd. Preliminary discussions with some of the interested parties recently identified a number of potential routes, avoiding important signalling and operational areas for both passenger and freight services. In the medium/long term, scope exists for down sizing and relocation of the Station out onto the through line, and integrating this with a modern bus station on adjoining land to the south and closer to the town centre. This would realise a long-cherished ambition of many Members and people in the town, as well as providing modern interchange facilities befitting a regional centre and major tourist destination. If the Council are minded to revisit these objectives, there are important corollaries for the Royal Life and Safeway planning applications which remain to be determined :-
- reserving sufficient ground to allow for construction of a new cross railway link between Millburn Rd and the Inner Relief Road.
  - a need for buildings to present an acceptable design quality on three sides due to their ultimate 'exposure' to view from an elevated roadway and public transport interchange immediately to the north.
- 5.5 Among the many other benefits of making this road connection would be to release further prime commercial development land presently occupied by the railway. It would also allow the closure or calming of Academy St (currently carrying more than 15,000 vehicles per day). Road access for the Crown from Millburn Road would be retained but careful attention would need to be paid to avoid excessive cross-town 'rat-running' in that area by other

drivers. A more immediate objective should be to remove private cars from the Queensgate/Union St and Upper Church St area. Provision would continue for on-street servicing of commercial premises in this area, possibly with access subject to certain time-limitations. It would nevertheless substantially widen the pedestrian-priority nucleus within the town, allowing for removal of clutter and a concerted programme of hard landscaping improvements. The Common Good Fund might wish to consider becoming one of the partners in investment of this kind. In the longer term, scope should exist to extend this pedestrianised core into upper Academy St. linking through into a series of new urban squares. These could comprise deepening of Station Square, pushing through a concourse towards the new Station/Transport Centre and linking through the proposed Academy St Centre into Farraline Park which could be extensively remodelled once the bus station has been removed. These could form important strands of a comprehensive network of pedestrian routes and greenways linking key nodes around the central area, including visitor attractions, hotels and peripheral car parks.

- 5.6 A vision for the central area should endorse its greatest natural attribute – Inverness is a TOWN SPANNING A RIVER. The Ness is a significant barrier, with limited but delightful crossing points. The river margins are therefore a channel for pedestrian and vehicular movement. Currently the latter enjoys over-riding supremacy. With the castle, spires and spectacular outlook over the Black Isle to Ben Wyvis, the riverside epitomises Inverness as a town set 'in the Highlands' for most visitors and is an important landmark for residents. Although this prospect is currently marred by unsympathetic commercial developments from the 60's and 70's, it remains the prime focus towards which tourists inevitably gravitate. Bishop's Walk and the Ness Islands show how the amenity of the wider riverside could be dramatically lifted by narrowing down adjoining roads, reclaiming space for pedestrians and the provision of simple seating and other amenities.
- 5.7 A programme of works to that end would reinforce the gradual transition in land use terms towards greater specialisation for visitor/wet weather attractions. The riverside could increasingly be a venue for restaurants, bars, bistros, antiques, books, souvenirs and mementos. These commercial facilities should be encouraged and supplemented with additional cultural uses. Possibilities exist for arts and performance centres, galleries, heritage and orientation projects of interest to visitors and locals alike. A number of key properties, many of them important listed buildings, are likely to become surplus to requirements and be vacated in coming years. These include properties which the Council own, such as the Castle and former Glebe St Baths, as well as the possibility of redundant churches and turnover of some of the commercial outlets. It might be possible to stimulate a lively Arts and Crafts quarter in this part of the town.
- 5.8 Virtually the whole of the town centre is designated as an Outstanding Conservation Area and much is of considerable potential archaeological interest. Inverness is an HISTORIC PLACE although the legibility of this heritage is not well-executed at present. Important landmarks, most notably the Castle, are diminished by the poor quality of adjoining office blocks and other relatively modern buildings. Although the urban scale appropriate to the town centre has generally been retained, the quality of construction, detailing and finishes on these 'eyesores' is substandard. Key building lines have been lost in areas such as Bank Street with the Caledonian Hotel. Scope exists for a facelift of much of the older built fabric. This is already happening on the High St as retail properties there are being upgraded and modernised, but cleaning and reinstatement may require organisation and assistance in some of the secondary and fringe town centre areas. Streetscape improvements are paramount. The durability and superior appearance of natural materials such as granite setts, Caithness slab and 'local' sandstone make them a more cost-effective approach for the treatment of new pedestrian areas. A coordinated approach also needs to be given to the quality of shopfront design, changing on average every five years, as well as to directional signage, lighting and other street furniture. Although the character of the centre is generated predominantly by the

pattern of building frontages and connecting streets, there are important splashes of green space and treed areas along the riverside, at the Glebe, as well as in the Castle, Cathedral and Old High Church precincts which should be protected.

## **6. The Way Ahead**

- 6.1 The private sector very clearly recognises the potential of Inverness. The Council could stand back and adopt a reactive role to development proposals.
- 6.2 Within the Strategic Goals and Values of the Council, priority is given to striving for equality in service levels, in access to services and in communications. This will inevitably lead to preference being given in the allocation of scarce resources to Areas of greatest need where there are fewer opportunities to secure finance from other agencies or the private sector.
- 6.3 Inverness should be A PLACE FOR PARTNERSHIP. The Vision needs Member direction and on-going commitment but it also needs to be a shared ownership with the community. This clearly suggests dialogue with a range of interested organisations and people in taking the Vision forward.
- 6.4 Delivery will not be achieved overnight. Some opportunities are modest in cost and could be achieved with 12-18 months. Others represent a long haul. However, if the desired end solution is known, there can be avoidance of opposing proposals which might block future achievement of the Vision.
- 6.5 Once a Vision has been adopted there will need to be an alignment of priorities and coordination of strategies/investment priorities between public sector agencies. The private sector must be partners and an early recognition of this is the very recent appointment of a Town Centre Manager. Other opportunities can and will arise associated with the grant of individual planning applications with appropriate planning gain within the scope of Circular 12/96. European Trans-National Cooperation Programmes, particularly the North Sea Programme under INTERREG IIC initiative, might secure funding to explore innovative solutions to tackling ways of making towns more pleasant places to live and work.
- 6.6 There is considerable potential and a number of early opportunities which could show the Council's commitment to carrying forward a Vision for Inverness. Discussion by Members today gives the opportunity to seek a measure of consensus on broad principles. These could be developed, following discussion with other parties, into an Action Plan.

Members agreed that the Vision paper should be publicised, and views sought from interested parties. A series of public meetings and presentations took place during June-August 1997. The response was reported back to the Planning Committee meeting on 1 October 1997 together with a list of priority action points arising. Members agreed that the Vision statement together with the accompanying schedule of follow up action would henceforth be regarded as supplementary planning guidance in amplification of the adopted Local Plan. These will subsequently form an important planning consideration in the determination of related planning applications in the Inverness area.

## VISION FOR INVERNESS : Action Points

### SUB-REGIONAL ROLE

#### Short term

Strategic land use-transportation model for the Inner Moray Firth (multiple collaboration with public agencies and private sector, together with prospective European partners and Universities).

#### Medium term

Inner Moray Firth – Town Centres (monitoring healthchecks of performance for the key centres of Tain, Invergordon, Alness, Dingwall and Nairn).

Assessment of future Commuter Rail prospects for Easter Ross through to Airport/Nairn.

### THE TOWN AS A WHOLE

#### Short term

Park n'Ride (in conjunction with Parking Strategy and Bus Priority/Quality partnership measures). Group to examine detailed prospects covering the Eastgate II construction period.

Key Development Briefs -- Craig Dunain (underway), North Longman (under discussion), A96 Corridor MasterPlan (with INE support).

#### Medium term

Completion of Southern Distributor road -- PFI or similar package (HC, INE, Trunk Roads, private sector).

Developments Briefs for SDR-related lands.

### THE TOWN CENTRE

#### Short term

New signage/shop frontage design guidelines (in conjunction with Area Planning Service)

Pedestrian-priority scheme for Union St, Queensgate & Upper Church St.

Design/implementation of the Cross-rail link road.

#### Medium term

Pedestrian priority scheme for Academy St. (Eastgate-Strothers Lane)

Parking Policy - Commuted Payments Policy

Cross-rail link development opportunities, incl. Transport Interchange.

Riverside walkway for Castle Rd, Bank St, Huntly St & Ardross Terrace.

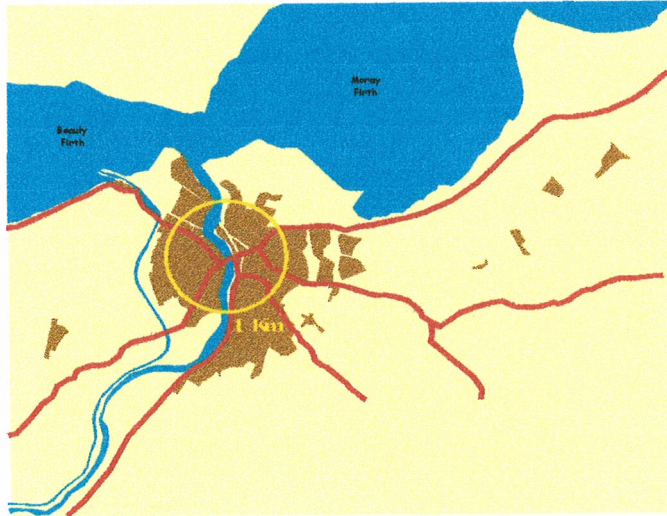
Town centre housing initiatives (with SH).

Townscape/heritage initiative (audit of Conservation Area guidance, masterplanning for nodes/squares, streetscape and redevelopment opportunities).

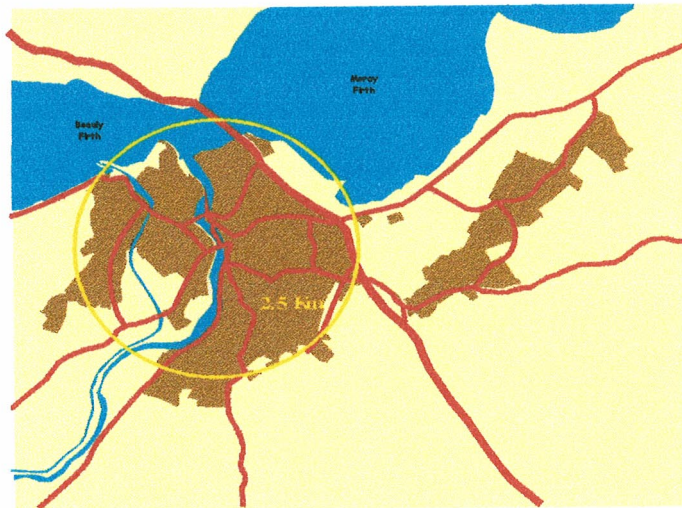
Town Centre functions/buildings -- Glebe St, Castle, Farraline Park, Rose St etc.



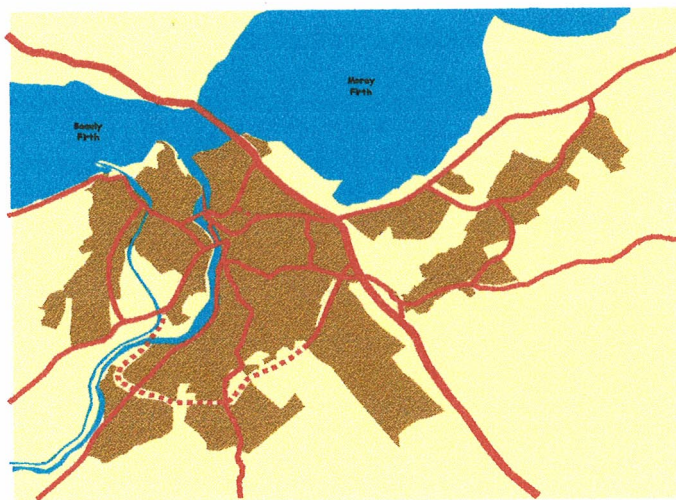




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