

# Pressured Rural Areas Balnafoich Housing Capacity Study

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# Background

## 1.1 Introduction

Balnafoich - from the Scottish Gaelic "Baile Na Faich" meaning Township of the Green Field - lies some 7 miles south of Inverness. In recent years this area has seen a significant level of new housing development, and is under continual pressure for additional housing.

The extant Local Plan for the area is the Inverness Local Plan (March 2006). Balnafoich was identified within this Plan as a housing group and an upper limit of 25% of the existing housing stock (including existing permissions as at Sep 2002) of 4 additional units was set. The Inverness LP does not identify the geographic extent of Balnafoich; however the limit as contained within the Local Plan has been breached by a considerable amount at the date of this review.

The Highland-wide Local Development Plan policies are also relevant, in particular (but not restricted to) the following;

- Policy 28 Sustainable Design
- Policy 30 Physical Constraints
- Policy 35 Housing in the Countryside (Hinterland areas)
- Policy 51 Trees and Development
- Policy 52 Principle of Development in Woodland.

## 1.2 Requirement for undertaking the study

The continued pressure for housing development in the area has brought the requirement for a Housing Capacity Study to be undertaken to analyse the extent of existing housing development (and houses with the benefit of planning permission) in regard to their fit with current planning policies - with particular reference to the "Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design" Supplementary Guidance - and to identify where potential may exist for additional housing in the area which complies with the existing policy framework.

Given the eminent position of trees within the local landscape in and around Balnafoich, this document also takes cognisance of the policy approach contained within the "Trees, Woodlands and Development" Supplementary Guidance.

This study offers clarification on the Council's policy position in relation to Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design in relation the development at Balnafoich and gives guidance and interpretation to existing policy and should be used by applicants, Planning Officers and Members in the assessment of current and future development proposals and planning applications within the Balnafoich area.

## 2 Analysis

### 2.1 Methodology

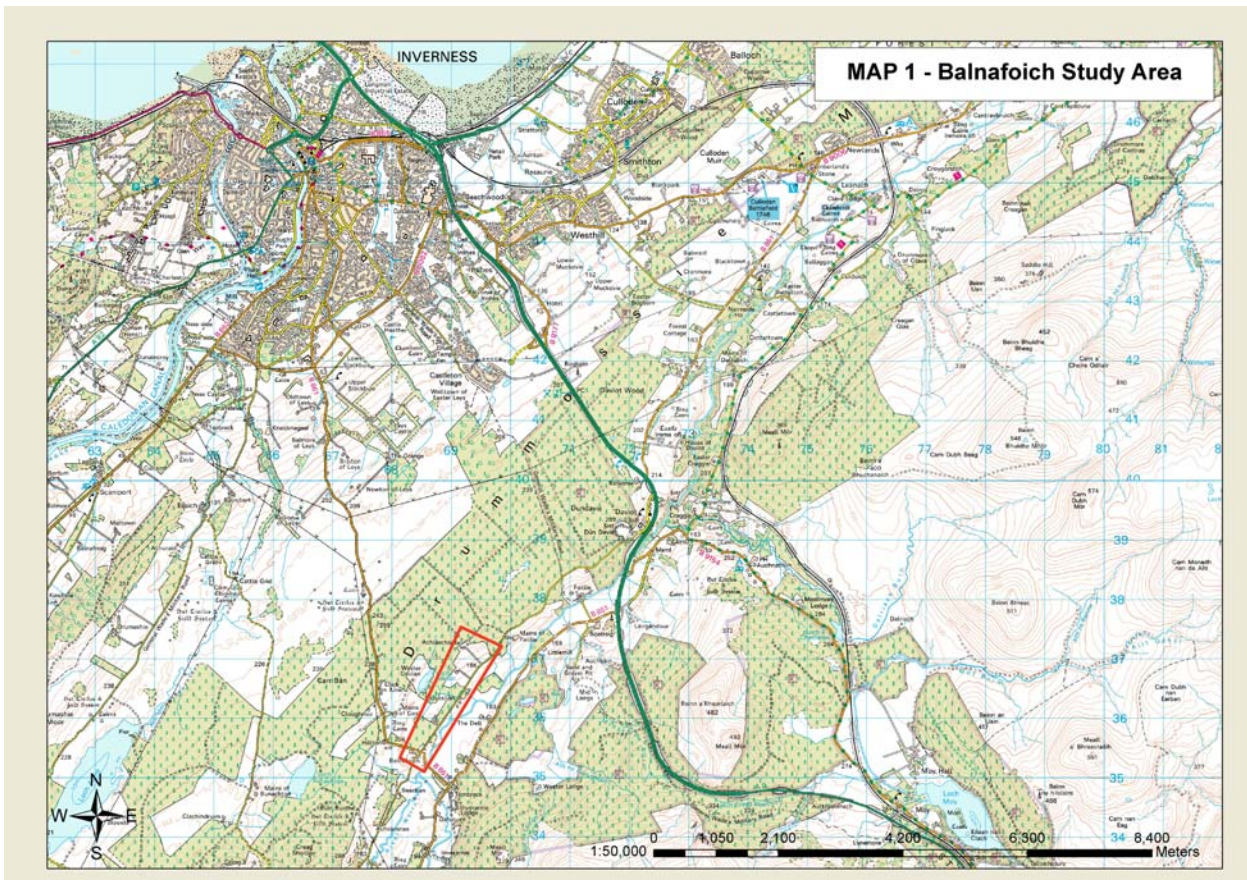
This study was prepared using a combination of desk-based analyses of existing and approved housing developments using the Council's geographic information system (GIS) and UNIFORM, the Council's planning and building standards case management system, supplemented with site visits to the Balnafoich area.

The general area to be reviewed was agreed with the Inverness Area Planning Office and the indicative area for this study highlighted in red on Map 1. The study area stretches from Balnafoich crossroads in the SE to the forested edge of Achlaschoille in the NW alongside the road leading to Daviot. For the purposes of clarity and brevity, the name 'Balnafoich' will be used to refer to the entire study area.

The initial GIS-based analysis examined physical constraints - such as flooding - and was used to map the existing and approved housing within the area using data from UNIFORM.

Site visits were used to gain a better insight into how existing and approved housing developments relate to each other as well as the landscape, and helped inform the analysis of the pattern of housing against existing planning policies.

A desk-based study was undertaken to determine how existing development related to housing groups as defined as houses in terms of the definition included in paragraph 6.10 of the Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design Interim Supplementary Guidance, to inform the outcomes of the study.



## **3 Findings**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In the last 10 years there have been 26 planning consents for housing and related developments across the 3 areas. Since September 2002 the additional units have also exceeded the 25% limit for growth of 4 additional units set by the Inverness Local Plan by a considerable margin. Despite reaching the maximum allowed for by the Local Plan, there is continued pressure for additional housing units.

The Balnafoich study area effectively consists of 3 distinct physical 'sub-areas' defined through differing characteristics in their development pattern, each forming a housing group. one at Balnafoich Crossroads, a second linear area which mirrors Balnafoich Wood alongside the Daviot road, and a third area opening out at Achlaschoille. [Map 2]. For each of the 3 areas a boundary for each area has been drawn to define the extents of the groups in line with the Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design Interim Supplementary Guidance. Dwellings that do meet with the definition for housing groups are excluded from identified housing groups.

Opportunities within each area are identified generically by highlighting the constraints for each area which can be used to guide and assess future planning applications for housing within these areas. Individual sites have not been identified as this study is not a replacement for the extant Local Plan site allocations, and is instead intended to offer interpretation of *existing* planning policy as they apply to Balnafoich.

Further proposals for housing located within the indicative area boundaries *does not in itself* indicate that housing development would be permitted - the requirements outlined in the attached Appendix will still have to be met. The area boundaries identified through the study reflect where existing housing is seen to have the characteristics to be classed as a housing group in line with the Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design Guidance. The boundaries set the limits of any further development that meets the general terms of the guidance. The boundaries generally follow physical features such as field boundaries, roads, plots or demarcations of garden ground where visible.

### **3.2 General Constraints**

In terms of generic constraints within this study area, whilst there is a public water supply available, there is no public sewer network in the vicinity. Private sewerage arrangements will have to be provided in line with Council policy. Early consultation with SEPA is recommended in any event.

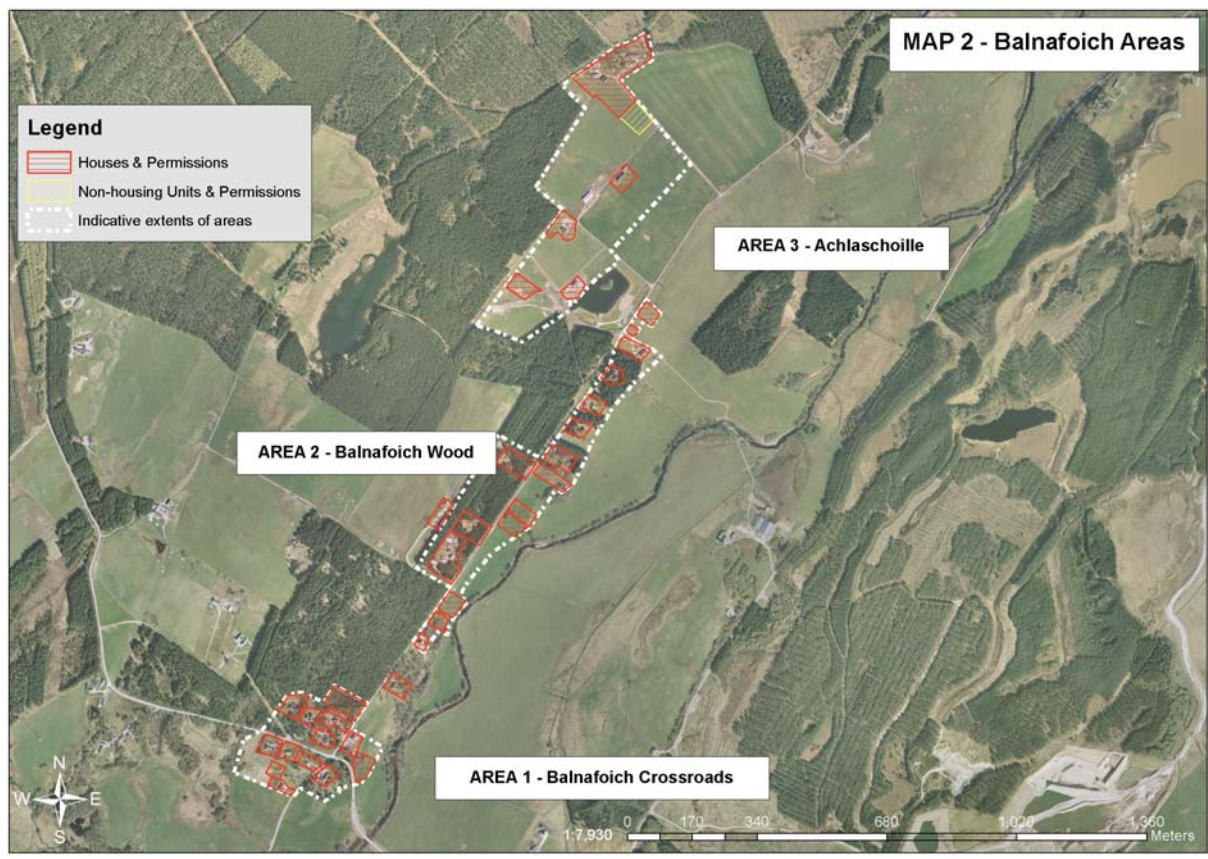
There have been no indications from the Council's roads consultation responses that the capacity of the road network is an issue, but the suitability of access arrangements, and the cumulative impact on the road network will be a material consideration on a case by case basis. It is noted that the physical condition of the roads are in need of maintenance. Again, early consultation with the Inverness, Nairn and Badenoch and Strathspey Area Roads and Community Works Office is recommended.

A number of houses and permissions for houses have been made on what effectively are small-holdings. Whilst the indicative boundaries for the three areas have encompassed much of the land associated with these small-holdings, this should not necessarily be taken to indicate that further housing on these fields would be appropriate. Again, the attached Appendix provides additional guidance and detail on what may be acceptable, as previously undeveloped field and open land are offered protection by the Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design Interim Supplementary Guidance.



The afforested areas within Balnafoich are offered policy protection through national and Council policy through not only by the Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design Interim Supplementary Guidance, but also be the Council's Interim Supplementary Guidance: Trees, Woodlands and Development. This guidance states that, in assessing planning applications, "The Highland Council will consider the impact on trees and woodland as a key material consideration. The Highland Council strongly opposes any pre-emptive felling in advance of a planning application, which can result in the unnecessary loss of trees or woodland and may also be in contravention of felling licence regulations, as administered by Forestry Commission Scotland under the Forestry Act 1967 (as amended)".

The 3 defined areas form the basis for consideration of any future planning applications for housing development.



### **3.3 Area 1 - Balnafoich Crossroads**

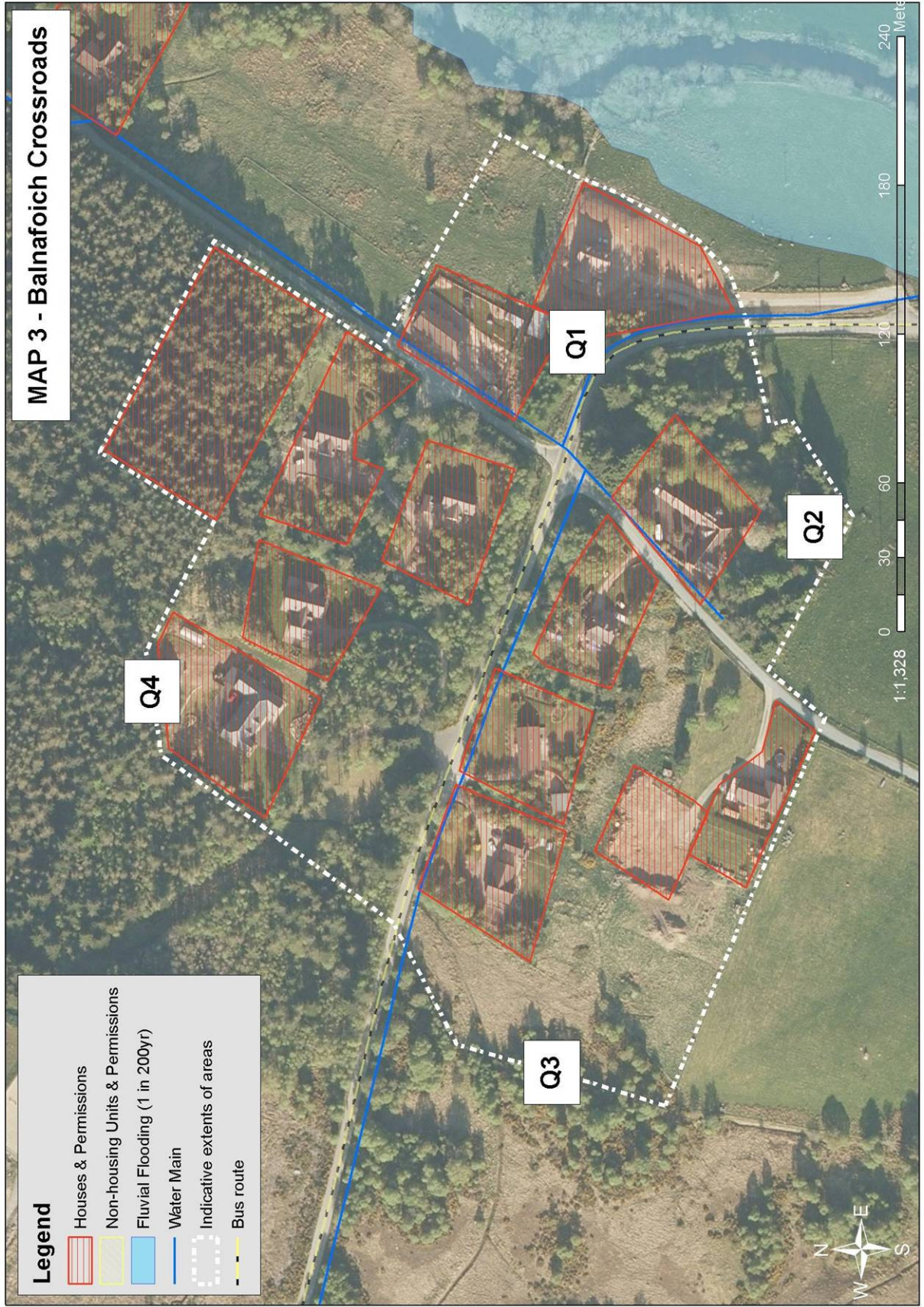
This area is an easily identifiable Housing Group and sits on all four quarters of the crossroads, although the majority of the housing is towards Q3 and Q4 [Map 3]. All of the existing dwellings (and permissions) are defined as houses as per the Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design Interim Supplementary Guidance.

Map 3 shows an indicative boundary to this group, which will limit the spread along the Daviot road (where it could coalesce with Area 2) and also towards the river where flooding is an issue. The boundary also provides protection for the existing open land and the remaining forested areas of Balnafoich Wood.

There is perhaps scope for one or two additional dwellings as infill/round-off units, but the further loss of trees should be avoided and the density of development should not be significantly increased, so that the character of this Housing Group can be conserved, and avoid further suburbanisation of this rural grouping.

Note that because of the potential for flooding from the River Nairn a Flood Risk Assessment may be required within or close to the indicative extent of the 1 in 200 flood risk.





**MAP 3 - Balnafoich Crossroads**

- Legend**
- Houses & Permissions
  - Non-housing Units & Permissions
  - Fluvial Flooding (1 in 200yr)
  - Water Main
  - Indicative extents of areas
  - Bus route

### 3.4 Area 2 - Balnafoich Wood

This area is linear in form, with the majority of development situated to the south east of the road, to the north west of the road fewer houses have been developed in the existing Balnafoich Woodland. The extent of the area is defined by the relative proximity of the houses with “natural” breaks in development. The defined area stretches along the Daviot road and includes existing dwellings which are closely related both spatially and visually.

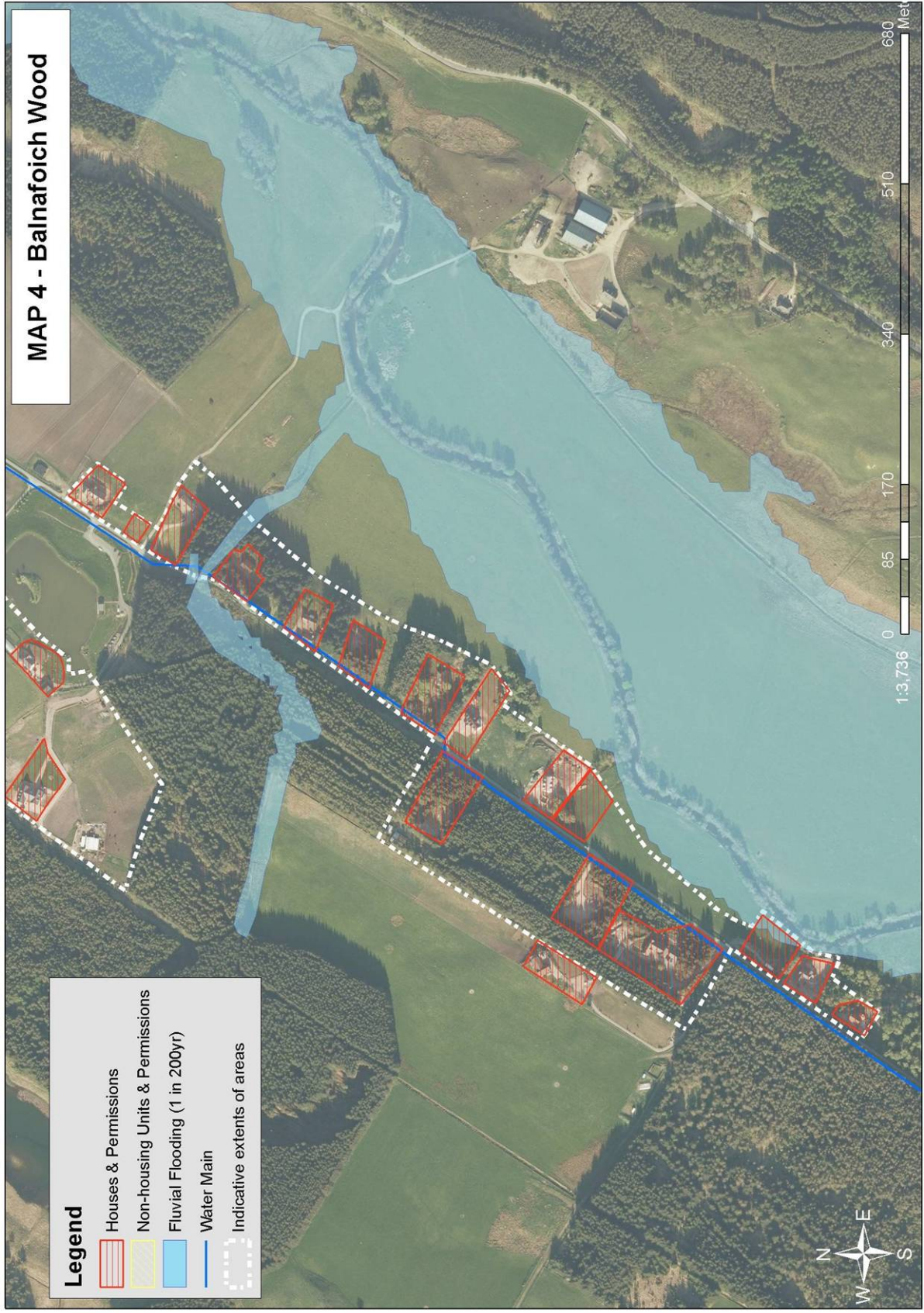
Balnafoich Wood is an essential element of the character of the local landscape and forms an important visual backdrop and no further development will be acceptable in this area. *The policy approach contained within the “Trees, Woodlands and Development” Supplementary Guidance gives additional guidance on this matter.* Opportunities for infill focus on the southern side of the Daviot road where the majority of existing and permitted housing is located.

The flood-plain of the River Nairn should be avoided and further loss of trees on the river side of the Daviot road should be resisted as it is currently used to good effect to help new and existing developments bed into and sit within the existing landscape. Again the density of development should not be significantly increased so that the spacing and character of this linear Housing Group can be conserved.

Further extension of this linear group beyond the north east end of the group and the field to the south east end should be resisted to protect the undeveloped and open field to the NE and also to avoid coalescence with the other 2 areas and their housing groups.

Note that because of the potential for flooding from the River Nairn Flood Risk Assessment may be required proposals within or close to the indicative extent of the 1 in 200 flood risk.





MAP 4 - Balnafoich Wood

**Legend**

-  Houses & Permissions
-  Non-housing Units & Permissions
-  Fluvial Flooding (1 in 200yr)
-  Water Main
-  Indicative extents of areas

### 3.5 Area 3 - Achlaschoille

The third area lies at the NE end of the Daviot road, and stretches from the edge of Balnafoich Wood eastwards to the access road leading to 'Achlaschoille House.

This area is bordered by forested areas on three sides and also by the Daviot road and is characterised by its open aspect on either side of the Daviot road at the NE end, including views over undeveloped and open fields towards the River Nairn and beyond.

This is the most complex of the three areas, as it is dispersed in form, with the spacing between dwellings varying considerably, and it contains large expanses of undeveloped fields and fields associated with existing small-holdings.

An overview of existing housing a permission in this area revealed that one housing application (10/04664/FUL) will be subject to a Section 75 legal agreement and as such will not constitute a housing unit in terms of the definition of a housing group (see Appendix). This unit is within the indicative boundary and is indicated on Map 5.

This area contains two groups of housing;

- a linear grouping of 3 houses running north east from Balnafoich Woods sitting above a single unit on the lower slopes;
- a further grouping of 3 units sits to the north on the upper slopes.

There may be opportunities within these groups for infill or rounding off, but only where the character and spacing of the existing units in the groups are respected.

There should be no further expansion along the Daviot road, nor into the existing fields on either side of the road so that the open nature and landscape character of this area can be preserved, and intrusion into previously undeveloped fields avoided. The indicative boundary for development shown on Map 5 takes the protection of these areas from development into account, as well as protection for the existing forested areas.

The open nature and topography of this area means that any new housing proposals will have to carefully consider siting and design to mitigate the visual impact of development. The visual impact of *any* additional development in this area, when viewed within a wider landscape context will also require assessment.





## **4 Further Information**

This guidance is intended to clarify and summarise the existing planning policy for the Balnafaich area to help applicants, Planning Officers and Members assess future development proposals and planning applications for new housing.

The advice provided is by its very nature generic, and the specific issues associated with a particular proposal and its site will require individual consideration based on a number of factors unique to that development.

Applicants and developers are therefore advised to seek early discussions with their local Area Planning Office in order to ascertain how this document and its supporting planning policies/Supplementary Guidance relate to their specific proposal.

Contact details for the Highland Council's Area Planning Offices can be found here:

<http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/planning-and-development-contacts.htm>



## Appendix – Terms and Definitions Used

The following terms and definitions are from the Housing in the Countryside and Siting and Design Interim Supplementary Guidance August 2011 have been used to inform this study. These terms and definitions should also be used by developers, applicants and agents to help inform their choice of site.

### Definition of a Housing Group

The first consideration is whether or existing housing can be regarded as a housing group or not:

In order for a group of houses to be classed as a 'housing group' for the purposes of this guidance, the following criteria must apply:

- i. there must be at least three houses that are physically detached from one another;
- ii. all of the houses must have a perceptible relationship with one another and share a well-defined, cohesive character; and
- iii. the houses must not comprise part of a 'small settlement' as may be defined in the applicable Local Development Plan.

For the purposes of this definition, the following *shall not count as a house*:

- i. a house limited to use as self-catering/holiday accommodation by either a Section 75 obligation or a planning condition, or designed for the principal purpose of providing, and possessing the general levels of amenity, facilities and/or character of, self-catering/holiday accommodation;
- ii. a house tied to a farming unit, croft, forest croft or rural business by a Section 75 obligation; or
- iii. a house granted planning permission under the 'garden ground' exemption outlined in this guidance.

### Suitability for Growth within Housing Groups

Finally, development within Housing Groups must also meet additional criteria relating to their suitability for growth:

Proposals for new houses within housing groups will only be supported where it can be demonstrated that the development would meet all the following criteria:

1. constitute acceptable small-scale in-fill or round-off;
2. reflect and respect the character, cohesiveness, spacing and amenity of the existing group and the individual houses within the group;
3. not constitute ribbon/linear development along a public road, result in the coalescence of the housing group with a nearby settlement/another housing group or constitute the unplanned extension of a defined settlement; existing groups, however, may be extended in a linear fashion, but only where there is a clearly defined boundary or natural feature that will conclude the extension (e.g. watercourse, woodland, field boundary, road), bearing in mind the context of that group.;
4. do not impact detrimentally on existing trees and/or woodland;
5. not create an inappropriate intrusion into a previously undeveloped field or open land or overwhelm their landscape setting;
6. meet with criteria outlined at paragraph 5.2 General development considerations.

All proposals must take into account the topography of the area, infill opportunities may be inappropriate when viewed in a wider landscape context.

Notwithstanding the above, no housing group will be allowed to increase in number by more than 100% of the number of houses existing in that group from the date of adoption of the guidance, 3rd August 2011.

### **General Considerations**

In addition, any proposed development within a housing group will also have to comply with a number of 'General Considerations'. These are as follows:

Factors that will inform the assessment of suitability for development include other considerations. Proposals will only be supported when they meet the criteria below:

1. do not impact detrimentally on existing trees and/or woodland which are important to the character, setting, amenity and/or containment of the housing group or surrounding landscape;
2. do not conflict with adjacent land use (inc working farms or other rural industries);
3. do not impact detrimentally on natural, built and cultural heritage; protected species and scenic quality and are compatible with landscape characteristics;
4. do not impact to the detriment of other services and utilities and are serviceable by the local road network and relevant junctions, without the need for improvements and upgrades which would be out of keeping with the character of the housing group and surrounding countryside;
5. are compatible with existing servicing infrastructure, or where not available or has insufficient capacity acceptable arrangements are made for the provision of new servicing infrastructure (n.b. proposals for new infrastructure must meet applicable planning policy requirements and be capable of receiving consent from all relevant regulatory bodies and regulations such as, SEPA, Scottish Water, Marine Scotland, Building Standards, etc; furthermore, they must not involve infrastructure out of keeping with the rural character of the area);
6. do not impact on the economic viability of service delivery (for example, the economics of school bus provision and refuse collection if not on existing route);
7. where there has been appropriate consideration of flood risk, (flood risk is a material planning consideration for a wide range of sites including those in a flood plain or with a history of flooding; sites adjacent a watercourse, drained by culvert with drainage constraints/poorly drained);
8. demonstrate a consideration of siting principles and layout, building design and residential amenity in line with the Siting and Design guidance;
9. accord with all applicable policies of the Development Plan.

