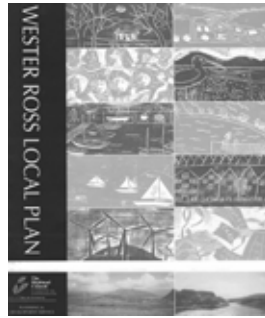


Introduction



Chapter No:

1

1. In a number of the chapters contained in this report, I refer to a certain confusion between the roles of the structure and local plan as part of the development plan. I have noted that the Scottish Executive has welcomed the succinctness of this plan and the way that it “provides clear guidance to developers without resorting to a compendium-of-policies approach”. Without wishing to detract in any way from the plaudits the council has received in this regard, it seems to me that this has quite largely been achieved first, by transferring to the structure plan many of the policies which would normally be included in a local plan; and second, by reducing the detail of the information contained in the local plan to a minimum.

2. It has become evident to me during the course of my involvement in this plan that both of these measures have led to a certain frustration on the part of objectors. First, they have found that either the policies to which they wish to object, or which they wish to amend, are already included in the structure plan (for example, see Chapter 2). The fact that the structure plan has already been approved, and that it had been through a process to which the objectors were not party (whatever the reason for this may have been), is likely to have led to further frustration. In my opinion, the solution lies not in this plan, nor in this report (although, where I consider that the objectors have a valid objection, I have attempted to rectify the situation in my recommendations to the council), but most likely in the future shape of development plans themselves, which is beyond the remit of this exercise.

3. The second feature of the approach to this plan is illustrated by my conclusion in Chapter 16, that the inset maps should contain more information. In the past, I have always recommended the reverse, in that a plan or map containing too much information can become cluttered and this impedes the identification of the very information it is supposed to impart. In the case of the Wester Ross plan however the reverse is the case, as the inset maps contain minimal information, to the extent that important detail is simply not disclosed to the reader. In my opinion, these inset maps should include as much information as possible, within the parameters I have already identified. The omission of any lettering whatsoever on the plans is an obvious example, but when the scale of the maps is as sufficiently large as it is, the absence of important information from the Background Maps is also an omission.

4. In this regard, I also agree with the objector in Chapter 9, that the mapped detail shown in the Background Maps themselves is so small as to be unreadable. While accepting that the council holds larger scale plans which can be consulted, I consider that, particularly in an area as widespread as Wester Ross, a visit to a council office perhaps can be more of an imposition than is

realised. However, this is another reason why I consider it to be so important that the inset maps include as much as possible of the information the Background Maps document currently contains.

5. Another recurring feature of the plan which has been the frequent subject of objection is the extent of additional land identified within the Settlement Development Areas. There is a dispersed pattern of development in the Highlands, which is universally recognised (see paragraph 50 of Scottish Planning Policy 3: Planning for Housing – Appendix 3), but as settlements become larger, their density increases. This happens through infill development, and while such development is considered to be windfall in terms of planned housing numbers, nevertheless I consider it to be a trend which militates towards the necessity in larger settlements to identify less additional land in percentage terms rather than more. Gairloch is an example of this, and Chapter 32 illustrates why I consider certain of the more urban Settlement Development Areas with higher densities of development, should contain less additional land. At best, the situation thereby created raises hopes; at worst it provides misleading guidance to development and is therefore contrary to paragraph 25 of Scottish Planning Policy 1: The Planning System.

6. In a number of chapters relating to the settlements, despite the recommendation of the Landscape Capacity Study to the contrary, areas of countryside have been included in the Settlement Development Area concerned. I found that some of these involved land that was prominent in the landscape, while in others, land has been included which was important to the visual amenity of the surrounding area. It was clear from this that, although a dispersed settlement pattern of development is an established feature of this area, nevertheless, there remain parts of the landscape where the erection of any form of development would be undesirable, and from which it should be discouraged. Such land therefore should not only be excluded from the Settlement Development Area, but with inevitably relaxed development policies elsewhere in the countryside, irrespective of the degree of sensitivity, should be identified as land to be avoided. This is a matter covered in Chapter 21 of this report.

7. For the convenience of the reader, I have set out the local plan policies referred to in this report in Appendix 1, and the alterations recommended to them in Appendix 2. At first sight, the number of modifications proposed appears high, as the structure itself of the plan has been altered as a result of objections which I found to be valid. However, at least as many of the modifications incorporated into that chapter have been proposed by the council, and the restructuring involved is merely one means of clarifying the layout and content of the plan.

8. One objector submitted a number of objections and recommendations in relation to the plan. Although a number of these representations were not met by the council in its proposed modifications, and while not withdrawing its submissions, the objector confirmed that it did not wish to take matters any further. This was not of assistance, in that I was unable to discern from what was before me, which, if any, of the representations were of more importance to the objector than others. If I have overridden some of those to which it would have preferred that priority should be given, then its withdrawal from the correspondence was the reason for this.

9. In certain of its submissions, the council appears to have taken some comfort from objections which contain recommendations, founding on the premise that a submission made in the latter form should somehow carries less weight. This is not a view to which I subscribe, and Chapter 19 is an example of the situation. I consider that an objection to the plan relates to the issue raised, irrespective of the language in which it is framed, and that it is the issue in question which demands attention; the mere recommendation of a potential remedy in itself does not make the original objection any less compelling in my opinion.

10. Finally, I agree with the concept of short and succinct development plans, so long as they contain the information essential to those that consult them; without that I consider that they have the potential to create more problems than they resolve. I consider this plan to be admirably succinct, and I trust that, with the modifications recommended in this report, it will prove to be a more useful tool to all those who consult it over the period of its designated life.