

The A832 and A835 as Scenic Routes



Chapter No:

4

2	-	Mr Andrew Bluefield [Written Submissions]
22	-	Ms S Hopkinson [Written Submissions]
24	-	Mr and Mrs E Hughes [Written Submissions]
43	-	Mr and Mrs I Roy [Written Submissions]
44	-	Mr Ewan Scobie [Written Submissions]
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BACKGROUND

1. The objectors are seeking to ensure the preservation of scenic views, particularly those obtained along the tourist routes of the A832 and the A835.

2. Structure plan Policy T6: Scenic Views refers to these views when it states,

“Policy T6: Scenic Views

The council will protect important scenic views enjoyed from tourist routes and view points, particularly those specifically identified in local plans. There will be a presumption against development in narrow areas of land between roads and railways and open water.”

3. Structure plan Policy G2 sets out thirteen criteria upon which proposed developments would be assessed. Those referred to specifically in relation to this objection are:

“Policy G2: Design for Sustainability

Proposed developments will be assessed on the extent to which they:

- ...
- have an impact on the following resources, including pollution and discharges, particularly within designated areas:

habitats
species
landscape
scenery...

Developments which are judged to be significantly detrimental in terms of the above criteria shall not accord with the structure plan.”

4. Another structure plan policy referred to in connection with this objection is that of U1: Electricity Distribution Network. It sets out that,

“Policy U1: Electricity Distribution Network

The council welcomes the refurbishment and strengthening of the electricity distribution network. Proposals for new and replacement lines will be assessed for environmental impact, and in sensitive locations by virtue of landscape character, visual intrusiveness or bird movements, the case for undergrounding should be strongly considered.”

5. In its paragraph 4.1, the Wester Ross Local Plan sets out the main issues which have been identified for the area. Under the heading of “Natural and Cultural Heritage”, these are confirmed as,

- “• Maintaining a high quality natural heritage;
- Recognising the high number and extensive coverage of European and national designations (covering landscape and natural conservation);
- Taking account of cultural heritage sites (including historical landscapes, archaeological sites and historic buildings);
- Dealing with demand for development, while protecting the quality and character of the environment; and
- Recognising the importance of recreation and tourism.”

SUMMARY OF THE OBJECTIONS

6. The adopted Lochbroom Local Plan (Alteration No 2 – Landward) contained references to the retention of scenic views such as those obtained along the A832 and A835 roads. For example, under Chapter 5: Lochside, one of many referred to, it had stated,

“The drive through Strath More by Lael from Corrieshalloch Gorge to Ullapool is one of the finest in the Highlands. The extensive roadside woodlands, views across Loch Broom, and the setting of Ullapool itself are important resources which must be protected. To the north of Ullapool there are outstanding views across Ardmail and Isle Martin towards Ben More Coigach.”

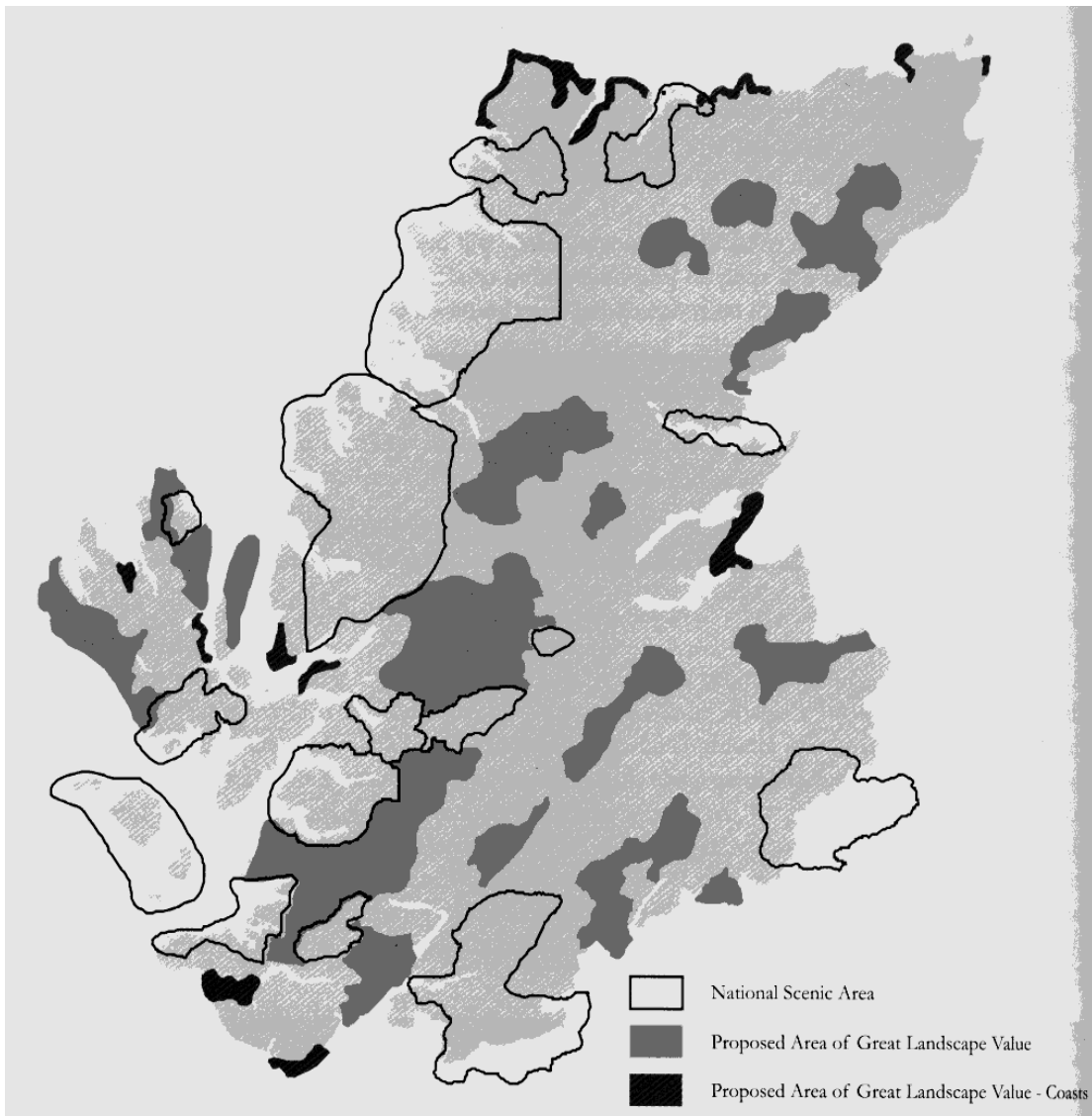
7. The objectors complained that the current draft Wester Ross Local Plan had omitted such references and designations. They considered that the council should stand by its commitment to preserve them. Viewpoints at Loch Droma and Strathmore should be identified. The structure plan included no designation for any of these areas and, according to the key diagram, which was less than clear as to the location of the boundaries (see following page), some were identified as being of low sensitivity. In any case, the assessment illustrated on that diagram was rejected. These areas formed part of the most wild and beautiful scenery, not only in Scotland, but in the world, and they had to be preserved for future generations of residents and visitors to appreciate and enjoy.

8. National Planning Policy Guidelines 5, 6, 11, 13 and 14 alluded to the preservation of unspoiled landscapes, their biodiversity and environment; their habitats, flora and fauna; and these documents should be seen as supporting the objectors’ case. While some of the land involved had been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, National Scenic Areas, Areas of Great

Landscape Value, etc there were some areas that held no such landscape designation, and the objectors considered that they should.

9. This was an area visited by thousands of tourists every day in the summer. These tourists generated over 20% of the Gross Domestic Product, some 25,000 visitors going to see the Corrieshalloch Gorge each summer month.

10. There was also a number of references to a proposal by an electricity company to run a line of high voltage overhead electricity lines along the tourist route. It was considered that the local plan should include a statement opposing the upgrading of such power lines, and the installation of visible wind farms, on the grounds that the current pattern of development did not



Structure plan diagram to show National Scenic Areas and indicative proposed Areas of Great Landscape Value

include large-scale electricity cable support structures (the proposal was for 50m high structures) and sub-stations, which would be out of character with the size and design of existing lines. Current power lines were either significantly smaller or non-existent; large-scale electricity lines would alter the identity of the area, which would thereafter be neither such a unique nor special landscape. Major new power lines and wind farms should therefore either be banned from wild or

scenic areas, or the plan should state that such developments would be unacceptable if they had a detrimental effect on the scientific, landscape, cultural or amenity interests.

11. One objector produced a copy of a letter written to Mr Jack McConnell MSP.

SUMMARY OF THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

12. The council denied that the extant 1999 Lochbroom Local Plan (Alteration No 2 - Landward) provided any more protection to the areas cited by the objectors than did the current deposit draft Wester Ross Local Plan. Far from failing to designate or protect scenic views, it promoted scenic routes, views, infrastructure, etc, and even promoted the A832 and A835 as tourist routes, although it provided no specific protection to scenic views.

13. By contrast to the objectors' allegations, the council considered that the draft plan made clear and unambiguous reference to the structure plan and to the need to take account of its policies. Any application for development would require to be judged against both the structure plan and the local plan. The importance of scenic views to the Highlands was set out in structure plan Policy T6: Scenic Views (see paragraph 2 above) and the council confirmed that many of the views and viewpoints identified by the objectors would be covered by this policy. In addition, other structure plan policies, such as Policy G2: Design for Sustainability, protected other natural and cultural heritage features of the plan area. The structure plan map (reproduced at paragraph 10 above) showed the indicative proposed boundaries of Areas of Great Landscape Value, Proposal L3 confirming that local plans would identify these areas in general accordance with the areas indicated on the structure plan map.

14. The draft local plan went further however, in that its Policies 2.1 and 2.2 referred to the existence of National Scenic Areas and other locally identified landscape features, so it was not considered to be necessary to identify other scenic views specifically. The Local Plan Background Maps indicated the areas which fell within an Area of Great Landscape Value and most of the views identified by the objectors were included. In fact, the Area of Great Landscape Value had been identified since the adoption of the 1999 plan and Scottish Natural Heritage had not requested any additional designations relating to viewpoints of scenic views.

15. There was currently no firm or formal proposal for an overhead transmission line along the route suggested by the objectors. However, the council's Planning, Development, Europe and Tourism Committee had considered a report, which the council produced, on the preliminary consultation by the electricity company concerned regarding the route options for the proposed Western Isles link to the Beaully to Denny overhead transmission line. The committee had agreed that the options from Ullapool (Ardmair or Loch Broom) to Beaully, following the general route of the A835 (said to be the "preferred corridor" by the operator), "should be stated as unattractive to Highland interests". Both structure plan Policy U1 and the Area of Great Landscape Value would also be material considerations in any such proposal.

CONCLUSIONS

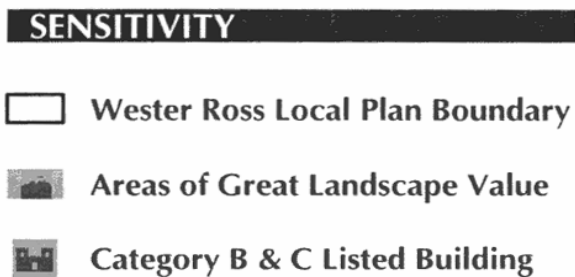
16. As I have already noted (in my introduction to this report), there appears to be some confusion in relation to the roles of the structure plan and local plans for this area. While the council is quite correct that it is the structure plan and local plan together which form the development plan, nevertheless, in the Highland area, the roles of each component part appear to have become somewhat blurred. In these circumstances, it is no wonder that one objector had difficulty in attempting to identify the boundaries of the Area of Great Landscape Value from the

structure plan, when illustrations such as that reproduced on the previous page are supposed to be no more than diagrams, with local plans identifying the actual policy boundaries. This much is confirmed by the council in its submission.

17. However, although the local plan (in its Background Maps section) does provide a further illustration of the Areas of Great Landscape Value, of Views over Open Water, Remote Landscapes of Value for Recreation, and Settlement Settings on an Ordnance Survey background, they are at a scale which makes it almost as difficult to decipher as the structure plan’s diagram (see extract below, although it should be noted that in reproduction in this report, this will lack the colour and some of the definition of the original). This is a matter dealt with more fully in respect of an objection directly related to these maps (see Chapter 9 below).



Extract from local plan background map showing certain facets of areas identified as being of “Low Sensitivity”



Key to above background map extract

18. As to where the precise boundary of these areas should be drawn, it is clear at least from the background map that the A835 runs through an Area of Great Landscape Value to the south of Loch Broom, and although the A832 does so only for a very limited section of its overall length, much of it runs through a National Scenic Area with the Medium Sensitivity designation. As noted in the previous paragraph, a number of other

features have also been identified in the background maps and when taken all together, I consider that they should provide the necessary degree of safeguarding to the area sought by the objectors, without introducing a blanket-protection approach.

19. Finally, the council maintains that the question of the erection of the 400kv overhead transmission line simply does not arise on the basis that no firm or formal proposal for it has been put to the council. However, informal consultation has obviously taken place, as the council has considered possible routes, including a “preferred route” (“preferred” that is, by the operator). Furthermore, the objectors maintain that the quality of the visual landscape of the area is so great that it requires protection from unsightly development such as overhead power lines and their supporting structures. I not only agree with the objectors, but in view of the fact that the council has already determined that it would oppose such a route, I consider that it is the very role of a local plan to state as much, and that this one therefore should incorporate such a policy.

20. Normally, I find that a local plan would include a form of policy such as that set out as Policy G2 of the structure plan and it seems to me that an additional bullet point in that policy would have been the most suitable location in which to cover the issue. However, because of the confusion between the roles of the plans, this policy has been included in the structure plan instead of this plan and such an addition is now not possible. The only suitable alternative therefore seems to be its addition as a further development consideration under Policy 4 (see Appendix 1 to this report, although the policy has been amended in Chapter 5 to become Policy 1B, and it is therefore shown as such in Appendix 2).

RECOMMENDATION

21. Accordingly, I recommend that the council’s determination that it would oppose the erection of overhead transmission lines between Ullapool (Ardmair or Loch Broom) and Beauly, on the basis that they would be unattractive for Highland Interests, be included as an additional consideration under Policy 4: Other Development Considerations (subsequently amended in Chapter 5 below to become Policy 1B) as follows (additional text shown underlined):

“Overhead Power Lines – We will oppose the erection of overhead transmission lines between Ullapool (Ardmair or Loch Broom) and Beauly, on the basis that they would be unattractive for Highland Interests.”