

Ancient Woodland



Chapter No:

11

23	-	Mr Martin Howard [Written Submissions]
70	-	Woodland Trust Scotland [Written Submissions]

BACKGROUND

1. Ancient woodlands comprise the country's richest and most important sites for a range of insects, birds, animals and trees, and are home to more threatened species than any other habitat in the United Kingdom. The Woodland Trust is committed to achieving no further loss of ancient woodland.

2. In Box 1 of the plan, Inventoried* Ancient and Long-Established Woodland is categorised as being of Medium Sensitivity, including Nationally Important Natural and Cultural Features; while Inventoried* Semi-Natural Woodland is categorised as being of Low Sensitivity, including Locally and Regionally Important Natural and Cultural Features.

3. Leckmelm Wood is evidently categorised as an Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland in the Nature Conservancy Council survey (although this is not clear from the scale of the Background Maps document – see Chapter 9 of this report).

SUMMARY OF THE OBJECTIONS

4. The **first objector** pointed out that identifying Leckmelm Wood as an Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland did not make it such; it was still a second rotation conifer plantation and was of low sensitivity. The map should be amended accordingly.

5. The **second objector** sought greater protection for areas of ancient woodland and considered that they should be amended within Policy 2: Countryside to fall within the category of High Sensitivity (now to have further identification as “(including Internationally Important Natural and Cultural Features)”). The reasons for seeking this change included the following:

- The Highland Council area had one third of the small proportion of all remaining ancient woodland in Scotland, or 1% of its land area. If a precedent were set to accept losses through a low level of protection, the objector was concerned that it would lead inevitably to the disappearance of an irreplaceable habitat. It was therefore considered to be crucial that Wester Ross led the way in protecting this diminishing resource.

* - the word “Inventoried” added by paragraph 20 of Chapter 5

- Only 25% of ancient woodland of semi-natural origin in Scotland lay within the boundaries of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, leaving 75% with no statutory protection.
- It was an irreplaceable natural resource which took centuries to evolve and formed a direct link with the original wild wood, established after the last Ice Age. As such, sites of ancient woodland should be exempt from areas of potential development.
- It was an example of a habitat that linked people to the past, creating a sense of continuity and making a significant contribution to the landscape.

6. In addition, the introduction to National Planning Policy Guideline 14: Natural Heritage and its paragraphs 50 and 51 gave guidance on how the Scottish Executive's policies for the conservation and enhancement of Scotland's natural heritage should be reflected in land use planning; and how ancient or semi-natural woodlands have the greatest value for nature conservation (see Appendix 3 to this report for the full text of these references). The objector cited references to other documents and studies and concluded that if absolute protection were to be given to ancient woodland in the plan area, the council would be protecting from destruction one of the richest habitats for wildlife.

SUMMARY OF THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

7. The council accepted that the area referred to at Leckmelm in the **first objection**, was classified as "Long-Established Plantation Origin" and not either ancient or long-established semi-natural original woodland. It had been so designated as the result of an error, the circumstances of which were explained. The Background Maps would be amended and further checks carried out to ensure no similar errors elsewhere within the plan area.

8. As to the **second objection**, Policies 1 and 2 of the deposit draft of the Wester Ross Local Plan already sought to protect trees, groups of trees and areas of woodland where they had natural heritage value, or where they contributed to the character or amenity of an area.

9. The council already recognised the importance of ancient and long-established woodland to the natural and cultural heritage of Wester Ross. As such, it was therefore protected in the plan as of medium sensitivity, and semi-natural woodland as of low sensitivity. On behalf of ancient woodland, Policy 2, paragraph 2 (now Policy 1, paragraph 2) allowed only for development that could be shown not to compromise the woodland resource. In areas of semi-natural woodland, development would only be permitted where it would not have an unreasonable effect on the woodland (see Policy 2, paragraph 1 – now Policy 1, paragraph 1)

10. Only those features which were of European importance* were categorised as being of high sensitivity; a higher level of protection was already conferred on any ancient and semi-natural woodland which had been designated as a Special Area of Conservation, or a Special Protection Area. In setting out the hierarchy of protective policies, the council had been required to reflect the structure plan, national planning policy guidance and relevant legislation and was seeking to encourage an acceptable balance between development and conservation. It considered this to be consistent with government advice, although no specific reference was given.

* - in fact described as "including Internationally Important Natural and Cultural Features"

CONCLUSIONS

11. The **first objection** occurred as a result of an error which is to be corrected and checks made to ensure no others within the plan area.

12. I understand the **second objector's** concerns regarding ancient woodland in the terms expressed in its submissions. While ancient woodland is a very limited national resource, nevertheless, in relative terms, there is a lot of it in Wester Ross. For this reason, it appears to be less valued by the council and has been classified in the same terms as Tree Preservation Orders and Category 'A' listed buildings, which appear all over Scotland.

13. As has been explained by the council in other chapters of this report, allocation in one of the three categories of Box 1 depends upon whether the feature concerned is designated locally/regionally, nationally or internationally, rather than for any predisposed reasons as to its importance. Its allocation to the Medium Sensitivity box therefore is a reflection of its national designation, and any one section of it would only be promoted to the highest level, were it to be recognised as a Special Protection Area or as a Special Area of Conservation. As the council has explained, this accords with national and structure planning policy and is not a matter of judgement.

14. Nevertheless, in Chapter 21 of this report, I have recommended that there is a need for an additional designation to be created on the Proposals Maps for Areas of Avoidance, where for whatever reason, development should be discouraged more vigorously than elsewhere; and I agree with the objector that an Area of Inventoried Ancient and Long-Established Woodland should be considered for this category of protection. Although to a degree already protected by being of Medium Sensitivity, it is intended that Areas of Avoidance would be a separate designation which could operate within or outwith the declared sensitivities. I consider that where such woodland falls within, or close to a Settlement Development Area, or where it is particularly or justifiably vulnerable, it should receive the additional protection of an Area of Avoidance and accordingly should be so designated. As pointed out in Chapter 21, consultation with the appropriate bodies should be undertaken by the council in its determination of the locations involved in such areas.

RECOMMENDATION

15. Accordingly, I recommend that,

- (i) the Background Maps be amended in relation to the identified woodland at Leckmelm;
- (ii) checks are made to ensure no similar error within the plan; and
- (iii) following consultation, areas of ancient and long-established woodland which lie within, or close to a Settlement Development Area, or which are particularly or justifiably vulnerable be designated as Areas of Avoidance in accordance with the policy to be inserted by Chapter 21 of this report.