



PLANNING &
DEVELOPMENT SERVICE

ENVIRONMENT

SUTHERLAND LOCAL PLAN

BACKGROUND PAPER No.3

November 2005

1. Introduction

1.1 Preserving and enhancing the quality of the environment will be crucial in the review of the Sutherland Local Plan. National Planning Policy Guideline 14, Natural Heritage states: 'A key role of the planning system is to ensure that society's land requirements in terms of housing, economic activity, transport infrastructure and recreation are met in ways which do not erode environmental capital.' The requirements set out through national planning guidance and the Highland Structure Plan must also be met in the Local Plan.

1.2 There are a wide range of international, national and local designations relating to the natural and cultural heritage features which affect development proposals. However, with favourable advice of SNH it may be possible for development to take place within them, as long as there are no detrimental effects on their special interests. The Local Plan must also account for the need to conserve the built environment and archaeological heritage in some areas. Opportunities for environmental improvements, including measures for interpretation and enjoyment of the natural and cultural heritage, also require consideration.

2. Strategic Environmental Assessment

2.1 Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is now integral to the development plan process and will help generate better policies and make planning authorities more fully aware of their potential consequences. SEA legislation came into effect in July 2004 through the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Scotland) Regulations 2004, and Scottish Ministers intend to introduce a Bill to further widen the scope of SEA.

2.2 The SEA process will assess the potential environmental affects of the proposed policies of the draft Local Plan. This will involve testing the Plan's aims, policies and proposals against sustainable development criteria. SEA will therefore increase the sensitivity of the Plan to environmental issues and help determine policy options and land allocations. In terms of procedure the Council are developing a scoping approach for SEA based on a respective assessment of the Wester Ross Local Plan and in line with national guidance and advice.

Issues for the Local Plan

- Strategic Environmental Assessment will be integral to the preparation of the draft Local Plan and, inline with emerging guidance and procedures it will be tailored to suit the needs of the area.

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3. Nature Conservation

3.1 Natural heritage designations cover a diverse range of habitats in Sutherland. In terms of international designations there are two wetland **RAMSAR sites**: one covering Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands; and the other covering Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet. There are also many European designated sites, with 24 **candidate Special Areas of Conservation** (cSACs) for habitats and species and 12 **Special Protection Areas** (SPAs) for wild birds, both of which afford a high level of protection (see Map 1). There are 94 nationally designated **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** (SSSI), which can cover important biological, geomorphological and geological areas. There are also 4 **National Nature Reserves**, which are also SSSI's, but are managed by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) or under agreement with land owners. The NNR's at Loch a'Mhullin and Inchnadamph are currently under review.

Table 1: Nature conservation designations

	Area coverage in Sutherland (ha.)	% of Sutherland LP area	Area in Highland (ha.)	% of Highland
RAMSAR site	94,470	15.4%	167,877	6.87%
Candidate Special Areas of Conservation	119,015	19.4%	542,436	20.8%
Special Protection Areas	101,630	16.5%	310,420	11.9%
Sites of Special Scientific Interest	155,288	25.3%	443,091	17%
National Nature Reserves	1,582	0.3%	84,792	3.3%
Total designated for nature conservation (*)	156,988	25.6%	615,958	23.6%

(*) This accounts for overlaps between different designations – cSACs and SPAs are also SSSI

3.2 In the past **Sites of Local Nature Conservation Interest** (SLNCIs) have been referred to as Local Nature Conservation Areas or Local Natural Heritage Areas. These are identified in some of the existing Local Plans covering the Sutherland area. There is a need to review and update these local designations drawing upon the information in the **Sutherland Local Biodiversity Action Plan** (LBAP) and in consultation with Scottish Natural Heritage, the Royal Society for Protection of Birds and the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The Council will have regard to their local special interest, in either identifying sites, or assessing any planning applications that may affect them. With the support of nature conservation bodies such areas may be eligible for management funding.

3.3 **Local Biodiversity Action Plans** (LBAPs) aspire to encourage organisations and individuals to re-establish and conserve biodiversity. The Sutherland LBAP was produced in October 2003 by Highland and Sutherland Biodiversity officers in liaison with representatives from various organisations with a broad knowledge base, including the Sutherland Partnership, the North Highland Woodland Trust, the Sutherland National Farmers Union and the Scottish Landowners Federation. The Sutherland LBAP identifies what is most significant and valued about the natural environment and looks at ways to conserve and enhance this. The Local Plan will look at the priorities identified within the LBAP and how these might be represented.

Issues for the Local Plan

- The Local Plan will identify sites protected for nature conservation interests, and examine the opportunities for interpretation linked to them. This includes a review of existing Sites of Local Nature Conservation Interest and the scope to identify additional sites, in partnership with SNH, the Scottish Wildlife Trust, land owners and local communities.
- These will consider how the priority areas identified through the Sutherland LBAP can be reflected in the Local Plan, including potential policies which afford protection to species and habitats.

4. Landscape

4.1 There are vast areas of the Highland landscape which are currently considered to be of national

significance for their outstanding scenic interest as part of Scotland's natural heritage. These **National Scenic Areas** (NSAs) provide an additional planning control, which principally requires consultation with SNH. The quality and diversity of the Sutherland Landscape is appreciated with the designation of 4 NSAs: Assynt/Coigach, North West Sutherland, Kyle of Tongue and the Dornoch Firth (see Map 2). These comprise mainly mountainous and contrasting coastal scenery. However there are currently no management strategies for the NSAs in Sutherland.

4.2 In terms of the local or regional landscape there are 5 existing **Areas of Great Landscape Value** (AGLV) at Loch Fleet, Loch Migdale, Loch Brora, Ben Klibreck and Ben Griams. Additional AGLV are proposed through the Structure Plan for the coastal areas of Cape Wrath, Strathy Point and Loch Eriboll. At present AGLV are considered to be of at least regional importance. The Sutherland Local Plan will review these designations in the context of national guidance.

4.3 The **Settlement Landscape Capacity Study** is being prepared for Sutherland on behalf of the Council and SNH to inform preparation of the new Local Plan. This document will be one of many considerations that can help identify potential development areas, but essentially specific landscape and visual characteristics. It will provide advice on visual impact mitigation measures as well as siting and design considerations.

Issues for the Local Plan

- The Local Plan will identify the four NSAs and include appropriate policies for their recognition.
- The Local Plan will review existing AGLV to consider whether they should continue to be designated and/or to clarify detailed boundaries of proposed AGLV.
- The preparation of the Local Plan will have regard to the Settlement Landscape Capacity Study in assessing potential land allocations and settlement boundaries.

5. Wild Land

5.1 The concept of wild land/wildness has been introduced by the Scottish Executive through national planning policy (NPPG14 Natural Heritage) with recognition that such land is sensitive to any form of development and provides psychological benefit to those seeking more challenging forms of outdoor recreation. SNH have also produced a recent policy statement on wildness in Scotland's countryside, noting that it is scarce in national terms and has declined in extent over the past few decades. It is defined in NPPG 14 as "uninhabited and often relatively inaccessible countryside where the influence of human activity on the character and the quality of the environment has been minimal." An exercise has been carried out on a Highland wide basis in line with the requirements set out in the Highland Structure Plan Sport and Recreation chapter to identify wild land. In doing this, it has allowed a clearer picture to emerge as to what types of development should or should not be favoured in respect of the special and rare qualities that wild land areas possess. These areas will be recognised in the Local Plan.

Issues for the Local Plan

- The Local Plan will identify the areas of wild land as sensitive and seek to encourage responsible access to the countryside where this is compatible with its conservation interest.

6. Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Designed Landscapes

6.1 Any building or structure which is considered to be of special architectural or historic interest is listed by Scottish Ministers. Those of national importance are listed as "Category A" (e.g. Dunrobin Castle), those of regional importance are listed as "Category B", and those of local importance are listed as "Category C". Special planning controls apply to such buildings of which there are some 322 in Sutherland (see Table 2). Funding agencies in central and local government may provide grants for projects concerned with the conservation of these buildings.

Table 2: Listed buildings in Sutherland

Category of Listed Building	Number
A	19
B	187
C	116
Total Listed Buildings in Sutherland	322

6.2 Areas which are considered to have special architectural or historic interest are designated as **Conservation Areas**. They may range from groups of buildings to open spaces, historic street patterns or whole town centres. Any development requiring planning permission will be assessed in terms of how it will contribute to the preservation or enhancement of the area. At present there is only one Conservation Area in Sutherland which covers Dornoch's historic core. There are proposals in existing Local Plans to designate the core areas of Embo, Golspie and Helmsdale, as well as the whole of Achfary. These proposals need to be reviewed with the communities concerned in relation to national planning guidance (NPPG18) on the Historic Environment requiring prior Conservation Area appraisals.

6.3 There are 4 areas in Sutherland are listed in the **Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes** in Scotland: Dunrobin Castle, Kildonan Lodge, Skibo Castle and Tongue House. National guidance requires the settings as well as the gardens themselves to be safeguarded from unsympathetic development.

Issues for the Local Plan

- The Local Plan will review the policy provision for the built heritage of Sutherland, including listed buildings, conservation areas and designed landscapes.
- Should proposals to designate Conservation Areas for Achfary, Embo, Golspie and Helmsdale be taken forward?

7. Archaeology

7.1 Sutherland's history and relative remoteness means many archaeological features of all periods remain well-preserved, with almost 8,000 features recorded, including 294 Scheduled Ancient Monuments, and many more yet to be discovered. The arguably more significant archaeological features include: Dornoch Cathedral, Dunrobin Castle, the Bronze Age house-sites, field systems, and Neolithic cairns found around Ord Hill in Lairg, the many brochs, and the ruins of villages and townships abandoned during the clearances. Due to the strength of its archaeology heritage it is vital that this is both protected and enhanced in policy; through both appropriately safeguarding features and promoting interpretation.

Issues for the Local Plan

- The Local Plan will make the appropriate provisions for archaeological features in terms of conservation and consideration of opportunities for interpretation.

8. Environmental improvements

8.1 There are opportunities for the Local Plan to identify sites which require some form of environmental improvement, both within communities and related to paths or other features outwith settlements. For example the North Highland Forest Trust has been able to secure funding for path works, picnic areas, a play area and toilets for six community woodlands. All of the existing Local Plans include suggestions and proposals for environmental improvements. Significant works have been completed including at Lower Brora. The Council's current programme includes improvements at Bonar Bridge picnic site and car park, South Bonar Industrial Estate, Smoo Cave (Durness), Clachtoll, Dornoch and Embo.

Issues for the Local Plan

- The Local Plan will, in consultation with communities, identify existing and potential areas which, subject to suitable funding, would benefit from environmental improvement.

APPENDIX 1: Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the Sutherland Local Plan Area

Assynt Lochs	Eilean nan Ron
Loch Awe and Loch Ailsh	Eriboll
Loch Urigill	Foinaven
Eilean Hoan	Forsinard Bogs
Altnaharra	Garbh Allt
Lairg and Strathbrora Lochs	Inverbrora
River Borgie	Handa Island
Strathy Coast	Scourie Coast
Strath an Loin	Inverhope
Berriedale Cliffs	Invernaver
Knockfin Heights	Knockan Cliff
West Strathnaver	Laxford Moors
Red Point Coast	Ledmore Wood
Sandside Bay	Loch A' Mhuilinn
Mallart	Loch Beannach Islands
Cnoc an Alaskie	Loch Fleet
Cape Wrath	Loch Glencoul
Durness	Loch Laxford
Druim nam Bad	Loch Stack
Bad na Gallaig	Loth Gorge
Skinsdale Peatlands	Migdale Rock
Sletill Peatlands	Mound Alderwoods
Loch Meadie Peatlands	Oykel Gorge
Strath Duchally	Kyle of Sutherland Marshes
Rumsdale Peatlands	Southern Parphe
Beinn Dearg	Spinningdale Bog
Black Park Edderton	Stack Woods
Craigroy Burn	Strathfleet
Easter Fearn	Strathy Bogs
Inverpolly	West Halladale
Dornoch Firth	Torboll Woods
Struie Channels	Helmsdale Coast
Aird Torrisdale	Sheigra - Oldshore More
Alladale Pinewood	Carn A'Mhadaidh
Amat Woods	Creag na Croiche
Ardvar Woodlands	Grudie Peatlands
Armadale Gorge	Truderscaig
Badanloch Bogs	West Borgie
Ballinreach Coastal Gorges	Syre Peatlands
Ben Griams	Lon A' Chuil
Ben Hope	Skelpick Peatlands
Ben Hutig	Lochan Buidhe Mires
Ben Klibreck	A'Mhoine
Ben Loyal	East Halladale
Ben More Assynt	Coir' an Eoin
Carrol Rock	Druim na Coibe
Cam Loch	

APPENDIX 2: Special Area of Conservation in the Sutherland Local Plan Area

Inverpolly
Abhainn Clais An Eas and Allt a' Mhuilinn
Ardvar and Loch a' Mhuilinn Woodlands
Loch Laxford
Oldshoremore and Sandwood
Cape Wrath
River Oykel
Inchnadamph
Foinaven
Durness
Altnaharra
River Naver and Mallart River
River Borgie
Invernaver
Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands
Strathy Point
East Caithness Cliffs
Beinn Dearg
Amat Woods
Ledmore Wood
Dornoch Firth and Morrich More
Mound Alderwoods
River Evelix
Moray Firth

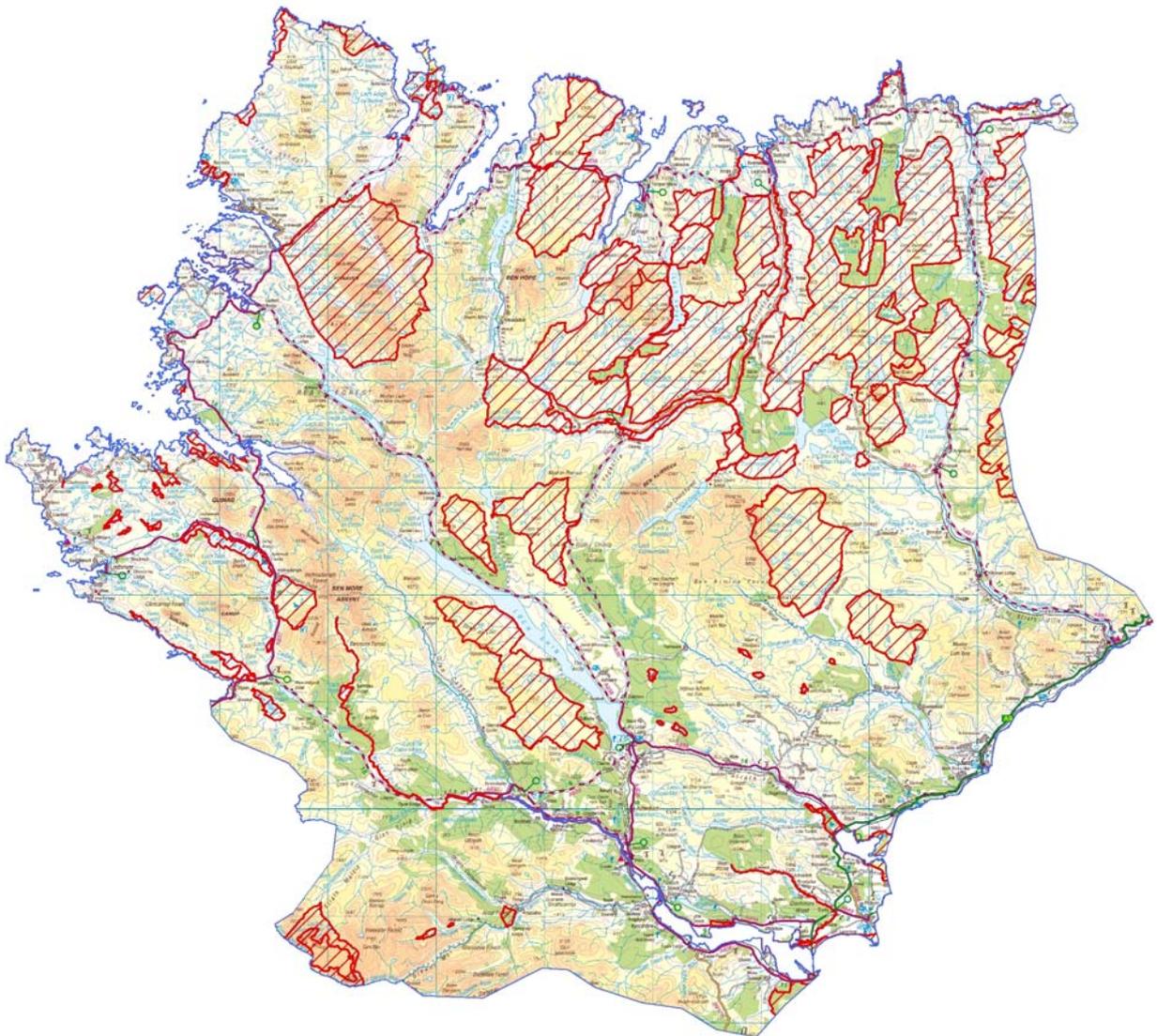
APPENDIX 3: Special Protection Areas in the Sutherland Local Plan Area

Inverpolly, Loch Urigill and Nearby Lochs
Assynt Lochs
Handa Island
Cape Wrath
North Sutherland Coastal Islands
Lairg and Strathbrora Lochs
Caithness & Sutherland Peatlands
North Caithness Cliffs
East Caithness Cliffs
Beinn Dearg
Morangie Forest
Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet

APPENDIX 4: National Nature Reserves in the Sutherland Local Plan Area

Loch a' Mhuilinn
Inchnadamph
Loch Fleet
Knockan Cliff

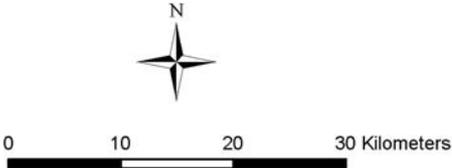
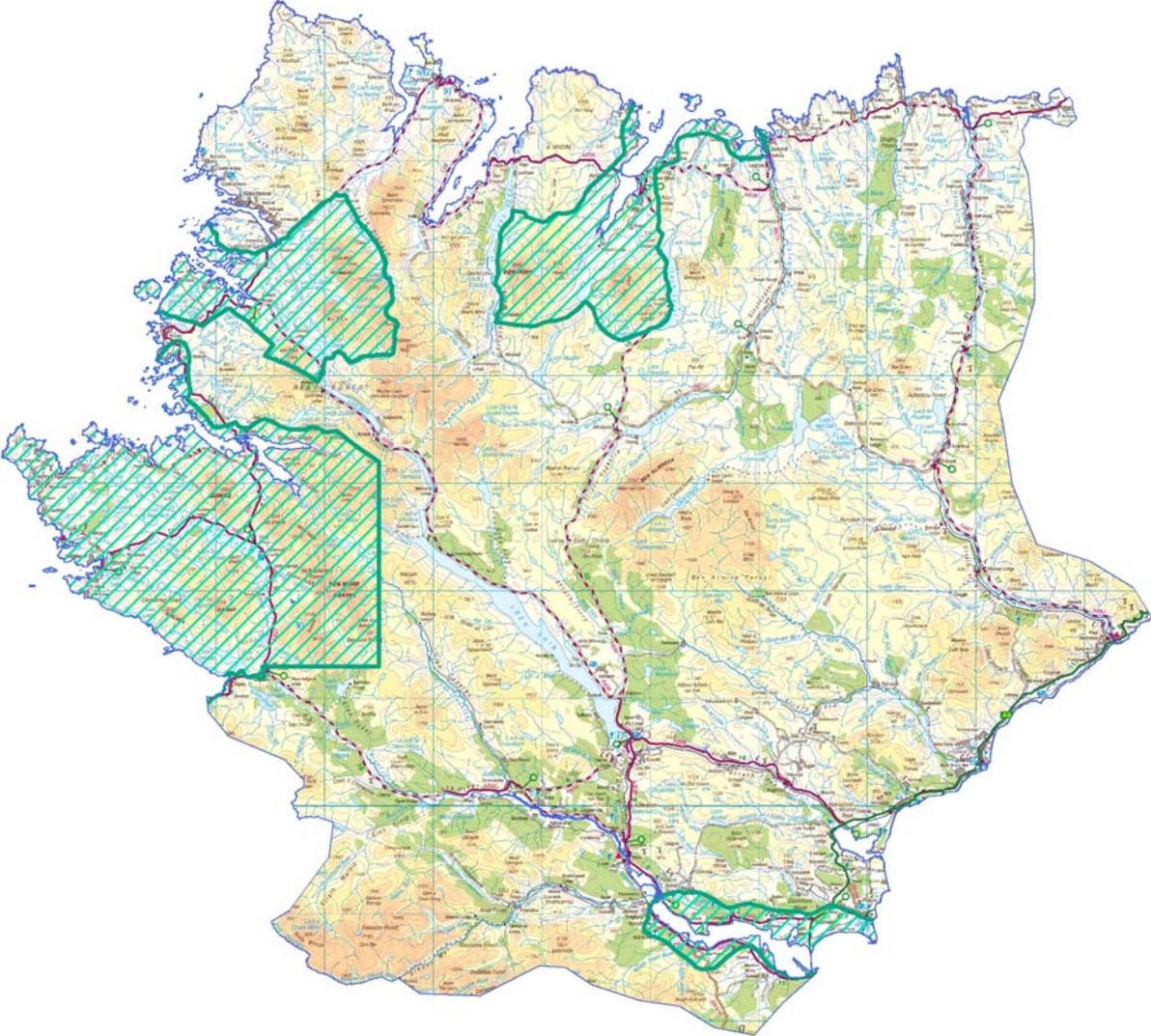
MAP 1: Natura 2000 Areas – Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs)



Legend

-  Special Protection Areas (Natura 2000)
-  Special Areas of Conservation (Natura 2000)

MAP 2: National Scenic Areas



Legend

 National Scenic Areas