



PLANNING &
DEVELOPMENT SERVICE

SUTHERLAND LOCAL PLAN

BACKGROUND PAPER No. 1

November 2005

HOUSING

1. Introduction

1.1 The availability of quality housing is fundamental to social and individual wellbeing and to creating and maintaining balanced communities. The Local Plan contributes to this by allocating land for housing and defining settlement boundaries in a manner consistent with the availability of infrastructure and environmental considerations. It also promotes sensitive siting and design and aims to help facilitate the provision of affordable housing. In doing this the Plan is required to comply with both national policy, as set out in Scottish Planning Policy 3 Planning for Housing¹ and the Highland Structure Plan². The Plan also requires to be consistent with the Local Housing Strategy³.

2. Housing land requirement and allocations

2.1 Scottish Planning Policy 3 Planning for Housing requires local plans to provide sufficient effective land (i.e. free of development constraints) to meet the housing land requirement for at least 5 years and to identify further sites to meet requirements in the medium and longer term. Housing land requirements have to be monitored regularly and reviewed in light of changing circumstances. This now forms part of an annual Housing Land Audit that also assesses the effectiveness of land allocated for development in existing Local Plans to help determine the need for new or revised allocations.

2.2 The Highland Structure Plan, approved by Scottish Ministers in March 2001, requires the allocation of land for up to 1150 houses in Sutherland in the period 1998 to 2017. The figure was derived from 1994 based population and household projections and included an additional allowance for flexibility and choice of locations, fluctuations in the market and to take account of the high level of second and holiday home ownership in Sutherland. Some 253 houses were completed in Sutherland in the period 1998 - 2004. On the basis of the Structure Plan figures this suggests the need for sufficient land for approximately 900 houses in the period 2005-2017.

2.3 In preparing the new Local Plan, this requirement will be revisited to take account of revised population and household projections due early in 2006, together with more detailed factors arising from discussion with local communities and relevant housing needs surveys. The Local Plan will allocate land to account for the projected housing need and also meet the demands of the open housing market. Areas which are experiencing more significant growth will require a greater level of allocation to help maintain an adequate supply of housing land that is available for development and also to provide a range of housing sites, aimed at meeting the varying needs of the housing market.

2.4 The main allocations in the main towns and villages, as identified within the current Local Plans covering Sutherland area, are listed in Table 1 (over the page). The table also indicates the average annual completion (house building rate) within the wider Settlement Zone. The countryside areas around Dornoch and Lochinver experienced a particularly high rate of development in recent years, due in part to the lack of available land within in the settlements. Ideally any future requirements need to account for such growth to be accommodated largely within the settlements in the future, in line with national and Structure Plan guidance for housing in the countryside. However, in the fragile areas of North and West Sutherland the policy is likely to be more relaxed.

Council Buildings
Glenurquhart Road
Inverness, IV3 5NX
Tel. 01463 702250
Fax. 01463 702298



Table 1 Main housing land allocations and annual build rates

Local Plan Area	Settlement	Residual LP allocation	Annual average build rate (wider Settlement Zone)
North West Sutherland (1987)	Durness	22	2
	Kinlochbervie	26	2
	Scourie	-	1
	Lochinver	56	5
Tongue & Farr (1995)	Bettyhill/Farr	13	1
	Melvich	10	1
	Tongue	8	2
South & East Sutherland (2000)	Dornoch	380	11
	Brora	123	5
	Golspie	193	2
	Helmsdale	71	1
	Bonar Bridge	103	2
	Ardgay	40	1
Golspie & Lairg (Lairg & Rogart areas) (1983)	Lairg	16	3
	Rogart	-	1

2.5 Table 2 (over the page) apportions the residual allocation from the Structure Plan requirement on the basis of the existing % share of existing housing stock by Settlement Zone. A further growth element has been added to Settlement Zones where levels of house construction have been higher than expected in the last 10 years. These figures also account for development outwith the main village boundaries. Also indicated are the allocations from the existing Local Plans. Those in the South and East Sutherland Local Plan area are indicated as *. In this area and in Edderton, currently located within the Ross and Cromarty East Local Plan area, significant additional land was allocated to provide a much longer term land supply to address long standing unmet housing needs.

2.6 The table suggests that in Ardgay, Bonar Bridge, Dornoch, Golspie and Helmsdale there would appear to be a surplus of land beyond the projected requirement to 2017. However, it also suggests significant shortfalls in Bettyhill/Farr, Lairg, Lochinver, Melvich and Tongue and where the allocation of more land within the villages could help sustain population and local services. In other areas the apparent deficit of allocated land is less relevant largely in view of a history of self-build development on single one off sites either within definable dispersed communities or in the open countryside. The Local Plan will consider the scope for such additional development of this nature where the existing development pattern allows, servicing can be achieved and there are no other major constraints to development.

2.7 The allocation of new sites for housing will need to take account of a range of factors, such as infrastructure, ground conditions, economic viability and, land ownership. In South and East Sutherland and Lochinver an assessment of the effectiveness of allocated land has identified land ownership, drainage, road access and topographical constraints which have so far prevented it from being brought forward for development. The findings of the Sutherland Settlement Landscape Capacity Study, to be completed in due course by consultants on behalf of SNH and the Council, will also be an important consideration. This identifies sites which can be developed while maintaining the landscape quality, or enhancing the structure of existing settlements and ensuring that development will contribute to the landscape character. It also identifies where development should be discouraged for reasons of landscape character of scenic quality and where planning or other landscape enhancement measures could be undertaken to create further opportunities for siting development in the long term.

Table 2 Indicative housing requirement for 2005 – 2017 relative to Structure Plan

Settlement Zone	Projected housing requirement apportioned on basis of % of housing stock	Additional growth from higher rate of house completions in 1995 - 2004	Total Requirement	Existing specific allocations	Deficit/surplus/ longer term allocation
ACHFARY	4	0	4	#	#
ALTNAHARRA	3	0	3	#	#
ARDGAY*	34	0	34	40	6
BETTYHILL / FARR	43	0	43	13	-30#
BONAR BRIDGE*	43	2	45	103	58
BRORA*	119	0	119	123	4
CROICK	2	2	4	#	#
CULRAIN	8	0	8	#	#
DORNOCH*	148	82	230	380	150
DRUMBEG	11	0	11	#	#
DURNESS	26	5	31	31	0
EDDERTON	30	0	30	30	0
GOLSPIE*	96	0	96	193	97
HELMSDALE*	57	0	57	71	14
KINBRACE	6	0	6	#	#
KINLOCHBERVIE	32	4	36	26	-10
LAIRG	58	7	65	16	-49
LOCHASSYNT	8	2	10	#	#
LOCHINVER	47	56	103	56	-47
MELVICH	36	0	36	10	-26
ROGART	32	0	32	#	-32#
ROSEHALL	18	6	24	#	-24#
SCOURIE	16	0	16	#	-16#
STOER	15	4	19	#	-19#
TONGUE	33	16	49	8	-41
UNAPOOL	5	9	14	#	#
TOTAL	930	195	1125	1100	

* South & East Sutherland LP Settlement Zones

Greater proportion might be met through unspecified infill development and dispersed housing to reflect settlement pattern rather than specific allocations for groups of houses.

Issues for the Local Plan

- Encouragement should be given to develop existing land allocations in the main communities of South and East Sutherland, notably in Dornoch and Golspie.
- There is a need to identify more land in Lochinver capable of early development.
- Should allocations be increased in other settlements such as Bettyhill/Farr, Lairg, Lochinver, Melvich and Tongue to support and enhance existing services, to give greater flexibility in the choice of locations and to provide more opportunity for affordable housing?
- Is there a need to phase development of allocations?
- Are there any locations where more land should be identified to stimulate growth, e.g. Kinlochbervie, Altnaharra?

3. Affordable housing

3.1 Affordable housing is broadly defined as housing of a reasonable quality that is affordable to people on modest incomes. In some places the market can provide some or all of the affordable housing that is needed, but in other places it is necessary to make housing available at a cost below market value, to meet an identified need. The main ways through which this is achieved are:

- social rented accommodation;
- low cost housing for sale, for example shared ownership, self-build or other subsidised or discounted housing for sale; and
- some private sector rented accommodation, available at lower cost than market rents, and provided either by local landowners or commercial landlords.

In the past, social rented housing was funded entirely from the public purse, and local authorities were the main providers. More recently, most new social rented housing and low cost home ownership have been provided by housing associations, with a proportion of costs being met by grants from Communities Scotland, and the remaining finance borrowed from commercial lenders. Some private sector housing, including self-build, contributes to the availability of affordable housing, and for some low-cost home ownership schemes, grant may be paid directly to developers or to private individuals. However in certain areas there is still a shortfall in the supply of new affordable housing, and even where subsidy is available, housing associations can have difficulty in obtaining land at an affordable price. As a result, in recent years there has been increasing interest in the use of the planning system to secure additional investment in affordable housing from private developers, as well as to ensure that sufficient land is available.

3.2 The Rural Partnership for Change Highland Pilot identified parts of Sutherland as experiencing housing related stress with a need for both affordable rented housing and affordable home ownership. The methodology for this involved the statistical analysis of a wide range of indicators (including waiting lists, the circumstances of those applying for housing, turnover rates of affordable housing, house and land prices and the supply of affordable housing). This was supplemented by an assessment of professional opinion and community need. The results of the Rural Partnership for Change assessment have been reinforced by more detailed housing needs survey work by the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust (HSCHT) and by The Council's Local Housing Strategy and Needs Assessment.

3.3 Overall, 47% of households in Sutherland were identified as having some form of need. Short term projections indicate that around 80 households will require social housing in the period 2003 to 2008 (lower estimate). The Housing Needs Assessment for Sutherland suggested that the supply of social rented housing, at around 115 per annum, given the continuing public investment programme, would be sufficient to meet this need. However, geographical differences and local supply and demand factors provide a mismatch in many areas. The growth in private sector sales in general, Council sales under Right to Buy legislation and the high rate of second and holiday home ownership are of particular concern. Recent local housing needs surveys undertaken by the HSCHT have clarified particular pressured areas in this regard. The survey information also identifies the need for varying types of affordable housing – rented, shared ownership and equity and low cost home ownership. (see Table 3 below) The Council's own waiting list information illustrates the level of need for Council rented housing that is evident across Highland. All of this information has influenced the identification of future priorities for the delivery of affordable housing in Sutherland, both in terms of public sector investment and the need for contributions from private developers. This in turn will play an important role in determining the type and level of additional land allocations required within settlements.

Table 3 – HSCHT Housing Needs survey results in Sutherland

Community Council Area	Year of Survey	No of h/holds responding	As % of all h/holds	H/holds with a need	Nos looking for HA/ Council rented	Nos looking for LCHO*	Other or no preference
BRORA	2004	150	20.5%	56	16	31	7
DORNOCH	2003	409	46%	67	16	42	9
HELMSDALE	2004	85	20.2%	28	11	12	5
NORTH ASSYNT	2001	150	38%	52	30	6	14
Lochinver	Sub total			31	18	4	9
Stoer	Sub total			15	10	1	4
Drumbeg	Sub total			6	4	1	1
STRATHY & ARMADALE	2002	16	16%	9	6	-	3
TONGUE	2003	83	35%	20	6	14	
Tongue	Sub total			11	4	7	
Melness	Sub total			6	2	4	
Skerray	Sub total			3	-	3	

HSCHT Surveys in pipeline

GOLSPIE - underway (Nov 2005)

ROGART - to be undertaken

LAIRG - to be undertaken

* Low cost home ownership (LCHO) options include shared ownership/equity housing, subsidised starter homes and Rural Home Ownership Grant (RHOG) plots

3.4 The proposed level of development funding in the context of the Council's Community Ownership programme and in partnership with other agencies is for almost £8 million over the next five years to provide 157 affordable houses throughout Sutherland. These will comprise 73 low cost rental units and 84 low cost home ownership units, with specific development projects in Dornoch, Golspie, Brora, Lochinver, Lairg, Bettyhill, Scourie, Durness and Armadale. Work has commenced on 6 houses at Scourie and 8 houses at Lochinver with schemes at Armadale and Dornoch due to commence shortly.

3.5 The Council's policy on Affordable Housing currently seeks contributions from developers of larger scale proposals of 10 houses or more, although the recent Wester Ross Local Plan has sought contributions from a lower threshold of 4 or more houses. This is applied in that area because lower volumes of building exist and is to be reflected in a review to the current approved Highland wide policy. This in turn will set the context for the implementation where each threshold would be utilised. Given the low volume building history in Sutherland application of a lower threshold might also be appropriate.

3.6 Other mechanisms will be required to secure affordable housing through the Local Plan. Whilst it is not possible under existing legislation to allocate land specifically for affordable housing, Planning Advice Note 74: Affordable Housing indicates that Local Plans may seek to allocate land for this purpose. Instances of this are likely to involve either local authority land or a voluntary agreement being reached with the landowner. Where an acute shortage of available housing land is identified to fulfil affordable requirements The Council will seek to identify land for this purpose. The use of Section 75 agreements to retain sites for affordable housing where there is a proven need and the site is deemed to be crucial to meeting that need.

Issues for the Local Plan

- How would you like to see the Local Plan help facilitate the provision of affordable housing?
- Are there other priority areas where a Local Housing Needs Survey should be carried out?
- Should the Local Plan seek contributions towards the provision of affordable housing on sites of 4 or more or for 10 or more houses? What should be the minimum threshold in areas of housing need?

4. Settlement Development Areas

4.1 Difficulties in servicing and developing sites in larger settlements, population and traditional settlement patterns in remoter areas mean that a significant proportion of planning applications (42%) are for single houses mainly outwith the current settlement development boundaries or envelopes. It may, therefore, be necessary to review the boundaries of existing settlements and to delineate new envelopes where there is some development potential. Many settlements do not, however, lend themselves to discreet and well defined boundaries. In reviewing settlement boundaries there is a need to take account of the Settlement Landscape Capacity Study.

Issues for the Local Plan

- Should clear boundaries be drawn around all existing settlements?
- Where are new Settlement Development Areas or envelopes necessary?

5. Crofting townships

5.1 National and Highland wide guidance suggests the need to ensure adherence to the traditional crofting settlement pattern and to encourage the redevelopment of derelict croft and other buildings consistent with the principles of sustainable development. This also contributes to the resurrection of previous patterns of settlement. This guidance does, however, recognize that crofting settlements vary. In linear townships there may be opportunities for more closely sited infill development which emphasises existing character. In dispersed townships there may be difficulty defining boundaries within which development in accordance with traditional spacing distances would be acceptable. Decrofting, the amalgamation or subletting of crofts and the development of new houses on croft land has already had an impact on crofting settlement patterns in some areas. The Settlement Landscape Capacity Study suggests that there are, however, a small number of settlements where the landscape character is made all the more distinctive by the well defined pattern of land use and the sense of an actively worked landscape. There may, therefore, be value in preserving the existing settlement pattern in these areas.

5.2 The creation of new crofts may offer potential for contributing to both the housing requirement and providing economic opportunities. The potential may also exist for the development of forest crofts, which will seek to develop systems of forest management that will contribute to the local economy and skills base whilst protecting and enhancing the ecological and cultural heritage of forests. Areas such as Ledmore, South Assynt and Strath Naver have been suggested in recent times as having potential for new croft based settlements.

5.3 The release of crofting land, including common grazings is one of the key potential means of not only helping to meet the housing requirements outlined above but also to sustain and develop crofting communities. It will, however, be important not to undermine the economic viability of crofting townships by developing on productive land. The Crofting Right to Buy legislation may provide an opportunity to access some housing land, although it

depends on the whole community wishing to exercise the right to buy. Absentee crofts may also be able to make a contribution towards the housing requirement in some areas.

Issues for the Local Plan

- Are there particular crofting settlements which the Local Plan should aim to preserve?
- Should the Local Plan identify derelict and disused buildings which could be restored?
- What contribution can crofting communities make to meeting the housing land requirements?
- Are there areas where new crofting settlements should be considered?

6. Design

6.1 Structure Plan Policy G2 Design for sustainability aims to promote sensitive siting and high quality design in keeping with local character and historic and natural environment. The Council is shortly due to agree the Development Plan Policy Guideline on Designing for Sustainability in the Highlands following the consultation process. This will provide further guidance on sustainable design issues for all types of development. A further guideline is to be prepared for the siting and design of housing in the countryside.

Issues for the Local Plan

- Do you think there is a need for specific guidance to be included in the Local Plan on siting and design?

7. Infrastructure

7.1 Some infrastructure constraints continue to limit the potential for in the Local Plan area. Scottish Water advise that the sewage treatment works at Bonar Bridge/Ardgay is at capacity and that off-site sewer improvement works are needed in Dornoch. Work has taken place or is planned for other areas, such as Helmsdale, Durness, Lochinver and Stoer to remove waste water treatment constraints. Investment has taken place in improving the water supply, largely along the North coast and in East Sutherland. The long awaited Scottish Water Quality and Standards 3 investment programme is due to be published in January 2006 indicating proposals to 2014.

7.2 The Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) seeks connections to a public sewer within settlements that are served by a public foul drainage system. Elsewhere connection to a public sewer will be required unless it can demonstrated that:

- (a) a connection is not technically or economically feasible;
- (b) the treatment plant is at capacity and Scottish Water has no programmed investment to increase capacity;
- (c) or the proposal is not likely to result in significant environmental or health problems.

7.3 The cost of providing site infrastructure for larger scale developments is a key factor in bringing forward housing land for development. Scottish Water continue to review their Site Servicing policy whereby a contribution to developers up a limit of £1500 per house may be available towards the cost water and drainage works. Costs in excess of this limit will be required to be funded by the developer and applies to both on site and off site infrastructure, including waste water treatment facilities. Continuing high rates for off and on site costs will affect the feasibility of building houses, particularly in the remoter areas where mains infrastructure does not exist. This is a key factor in relation to the identification of suitable building land in Lochinver, for example. The Council are making strong representations to consultation on this subject to Scottish Ministers, seeking recognition that more public investment in drainage infrastructure is required to make housing provision in the rural areas more achievable.

7.4 There are no constraints in terms of educational capacity and there are no current proposals in the Education Capital Plan. Consideration has been given to upgrading or redeveloping facilities in Bettyhill. In the remoter areas further house building is a key concern relative to sustaining existing small primary schools. The County continues to be served by six secondary schools, four in Sutherland at Kinlochbervie, Farr (Bettyhill), Golspie and Dornoch, and two in Ross-Shire at Ullapool and Tain.

Issues for the Local Plan

- There is a need to work closely with Scottish Water and SEPA to identify capacity for additional development, particularly in terms of sewage treatment.

8. Gypsy Travellers

8.1 The Council has a statutory responsibility to make provision for Gypsy Travellers. The Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee recently produced a number of recommendations into Gypsy Travellers and Public Sector Policies. In relation to local planning it states that planning authorities should be required to identify the need for Gypsy Traveller site provision and land for sites in statutory (land use) plans, using Community Planning frameworks, which include Gypsy Travellers. Where there is a history of unauthorised encampments The Council will take that into account in considering any planning application for a permanent or transit site.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Scottish Planning Policy 3 Planning for Housing – The Scottish Executive, Development Department
Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/planning/spp3-00.asp>
- ² Highland Structure Plan – The Highland Council, Planning and Development Service
Available at: http://www.highland.gov.uk/plintra/devplans/splan_index.htm
- ³ Local Housing Strategy – The Highland Council, Housing Service
Available at: <http://www.highland.gov.uk/hsg/hsgstrategy/hsgstrategy.htm>