

## **Sutherland Local Plan- Examination**

### **Reporters' request for further information concerning Transport- Issue 101**

*"One of the reporters has identified that in response to representation by Transport Scotland the council commends further changes to reflect publication of the STPR and to clarify the status of the transport schemes/ interventions referred to in paragraphs 4.30 and 4.44 of the plan. In the absence of any supporting information on this matter, further detail is requested in order to clarify a precise wording for these proposed changes."*

### **The Highland Council's response**

The Council sets out below the precise wording of the changes that it wishes to commend to the Reporters on this matter, whereby:

- part of paragraph 4.30 is moved and incorporated into paragraph 4.29;
- the wording suggested by Transport Scotland and commended by the Council for incorporation in paragraph 4.30 (as set out in Summary of Unresolved Issues- Issue101) is instead included as a new paragraph 4.31;
- additional new paragraphs 4.32 and 4.33 are included;
- amendments are made to paragraph 4.39;
- amendments are made to paragraph 4.44;
- minor changes are made for clarity or as a consequence of the other changes specified above.

In addition to the above, and not shown below, the paragraphs in Chapter 4 of the Plan which are currently numbered 4.31-on would require renumbering 4.34-on as a consequence.

The changes commended are as follows:

**4.29** Important strands of the strategy aimed at creating prosperity include: strengthening interaction with the growth "hub" to the south and Caithness to the north, particularly in the context of the decommissioning of Dounreay, diversifying the employment base in those parts of the County with greater self-containment and a genuine drive to sustain jobs and regenerate the remote, landward areas. Sutherland needs to maximise sustainable development of, and add value, in the resource-based landward sectors, grow its small business and service economy, promote its tourism and heritage assets and attract "footloose" e-commerce and inward investment which might be drawn to the Area by its accessibility and exceptional environment. Major improvements to transport infrastructure will help to facilitate these objectives. The A9 regional road network is vital to prospects.



Improvements near Helmsdale are progressing in steps. There may be opportunities in the future to shorten journey times whilst improving local communities. Continued promotion of the Invernet commuter rail service can be expected to increase custom, and the strategic "gateway"/ distribution role of Lairg will maintain the rail-freight capacity of the Far North Line which is an important contributor to economic and social prospects of communities in Central Sutherland. There may be opportunities to promote strengthening of rail-freight infrastructure through the further development of a network of strategically located sidings with loading facilities.

**4.30** The HITRANS Strategy (2007) identified a network hierarchy, which in Sutherland comprises:

- *Strategic Rail Network*- Inverness to Wick/Thurso;
- *Strategic Road Network*- Inverness A9 (T) to Wick/Thurso;
- *Regional Road Network*-
  - A836 Tain to Lairg/ A838 to Rhiconich /B801 Kinlochbervie
  - A837 Lochinver to Ledmore jct/ A835 Ullapool
  - A836 Bettyhill to Thurso;
- *Local Road Network*-
  - A839 The Mound to Lairg A839/A837 to Ledmore jct
  - A836 Lairg to Tongue
  - A836 Bonar Bridge to Lairg
  - A897 Helmsdale to Melvich
  - A838 Rhiconich to A836 Bettyhill
  - A894 Laxford Bridge to Skiag Bridge.

As part of a wider network they provide a link towards onward travel, be it by road, rail, ferry or air. The HITRANS Strategy concluded that the priority for the A9 North Corridor (encompassing road, rail, bus-based public transport) should comprise works at Conon Bridge and speed enhancement measures on the existing alignment of the Far North Rail Line, together with the delivery of a Route Action Plan approach on the A9 North road to provide climbing lanes and other improvements (including bypasses) to reduce the average journey time on the road. The HITRANS Strategy flagged the option of by-passing Golspie and Brora in particular. The HITRANS Strategy also identified the A838 Kinlochbervie to Lairg road, for route enhancements in the medium term.

**4.31** However, since the HITRANS Strategy was prepared the Scottish Government has undertaken its Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR) which identifies interventions to be delivered, designed or developed beyond

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2012 and primarily between 2012 and 2022. Projects relevant to the Sutherland Local Plan area are as follows:

- Strategic Road Safety Plan;
- Maintenance and Safe Operation of Scotland's Rail Network;
- Integrated ticketing;
- Rail system enhancements, including the replacement of the Radio Electronic Token Block signalling in the Highland region; and
- Road safety improvements in North and West Scotland.

A number of other measures in the STPR will have positive implications for the Sutherland area, including projects aimed at increasing the frequency of rail services and reducing journey times between Aberdeen and Inverness, and the Highland Mainline Rail Improvements Project aimed at improving network capacity for passengers and freight between Inverness and Perth.

**4.32** The Council is in the process of reviewing and replacing its Local Transport Strategy (LTS); the LTS will need to identify priorities for local delivery in the light of what the HITRANS Strategy identified and of what has and has not been included in the STPR.

**4.33** The Local Plan's Vision refers to the possibility of three substantial future transport interventions in Sutherland- namely bypasses for Golspie and Brora and a Dornoch Firth rail crossing. The HITRANS Strategy had flagged the option of by-passing Golspie and Brora as already noted, although the timeframe it indicated for possible preparation of schemes was at the earliest towards the end of the period covered by this Local Plan. The HITRANS Strategy did not include a Dornoch Firth rail crossing in like manner within its priorities but such a scheme is being promoted by a campaigning group with some wider support. However, none of these three transport interventions are currently identified as national priorities for investment in the STPR referred to above. Given these facts, this Local Plan does not therefore identify routes for safeguarding but the definition of the settlement development areas tightly around the existing built form and allocated sites will help to maintain options for possible investigation in the future. The section of this chapter dealing with Implementation, Monitoring and Review indicates in broad terms what would need to happen for such schemes to progress.

**4.39** Implementation of the Local Plan will require action by the Council and by many other organisations and individuals. The Council does not control all of these matters but will rely on collaborative working and liaison. Delivery of certain projects, schemes and aspects of the Plan's 'Vision' would in particular be dependent upon other priority-setting and decision making processes that are

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wholly or partly outside the Council's control and have not yet been undertaken. For example:

- Any case for a major transportation scheme should result from an appraisal using the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG). Progressing such schemes will be dependent upon their inclusion in the appropriate list of priorities and commitment to funding. ~~Whilst regional priorities were set out in the HITRANS Strategy, the Scottish Government's subsequent Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR) has not included them all in its national priorities for investment. The Council is in the process of reviewing and replacing its Local Transport Strategy (LTS); the LTS will need to identify priorities for local delivery in the light of what the HITRANS Strategy identified and of what has and has not been included in the STPR.~~
- Any consideration of a National Park for the whole or part of Sutherland would have to follow the procedures as set out in the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 whereby the Scottish Ministers in the first place make a 'National Park proposal'.
- Any potential to bid for World Heritage Site status for the Flow Country would be considered once the review of the Tentative List has commenced and the requirements are clearer.

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As set out in one of the plan's objectives, an Action Programme will set out how, when and by whom specific actions will be undertaken and will form a basis for the monitoring of action. Monitoring progress on the implementation of the Local Plan will be vital and where necessary will lead to policies and proposals being reviewed. We will in particular monitor the delivery of homes and jobs. We will prepare a Monitoring Report on a regular basis, drawing on a number of sources of information including our own Housing Land Audit and Business & Industrial Land Audit. If sites prove to be ineffective in delivering growth within the timescales required then we will seek to work with the interested parties to establish the reasons why (such as infrastructure issues) and, if necessary, propose the de-allocation of sites and allocation of alternative sites as part of future Plan review. It will also be important to monitor retail development, indicators of the health of town centres, village facilities, jobs growth and changes in employment, housing affordability and need and changes in the profile of Sutherland's population. There will also be a range of matters concerning Sutherland's environment that will be monitored as required by the Environmental Report. This Local Plan will eventually be reviewed and replaced by a new-style Local Development Plan under the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 as referred to in the Council's Development Plan Scheme.

#### 4.44 A Connected and Accessible Place

- a. A9 improvement schemes - notably the long awaited by-passes of Golspie and Brora which ~~were identified in the HITRANS Strategy with congestion relief.~~

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community safety and shortened journey times anticipated – may have been explored further through the preparation and review of Highland-wide, regional and national planning and transportation strategies, though only if new priorities are able to be included and with due consideration given to the economic, social and environmental impacts of such schemes. In the event of such schemes being favoured and any formal preferred and programmed routes being announced, the Development Plan of the time could protect such routes. Future expansion options for communities being fitted with these routes, enabling enhancement of their commercial thoroughfares.

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**b.** Integrated transport solutions for passengers and for freight: frequent community bus routes giving more convenient access to work and services; a network of cycle routes, preferably segregated linking the main communities; promotion of tourist-based cycle routes; a significant increase in rail-freight which consolidates Lairg as a major transit/ break-of-bulk and distribution "hub" for the north-central Highlands as part of a network of strategically located sidings with loading facilities (serving the import and export needs of the forestry, farming, fuel supply, aggregates and renewables industries) which could be underwritten by a consortium.

**c.** Substantial increase in passenger numbers on the Far-North rail line as efficiencies reduce the Inverness-Wick journey time. A sustained, full peak-time return Invernet commuter service extending to Lairg, Ardgay and Bonar Bridge. The rail service as a key driver in their economic prospects, as well as places further north and west. The possibility of a Dornoch Firth rail crossing (which is being promoted by a campaigning group with some wider support) may have been explored further through the preparation and review of Highland-wide, regional and national planning and transportation strategies, though only if new priorities are able to be included and with due consideration given to the economic, social and environmental impacts of such a scheme. In the event of such a scheme being favoured and any formal preferred and programmed route being announced, the Development Plan of the time could protect such a route.

**d.** Maintaining and pursuing the case for twin-tracking the 'lifeline routes' or 'locally important roads' to the north and west coast communities and seeking improvement of other roads which are under stress, such as the Dornoch-Embo road, and progress made with route enhancement scheme(s) such as the A838, where identified or confirmed as priorities.

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**e.** Deficiencies in the water and waste-water networks across Sutherland relieved through ongoing investment.

**f.** The Area's expertise and associations with hydro-electricity generation underpinning the development of renewables. Wave farm technology earmarked for testing, community-based energy systems in place, and bio-fuel technologies having enabled residual agricultural and forestry products to be utilized.