

## West Highlands and Islands Local Plan Examination

### Hearing 1: The Alleged Over Provision of Land Allocated for Housing Development in Fort William

Written Submission by West Highland Woodlands (Fassfern Estate)

14 December 2009

H.C. PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICE		
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## Current Position

The current local plan identifies 23 sites at Fassfern for housing development at four locations around the existing settlement.

West Highland Woodlands have obtained outline planning permission for the development of 12 sites and have been successful in obtaining an offer of grant from the Scottish Government's Housing and Regeneration Directorate under the Rural Homes for Rent scheme to build four of these as affordable homes for rent. Final planning permission is currently being sought for this development and it is anticipated that construction will begin early in the New Year. The estate is registered as an accredited landlord and already provides eleven homes for rent and three houses as accommodation for estate workers.

The existing planning approval (ref 05/00495/OUTLO) states, as a condition, that the detailed layout of the scheme should "encompass a road layout which safeguards a future road corridor for a fully adoptive road to access land to the rear." indicating that the land to the rear of this site is considered suitable for housing development by Highland Council.

The old sawmill yard is currently an unused brownfield site with development potential.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise have identified Fassfern as a possible site for a major tourist development and the site is included as a category 2 site. This proposal would see a major high quality hotel or timeshare development together with recreational facilities such as a spa/health resort and with an emphasis on outdoor activities including mountain biking, pony trekking, hill walking, sailing, canoeing etc being developed. One of the first things any developer will look at is the status of the site within the Local Plan and one of the things required to help bring the site up to category 1 would be a more positive planning position.

## Plan Review Process

At the beginning of the plan review process West Highland Woodlands contacted Highland Council on the basis that the estate would be willing to release land to help address the lack of available housing in the Lochaber area. The estate was then asked by the planners at that time to consider the possibility of a new community at Fassfern of up to 500 houses. With this encouragement the estate then met with the planners and prepared various submissions as part of the plan renewal process. These submissions were well received and when the first Deposit Draft Local Plan was produced in December 2007 it was stated that...

"Environmental considerations, travel impacts and a "sustainable" footprint reveal **Fassfern** as a potentially suitable location for a new settlement. In accordance with the Structure Plan, a minimum of 25 ha of land would be needed for 500 houses (1,000 population) with capacity to support a nucleus of employment, social facilities, a primary school and public transport. This will be based a high quality, sustainable design ethic, a masterplan and planning agreements to deliver infrastructure and services as part of a phased, long term building programme. The delivery of land with capacity for less than 500 houses in Fort William within 2 years of the Local Plan being adopted will trigger support in principle for development of a new settlement at Fassfern."

and later..

"Land is identified for strategic development at Fassfern. This will comprise a new community of a minimum of 500 houses – designed on sustainable principles and incorporating mixed residential development, a new primary school and other community/commercial facilities, business and leisure, open space and structural landscaping, infrastructure and utilities, and a regime for public access and management of the heritage and setting. A masterplan will be prepared to guide the layout and phasing of development, provide a basis for developer funded utility upgrades, community facilities, and "green" transport services, providing also for the integration of a rail halt ultimately; and Section 75 Agreement as necessary. Development which will be subject to design competition and an agreed protocol for the procurement in an

5. Section 6.1 "In the past, planning has been perhaps unnecessarily niggardly on issues of land supply. We want the new approach generally to be more aspirational." The outright removal of Fassfern from the current deposit draft seems at odds with this statement.
6. Section 6.4 "Almost all of Fort William's allocations and potential alternatives suffer from supply side constraints." 90% in fact or 1791 out of 1809 identified sites according to the document. The December 2007 draft provided Highland Council with a suitable alternative strategy if these supply side constraints cannot be overcome within a reasonable timescale. The removal of Fassfern could simply leave the supply of sites for housing in Fort William at crisis point within a few years. On the other hand there is nothing to be lost if 500 house sites are brought forward within two years as the masterplanning and development of a new settlement at Fassfern would not be triggered.
7. Section 6.6 bullet point 3 "Removing sites would only reduce choice and competition thereby inflating land and ransom values". Why then has Fassfern been removed from the list of potential sites and why have the existing allocations at Fassfern not been continued?

## Conclusion

West Highland Woodlands wish to ensure that the new Local Plan adequately reflects the current and ongoing situation at Fassfern and in the wider Lochaber area with regard to.

**Housing Supply:** Meeting the future demand for housing in Lochaber and addressing the historical chronic shortfall of housing plots.

As development at Fassfern would only be triggered if the chronic shortage in land for housing development is not overcome by the new Local Plan then it is only prudent for Highland Council to retain Fassfern as a back up option. The only possible negative outcome is if Fassfern is excluded and demand for housing continues to outstrip the supply of land. This would lead to a shortage of development land which is not an unlikely scenario given the constraints on other identified sites.

**Tourist Related Development:** While West Highland Woodlands would accept that a major tourist development at Fassfern is unlikely in the short term due to the current economic cycle, as the economy begins to improve the development of a high quality resort at Fassfern would provide a major boost to the local economy. The Local Plan should be brought into line with the potential seen in the site by HIE and Scottish Enterprise. Without some encouragement for potential developers in the Local Plan then the opportunity may be lost. Given that the plan will be in place for the next ten years it is necessary to ensure that the planning position of the estate is maintained in line with the aspirations of Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to bring a major recreational and tourism related inward investment into Lochaber and in line with the desire to maintain Lochaber's position as the Outdoor Capital of the UK..

## Recommendation

1. West Highland Woodlands would request that wording similar to that removed from the December 2007 draft should be reinserted into the final plan.
2. Existing land allocations at Fassfern should be retained in the final plan.