

## Chapter 2 : Area Profiles and Key Areas of Change

- 2.1 The Highland Council serves a total land area of 26,484 square kilometres which equates to one third of the land area of Scotland, including the most remote and sparsely populated parts of the United Kingdom. The Highlands has the 7th highest population of the 32 authorities in Scotland (235,540) while having the lowest population density at 8 persons per square kilometre.
- 2.2 Owing to this scale, there is significant variation in the profiles and characteristics of many diverse communities. Authority-wide demographic and socio-economic indicators while useful, can often obscure wider variations at area level. The unique challenges and key areas of change that will inform the HLDP are therefore presented within this chapter structured within the nine Highland Council Areas as follows:
  - **Inverness and Area**
  - **Black Isle and Easter Ross**
  - **Dingwall and Seaforth**
  - **Nairnshire**
  - **Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh**
  - **Isle of Skye and Raasay**
  - **Lochaber**
  - **Caithness**
  - **Sutherland**
- 2.3 The [Highland Local Development Plan Area Profile Summary](#) provides an interactive dashboard illustrating detailed population, demographic and economic indicators at area level within the Highland Council area. Place Standard Tool Results have also been collated by Area level and are provided in the relevant sections below.
- 2.4 The Highland Council is currently finalising the preparation of Area Place Plans (APP) which collates an overview of local priorities development, investment and service delivery across these Areas, identified through stakeholder and public engagement in addition to reviewing the content of existing plans and strategies across public and community partners.
- 2.5 Individual APPs have progressed differently, with some adopting a hybrid APP/LPP position owing to similar geographic coverage. They have also

progressed at different paces – while some are finalised and published, others remain in progress. Finalised APPs at the time of writing include:

- [Caithness Area Place Plan](#)
- [Black Isle Local Place Plan](#) (hybrid)
- [Easter Ross Area Place Plan](#)
- [Lochaber Area Place Plan](#)
- [Nairn and Nairnshire Local Place Plan](#) (hybrid)
- [Skye and Raasay Future](#)
- [Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Area Place Plan](#)
- [Sutherland Area Place Plan](#)

2.6 The APPs will comprise a key source of evidence for consideration in development planning, future service delivery and community action.

2.7 The *Highland Investment Plan – HIP (THC###)* seeks to review and improve how essential services and facilities are provided in various locations across the Highlands, informed by APPs. A new generation of community facilities is envisioned for the Highlands, with Points of Delivery (PODs) seeing a range of public services brought together single locations.

### **Inverness and Area**

2.8 The City of Inverness Area is the most physically, environmentally and economically diverse of all subregions in Highland and arguably one of the most in Scotland because of its extremes of remote and inaccessible uplands and a quickly expanding coastal city. The area is the economic, public facility and transport network hub for wider Highland. Most settlement is concentrated on the coastal margins where the more developable, better connected and agriculturally productive land lies. Its economy drives that of Highland. Yet it also includes far remoter far more fragile land and communities. Investment is being channelled into maximising the benefits of planned urban expansion and the preservation and restoration of the remoter rural areas.

#### *Key Areas of Change*

2.9 Inverness and Ardesier contain sites within the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport (ICFGF) detailed in **Chapter 8: Business, Economy, Tourism and Productive Places**, and therefore play a central role in the ongoing restructuring within the Highland economy.

- 2.10 The urban-rural disparity across the Area creates challenges. Rapid growth in population has outpaced investment in infrastructure and placed considerable pressure on road congestion, health facilities and schools. In contrast, the remoter rural areas generally have greater infrastructure capacity but facilities such as school buildings and bridges are often of a considerable age.
- 2.11 Deciding where limited current and future public investment in infrastructure should be directed remains challenging. The cost per housing unit or per person is generally lower in larger settlements and therefore most future development and most future infrastructure investment should be directed in that way. However, there will be exceptions because the pattern of development and investment is also driven by political priorities, by land availability, and by unforeseen opportunities. For example, the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport project is a current initiative that may disrupt the optimum pattern and timing of future growth. The aim should be all public and private agencies coordinating their investment by location and over time so that development can happen at least cost and most benefit to all.

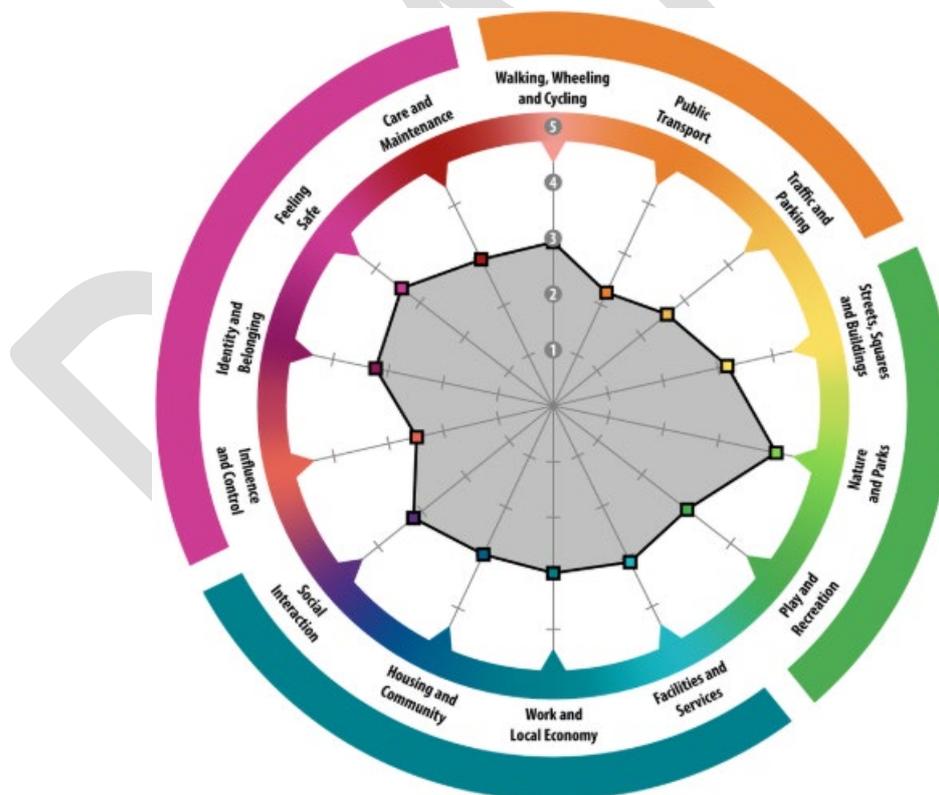


Figure 2:1 Inverness Place Standard Results

## **Black Isle and Easter Ross**

- 2.12 The Black Isle Area despite its name is a peninsula, has a long history of coastal settlement and occupies an important strategic position on Highland's east coast guarding the Inverness and Cromarty Firth entrances, giving access to fishing opportunities and agriculturally productive land. However, it wasn't opened up for significant growth until it was better connected via the Cromarty and Kessock bridges, the latter opening in 1982. This later trunk road connectivity meant that it still accommodates little industrial development instead now concentrating on agricultural, forestry and tourism employment. Less desirably, many of the villages now have a primarily dormitory function for job opportunities in Inverness and other part of Mid and Easter Ross. This encourages car-based commuting to employment and other opportunities since the villages don't have the critical mass or scale to support local services and facilities or a commercial bus service to higher order centres where those facilities can be accessed.
- 2.13 The Easter Ross Area has long history of settlement, contains much of Highland's flatter, better drained, agriculturally productive land, and sheltered deep water ports which were initially used for military purposes. Despite these advantages, significant development and population didn't establish until the 1960s and 1970s with the inward investment in heavy industries such as those servicing offshore oil and gas production. Each of the principal towns has good road and rail connections compared to the rest of Highland and fewer physical and environmental constraints to development. The landscape is principally rolling farmland often with attractive coastal views across the Cromarty, Dornoch and Moray Firths. Settlement is concentrated in a series of small towns or large villages most of which are along the old A9 route and railway line. The rural hinterland is upland, far less populous and large parts of it have been afforested.
- 2.14 The scenic quality of the local landscape, the townscape quality of its historic towns and villages and the natural heritage features principally around the coastal margins, all attract visitors and support tourism-based development and employment. The central upland spine of the Black Isle is less settled and given over to smaller, less productive agricultural units and forestry.
- 2.15 The Area has many locational and natural resource advantages compared to other parts of Highland. However, its infrastructure networks are spatially disconnected because traditional coastal settlements are inadequately served by the trunk road network. Central settlements such as Tore benefit from trunk road connectivity but have inadequate sewerage provision. North Kessock which is

coastal, connected and functions as a suburb of the City of Inverness, but is bottlenecked by the Kessock Bridge and the capacity issues at the Longman A9/A82 junction.

- 2.16 The lack of local employment opportunities has led to higher home working but also higher emission commuting, which has increased the need for improvements to public transport networks and strategic active travel routes. Proximity to Inverness has magnified pressure for housing in the open countryside and other “overheating” effects such as close to capacity medical and school facilities.
- 2.17 The historic cores of Cromarty, Rosemarkie, Fortrose, Avoch and Munloch are an asset in townscape terms but also a challenge as the spine roads that serve the villages have limited capacity to support further development. Similarly, the clustered patterns of these settlements have little room for expansion hemmed in by glacial escarpments, prime farmland, flood risk areas, and heritage resources. Accordingly, limited organic growth of the main settlements appears the most practicable way forward. Key priorities are to improve the safety of the trunk road junctions, control sporadic housing development in the countryside, ensure that main towns and villages are as self-sufficient as possible with a mix of uses and local access to daily needs, and encourage a higher proportion of longer distance journeys to be made by sustainable travel modes.

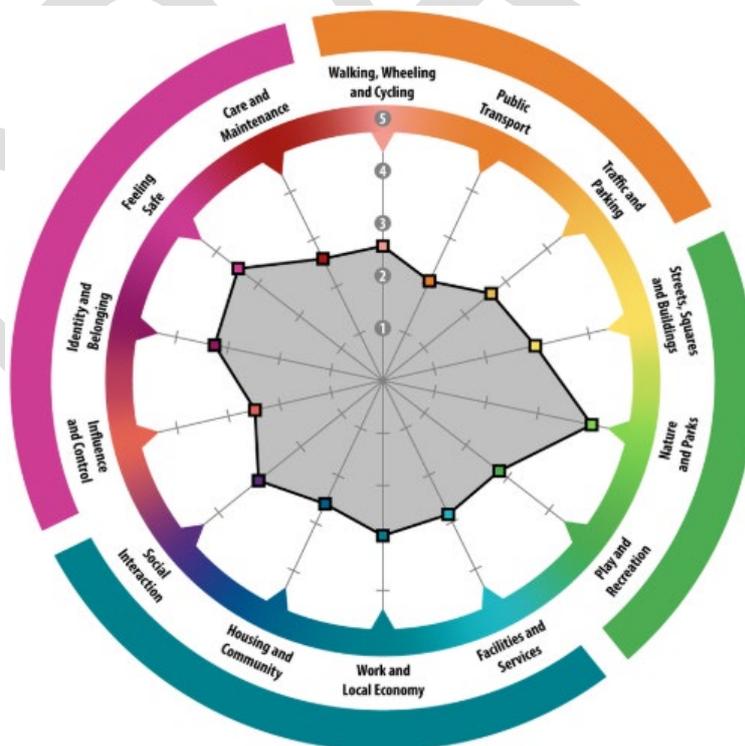


Figure 2:2 Black Isle and Easter Ross Place Standard Results.

## Dingwall and Seaforth

- 2.18 The Dingwall and Seaforth Area covers most of Mid Ross and accommodates most of its population. Dingwall is the pre-eminent place for administration, employment and other facilities, but sufficiently separate from Inverness not to be overly affected the 'overheating' effects of rapid growth such as traffic congestion and overburdened medical and school facilities. The area has good road and rail connections compared to the rest of Highland and fewer physical and environmental constraints to development. The landscape is principally rolling farmland with attractive coastal views across the Cromarty and Beaully Firths. Settlement is concentrated in towns or villages located linearly along the old A9 route and railway line. Fluvial and coastal flood risk and gradient issues constrain the development of Dingwall and therefore other settlements notably Muir of Ord and Conon Bridge accommodate a greater share of future growth.
- 2.19 Challenges arise, such as flooding issues in Dingwall, controlling sporadic housing in the countryside development, which has adverse landscape and service provision cost impacts. Revitalising town and village centres with community hub facilities and employment opportunities is a likely way forward. The Area is well placed to take advantage of the economic benefits of from the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport project and land is already safeguarded for employment use at Muir of Ord, Maryburgh and Dingwall.

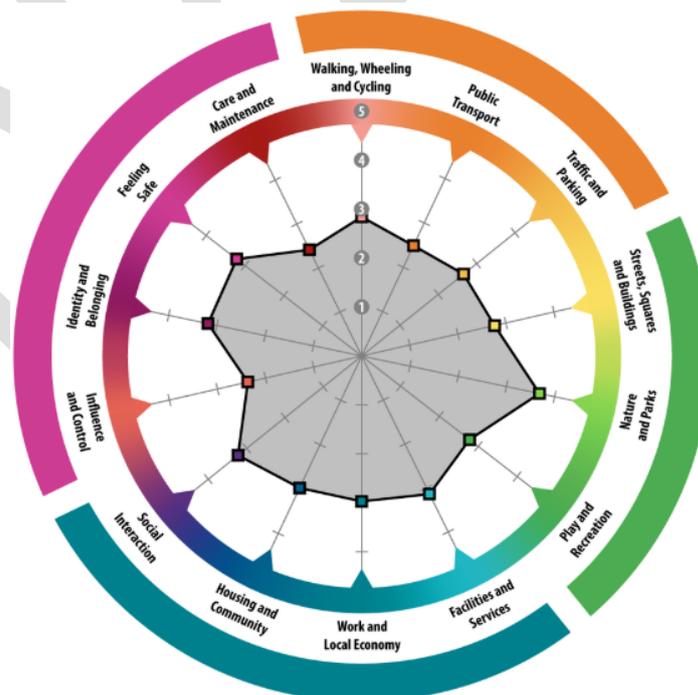


Figure 2:3 Dingwall and Seaforth Place Standard Results

## Nairnshire

- 2.20 Nairn was an ancient fishing port and a later market town and lies about 17 miles east of Inverness. Like most coastal settlements, its centre grew from the optimum fording point of the local river (the River Nairn, which bisects the present town). Today, the Royal Burgh has a mix of functions, still a market town with a good range of local facilities and services but now also a dormitory commuter and retirement settlement and a tourism magnet attracting visitors interested in beaches, golf, built and natural heritage all assisted by a local climate sunnier and drier than the rest of Highland.
- 2.21 Wider Nairnshire has similar attributes. Northern Nairnshire contains productive agricultural land and mineral reserves concentrated on the coastal plain. Land in southern Nairnshire is less productive, higher in altitude, less populous and more suited to less intensive land uses such as forestry and sporting estates. Cawdor and Auldearn are the other principal settlements both with strong historical heritage which attract visitors but also limit the potential for expansion.
- 2.22 Nairnshire has many attributes that attract people and investment. However, many of these also constrain further growth. For example, Nairn's high quality natural resources, built heritage and compact market town, limit future growth. Similarly, infrastructure networks which are concentrated along the coastal margins of the Area, restrict the potential for expansion. The intertwining routes of the Inverness to Aberdeen rail line and trunk road create severance issues and create the need for more, expensive bridging solutions. These constraints are illustrated in the cost of progressing a trunk road bypass for Nairn and remedying Victorian combined sewer network capacity issues in central Nairn.
- 2.23 Diversifying the age profile and economy of Nairnshire would create a more balanced and resilient community. The tourism economy can be impacted by events such as the pandemic and exchange rates. The tourism sector also depends upon the availability of a younger workforce, which in turn needs suitable affordable accommodation albeit often on a seasonal basis. The Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport project particularly with the current expansion of job opportunities at Ardersier Port offers an opportunity to diversify into manufacturing and other business and industrial sectors. Nairn has a paucity of allocated and serviced business and industrial land and therefore a key future challenge will be to assess the need and optimum location for such development.

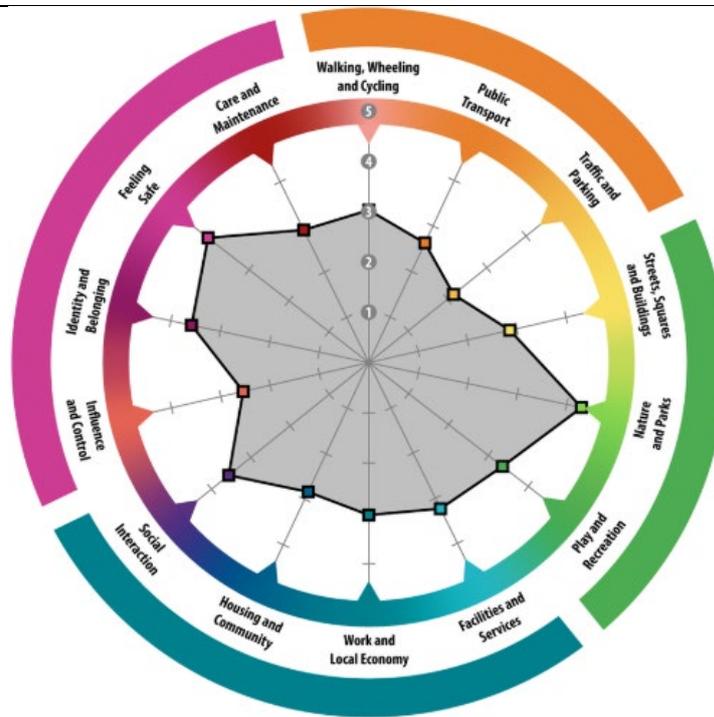


Figure 2:4 Nairnshire Place Standard Results

## Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh

2.24 This Area covers the largest geographic area of any Highland Council ward at 4,948km<sup>2</sup> and almost reaches from coast to coast across Scotland. However, with just over 12,000 permanent residents, its population is sparse and largely dispersed. Only 5% of the land area is easy to develop due to physical, servicing and heritage constraints and therefore settlement is concentrated on the coast and/or where marginally more productive agricultural land is available. Because of this population sparsity and dispersal, there is no critical-mass sized settlement to support higher order local facilities such as a hospital, further education or a large supermarket. Conversely, this rurality and the area's exceptional natural heritage quality is attractive to visitors and new in-migrants. The Area continues to attract tourists, early retirees, home workers, and second/holiday homeowners. The lack of regular and reliable public transport connectivity to larger centres has led to a high reliance on private car journeys and the harmful emissions associated with such travel. Even these are disrupted by the road network capacity constraints described below. More positively, this fragility has made local communities self-sufficient, socially cohesive, and resilient. A strong cultural identity based on crofting and the Gaelic language underpins this resilience.

2.25 The area's unique selling point is the extent and quality of natural heritage: important in species, habitats, visual and tourism economy terms but which also restricts future development. Most of the Area is too steep or of too high an altitude to support settlement. Accordingly, development is directed to the 5% of developable land which can undermine the aim of preserving inbye croft land, safeguarding built heritage (within the conservation areas of Plockton, Shieldaig, Strathpeffer and Ullapool), and preventing sporadic housing development in open countryside. Many heritage resources overlap the coast and constrain aquaculture and harbour related development and the employment they can provide. A tension remains as to whether the Area should accommodate more industrial development (such as at Kishorn) or tourism-based employment.

2.26 The lack of local employment opportunities but improvements in digital connectivity has increased home working but also higher emission commuting and trips to facilities and services, which aren't available within the Area. Both the UK and Scottish Governments have agreed to fund far better digital connectivity to the Area and therefore the range of online solutions will increase. An important current and future debate is whether all of the Area should be repopulated. Area population levels were far higher in the early 1800s, current national planning policy promotes resettlement, but circumstances have changed, and many depopulated Highland glens are not overly suitable in terms of employment, community facilities and infrastructure capacity.

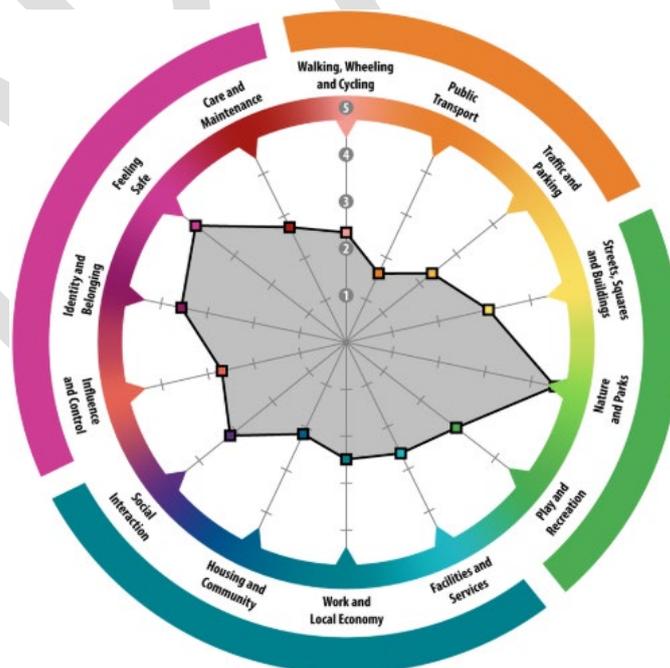


Figure 2:5 Wester Ross Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Place Standard Results

## Isle of Skye and Raasay

- 2.1 The Isle of Skye and Raasay Area is an iconic visitor destination in its own right. Tourists are attracted by its outstanding natural and cultural heritage. However, only 16% of the land area is easy to develop due to this heritage and other physical and servicing constraints. As a result, settlement is concentrated on the coast and/or where marginally more productive agricultural land is available. Even within existing settlements, crofting tenure and the need to safeguard the better inbye land limits where future growth can occur.
- 2.2 Island status has justified better locally based services and facilities than would otherwise be present within other similarly remote parts of Highland. The level of visitor spend makes it commercially viable to have greater supermarket provision than would otherwise be present. However, those visitors also place considerable pressure on infrastructure networks. The Area is also a through route to/from Hebridean islands which supports economic, social and cultural connections
- 2.3 The lack of diverse local employment opportunities but improvements in digital connectivity has led to higher home working but also higher emission longer distance commuting. Innovative solutions are required to reduce unnecessary travel. Electric vehicle car clubs, online shopping and delivery hubs, digital healthcare, and community transport schemes are all possible solutions. Both the UK and Scottish Governments have agreed to fund far better digital connectivity to the Area and therefore the range of online solutions will increase.

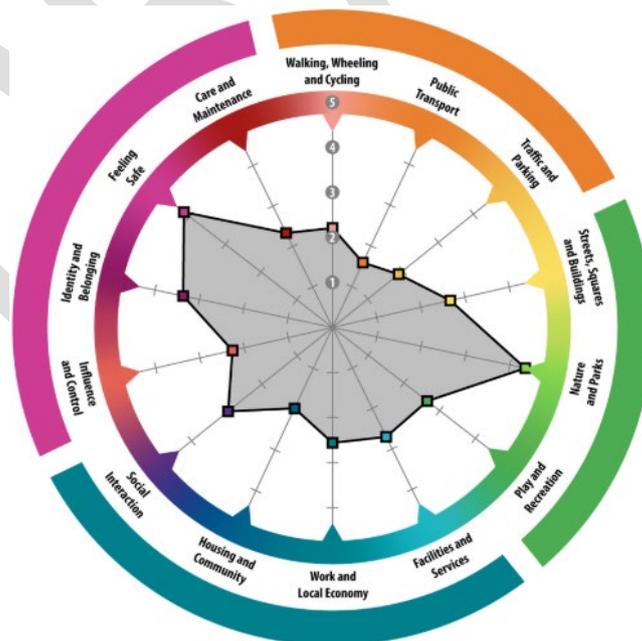


Figure 2:6 Skye and Raasay Place Standard Results

## Lochaber

- 2.4 Lochaber is extensive, covering 4,656km<sup>2</sup> and covers the most southerly portion of the Highland LDP area. Its climate is milder but wetter than most other parts of Highland. Only 7% of its land area is free from physical and heritage constraints and even this land may not be serviceable or free of crofting restrictions. It is very diverse in settlement terms varying from a dense urban pattern at Fort William, Caol and Kinlochleven designed to serve previous industrial employment to dispersed crofting township development in the remoter coastal and island communities. It has shorter connections to the central belt than other parts of Highland but those journeys are not necessarily quicker, safer or more reliable.
- 2.5 Lochaber has some of Highland's best natural and cultural heritage: important in species, habitats, visual and tourism economy terms but also restricts future development potential. Similarly, the vast majority of Lochaber is too steep, too high in altitude or too far from infrastructure connections to support settlement. Accordingly, development pressure is directed to the 7% of developable land which can undermine the aim of preserving inbye croft land and preventing sporadic housing development in the open countryside. Many of the heritage resources overlap the coast and constrain aquaculture and harbour related development and the employment they can provide.
- 2.6 A tension remains as to whether the Area should aim to resurrect its industrial development sites or concentrate on public sector and tourism-based employment. An important current and future debate is whether the remoter rural parts of Lochaber should be repopulated. Population levels in the crofting areas of Lochaber were far higher in the early 1800s than present levels. Current national planning policy promotes resettlement, but circumstances have changed and many depopulated parts of Highland are not overly suitable in terms of available employment, community facilities and infrastructure capacity.

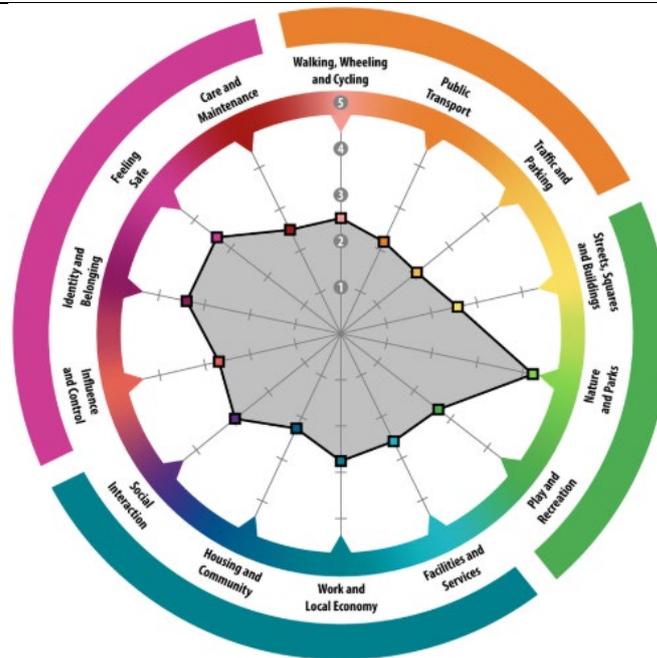


Figure 2:7 Lochaber Place Standard Results

## Caithness

- 2.7 Caithness lies in the northern part of the Scottish mainland, it is divided from the Orkney Islands by the Pentland Firth, and from the county of Sutherland by a picturesque mountain range stretching from the celebrated headland of the Ord to Drumholistan on the north Atlantic. Caithness is remote but connected through road, rail, sea and air both north and south and to offshore opportunities. Tourism supports an increasing share of the local economy stimulated by the North Coast 500 route and renowned destinations such as John O'Groats. Large parts of the local landscape are flat, farmed and exposed to climatic conditions that inhibit significant natural regeneration of woodland. Conversely, this climate has attracted many proposals for the generation, storage, use and transmission of renewable energy and associated employment. The local economy has other opportunities, for example, decommissioning of the former nuclear plant at Dounreay has seeded many supply chain opportunities; Rolls Royce, Subsea 7 and BT are among the global companies investing in employment in the far north of Scotland.
- 2.8 Caithness fares better than other remote areas because it has a strategic location enroute to the Northern Isles and close to offshore opportunities. However, its lack of a critical mass population means that higher order services such as

consultant and referral services healthcare are limited. Trunk and local road networks are lightly trafficked but maintenance issues are significant given the length and extent of the network and the resources available.

- 2.9 Car ownership is seen by many in Caithness as essential because of the paucity, cost, duration of journey, and unreliability of public transport alternatives. Disappointingly, the need to travel has been magnified by sporadic housing in the countryside development by those not willing or able to find suitable accommodation within the main settlements. Locating additional facilities and services within the major centres of Wick and Thurso could help reverse this trend so that a higher proportion of people's daily needs could be within a shorter more sustainable journey.
- 2.10 Diversifying the economy is a key challenge especially when there is a tension between the tourism and renewable energy sectors. For example, assets such as the Flow Country world heritage site should attract more visitors but more onshore renewable energy development may compromise that draw.

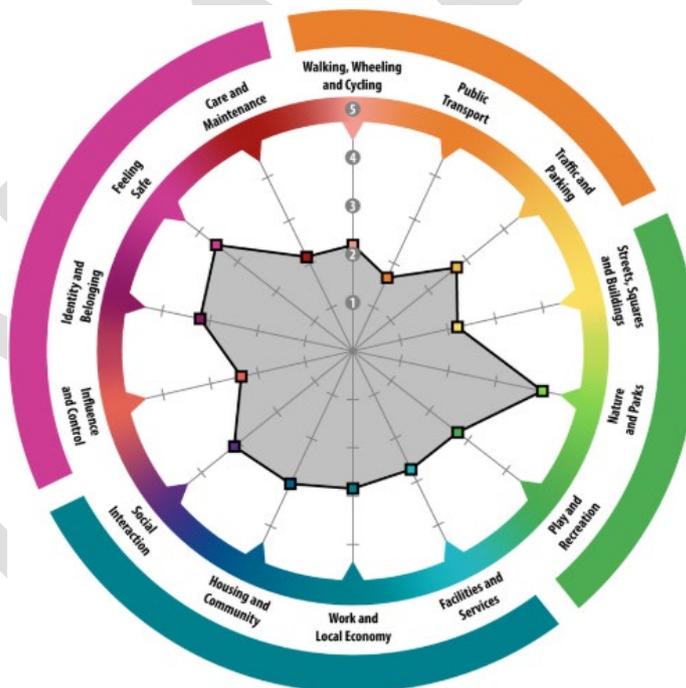


Figure 2:8 Caithness Place Standard Results

## Sutherland

- 2.11 Sutherland covers a large part of north Highland and is distinctly a county of two halves. Most settlement is concentrated within mid and east Sutherland closer to

the more productive agricultural land, a drier climate, more sheltered coastal ports and better transport connections along the A9 and Far North (rail) Line. North and west Sutherland is more remote, less settled, less connected and contains land less capable of productive cultivation. However, it does contain exceptional natural and cultural heritage and therefore sustains significant tourism-based employment. Aquaculture, crofting and deep sea fishing from ports at Lochinver and Kinlochbervie provide economic diversification. The lack of a critical mass local population means that facilities and services require a long and often unreliable journeys particularly by public transport. More positively, this fragility promotes better community and individual self-reliance and resilience.

2.12 North, west and parts of mid Sutherland have socio-economic fragility issues.

There is no practicable solution to geographic realities such as physical constraints and remoteness and therefore bolstering the principal settlements within the area and their digital and transport connectivity to other larger centres appears the best way forward. Resettlement of previously cleared glens has been suggested but will require a high level of public subsidy to make these areas suitable in employment and public service provision terms.

2.13 South and east Sutherland benefits from better connectivity. However, challenges such as revitalising the town centres of Brora, Dornoch and Golspie, addressing coastal/fluvial flood risk or tackling water and sewerage capacity issues remain.

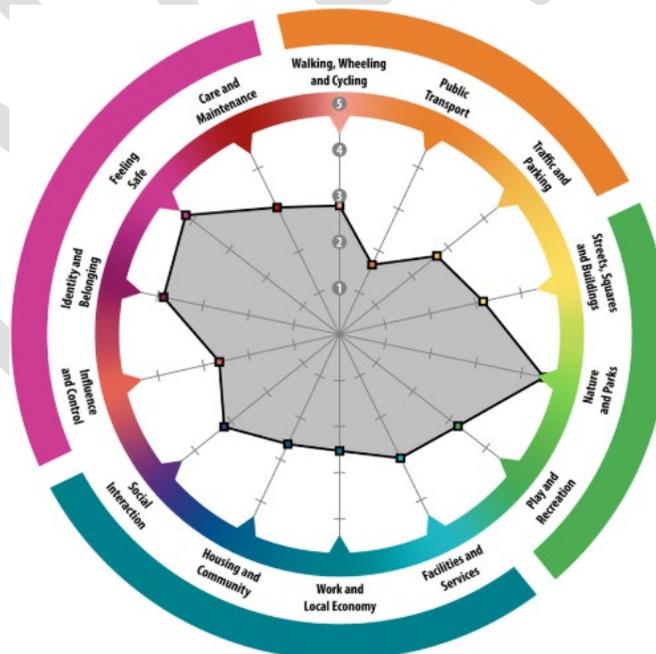


Figure 2:9 Sutherland Place Standard Results