

## What is a Masterplan Consent Area?

A Masterplan Consent Area (MCA) is a way to accelerate the delivery of a development site. It does this by focusing and coordinating community, developer, councillor, officer and agency input at an early stage.

An MCA is an optional legal power introduced by the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, available since December 2024 to allow a local council to accelerate the delivery of development. An MCA Scheme, if made, establishes the principle of development on the site and grants planning permission for specified types and forms of development within a specified area subject to specified conditions and exclusions.

## Why is the Council exploring potential Masterplan Consent Areas?

The principal reason to progress MCAs within Highland is to address presently unmet housing need and demand.

The Highland Housing Challenge was declared by the Highland Council on 27 June 2024 and set a housing target of 24,000 homes in the next 10 years. The Council confirmed the role of MCAs in meeting this target on 26 June 2025 via its approval of a Highland Housing Challenge Partnership Action Plan.

Against this target it is anticipated that only 14,920 housing units will be delivered in Highland over the next 10 years so there is projected shortfall of over 9,000 units over that period.

The Council's new Highland Local Development Plan will allocate new housing sites, however it will not be finalised until 2028 and not adopted until 2029, and subsequent planning permissions and completions will take at least 4 years thereafter.

MCAs can provide a shorter-term solution to provide additional deliverable housing sites. This will enable the Council to respond more quickly to newly emerging opportunities such as the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport project and to address other ongoing housing pressures such as long waiting lists for affordable housing.

Address ongoing housing pressures

Respond to projected shortfall of 9,000+ housing units

Provide additional deliverable housing sites

## Purpose of this event: providing feedback

At Stage 2, The Town and Country Planning (Masterplan Consent Areas) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 require the Council to "provide feedback to members of the public in respect of comments received by the planning authority" regarding possible proposals to make a masterplan consent area scheme.

During and following the first public event, Highland Council and the potential developer have received comments from members of the public, including Community Council(s), on the possible proposal for a Masterplan Consent Area. All feedback presented at this final event (for Stage 2) relate to comments received on or before 13 February 2026.

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### Today, you can provide your feedback via:

- Filling out a paper feedback form and posting in the black box
- Scanning this QR code and filling out the online feedback form

**The final deadline for comments in Stage 2 is 31 March 2026.**

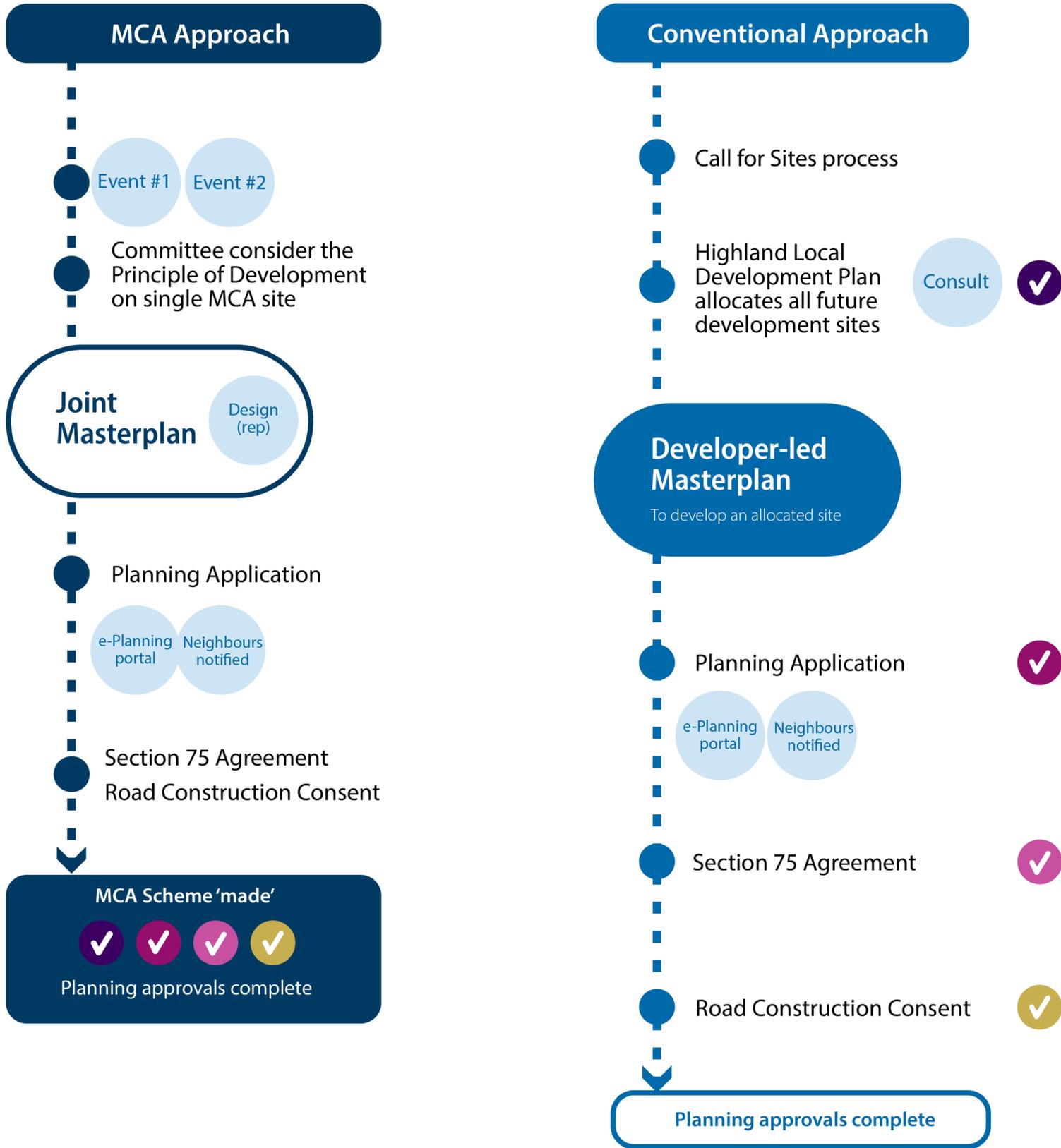
When submitting comments, please note:

- If you have already submitted comments, but have additional comments you are welcome to do so, up to 31 March 2026.
- It is not necessary to break up your comments into multiple entries. All comments submitted within the consultation period will be taken into consideration.
- Those not online who wish to fill in a paper comments form after this event can phone the Council's Service Centre on 01349 886608 and ask to speak to a member of the Development Plans Team.



# Approaches to seeking planning approval

There are two main ways developers can pursue approval for development in Highland: a conventional, sequential approach or a joint approach through a Masterplan Consent Area Scheme



# What is the process to establish a Masterplan Consent Area?

Scottish Government has approved and published legislation and guidance that set out how Masterplan Consent Areas should be consulted upon, prepared and approved.

- Town and Country Planning Act 1997 (as amended) Section 54 MCA Provisions
- The Town and Country Planning (Masterplan Consent Areas) (Scotland) Regulations 2024
- Masterplan Consent Areas Guidance, 2025

The guidance outlines seven key steps required to prepare and establish an MCA Scheme (below).

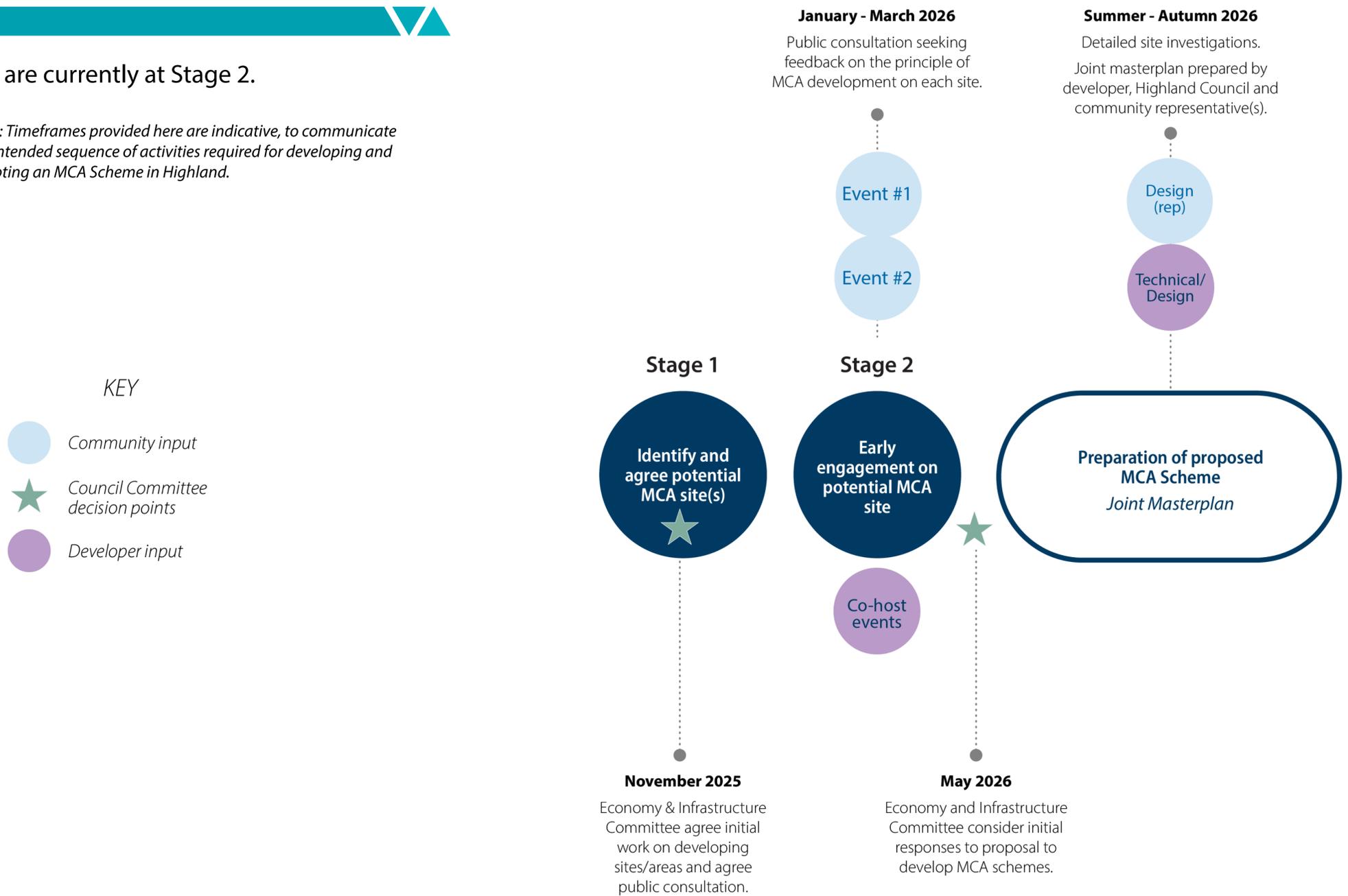
For Stage 1, in November 2025, the Highland Council decided to proceed with initial community consultation on the potential for an MCA at 3 locations.

- Essich Road (Inverness)
- Ardersier
- Embo (by Dornoch)

## Indicative timeline for MCA Scheme development

We are currently at Stage 2.

*Note: Timeframes provided here are indicative, to communicate the intended sequence of activities required for developing and adopting an MCA Scheme in Highland.*



## Summary of Engagement Feedback

The Highland Council and the potential developer partner Springfield undertook a community engagement event, on the site becoming a possible Masterplan Consent Area (MCA), consisting of a drop-in, presentation and roundtable on Wednesday 14 January 2026 at the Ardersier Memorial Hall. There were approximately 75 people at the drop-in session. It was estimated that 50 attended the evening roundtable, some of which attended in the afternoon also.

Comments were received in paper, email and via the online Consultation Portal from 73 individuals or groups, up to and including 13 February 2026.

The following panels outline the issues raised and indicates how concerns raised might be addressed if the MCA proceeds to Stage 3.

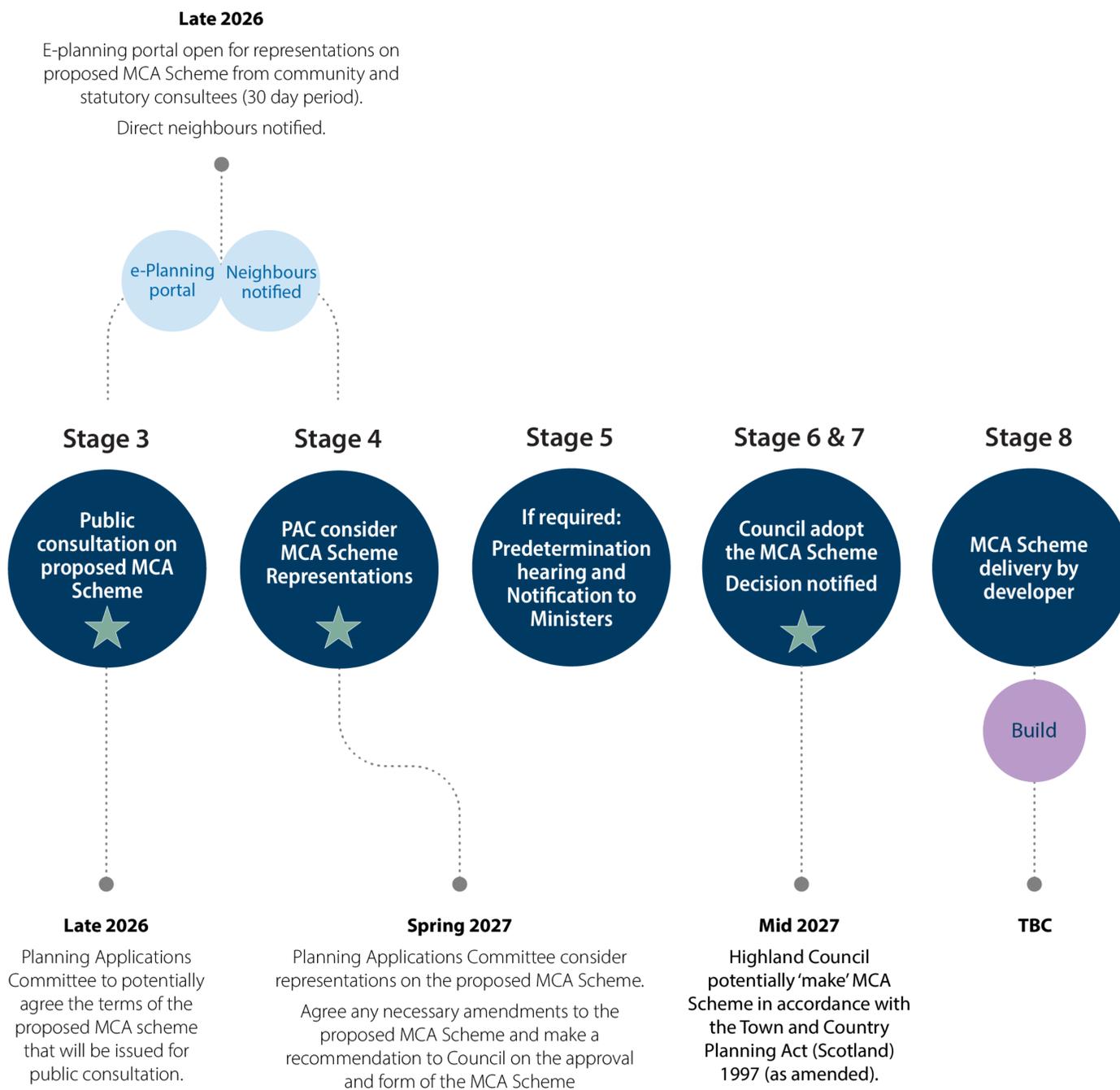
# When can community input to the MCA process?

At Stage 2, communities have the opportunity to provide engagement feedback on the potential MCA site. Further, the Community Council is a statutory participant at this stage, as per the MCA Regulations.

Between Stage 2 and 3, there will be a joint, collaborative masterplanning process with developers, the Council and community representation. The Council wishes to embed a community representative in the design team, with monthly involvement in the proposed MCA Scheme development.

At Stage 3, when the Proposed MCA Scheme is submitted to the Council, communities can provide further written feedback on the MCA Scheme, by way of representations.

At Stage 4, the Planning Applications Committee will consider these representations on the proposed MCA Scheme.



## Next Steps

The Economy & Infrastructure Committee meeting on 28 May 2026 will consider initial responses to each potential MCA scheme. Council officers will prepare a report for Committee which considers all public comments received up to 31 March 2026. This report will be published on the Council website in the Committee agenda.

If a potential MCA site is selected to progress to preparing a proposed MCA scheme, a joint masterplanning group will be established, including a community representative(s).

If a potential MCA site is not selected to progress at this committee, there is nothing to preclude a developer partner putting their site forward for consideration in the new Highland Local Development Plan.

**Initial responses to each potential MCA site will be considered on 28 May 2026**

## General opposition

### Summary of Issue

The majority of submissions oppose the proposal, viewing 600 homes as disproportionate to the size of a small conservation village, risking loss of rural identity, loss of village character, and overloading already stretched services and roads.

Other reasons include: that the Council are doing this just to make a profit; the perceived excessive scale of the development; the risks of the development all being borne by the community; the influx of more in-migrants which will upset the social balance of the community; the loss of rural village character; increased pollution; the loss of rural tranquility; the suburbanisation of the village into a dormitory of Inverness; and, the belief that local properties will be devalued.

Some respondents oppose the MCA site without stating reasons or suggest that housing should be accommodated elsewhere without defining that alternative location.

### Response:

Each Highland settlement has grown (outwards) over time if the economic and social imperative to live in that location has been maintained. In Highland terms, Ardersier is a large, established village close to the A96 Growth Corridor, which has seen (and will see) millions of pounds of investment in the airport business park, in sewerage capacity, in a new town at Tornagrain, at Ardersier Port, at a new railway station, and in dualling the A96.

Although the armed forces presence at Fort George is being reduced, alternative tourism-based employment may replace it. Similarly, Ardersier Port should create new, local employment. As such, it is well placed to accommodate further growth.

The Council is not supporting the MCA process to make a profit. Tax revenue and Scottish Government grant settlement monies don't cover the additional cost of the public service provision necessary to serve each additional person. Attracting new businesses to Highland can enhance the local tax base but not housing. However, most if not all political parties and all tiers of central and local government agree that there is a housing challenge, crisis or emergency. Current housing legislation intends that everyone should have access to housing regardless of their origin or family circumstances.

The Highland Council has identified the need for 24,000 new homes over the next decade to meet increased demand. The MCA site, if it proceeds, will be phased over many years allowing for staged improvements in infrastructure capacity and allowing time for new residents to be absorbed into and to play a productive role in the future of the community.

## General support

### Summary of Issue:

A number of local residents have expressed conditional support for new homes if infrastructure is delivered up front, design is sensitive, and benefits (schools, health, improved digital connectivity, active travel, allotments, woodland planting, community facilities) are secured and enforceable.

### Response:

The representations that offer conditional support for the proposal are welcomed. If the MCA proposal proceeds, then the Council looks forward to a constructive dialogue with community representatives to identify and secure improvements for the village.

## Ecology and biodiversity

### Summary of Issue:

Respondents believe there will be adverse effects from the development on protected habitats and species, notably badgers and bats. Also believe there will be irreversible high-quality habitat loss and severed wildlife corridors. Respondents seek early ecological surveys, biodiversity enhancement, woodland buffers and dark-sky sensitive lighting, with design that strengthens nature networks rather than fragments them.

### Response:

The MCA site is subject to **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** legislation. A combined screening and scoping request has been submitted to the Council but the developer partner has already voluntarily committed to produce a full EIA report and commissioned various surveys and reports in this regard.

The developer partner will produce an **Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA)** showing how development will affect habitats, species, designated sites and ecological processes. The EclA must also provide mitigation measures against any impacts identified.

The Council will require net biodiversity enhancement from the development which will almost certainly include the creation of new woodland habitat.

# MCA process

## Summary of Issue:

Many parties object to the use of the new MCA process for this site claiming that it is rushed, provides limited information, and dilutes local decision making and influence.

## Response:

The relevant primary and secondary MCA legislation has, deliberately, been written by Scottish Government to provide flexibility in how each council can implement the concept. Highland Council is an 'early adopter' piloting this approach. The Council accepts that any new approach offers less certainty to those familiar with established processes.

Information about the new MCA process and how the Council intends to apply it are provided on the Council's website, at public events and via Public Notices served on the relevant community councils. **Stage 1 & 2 of the MCA process is like the conventional local development plan (LDP) process** which decides upon the principle of the development, an indicative housing capacity and a list of developer requirements.

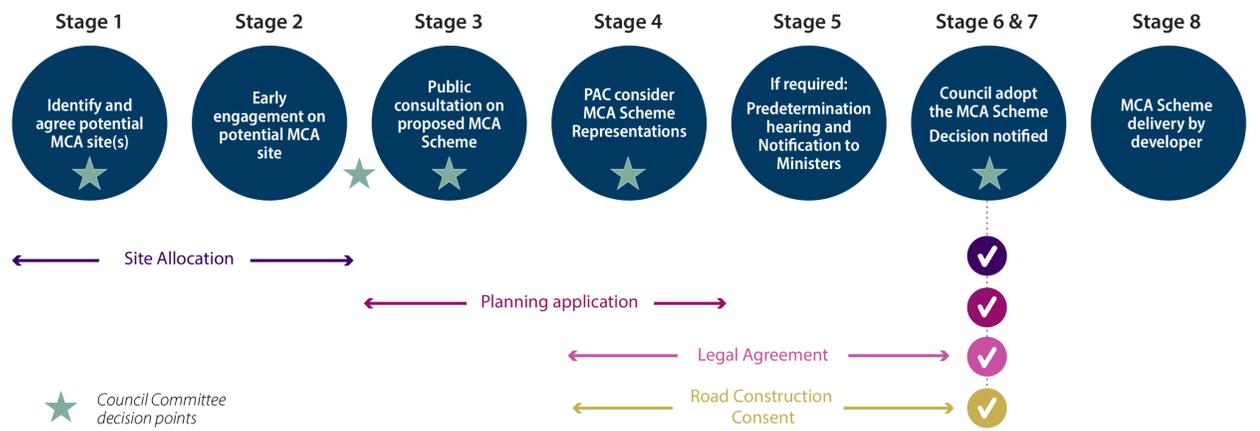
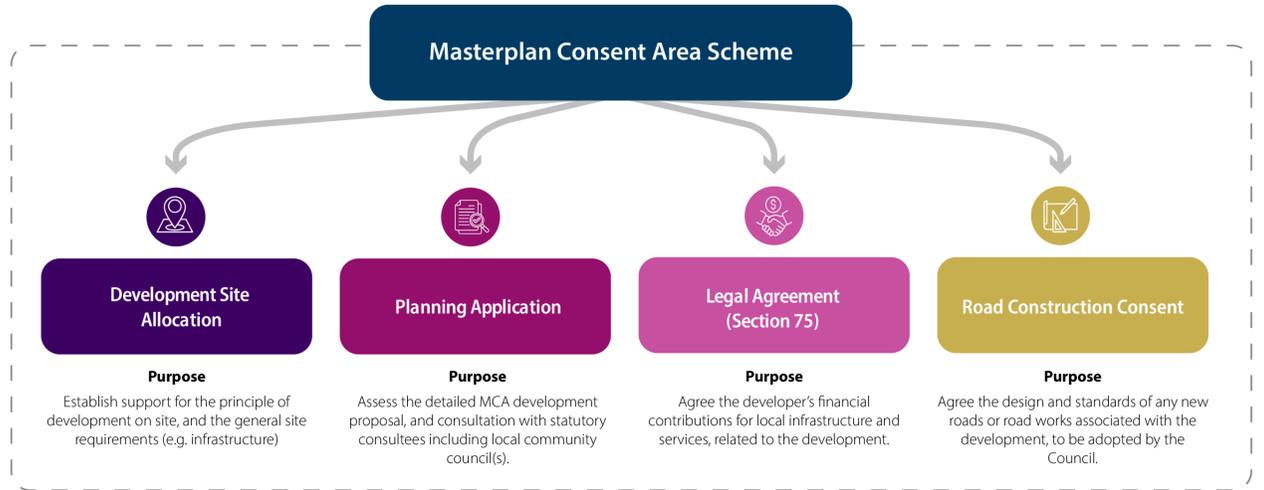
If confirmed in principle, then **the next stage is akin to a full planning application**. The MCA legislation mirrors conventional LDP and planning processes including opportunities for community input but attempts to do them within a more compressed timeframe.

**Local councillors are granted far more decision-making power in the MCA process.** The key decisions are made in the Highlands by people who live here. If the current possible MCA progresses beyond the next committee approval stage in May 2026 then it will be subject to three more Council committee approval stages. It is open to councillors at any of these 4 stages to abandon, amend or redefine the MCA Scheme.

The Public Notice advertising the Possible Proposal for an MCA Scheme was served on the relevant community council and placed on the Council's website on 5 January 2026. The closing date for comments in Stage 2 is 31 March 2026. **A consultation period of almost 3 months has been provided:** a month longer than the 2 months minimum required by statute.

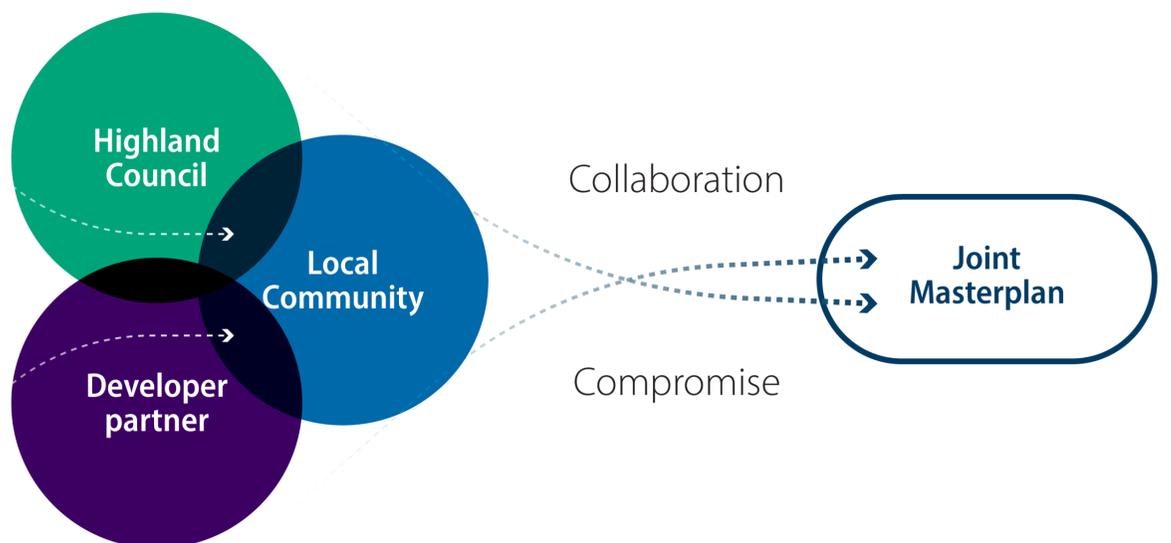
The MCA legislation and guidance require collaboration and compromise from all parties, including the community. It is unlikely that all the needs of each party will be met. The alternative is a conventional developer planning application over which the Council and the community may have less control.

At Stage 6, an MCA Scheme is adopted by Council. Highland Council intends that each MCA Scheme will include four elements conventionally used to approve development proposals.



Less Detail  
Low Certainty  
Less Commitment

Greater Commitment  
Greater Certainty  
Greater Detail



## School Capacity

### Summary of Issue

Most submissions raise concerns about school capacity and the impact of the additional children generated by up to 600 new homes on Ardersier Primary, local nursery school provision and Culloden Academy.

Contributors cite existing problems with the use of temporary classrooms/portakabins, loss of outdoor social space, large class sizes and subject reductions at secondary level.

Respondents want the impact on local schools assessed with different build rate assumptions and any necessary improvements funded and implemented.

### Response:

The latest published 2024/2025 school roll forecasts indicate Ardersier Primary School has a capacity for 150 pupils and a 2024/2025 roll of 96 pupils (64% occupancy). Without the MCA development, then the roll is projected to fall to under 50% occupancy from 2030 onwards. Culloden Academy had 1,124 pupils in 2024/2025 for a school with a capacity for 1,330 pupils (85% occupancy). Without the MCA development, then this roll is projected to decline to 78% occupancy by 2031.

As an example, if the MCA site was developed at 50 houses per year with completions and occupancy from 2028 then the primary school's 90% physical capacity would be forecast to breach from 2035 and its 100% capacity from 2037. Culloden Academy is not forecast to breach its 90% capacity over the next 15 years with this scale and rate of development of the MCA site.

The **Council will seek education developer contributions** from the MCA developer in line with its published policy and guidance. If the above phasing is implemented, then primary school contributions would be payable for house completions from 2035, and the Council's capital programme would need to be amended to identify an extension to the existing school or a new school site within Ardersier. **Contributions are sought, secured and enforced via a legal agreement** which would form part of the suite of documents that will comprise the final "made" MCA Scheme.

The Highland Council's Education team sets the physical capacity of each school based on national standards. Head teachers don't always agree with the methodology for the calculation of this capacity and believe that the more workable operational capacity should be lower. In terms of Culloden Academy's capacity and condition then demountable, other semi-permanent and modular unit accommodation has counted towards school capacity for at least the last 60 years in Scotland and wider UK. It may not be the perfect solution but offers a quicker, economically practicable way forward and offers accommodation of higher quality and condition than many existing schools in Highland particularly those that date from the Victorian era.

## Safer Routes to School

### Summary of Issue:

Existing problem of safer routes to school raised notably the lack of the promised school crossing on Nairn Road. Belief that road safety will be further compromised by more development and more vehicle trips.

### Response:

The developer will be required to produce a **Transport Assessment**. As with the conventional planning processes, for MCAs, the net additional infrastructure capacity impact of any development should be offset by the developer to the extent that is proportionate to that additional impact.

The Council will enforce any previous breach of planning control if a committed improvement has not been implemented.

## Local Employment

### Summary of Issue:

Respondents query why there should be more houses when there are few local jobs. They dispute that the Ardersier Port project will happen and that the suggested jobs will materialise.

### Response:

The future award of renewables sector contracts to Ardersier Port is an unknown issue at present but the site is very well suited to winning such contracts because it offers a very large, flat lay-down area adjacent to a very long quayside and the access channel has now been dredged. The port's current planning application's socio-economic assessment suggests between 300 and 3,000 jobs.

## Healthcare capacity

### Summary of Issue:

Residents report existing long waits for GP and dental appointments and pressure on Raigmore Hospital, warning that the development would exacerbate existing access and capacity issues. Request for a Health Needs Assessment with NHS Highland, early provision of a local health hub or expansion of the existing surgery, and binding phasing/occupancy triggers before homes are occupied.

### Response:

Current UK and Scottish planning system practice doesn't insist that sufficient capacity in all infrastructure and facility networks must exist or be provided first before development can be granted planning permission. Indeed, almost all areas of the UK have existing, unresolved deficiencies in terms of the adequacy of its infrastructure and facility networks. In Scotland, planning permissions are granted and appeal/court decisions are made on the simple basis that a developer commits to deliver or more usually provide financial contributions for other parties to deliver improvements to infrastructure capacity directly and proportionately related to the impact of its development. **The new MCA process will not deviate from this current, established, national approach.**

Therefore, for existing deficiencies in existing infrastructure networks then the relevant organisation is responsible. For example, NHS Highland for GP facilities, the Highland Council for local roads and education, Transport Scotland for trunk roads, and Scottish Water for the water and sewerage network. With continued public expenditure restraint, many existing infrastructure capacity issues are not being addressed.

Healthcare is an example where most councils do not seek developer contributions for the impact of new development because there is insufficient evidence of a direct causal connection between new development and the physical capacity impact on local healthcare facilities. Even if The Highland Council could justify health facility developer contributions the balance of monies would need to come from NHS Highland and its current capital programme cannot fund improvements to existing overstretched facilities such as at Culloden.

Despite these widespread existing constraints an embargo on new development in an area is not a practicable approach within the current Scottish planning system because applications will be allowed on appeal even if there are existing deficiencies in one or more infrastructure networks.

## Housing

### Summary of Issue:

Respondents question whether the proposals would meet local housing need, citing affordability barriers, prevalence of second homes/holiday lets, and requests for more social/affordable rental and downsizing options (e.g. bungalows).

Concerns are also expressed about build quality, heating/energy standards, accessibility standards, and the overall scale of the proposal relative to the size of the existing village.

### Response:

The 2022 census recorded Ardersier's population as 1,176 accommodated within 531 households. If taken forward and eventually completed, the maximum development would add is 600 households or an additional 1,200 persons at an average household size of 2 persons. This is a large-scale proposal that would be phased over many years. In Highland, typical large housing site completion rates are 25-40 homes per annum with phasing over at least 15 years.

Construction phase impacts would be minimised by the site layout, for example by siting the construction compound away from existing and new properties, creating a separate construction road access, and setting new development back from existing properties.

The housebuilder will be required to provide at least 25% of the homes to meet the Council's definition of affordable. The latest Scottish Building Standards require new homes to be accessible and adaptable with high levels of energy efficiency. Local affordable housing providers will influence the house types and sizes within the 25% to help address local need, but otherwise the developer will react to market demand on the types and sizes of the private homes provided. Social rented accommodation is secured as affordable in perpetuity.

## Archaeology and Conservation

### Summary of Issue:

Concerns that site is highly sensitive to adjoining development because it is adjacent or close to the Cromal Mount scheduled monument, historic boundary walls and markers, scheduled monument that has been linked to the Knights Templar and a conservation area.

Call for comprehensive archaeological assessment and for design to avoid overlooking/eroding the historic village character, with buffers and protection of key heritage assets.

### Response:

Ardersier Conservation Area was designated with effect from 31 May 1996 and will be a consideration during the later MCA process if it proceeds. Due to the difference in ground levels, intervisibility between the possible MCA site and the Conservation Area is not significant.

There are other closer built heritage features, such as the Cromal Mount Scheduled Monument and listed buildings, which will influence the design and layout of the site. Archaeological evaluation work is ongoing and it is expected that any significant results can inform the design and layout.

## Agricultural Land Quality and Disturbance to Farming Operations

### Summary of Issue:

Many highlight that the fields are prime agricultural land with ongoing farming value and raise food security concerns if lost to housing. Local farming interests concerned about new householders causing disturbance and impediment to existing farming operations and horse-riding routes.

### Response:

From a technical viewpoint, only 14.6% of land in the Highlands is developable.

The remaining 85.4% of land has several constraints preventing it from being built on. This ranges from the location of the land being too far from an adopted road, too steep, too high in altitude, at risk of flooding, or covered by a national or international heritage designation. Accordingly, choices for new development sites are very limited.

Most existing built development and large existing development plan allocations are on land of good agricultural quality because this land tends to be better drained, flatter and closer to existing settlements. Put simply, **there are insufficient, commercially viable alternative development sites in Highland to avoid building on prime farmland.**

The logical response is to maximise the development potential of good farmland: if it is developed, the development can reuse the quality soils within the site for landscaping and set-aside a portion of each site for community growing spaces or allotments. The prospective developer partner is trial pitting the site and will do a soils analysis of its quality. Anecdotal local evidence suggests the land is used for grazing livestock rather than for arable crop production.

## Sewerage capacity

### Summary of Issue:

Residents report that the sewerage system in the older, central parts of the village can't cope during storm events and that this will be worsened by the MCA site development.

### Response:

The MCA developer will be required to model the impact of the development on the existing water and sewerage networks. The development cannot and will not increase the volume and rate of surface water and into public sewer run-off from the site relative to pre-development conditions. There may be an opportunity to achieve net betterment relative to existing conditions.

## Health and Safety

### Summary of Issue:

Multiple submissions refer to the sandy raised beach geology which has a subsidence/landslip history, together with high radon and other contamination risks, arguing that these warrant independent ground investigations before any consent is given.

### Response:

The prospective developer partner is trial pitting the site which will give an indication of groundwater levels and the type of subsoils. A **Radon Risk Assessment** will also be undertaken.

The Council accepts that there have been landslips of the glacial raised beach escarpment in Highland (for example at Castle Stuart golf course) and that the increased frequency and intensity of storm events will magnify the risk of such occurring. An appropriate development setback from the top of the escarpment and planting to better bind soils at that location would be an appropriate design response.

## Local transport network capacity

### Summary of Issue:

Respondents report a lack of transport network capacity including: narrow B-roads (B9039/B9006/B9092); weak/weight-restricted bridges; difficult to access A96 junctions; unreliable public transport connectivity; and, narrow single-track roads regarded as unsafe and unsuitable for construction traffic and 1,000+ extra cars.

Respondents request improved safer routes to school, crossings on Nairn Road and Station Road, segregated walking/cycling links to Nairn, Inverness and Inverness Airport Railway Station, along with better public transport integration. Desire to keep the road to the cemetery open but also concerns about the Fulmar Crescent junction. One person requested traffic calming measures on the High Street.

### Response:

The MCA, if it proceeds to its next detailed planning stage, will require a developer-produced **Transport Assessment** (TA) which will assess traffic impacts and any necessary mitigation on the local road network. This will include consultation with Transport Scotland.

The capacity of the road between Ardersier and Ardersier Port is already being assessed. Subject to the results of that assessment then selective local road widening may be required to allow large commercial and farm vehicles to pass each other. This would either be carried out and funded by the developer or funded by the developer through contributions and carried out by the Council.

In terms of the A96 dualling scheme, there has been a positive recent Scottish Government announcement regarding its progress. The TA will also assess and, if appropriate, confirm the need for other transport mitigation including active travel route improvements.

The Council and developer partner are open to community views and discussion on if and how the access road to the cemetery and its junction with Fulmar Crescent are treated. Different local opinions have been raised on this issue.

## Developer

### Summary of Issue:

Respondents query the developer partner's reputation and track record with a previous development in the village and elsewhere.

### Response:

A planning authority must assess each planning case on its individual merits. It cannot prejudge a case simply because of the name of the applicant or developer. Instead, successful development outcomes depend on including the mechanisms to secure and enforce a high quality of development and the infrastructure and other improvements assessed as necessary to mitigate its impact.

The MCA process allows the use of mechanisms, at least equivalent to the existing planning application process, and could, with community involvement, go further in better holding the council and developer partner to account for commitments made.

## Groundwater flooding

### Summary of Issue:

Existing flooding from groundwater sources is reported. Respondents reference there are numerous springs, wells and a historic reservoir on the raised beach escarpment that flood the village centre including the High Street. There are also references to past landslips. Submissions call for independent Drainage Impact, Flood Risk and Surface Water strategies (incl. SUDS) before any consent, to avoid redirecting water toward existing homes and streets.

### Response:

SEPA and the Council's Flood Team have no record or other evidence of groundwater flooding in this area, but this does not disprove its existence. The developer partner will be required to commission **Drainage Impact and Flood Risk Assessments**, which will identify the need for and most appropriate type of mitigation measures.

## Land ownership

### Summary of Issue:

Respondents question whether the MCA could be developed if the prospective developer doesn't own all of the site and there is a crofting interest.

### Response:

A planning application applicant does not need to own a site to submit a planning application on it. The Council simply need an assurance that the prospective developer has sufficient control to implement the development, including for example, public road connections. The developer partner has demonstrated sufficient control.

Part of the MCA site is in crofting tenure. If the MCA Scheme is ultimately made (at Stage 7), the Crofting Commission would make a separate decision whether to decroft the land. Typically, in Highland, decrofting applications are allowed if the planning decision is positive.

## Community wealth building

### Summary of Issue:

Several submissions reference Scotland's Community Wealth Building agenda, arguing the proposal would extract value to shareholders while offering limited local benefit. Requests include stronger commitments to affordable homes for local/key workers, local procurement, and community benefit structures.

### Response:

At least 25% of the homes will meet the Council's definition of affordable homes. The allocation policies of Highland affordable housing providers can support those with a local family or employment connection.

There are now national and Highland community wealth building policies which will be applied to this MCA proposal.

Community benefit payments are a separate matter and, if appropriate, then are negotiated between the developer partner and the community.

## Effect on recreation

### Summary of Issue:

Respondents fear the loss of or reduction in quality of informal open space and valued walking routes (e.g., Sandy Brae, the circuit to Fort George, Carse Woods). Suggestions include allotments, green buffers along the ridge, upgraded core paths and a community/sports hub delivered early and linked to active travel routes.

### Response:

The MCA offers the opportunity for additional, publicly accessible greenspace and new walking routes, with views not presently available to the general public, to be created. A developer cannot be required to remedy existing deficiencies in active travel and core path networks unless the new development exacerbates those deficiencies. It would be appropriate for the layout of the development to avoid or minimise its impact on the views from and amenity quality of existing core paths.