



Tongue, Melness & Skerray Local Place Plan 2025-2030

Tongue, Melness & Skerray Community Council
[Month] 2025

Table 1. Local Place Plan Requirements

	Registration Requirement		Where Found	Additional Information
1	A copy of the finalised Local Place Plan (LPP).	✓	This document	
2	Confirmation of the Community Body’s status.	✓		The Community Body submitting this LPP is Tongue Community Council.
3	Contact details for organisation	✓		Colin McDonogh, Secretary, TMSCC tmscc@btinternet.com
4	A map of the boundary of the Local Place Plan.	✓	Page <u>7</u>	The boundary of the plan is contiguous with the boundaries of Tongue Community Council area.
Core Content				
5	A statement explaining how the Local Place Plan has regard to National Planning Framework and Local Development Plan, how the proposals in the LPP align with, or differ from, the relevant policies in the LDP and why you consider the LDP should be amended in light of this	✓	Pages <u>4, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 47</u> and <u>48</u>	
6	Statement of proposals for the development or use of land or buildings	✓	Pages <u>19, 22, 24, 25, 27</u>	43 proposals are laid out.
7	A map with a numbered legend showing where proposals for development or use of land or buildings are located	✓	Pages 29 - 44	16 maps with a numbered legend are included. Appendices 2,3 and 4 are maps showing settlement development boundary only.
Evidence of Compliance with the Requirements of Regulation 4				
8	Before submission of your plan, make sure you have sent an Information Notice and copy of the proposed Local Place Plan to all relevant councillors and Community Councils.	✓	Completed	The information Notice period ran from 29.12.25 until 26.1.26. For copy of Information Notice, see Appendix 6.
9	Records of when and to whom the Information Notice was sent	✓		The Information Notice was sent to Cllr Hugh Morrison, Cllr Marianne Hutchison, Cllr Michael Baird, BASCC, and Durness CC.
10	Evidence of level of community support for the Local Place Plan and how the Community Body reached that view.	✓	Pages <u>13, 15, 16</u> and <u>18</u>	TMSCC is confident that the proposals contained in the Local Place Plan are supported by the majority of those consulted. During the consultation process any objections were reconciled and there was no registered opposition to any of the proposals.
11	Copies of additional documents as appropriate	✓	Appendices 1 - 7	

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Acknowledgements

Preparation of the Local Place Plan was facilitated on behalf of the local community by Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council

Photo Credit:
Gary Macleod
Stuart Mingham
Nick Law



Introduction

Local Place Plans are a key mechanism for community engagement in the planning system, providing a bottom-up perspective that complements the strategic direction set out in Local Development Plans. Under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, Local Place Plans are recognised as formal expressions of community intent, and their integration into the development planning process is encouraged to ensure that local voices shape future land use and development.

This Local Place Plan (LPP) offers a spatial profile of the main settlement and larger townships of Tongue, Melness and Skerray focusing on community aspirations and land use opportunities. Designed to guide development over the next 5 to 10 years, the Local Place Plan extends until approximately 2030.

Rooted in consultations with local residents and stakeholders, this plan reflects views gathered through previous research by North West 2045 (NW2045) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) in 2022 and community engagement in 2025. It addresses key issues highlighted by residents. It aims to preserve what we value most about our community while shaping it for a better future.

The Plan is a statement of our aspirations that focuses on long-term strategic outcomes for the area and provides a basis to inform the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) from a community perspective.

The Local Place Plan offers several recommendations for the Highland Council to consider as it develops the upcoming Highland Local Development Plan. These recommendations reflect the aspirations and priorities of the local community and are intended to influence spatial planning decisions in alignment with national and regional policy frameworks. We hope the Highland Council will find our recommendations, along with those from other communities, useful in shaping the Highland Local Development Plan. This is a valuable opportunity to align planning policy across different levels to better address key issues affecting communities throughout the Highlands, such as providing affordable housing for working people and improving access to services, facilities, and opportunities.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our suggestions further and look forward to hearing how the Highland Council intends to incorporate them.

Regard for NPF4

The Plan has regard for the [National Planning Framework 4](#) (NPF4) specifically resonating with the NPF4 policies of Rural Housing and Rural Revitalisation and relevant local development plans. Please see pages 18,19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 47 and 48 where our LPP proposals align with, or differ from, the relevant policies and development proposals in NPF4 and relevant Local Development Plans. (Our LPP connects to Scotland's National Performance Framework, focusing on improving outcomes to improve wellbeing.)

Regard for Local Development Plan and Masterplan

The Plan has regard for the current Local Development Plan for the Local Place Plan Area which is comprised of two current adopted Local Development Plans, the Highland-wide Local Development Plan (HwLDP) (2012) and the Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) (2018). It also has regard for the previous Community Plan: Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Plan (2019). The Local Place Plan builds on the consultation carried out for, and should be seen as an update for, the Tongue, Melness and Skerray Masterplan (2022). As in the Masterplan, the present consultation highlights the need for allocated areas for sustainable housing and to address the need for increased opportunities for commercial development and the creation of jobs.

The key priorities set out in the LPP are therefore similar to those in the Masterplan. Several have specific spatial proposals which could be incorporated into the HLDP:

- Develop affordable new homes to meet local present need and future demand, to enable people to stay locally and to sustain our communities, while ensuring that new housing is appropriately designed to fit the character of rural communities and surrounding landscape. The LPP identifies 13 sites which could be allocated for new homes in the HLDP, located within existing settlement boundaries or located on individual crofts, promoting “local living/20 Minute Neighbourhoods”
- Future development of the area to promote local living. In this regard, alongside the identification of new homes to sustain the local population, the LPP focuses on the provision of services and facilities in the local area. Spatial proposals identified which could be included in the HLDP include sites for a childcare facility, Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) and a children’s woodland activity area, proposals which would result in the area becoming a more attractive place to live in the longer term.
- Support and participate in a review of commercial assets to identify resources that have spare capacity that can be repurposed. Several sites have been identified in consultation with local landowners and businesses.
- To promote “local living/20 Minute Neighbourhoods” through the creation of local jobs.
- Promote opportunities for new industries including through improvements in local infrastructure.
- To mitigate climate change through the promotion of new, low carbon industries in the community.


Other suggestions from the consultation exercise which were not linked to any particular sites in the area but which align with NPF4 policies for example Policy 15 local living/20 minutes neighbourhoods, Policy 24 - roll-out of digital infrastructure and Policy 23 - providing opportunities for exercise were as follows:

- Improved transport links
- Improved broadband
- Improved mobile phone coverage
- Safe dog walking areas
- More paths
- Community growing areas
- Natural burial grounds
- Hub for visiting services eg vet, hairdresser
- Developing a local hotel which is currently up for sale as a community owned premises

The Local place Plan supports community action, providing evidence for funding bids and buildson existing achievements and opportunities for sustainable development.

The development of any of the proposals depend on many factors including available funds, resources, and further engagement. It is acknowledged that consultation and agreement with land and property owners is a prerequisite for any development on their land or property.

The Area



The Local Place Plan covers the whole of the Community Council Area, which is bounded to the west by the Mhoine, to the south by Ben Hope and Ben Loyal, to the east by the River Borgie and to the north by the North Atlantic Coast.

There is a distance by road of approximately 28km from West Strathen south to Tongue and east to Modsary and Skerray, and then south to Borgie. The residents of each township identified the “settlement development boundary” of their individual settlements to place them within the Local Living and Rural Development context and with regard to the principle of Local Living.

All three areas have their own Village Halls. Tongue has a Community Health and Wellbeing Hub, the Kyle Centre, owned and run on behalf of the community by North Coast Connection, a registered charity. The Kyle Centre is available for hire both privately and by community groups. The local Community Transport organisation, Transport for Tongue Ltd, also has its base in Tongue. The area has a strong voluntary sector: both these organisations have evolved as the community responded to the loss of social care services in the area and the lack of public transport respectively. The nearest train station is in Lairg, 36 miles from Tongue. The nearest major town is Inverness which is over 90 miles from Talmine.

The area has a strong Gaelic heritage which is reflected in many of the place names of the area. Of the total population at the last census, almost 9% have some skills in Gaelic, which is significantly higher than the Scottish average.

The Area-wide map (figure 1) also shows the areas covered by each of the detailed settlement Insert Maps which were displayed as part of the community consultation events.

Tongue

This is the largest of the three communities in terms of population compared with Melness and Skerray, has a clearly defined “town centre” and is where the health centre and local primary school are located. Two of the biggest hotels in the region are in Tongue. The Tongue Hotel is owned by Highland Coast Hotels Ltd. and is a part of what the group describes as its “Collection”. The Ben Loyal Hotel is independent and privately owned, while Lundies House is operated as a luxury boutique hotel by Wildland Ltd who are a large landowner to the south and west of the community council area. Wildland Ltd have also financed the retention of the local shop and attached Post Office. Tongue is emerging as a centre for Wildland’s development in both leisure and tourism.

The village of Tongue lies within the Tongue Estate, which is privately owned by the Sutherland family. Tongue Grazings Committee also covers Rhitongue, Scullomie, Blandy, Dalcharn, Strath Tongue and Coldbackie, to the east of the village.



Figure 1

Melness

Melness identifies as a large crofting community and the crofting land, excluding private dwellings with appropriate title deeds, is owned by the Melness Crofters Estate (MCE). The village consists of 15 townships including West Strathen, Achininver, East Strathen, Midfield, Portvasgo, Achnahuaigh, Talmine, Midtown, Skinnet and Achuvoldrach. There are approximately 48 croft tenants and 5 bought crofts and approximately 8 active crofters. There is one Grazings Committee, and one common grazing. Melness has a community Centre, a Post Office and shop.

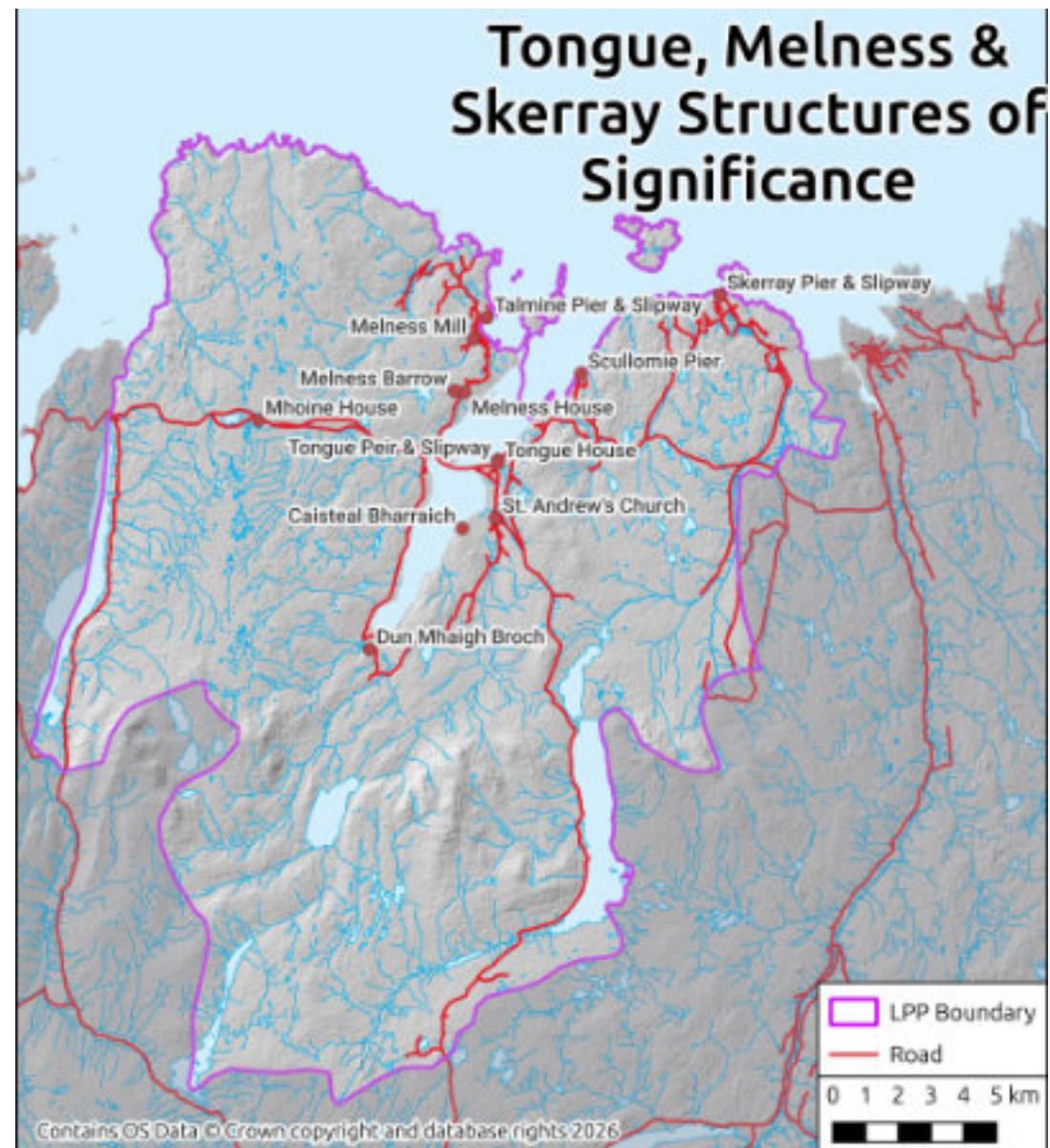
Skerray

Skerray is the smallest of the three communities in terms of population. There are approximately 26 crofting households across the two townships of Skerray and Borgie. The townships include Modsary, Strathan, Skerray, Lamigo, Torroy, Tubeg, Clashaidy, Achnabat, Achtoty, Torrisdale, Aird, Strathenbeg and Borgie. This community is part of the Tongue Estate with the vast majority of the land area being subject to crofting tenure. Skerray and Borgie have their own Grazings Committees. The local hotel, The Borgie Lodge Hotel is privately owned. The Post Office in Skerray closed earlier this year.

Structures of Significance

There are over 384 Historic Environment Scotland recognised sites including 123 scheduled monuments and the structures within the area that are of particular significance to the community are:

- Caisteal Bharraich (Castle Varrich)
- Tongue House
- Dun Mhaigh broch
- Melness Mill
- Piers & Slipways at Tongue, Scullomie, Skerray and Talmine
- Melness House
- Mhoine House
- Melness Barrow
- St. Andrews Church



Designated Areas

Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council has an area of approximately 42,573ha of which 33,480ha (78.6%) are areas with one or more designation (*Table 2*). These designations are Sites of Scientific Interest and National Scenic Areas designated by NatureScot and Scenic Landscape Areas designated by Highland Council and National Trust of Scotland Conservation Agreements. Part of the UNESCO Flow Country World Heritage site (FCWH) is within the community council area and is also included in the map: Tongue is a key location in the FCWH with its proximity to A'Mhoine - the long stretch of bog between the Kyle of Tongue to the east and Loch Hope to the west. A small section of the community council area lies within the UNESCO North West Highlands Geopark but the whole community council area is a gateway area to the Geopark.

Table 2. List of Designated Sites within Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council Area.

Designated Location	Type	Total Area (ha)	Area in Tongue MS CC (ha)
Kyle of Tongue	NSA	24,496	18,743
A'Mhoine	SSSI	5,995	5,995
Aird Torrisdale	SSSI	135	135
Bad na Gallaig	SSSI	4,719	442
Ben Hope	SSSI	3,028	1,251
Ben Hutig	SSSI	2,695	2,695
Ben Loyal	SSSI	4,339	4,339
Carn a' Mhadaidh	SSSI	66	66
Druim na Coibe	SSSI	1,142	1,142
Eilean nan Ron	SSSI	175	175
Inverhope	SSSI	48	48
Loch Meadie Peatlands	SSSI	6,215	3,595
Syre Peatlands	SSSI	3,169	2
West Borgie	SSSI	2,199	2,160
River Borgie	SSSI	34	33
Tongue (Coastal Strip)	NTS CA	1,106	1,106
Eriboll East & Whiten Head	SLA	5,999	1,657
A'Mhoine	FCWH	42,438	21,719

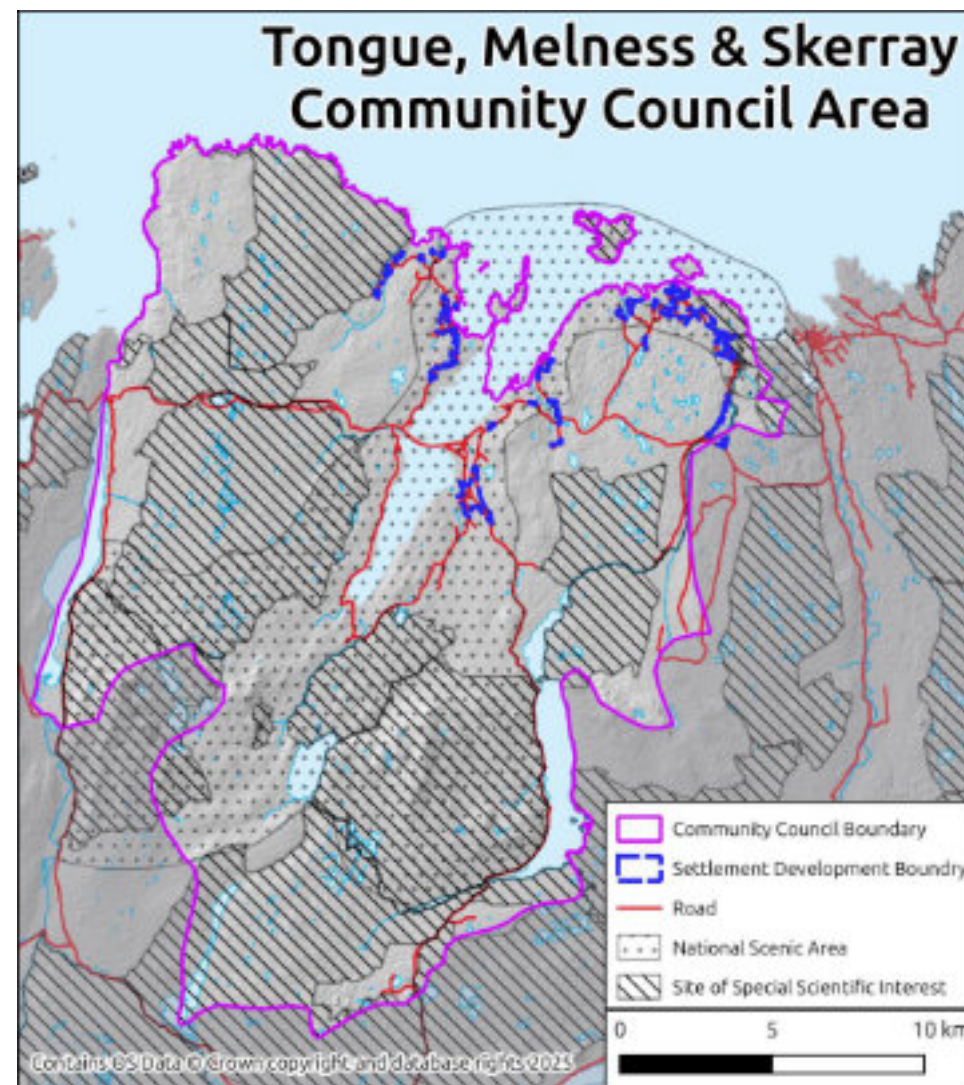


Figure 2

Fragile Community

An aerial photograph of a coastal village in a rugged landscape. The foreground shows a sandy beach and rocky shore meeting the sea. The middle ground features a small cluster of white buildings with dark roofs, surrounded by green fields and rolling hills. In the background, there are more hills and mountains under a dramatic sky with large, colorful clouds. The overall scene is serene and remote.

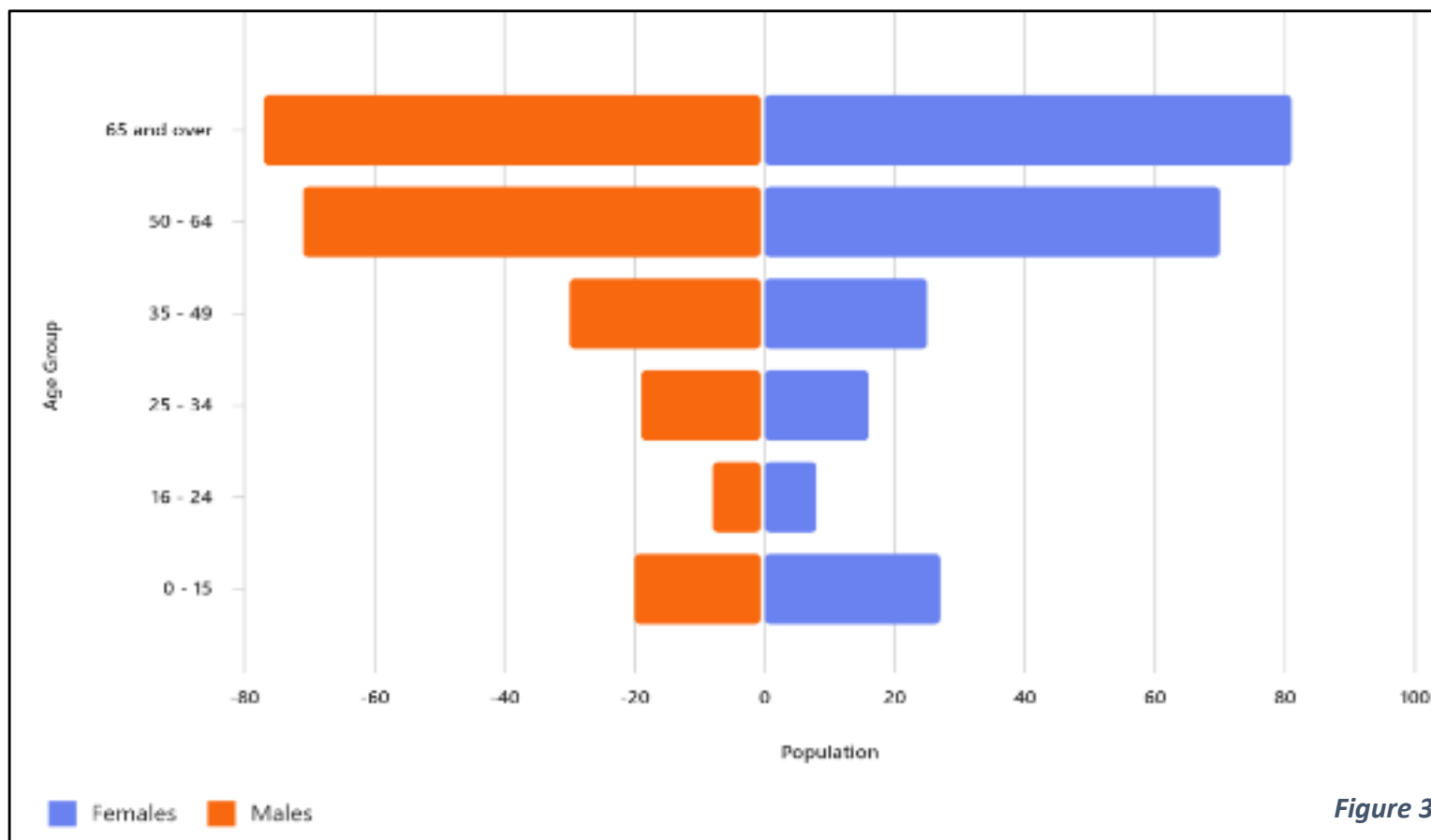
The classification of Highland Fragile Communities has been carried out using the Highland Fragile Communities Tool, which assesses 2011 Data Zones based on four key criteria: population, dependency ratio, employment, and housing.

The Tongue, Melness & Skerry Community Council area is partially covered by two Data Zones:

- **Sutherland North and West – 02** (Tongue & Bettyhill), which meets the **Fragile Community Generous Criteria**.
- **Sutherland North and West – 03** (Durness & Hope), which meets the **Fragile Community Strict Criteria**.

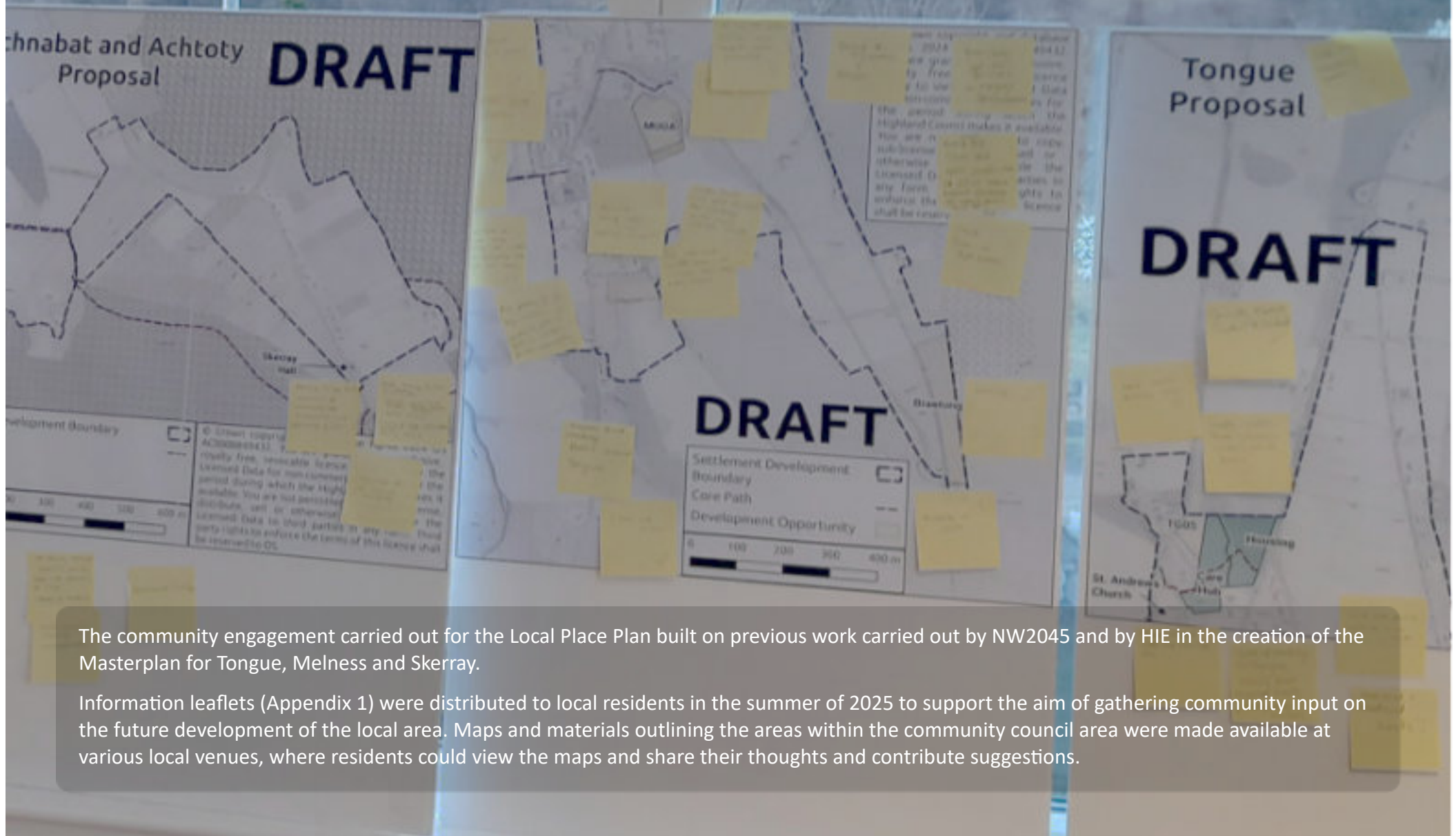
It is important to note that the Data Zone Sutherland North and West – 02 also includes parts of the Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra Community Council area, which has experienced a population increase between 2011 and 2022.

However, demographic analysis of the Tongue, Melness & Skerry Community Council area reveals a **regressive or negative growth population pyramid** (Figure 3), indicating a high dependency ratio and declining working-age population.



In light of these demographic challenges and the classification of the relevant Data Zones, we respectfully request that the **Tongue, Melness & Skerry Community Council** be formally recognised as a **Fragile Community**.

Community Engagement



The community engagement carried out for the Local Place Plan built on previous work carried out by NW2045 and by HIE in the creation of the Masterplan for Tongue, Melness and Skerray.

Information leaflets (Appendix 1) were distributed to local residents in the summer of 2025 to support the aim of gathering community input on the future development of the local area. Maps and materials outlining the areas within the community council area were made available at various local venues, where residents could view the maps and share their thoughts and contribute suggestions.

Community members were also invited to participate by completing a survey, which was accessible both in hard copy and online, via a QR code and direct links provided in the leaflet and on social media. Additionally, individuals had the option to request a face to face or telephone discussion to share their views in more detail. All responses were treated as confidential.

Considerable efforts were therefore made to ensure engagement from all areas and sections of the community. For example, the maps were displayed for several weeks at Skerray Hall and conversations held with those coming into the hall for a well-attended weekly community cafe. The maps were also displayed at Melness Hall and at the Kyle Centre in Tongue. This enabled members of the community attending events at the Kyle Centre such as the weekly meet and eat, bi-monthly fellowship services, numerous community group meetings and parents of children attending the weekly After School Club were able to view the maps and make comments and suggestions.

At a public consultation event held on 25th September at the Kyle Centre, proposals which had been suggested in the surveys were added to the maps and those attending were encouraged to give their feedback and make further suggestions. An artist's impression of the proposed MUGA and development proposals from Melness Crofter's Estate were also displayed at the event. The maps and drawings were then made available at the local Harvest Festival on 27th September with representatives from the community council present to invite further comment.

Fifty online and paper survey responses were received, equivalent to responses of over 11% of the population of the community council area, but a significant number of those who came along to events where the maps were displayed, and made suggestions, said they had not completed a survey, therefore the actual level of engagement was considerably higher than this.

Meetings were also held with stakeholders such as local landowners, businesses and key individuals. The community council is very grateful to the neighbouring landowners who engaged with the Local Place Plan in identifying a considerable number of sites for possible housing or economic development.



LOCAL PLACE PLAN



CONSULTATION EVENT

Have your say!
Shape the future of
Tongue, Melness and Skerray

Kyle Centre, Tongue
25th September
2-4pm - 5-7pm

Please come along to discuss your ideas with us.

Whether you have shared your thoughts already (via our online and hard copy surveys) or have yet to take part, please attend this important opportunity to build a brighter future with others.

Every voice strengthens our vision.
Together, we can meet today's challenges.



What is a Local Place Plan?
The Local Place Plan will build on the priorities of the IMR (2016-2021).
The will focus on:
- Housing & Jobs
- Local Environment & Public Spaces
- Sustainable Growth

Your Local Place Plan will be taken forward by Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council

Community Infrastructure Issues

The frequency of the issues arising from the community survey is illustrated in the Word Cloud (Figure 4) and the top issues tabulated below (Table 3).




Figure 4

Table 3. Responses to LPP Questionnaire for Infrastructure Improvements

Issue	% Rate Response
Increase availability of low cost housing	76%
Expansion of public Transport Services	76%
Nearer sport and leisure facilities	70%
More diverse childcare options	60%
Better traffic Mgmt including Parking & Signage	48%
Spaces to Gather	6%
Improved Broad Band	4%
Localised food production	4%
Retirement Village	4%

It can be seen that the highest percentage responses were received for priorities which were also highlighted in the Masterplan: housing, transport, sport and leisure and childcare. Local Place Plans focus on potential areas where new developments can be placed within the community. The infrastructure issues of the location for potential housing, sport and leisure facilities and better parking and signage are addressed in subsequent sections.

Homes



We support the construction of new homes in appropriate locations, built to environmentally sustainable standards. The community faces significant challenges due to an aging population and declining school enrolment, which threaten its long-term sustainability. As previously identified (Tongue, Melness and Skerry Community Plan 2019) there remains an urgent need for various types of housing to attract new residents to Tongue, Melness and Skerry, which will boost the local population and meet the forecasted requirements of staff for new developments such as the new care facility and Hope Lodge.

The questionnaire asked, if housing is an issue, what types of housing would people like to see developed. Of fifty respondents, 98% responded positively to the development of new housing with 49% identifying housing for young families as the clear priority. Similarly, 76% of respondents identified that low-cost housing is a priority.

Affordable Housing

The 2022 Census noted that within the Civil Parish of Tongue boundary, of all the resident households, 22% of the houses were rented, of which 14% were social rented accommodation (Figure 5). The amount of rented accommodation is less than the average for the Highland Council area.

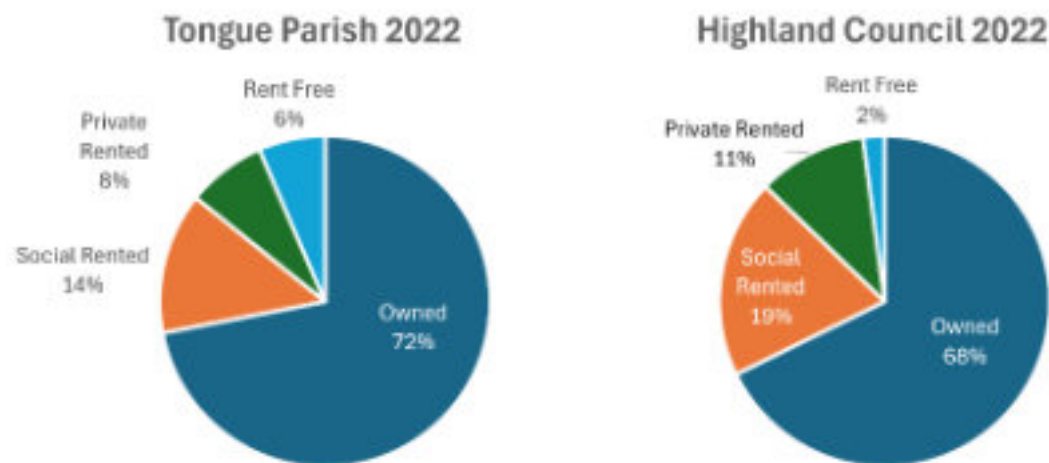


Figure 5

areas thus giving consideration to existing settlement pattern; Policy 16 - improves affordability and choice and addresses identified gap in provision; Policy 17 - supports and sustains existing fragile communities and supports identified local housing outcomes, reuses vacant building, re-instates a former dwelling house and Policy 29 - Proposals relate well to the existing settlements and would allow residents ease of access to local facilities.

The proposals also align with the Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) vision and the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan (HOIP) framework.

If you believe housing is an issue in your area, what types of housing would you like to see developed?

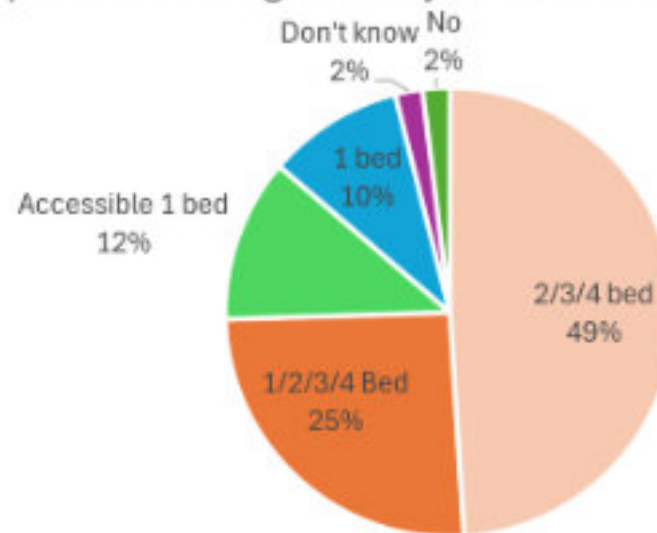


Figure 6

Potential Housing plots in Tongue, Melness and Skerryay

The Local Place Plan consultation identified 13 potential plots of land for housing with a cumulative area of 9.33ha within the settlements. The area and location of each of these plots and their alignment with current policies are listed in Table 4.

These proposals align with several NPF4 Policies including Policy 9 - sustainable reuse of brownfield land including vacant and derelict land and buildings; Policy 15 - contributes to local living: within settlement boundary and Policy 29 - Proposals relate well to the existing settlements and would allow residents ease of access to local facilities.

Table 4. List of Potential Housing Plots in Tongue, Melness and Skerray

Map and Item Number	Approx Area(h)	Location
Tongue 3	1.42	TG02
Tongue 5	0.03	Small plot east of Loyal Terrace
Tongue 6	1.46	East side of A836, extending from 42 Braetongue south to Radio Station
Tongue Mains 1	0.2	South of Eastwood, east of A838
Tongue 10		Wildland proposal
Deanside		Wildland proposal
East Strathen, Midfield, Portvasgo & Achnahuaigh 1	0.15	North of 1 Achnahauigh
Talmine 2		Teacher's old house next to Melness Hall
Talmine 3		Nurse's old house
Talmine 4	0.3	North of Old Manse, Talmine
Midtown & Skinnet 1	1.16	MU1
Midtown & Skinnet 2	0.88	East Of Cor-An-Easan 292
Airdtorrisdale & Torrisdale 1	0.15	Skerray Free Church

Services and Facilities



Potential Locations



Figure 7

The local Place Plan process identified 12 sites which could be developed in line with the following NPF4 policies: Policy 11- Rural Development (supporting a sustainable community childcare is considered as being a positive contribution to community resilience); Policy 14- Supporting Health Wellbeing and Equality: Policy 15 - local living and 20-minute neighbourhood; Policy 18 - contributes to infrastructure; Policy 21 - Community wealth building (the MUGA will create good quality provision for play, outdoor recreation and relaxation for people of all ages); Policy 23 - proposal will have a positive effect on health through providing opportunities for exercise; Policy 25 - Community wealth building, improving community resilience, increasing spending within communities and supporting community led proposals; Policy 27- Infrastructure and Services and Policy 30 - LDPs should support the recovery, growth and long-term resilience of the tourism sector. The spatial strategy should identify suitable locations that reflect opportunities for tourism development by taking full account of the needs of communities, visitors, the industry and the environment.

Table 4. List of potential locations for services and facilities

Map and Item Number	Approx area (ha)	Location, comments	Alignment with policies
Tongue 2	0.34	Childcare facility (Previously identified in CaS Plan as potential site for housing)	NPF4 Policies 11, 14, 15, 27
Tongue 7	1.19	Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) adjacent to Tongue Primary School	NPF4 Policies 14, 15, 21, 30 Also aligns HOIP Community Safety and Resilience outcome.
Tongue 8	1.58	Kirkiboll Wood Children’s play area	NPF4 Policies 21, 23 and 30 Aligns with HOIP Community Safety and Resilience outcome.
Tongue		Extension of Cockle path	NPF4 Policy 23 Aligns with HLDP vision and HOIP Mental Health and Wellbeing outcome
Tongue 9		Upgrade signage at A838/U1631 junction	NPF4 Policy 30
Tongue		Upgrade parking for Kyle Centre	NPF4 Policies 15 and 25
Tongue Mains 4		Recommend “Not Suitable for Large Vehicles” signage on shore Road - a narrow single track road with verges that drop off into the sea.	NPF4 Policy 30
Dalcharn 1		Upgrade Loch Cormaic track	NPF4 Policy 23 Aligns with HLDP vision and HOIP Mental Health and Wellbeing outcome
Talmine 12	0.007	Talmine Public Convenience – re-open public toilets	NPF4 Policy 30
Talmine 6	0.1	Upgrade parking at Talmine Bay Picnic Area	NPF4 Policy 30
Achuvoldrach 1	0.11	Extension of Melness Cemetery	NPF4 Policy 18
Achnabat & Aichtoty 1	0.15	Upgrading of Skerray Hall, improve provision for parking and increase provision of community cafe	NPF4 Policies 15 and 25

Development Opportunities

An aerial illustration of a coastal community. In the foreground, several houses with various roof colors (grey, red, green) are clustered together. A road winds through the middle ground, with a large eagle with its wings spread wide, appearing to fly over the houses. The background shows a sandy beach, a bay, and a distant shoreline with more buildings and trees. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

We encourage business and landowners to maximize development opportunities by reviewing their land assets throughout the community. Industries that may provide opportunities for Tongue, Melness and Skerray in the future are both offshore e.g. piers and marine facilities, and onshore e.g. space hub support facilities, community and hospitality facilities, and renewable energy.

We welcome the support for rural economic activity, including traditional crofting and other developments that create local employment. We also support efforts to encourage economic innovation and diversification where they respect the unique character of our rural communities.

The Local Place Plan process identified 17 sites that may have underutilized capacity, some of which might be repurposed for new commercial opportunities. The proposals align with the following NPF4 Policies: Policy 1 - LDPs must address the global climate emergency and nature crisis by ensuring the spatial strategy will reduce emissions; Policy 10 - Support the blue economy and contribute to the economy or wellbeing of communities whose livelihood depend on marine or coastal activities; Policy 11 - Encourage, promote and facilitate all forms of renewable energy development onshore and offshore; Policy 14 - The spatial strategy should be underpinned by the six qualities of successful places; Policy 15 - Contributes to local living including, consideration will be given to existing settlement pattern, and the level and quality of interconnectivity of the proposed development; Policy 18 - Proposal contributes to necessary infrastructure; Policy 25 - Community wealth building. Aligns with and has regard to the stated policy outcome to seek to bring forward “local economic development that focuses on community and place benefits as a central and primary consideration – to support local employment and supply chains”; Policy 26 - LDPs should allocate sufficient land for business and industry. This allocation should take account of local economic strategies and support broader objectives of delivering a low carbon and net zero economic recovery, and a fairer and more inclusive wellbeing economy; Policy 29 - supports rural economic development which contributes to the viability, sustainability and diversity of rural communities and local rural economy, including: farms, crofts, woodland crofts or other land use or local food production; Policy 30 - LDPs should support the recovery, growth and long-term resilience of the tourism sector, new or extended tourist facilities or accommodation, including caravan and camping sites, in locations identified in the LDP, reuse of existing buildings for farming and diversification through hospitality will be supported and Policy 31 - LDPs should recognise and support opportunities for jobs and investment in the creative sector, culture, heritage and the arts.

Table 5 lists these development opportunities.

Table 5. Economic Development Opportunities

Map and Item Number	Approx Area (ha)	Location, comments	Alignment with NPF4 Policies
Tongue Mains 2	0.11	Tongue slipway, pier and sheds	NPF4 Policies 10, 25 and 29
Tongue Mains 3	0.48	Tongue Mains sawmill and yard	NPF4 Policies 25 and 29
Ribigill		Wildland proposal: refurbishment of buildings for commercial use for farming and hospitality	NPF4 Policies 29 and 30
Scullomie 1	0.36	Scullomie Pier	NPF4 Policies 10, 25 and 29
East Strathen, Midfield, Portsvago & Achnahuaigh 2	0.04	Crofting storage facility	NPF4 Policies 25 and 29
Talmine 2		Melness Community Centre	NPF4 Policies 14, 15, 25 and 30

Talmine 5	0.22	Redevelopment of Caladh Sona (former care home) as centre of economic activity	NPF4 Policies 25 and 29
Talmine 7		Upgrade Melness ELT to 3-phase to enable economic activity currently limited by lack of 3-phase	NPF4 Policies 18, 25, 29 and 30
Talmine 8	0.66	Talmine pier	NPF4 Policies 29 and 30
Talmine 9	0.25	Melness church- adaptive reuse of the building as a mixed community hub in community lead ownership	NPF4 Policies 14, 15, ,21, 25, 30 and 31
Talmine 10	1.05	North of Talmine pier 1. potential for tourism and outdoor pursuits centre or 2. Potential for energy production site	1. NPF4 Policies 14 and 30 or 1. NPF4 Policy 1
Melness Crofters Estate 1	4.17	Loch A'Mhuilinn potential hydro scheme	NPF4 Policies 1, 11 and 29
Melness Crofters Estate 2	50.09	Loch A'Mhuilinn potential energy hub with energy produced being used within community	NPF4 Policies 1, 11 and 18
Melness Crofters Estate 3	499.49	Potential future economic development opportunity	NPF4 Policies 11 and 26
Melness Crofters Estate 4	0.97	Site for potential Science & Education Centre.	NPF4 Policies 25, 26, 29 and 30
Lamigo, Torroy, Tubeg & Clashaidy 1		Skerry pier and slipway	NPF4 Policy 25
Lamigo, Torroy, Tubeg & Clashaidy		Skerry campsite - planning permission in place for campsite and retail/gallery, adding a cafe in long term plans	NPF4 Policies 29 and 30

Natural Environment

A photograph of a natural environment featuring tall grasses and a prominent purple flower spike in the foreground. The background shows a clear blue sky and more vegetation.

The natural environment is extremely important to our community and support was expressed for the protection of certain areas which are important for local wildlife, especially plants, and as greenspace providing wellbeing benefits for the community. Along with many wildflowers, the area chosen has species which are on the Scottish Biodiversity List.

Table 6. Natural Environment

Map and item number	Talmine 11
Location, comments	Area of Common Grazing where flora growth occurs
Alignment with NPF4 policies	NPF4 Policy 3 - Biodiversity is protected Policy 4 - Natural places are protected Policy 23 -Positive effect on health through providing opportunities for exercise



Individual Proposal Maps



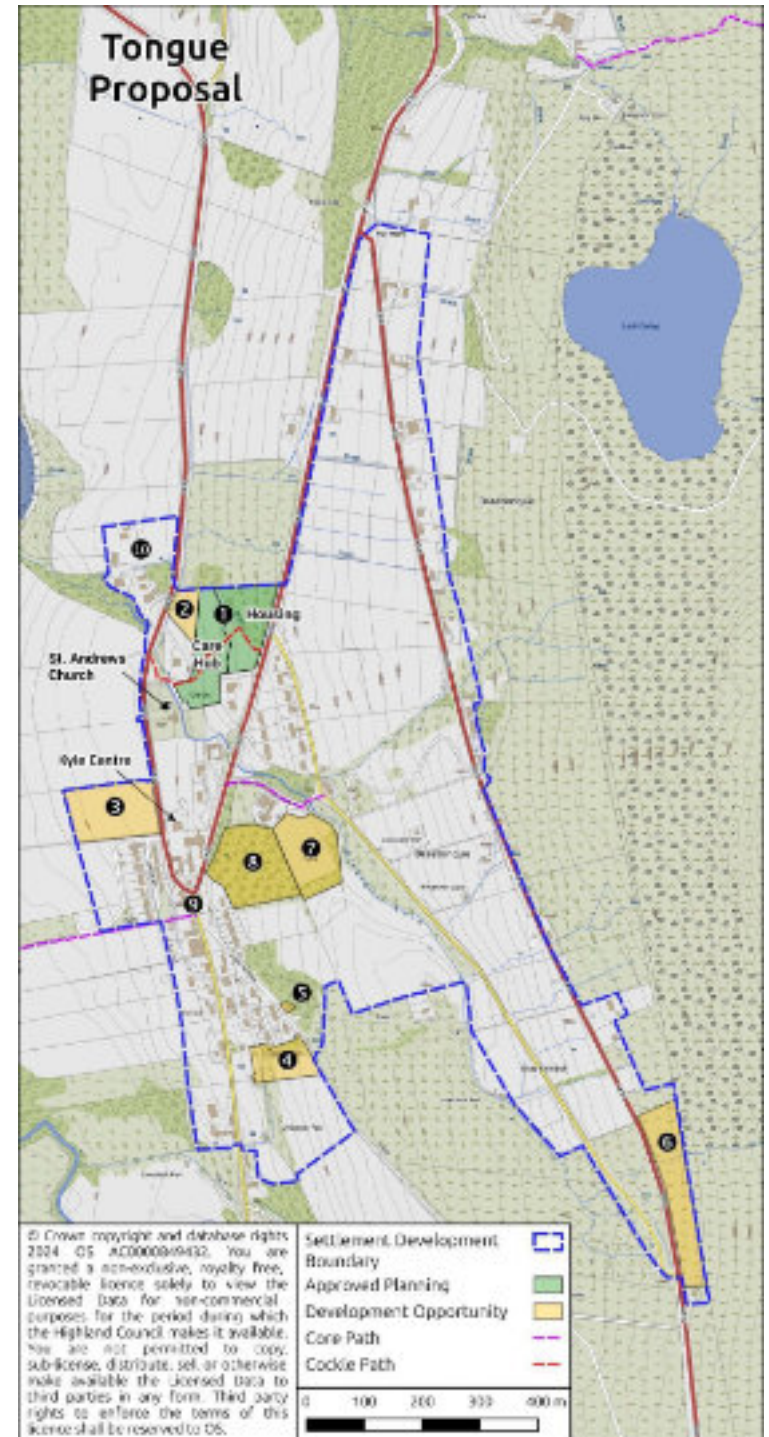
Tongue

Housing Development Opportunities

- 1 TG03 (as identified in CaS Plan) has consent to construct care home and housing.
- 3 TG02 (as identified in CaS Plan) opportunity for housing.
- 5 East of Loyal Terrace opportunity for housing.
- 6 Braetongue opportunity for housing.
- 10 Burr's - opportunity for housing (Wildland proposal)



Services and Facilities

- 7 Multi Use Games Area development opportunity.
- 8 School children woodland activity area development opportunity.
- 9 Suggest upgrade signage at A838/U1631 junction.
Parking for Kyle Centre.



Tongue Mains Proposal



Settlement Development Boundary 
Development Opportunity 

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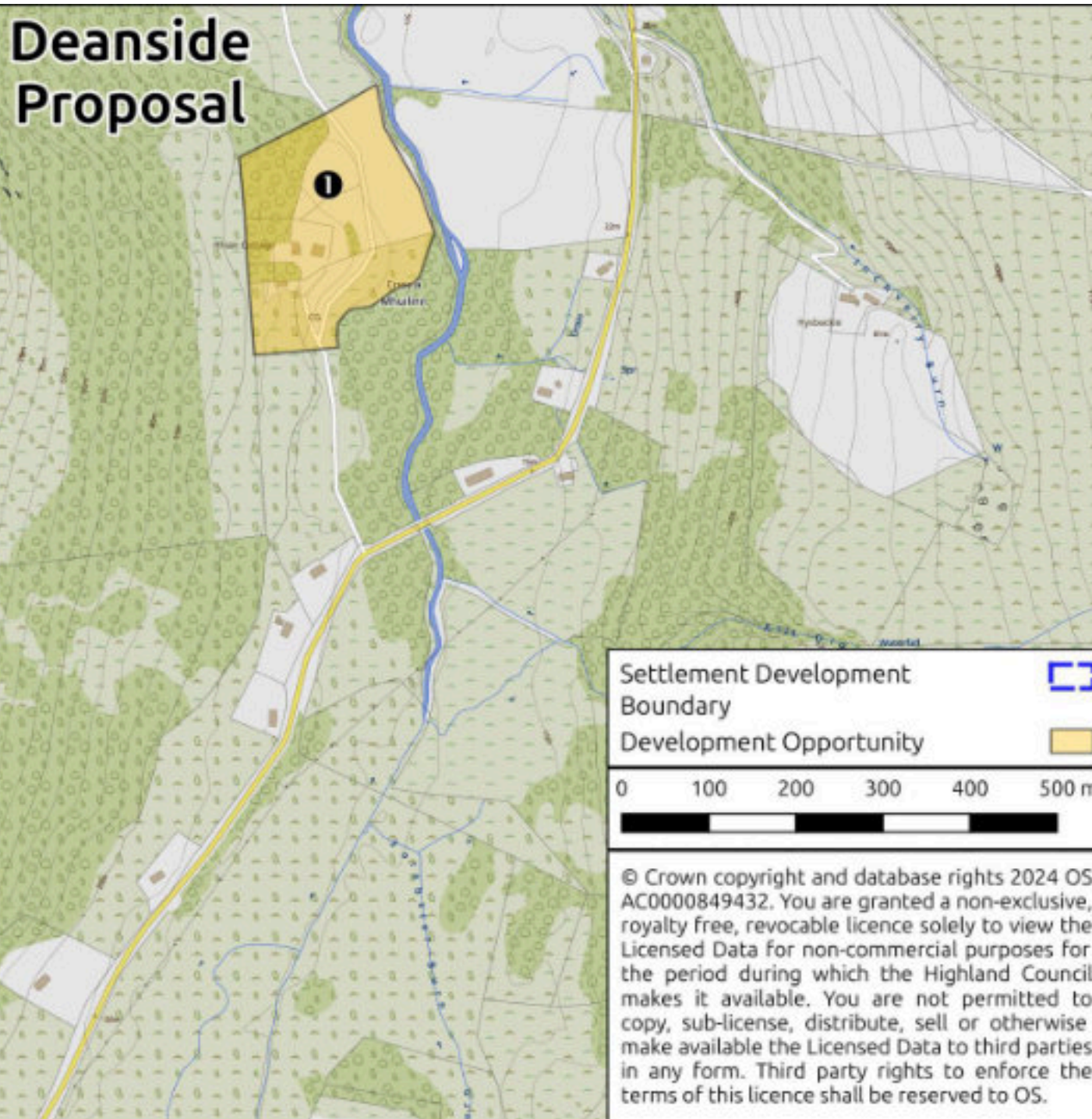
Tongue Mains

Housing Development Opportunities

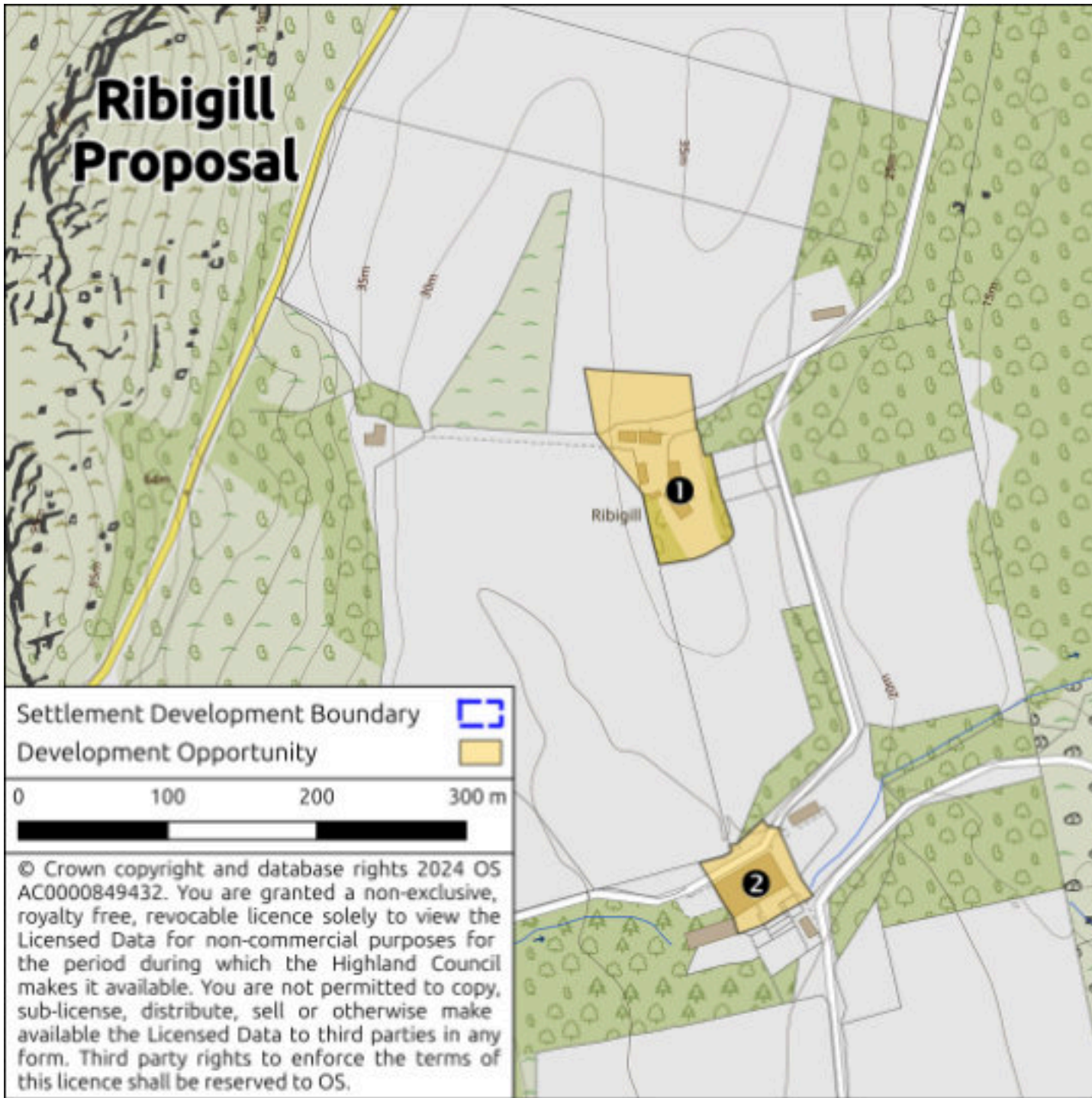
- 1 South of Eastwood potential housing development opportunity.



Development Opportunities

- 2 Tongue Pier, slipways & shed development opportunity.
- 3 Tongue Mains sawmill and yard redevelopment opportunity.
- 4 Signage for Shore Road to advise road is not suitable for large vehicles/mobile homes.



Ribigill Proposal



Settlement Development Boundary 
Development Opportunity 

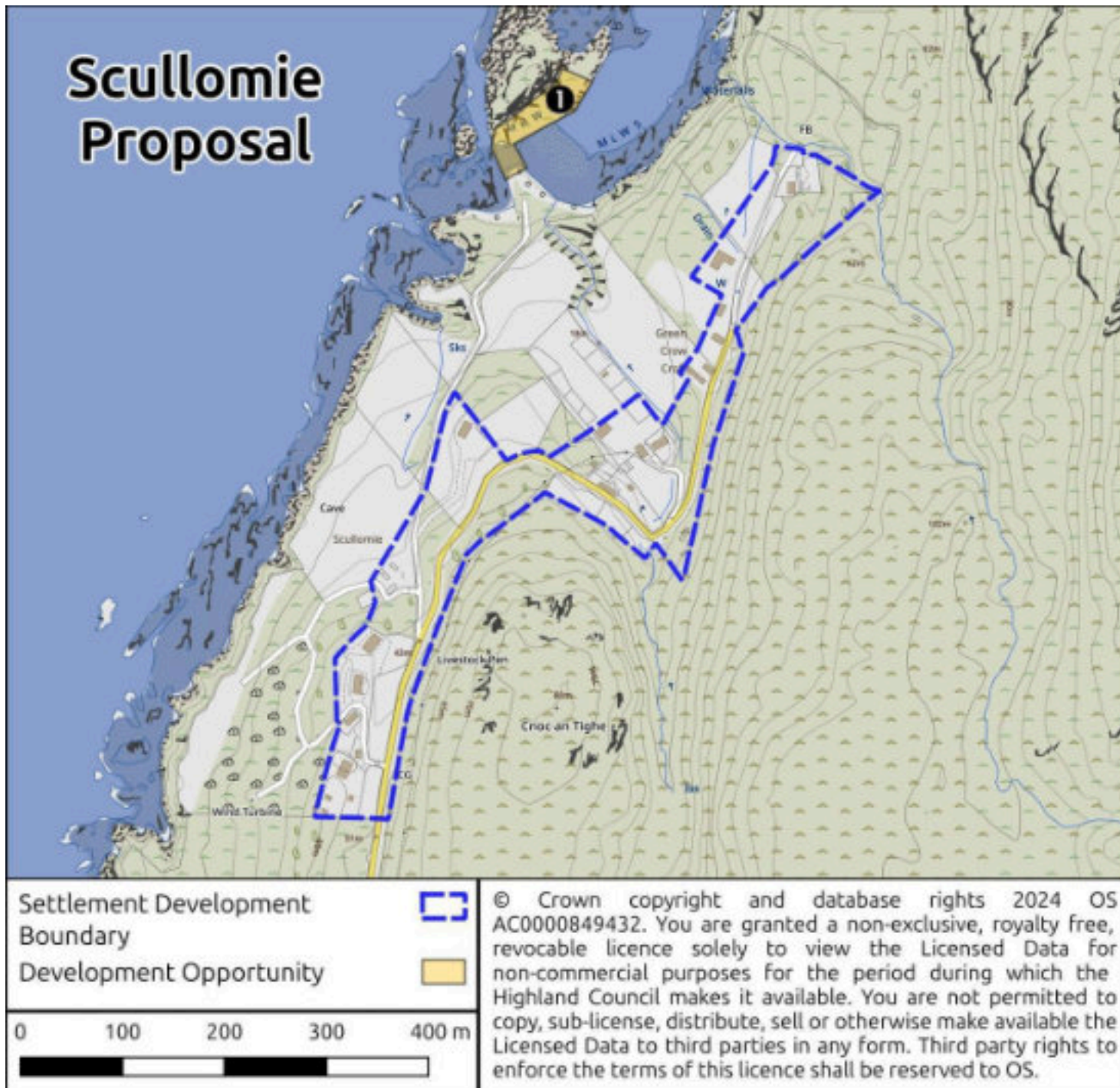
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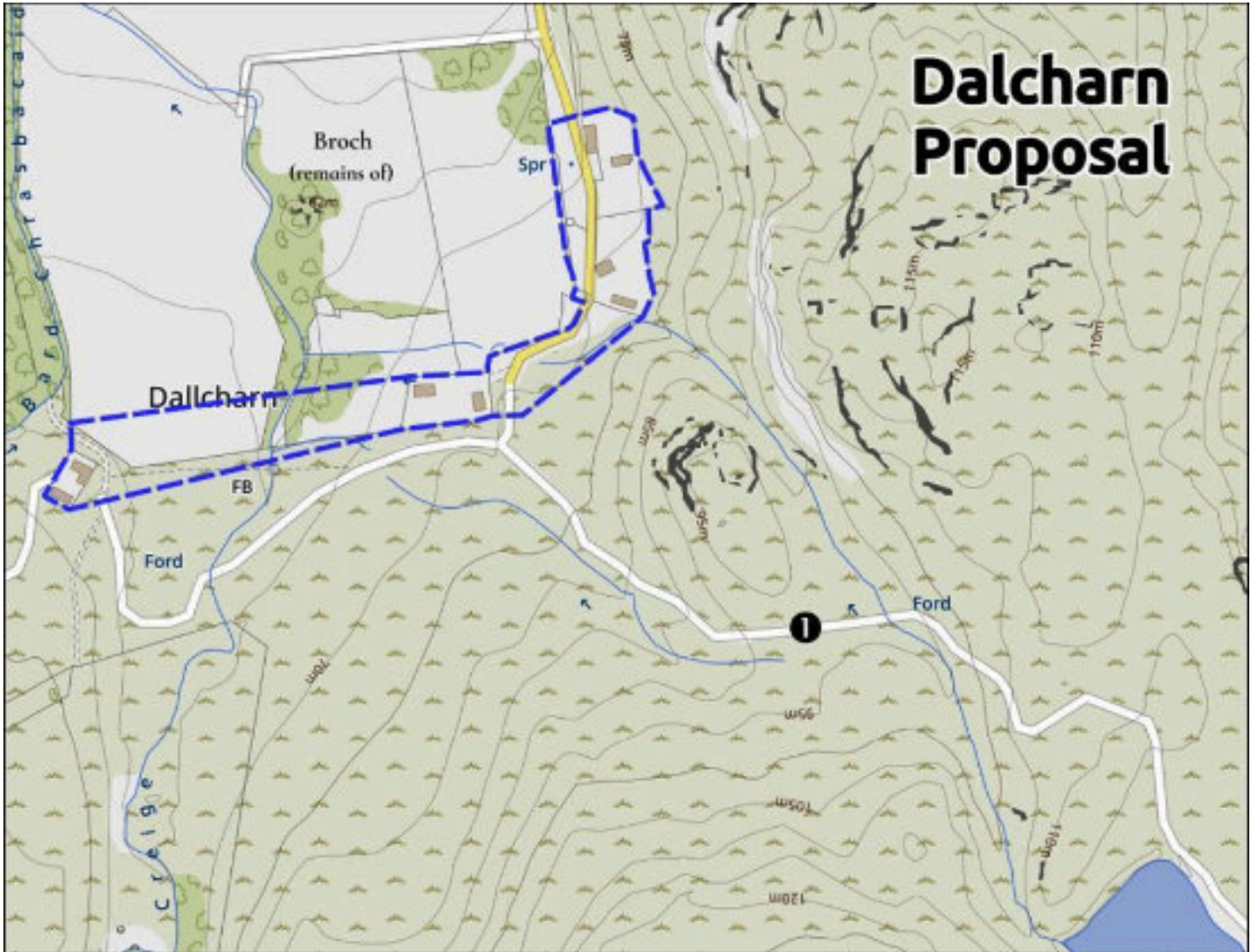

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Scullomie

Development Opportunities

- 1 Scullomie Pier development opportunity





Dalcharn Proposal

Dalcharn

Development Opportunities

- 1 Upgrade Loch Cormaic track opportunity

Settlement Development Boundary



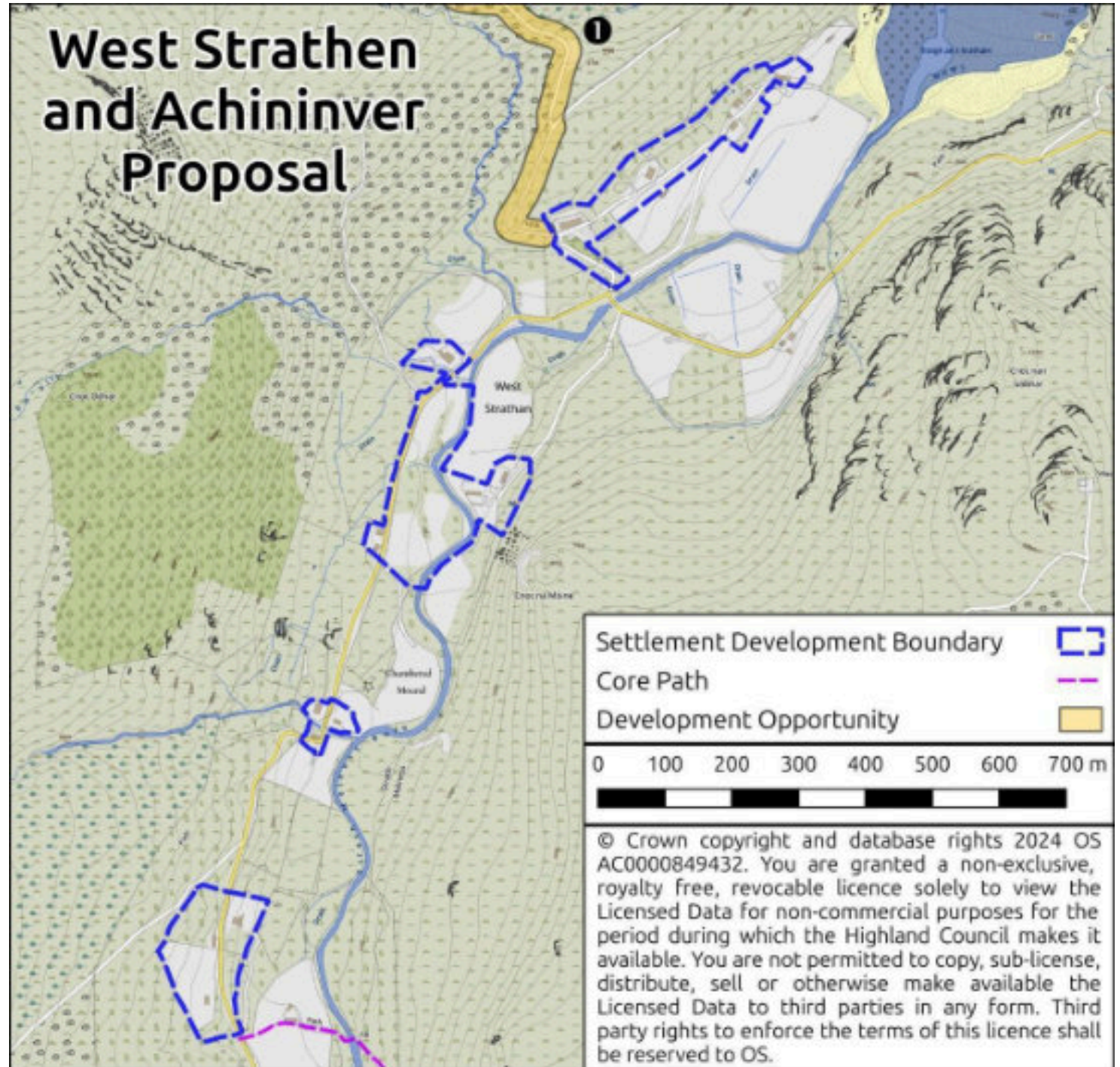
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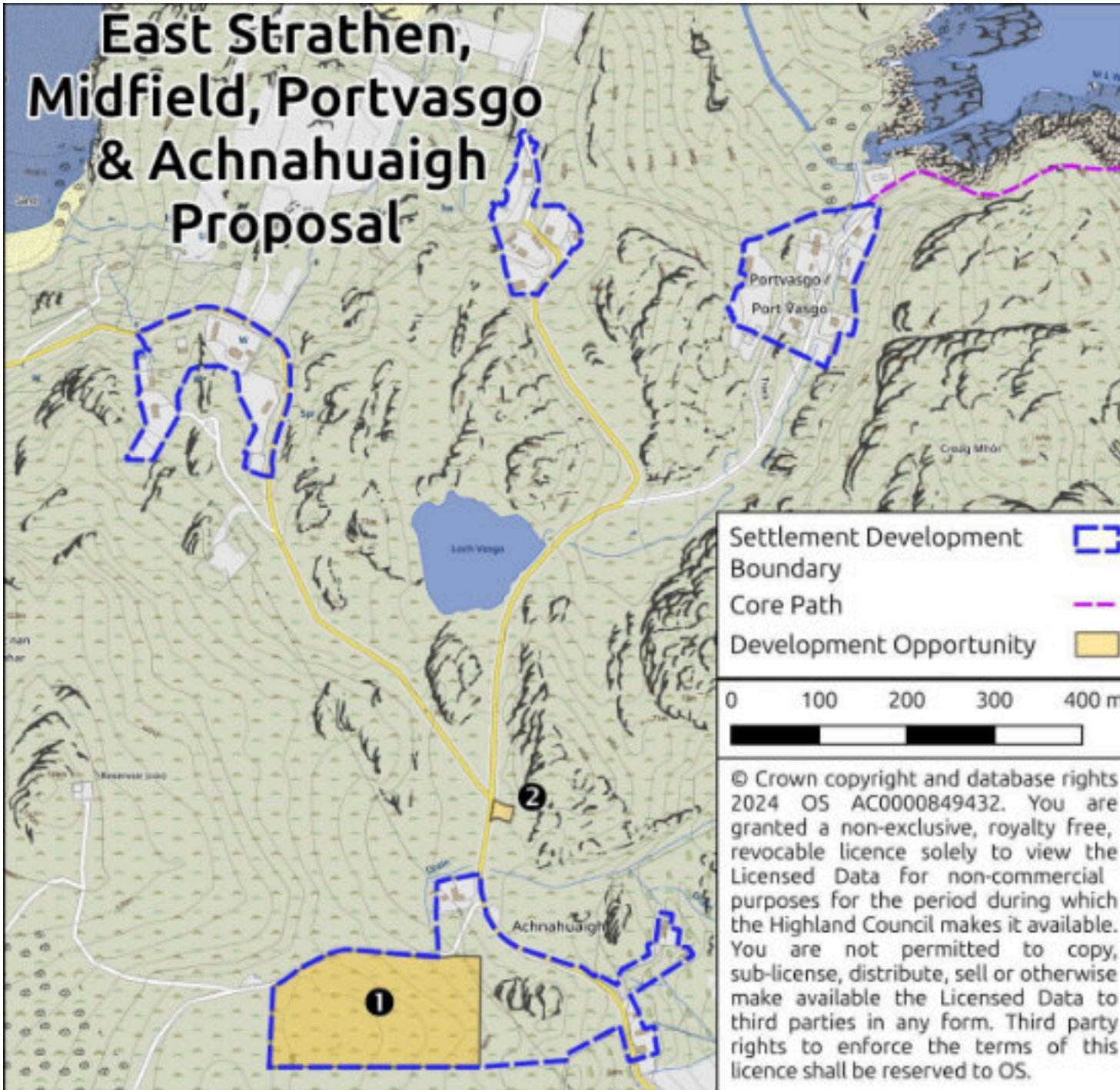
West Strathen & Achininver

Development Opportunities

- ① Economic opportunity access - see Melness Crofters Map



East Strathen, Midfield, Portvasgo & Achnahuaigh Proposal



East Strathen, Midfield, Portvasgo & Achnahuaigh

Housing Development Opportunities

- ① Achnahuaigh housing development opportunity.

Development Opportunities

- ① Crofting community storage facility.

Talmine

Housing Development Opportunities

- 1 West of Joseph Mackay Coart affordable housing project.
- 2 Teachers Old House for housing.
- 3 Nurses Old House for housing.
- 4 Site proposed for housing/commercial.

Services and Facilities

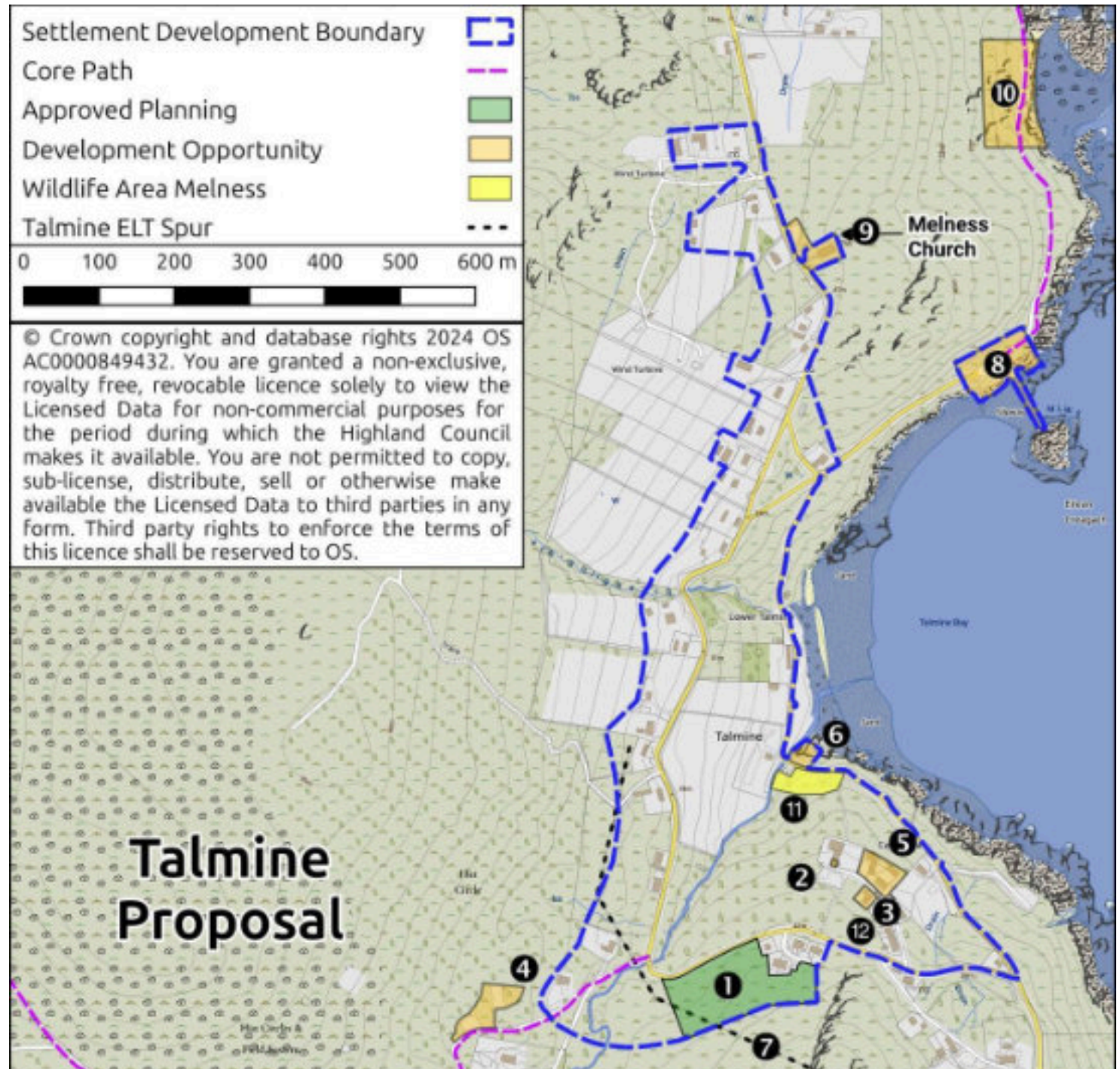
- 6 Reconfigure parking.
- 12 Re-open Toilets.

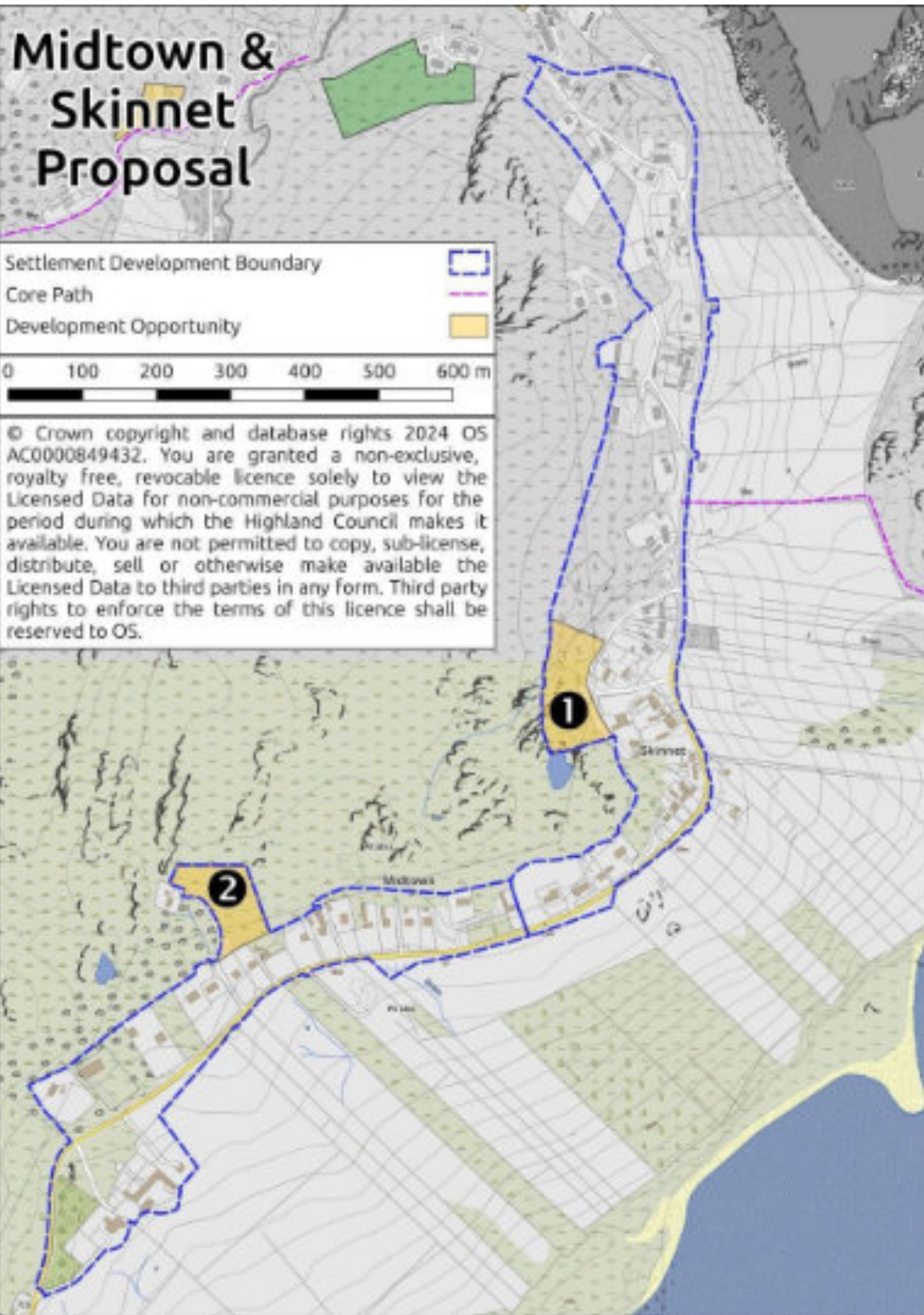
Development Opportunities

- 5 Cala Sona as centre for economic activity.
- 7 Upgrade Talmine Pier to enable economic opportunity for marine & supporting businesses.
- 8 Develop Talmine Pier to enable economic opportunity for marine & supporting businesses.
- 9 Melness Church development opportunity.
- 10 Economic opportunity.

Natural Environment

- 11 Suggested flora of interest area.





Midtown & Skinnet

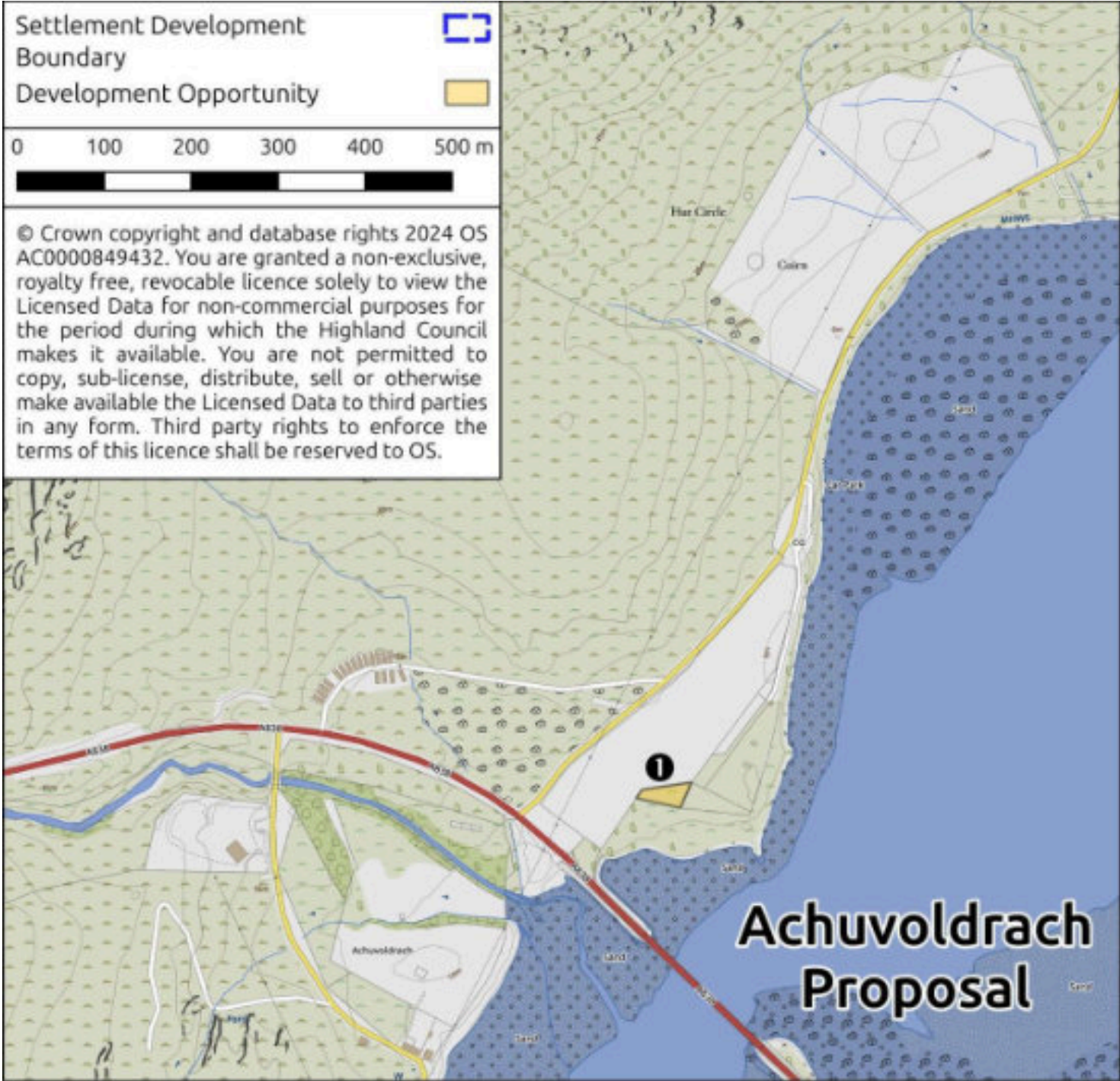
Housing Development Opportunities

- ① MU01 potential housing opportunity .
- ② Potential housing opportunity.

Achuvoldrach

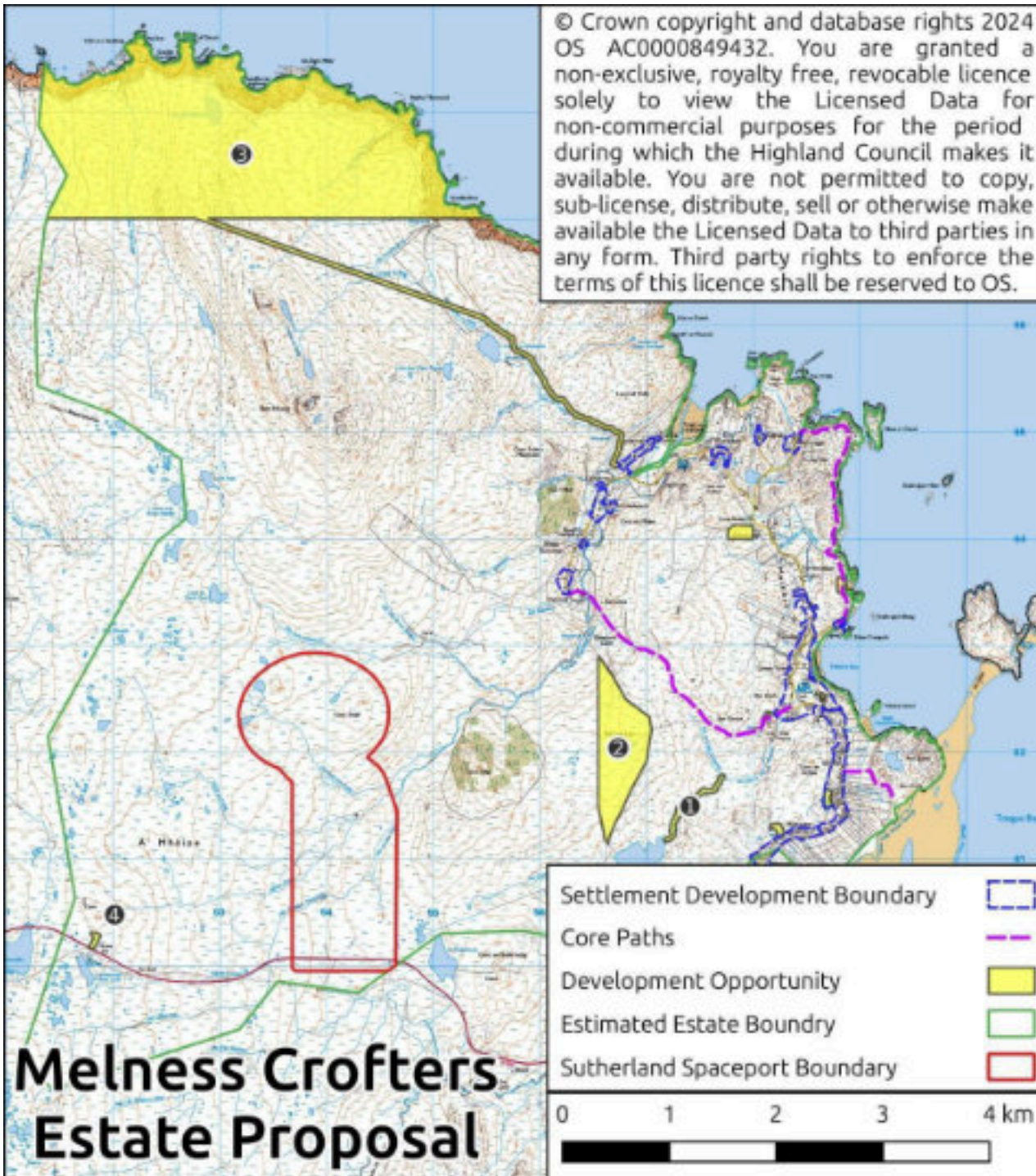
Services and Facilities

- 1 Extend Melness cemetery



Melness Crofters Estate

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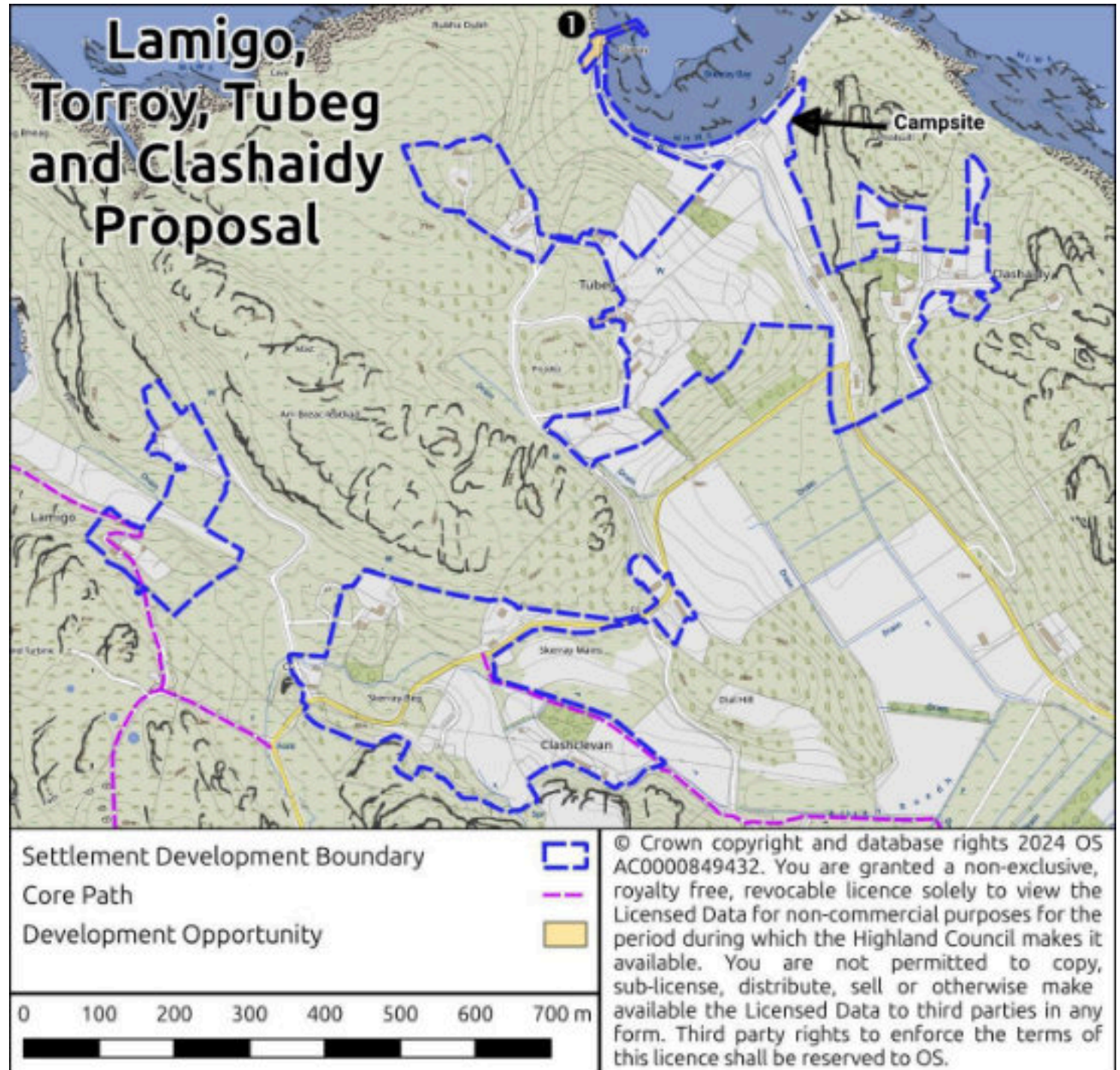
Development Opportunities

- 1 Loch A'Mhuilinn potential hydro.
- 2 Loch A'Mhuilinn potential energy hub.
- 3 Economic development opportunity.
- 4 Site for potential Science & Education Centre

Lamigo, Torroy, Tubeg & Clashaidy

Development Opportunities

- 1 Skerray Pier & slipway
Skerray Campsite

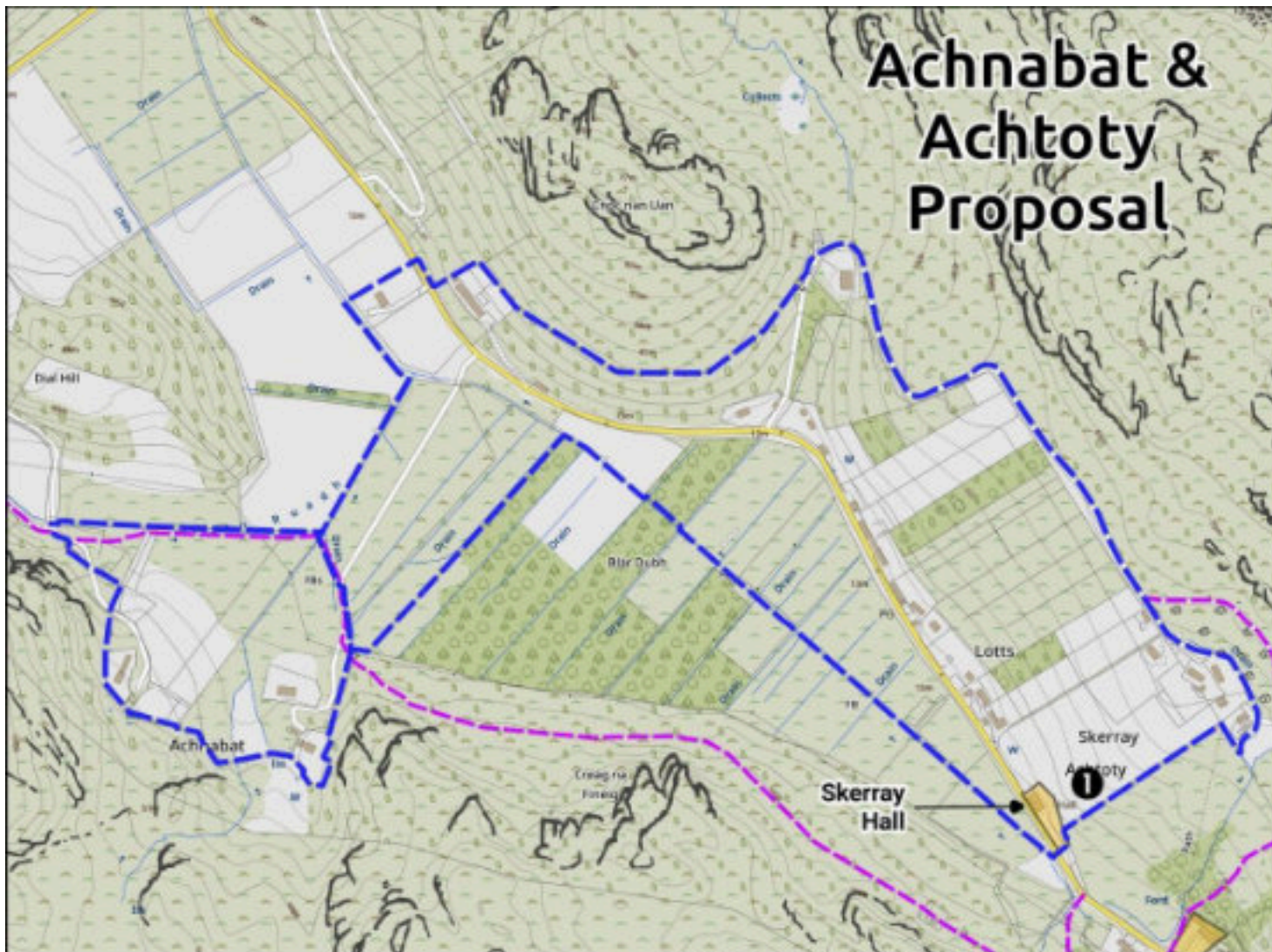


Achnabat & Achnatoty Proposal

Achnabat & Achnatoty

Development Opportunities

- 1 Renovate and upgrade Skerray Hall
Increasing parking and provision for community cafe.



Settlement Development Boundary



Core Path



Development Opportunity



0 100 200 300 400 500 600 m

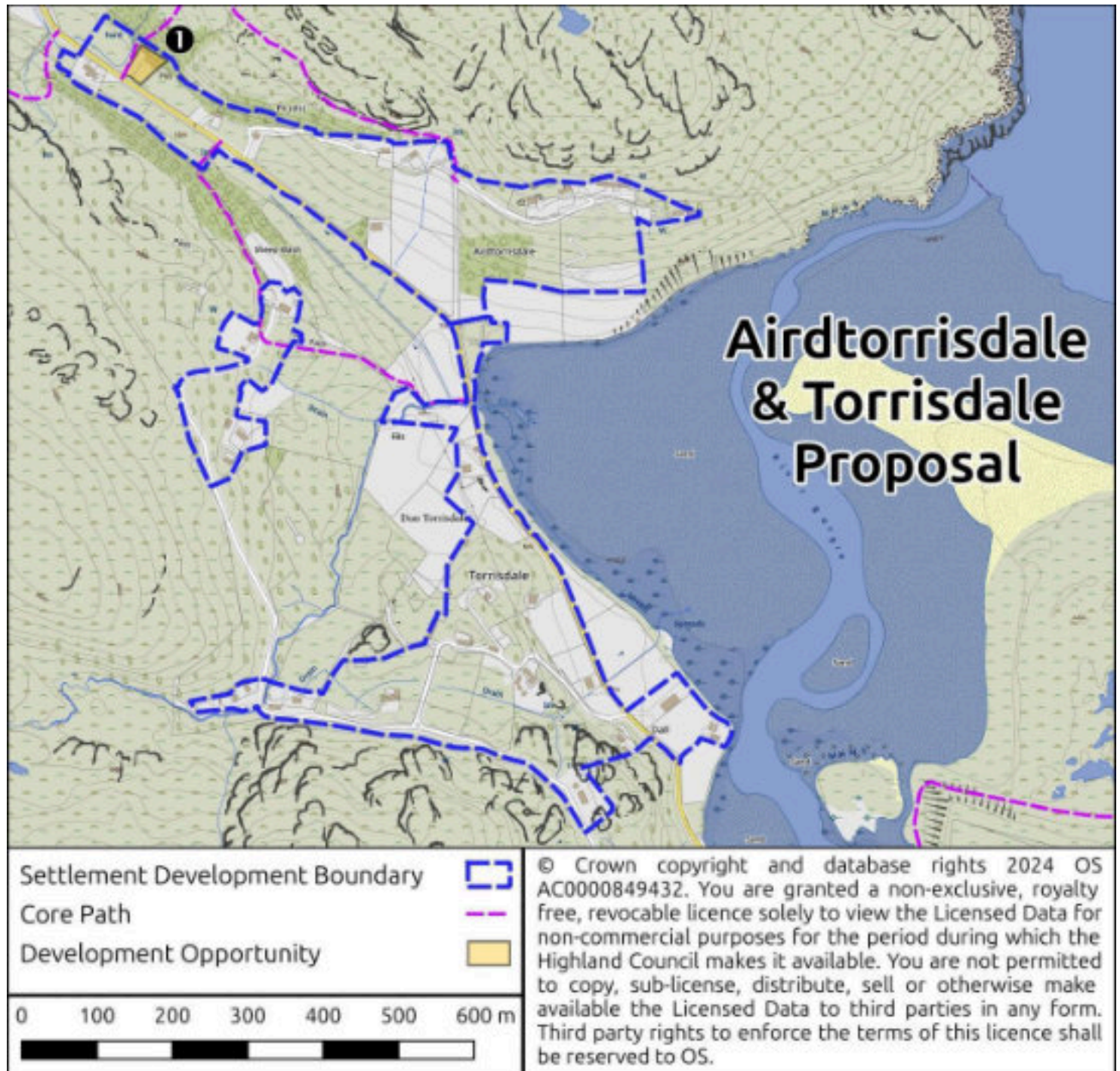


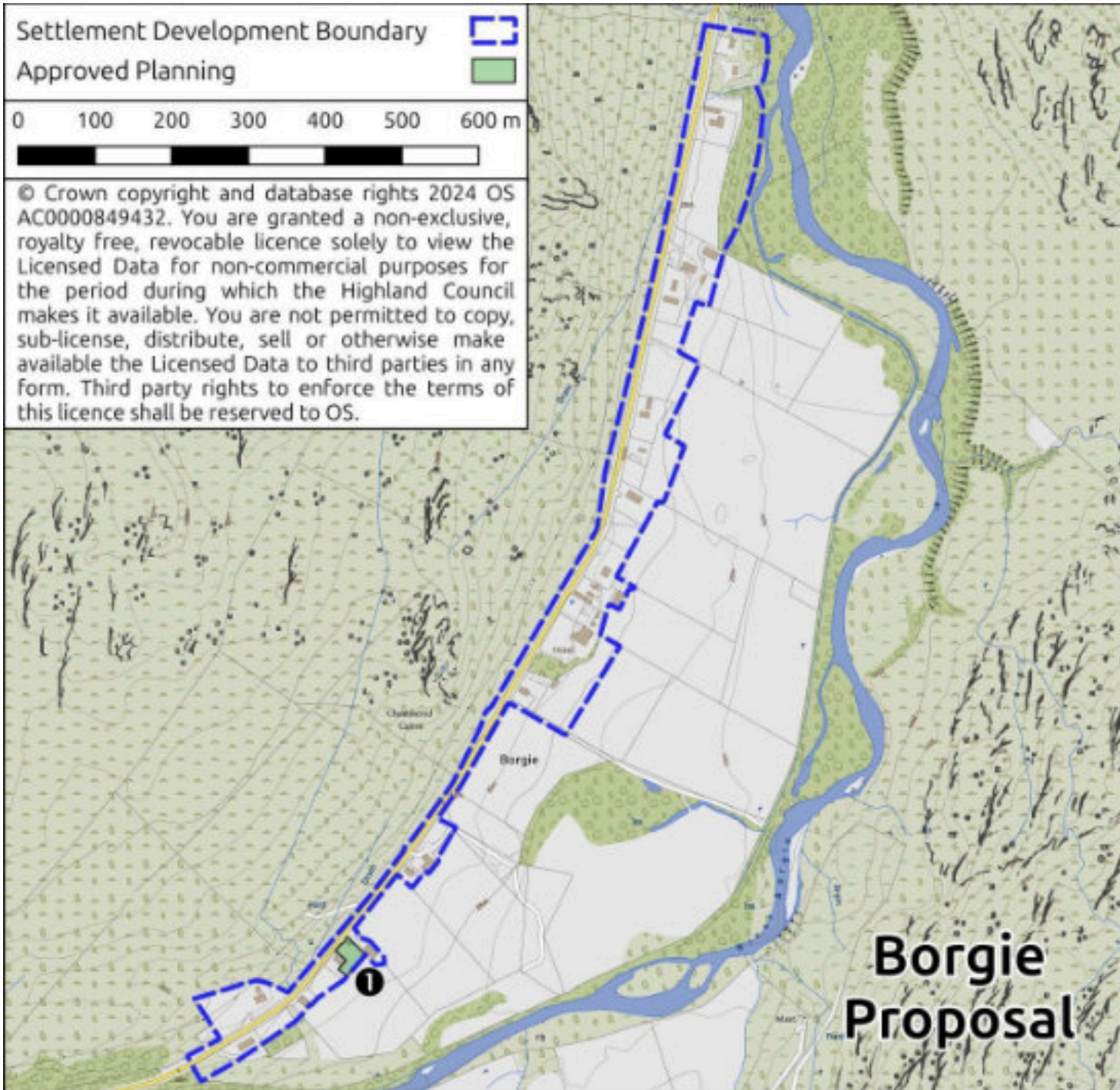
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Airdtorrisdale & Torrisdale

Housing Development Opportunities

- 1 Skerray Free Church possible housing opportunity.





Borgie

Housing Development Opportunities

- 1 NE of 6 Borgie has consent for construction for two affordable homes.

Planning Policy

An aerial photograph of a coastal landscape. In the foreground, a small settlement with several buildings is situated on a green hillside. A road winds through the hills. In the middle ground, a bay or inlet is visible, with a small pier extending into the water. The background features a large, rugged rocky island in the sea, surrounded by blue water under a cloudy sky.

By embedding the community's vision within the statutory planning framework, these recommendations aim to support a more inclusive, responsive, and place-based approach to development across Highland.

The Highland Local Development Plan must also align with the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), which sets out Scotland's spatial strategy and national planning policies. NPF4 places strong emphasis on sustainability, climate resilience, and the creation of 20-minute neighbourhoods - principles that are echoed in the recommendations of this Local Place Plan.

Key Policy Interpretation of National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)

Opportunities to strengthen NPF4 for fragile communities

Definition of Terms

Within the 33 Policies, NPF4 affords certain exemptions for “Fragile Communities” but does not provide a definition of “Fragile Communities”. The section of “Fragile Communities” within this document provides evidence that the communities of the Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council area are “Fragile Communities” and therefore should be afforded associated policy exemptions.

Small rural communities often depend on the voluntary sector to deliver essential infrastructure and development. While NPF4 sets out ambitious goals for sustainable, inclusive growth, its policies and the subsequent local plans and supplementary guidance from The Highland Council can unintentionally create barriers. While resources are limited and projects rely on volunteer effort, these requirements risk stalling progress rather than enabling it. The reality is that small fragile communities face unique challenges: limited funding, small scale economies and a pressing need to retain population. Applying NPF4 and Highland Council policies without recognising these constraints could undermine its own objectives of supporting rural resilience.

There is a strong case for introducing flexibility, allowing proportionate contributions and pragmatic approaches, so that these communities can deliver the housing, services and infrastructure desperately needed while still aligning with the spirit of NPF4. Recognition by the policy makers of the unique issues experienced by individual remote, rural and fragile communities needs to be highlighted and mitigated to create a process that will support development and resilience in these areas. Examples for the Tongue Melness and Skerray Community Council area include Policy 5, 5c, 5d, Policy 15 and policy 17a and 17c(i) with the reasoning for the request listed below.

Policy 5: Soils

According to NatureScot’s 2016 Carbon and Peat Map, carbon-rich soils (Classes 1–3 and 5) cover approximately 87.4% of the Tongue, Melness, and Skerray Community Council area. Most settlements, which make up around 0.6% of the area, are unclassified but likely to contain high-carbon soils due to the region’s climate.

Applying Policy 5 as currently written would significantly restrict development in this area, undermining efforts to support sustainable growth in these fragile communities. We therefore request the following considerations:

Policy 5c limiting development on carbon rich soils. Exempt Tongue, Melness & Skerray from restrictions on development in carbon-rich soils, recognizing their status as “Fragile Communities”.

Policy 5d Requires detailed site-specific soil surveys for development on carbon-rich soils. Waive or simplify the requirement for detailed site-specific soil surveys, which pose a financial and logistical burden. Instead, limit peat-related restrictions to structural foundation requirements.

Policy 15 Local Living and 20 minutes neighbourhoods

NPF4 states *“In rural areas the approach to local living will be shaped by local context.”* As the Tongue, Melness & Skerray communities are traditional crofting communities with extended lateral layouts within the geography of the landscape, the communities have defined their settlement development boundary to provide local context to all the townships. Although development could take place outwith the settlement boundaries it is expected that the planning process for housing or other developments within settlement boundary areas would be straightforward.

Policy 17 Rural Housing

Our community recognises that long-term sustainability depends on the delivery of new, affordable homes. We therefore request the following considerations:

Policy 17a) Development Proposals for new homes supports the reinstatement of a former dwelling or reuse of an existing building. Currently, new homes are only supported if they reinstate former dwellings or reuse existing buildings, and only on sites identified in the Local Development Plan (LDP). This approach does not reflect the needs of Fragile Communities like Tongue, Melness & Skerray, where flexibility is essential.

Policy 17c)i provides support for “new homes in remote rural areas” where the building of new homes “supports and sustains existing fragile communities”. This clause supports new homes in remote rural areas where development sustains “Fragile Communities”. Given the complex and undulating landscape of our area, we ask that this support explicitly include infill and windfall sites, not just those listed in the LDP, to enable appropriate housing growth.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission Report on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands has been accepted by the Scottish Government. The report found that “The cost of renting, building, or purchasing a home in the Highlands and Islands is a significant barrier, particularly for young people. Quality affordable social housing is not available in sufficient quantities to meet the region's needs”.

“In most areas of the Highlands and Islands, the lack of affordable housing was a central reason as to why young people were not able to return to their local areas after leaving, for example, for education; or, why young people left their communities in the first place – no available housing for them. In some areas, the lack of affordable housing was described as the single biggest issue contributing to depopulation, whereby the lack of housing meant that young people had no option but to leave”.

These issues were highlighted in our community engagement.

Local businesses and organisations tasked with providing services in our community have consistently highlighted the lack of affordable housing for staff. This has affected recruitment, as successful applicants are unable to take up the posts offered as they cannot find anywhere to live. This leaves posts in health and social care unfilled, to the detriment of the care required by the most vulnerable members of our community, and leaves businesses struggling to meet existing demand and completely unable to expand.

Our community therefore needs support to adapt the policies for rural contexts to ensure that the planning framework remains relevant, responsive, and reflective of the current and future needs of our area.

Next Steps

A scenic landscape photograph of a coastal area. In the foreground, there is a calm blue bay or inlet. A small, rocky island with some green vegetation sits in the water. The middle ground shows a rugged coastline with a prominent, rounded mountain peak. The background features more rolling hills and mountains under a sky filled with soft, grey clouds. The overall lighting suggests a late afternoon or early morning setting.

Our LPP has been completed as a collaborative exercise between a number of organisations who have come together with a shared interest in creating conditions which facilitate the sustainable development of our community.

This Plan outlines community-originated proposals to improve the quality of life in the Tongue Community Council area and to support a cohesive community which honours and celebrates the natural environment in which it is situated.

The development and delivery of the aspirations will require further exploration of the feasibility of these plans. Continued partnership working with a diverse range of organisations and landowners will be key to bringing many of these proposals forward.

Support will be needed to secure funding to progress these proposals.

The community council is committed to encouraging future collaboration, for example, with The Highland Council, landowners, local businesses and community groups to bring these proposals to fruition. At a local level, we have a Community Leaders Forum - an informal network of local organisations which meet on a regular basis to share ideas and explore ways of joint working for the benefit of our community. Through this forum, funding for a development post - a Masterplan Implementation Manager - has been secured to progress the priorities highlighted in the Masterplan. It is vital that further funding is available for a development officer to work with key community stakeholders to deliver the aspirations of our community as highlighted in this Local Place Plan.


Appendices



Appendix 1: Local Place Plan Leaflet

Side 1


Side 2



LOCAL PLACE PLAN

Shape the future of
Tongue, Melness and Skerry


Your Local Place Plan will be taken forward by
Tongue, Melness and Skerry Community Council



Dear Resident,


We all have a stake in the future of our community, how it grows, what it preserves and how it supports everyone who calls it home.

Following on from the community engagement held in the creation of the HIE Masterplan, we are inviting you to take part in shaping our **Local Place Plan**. This document will feed into the Highland Council's **Local Development Plan** for this area. It will build on the priorities identified in the Masterplan, reflecting our shared priorities and guiding future developments in the **Tongue, Melness and Skerry** community council



Why Your Voice Matters

This process isn't just about buildings and maps. It is about our local environment, jobs, housing, public spaces and how we make this a thriving, inclusive place for



This is your chance to **share** what you love about the place where you live, what you think needs **improved** and what kind of future you might imagine here.

Your insights, hopes and ideas truly matter.

Together we can create a plan that meets the **challenges** of today, is part of our planning processes and **builds** something lasting for the **next generations**.

How To Get Involved


Complete the survey
Fill in the survey **online** or in a **hard copy** format.

Hard copies will be available at:


- Tongue Stores
- Talmire Post Office
- Skerry Village Hall

The online survey:
<https://forms.gle/SRNKcs2dPSZu0cplIKQR>


Or scan the QR code below:



Housing development - Talmire, Melness



Visual Aids: Area Maps



To help with your ideas, maps of the area are viewable online via a website. This will be accessible via a link within the online survey.

These maps will also be displayed in:

- Skerry Village Hall
- the Kyle Centre

The maps will also be displayed in Melness Community Centre on (Date TBC)

Consultation Event

Kyle Centre, Tongue
26th September
2-4pm - 5-7pm


Please come along to directly discuss your ideas with us.

Important details


What is a Local Place Plan?
The Local Place Plan will build on the priorities of the HIE Masterplan. This will focus on:

- Housing & Jobs
- Local Environment & Public Spaces
- Sustainable Growth

Have your say!
Share your thoughts **online** or via a **hard copy** survey by **Monday 8th September**.

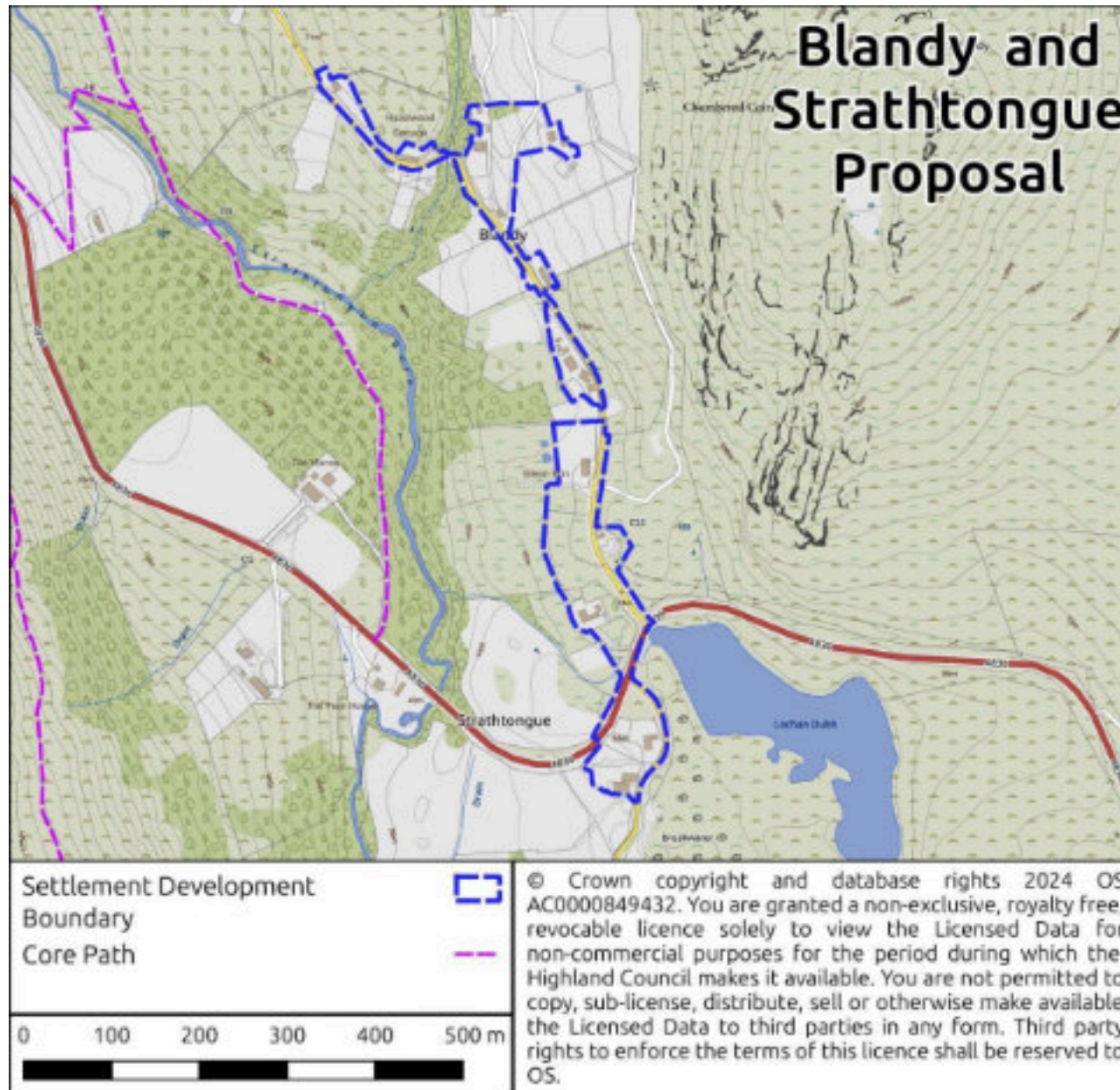


Attend our **Consultation event** on **26th September** to discuss the results of the survey.

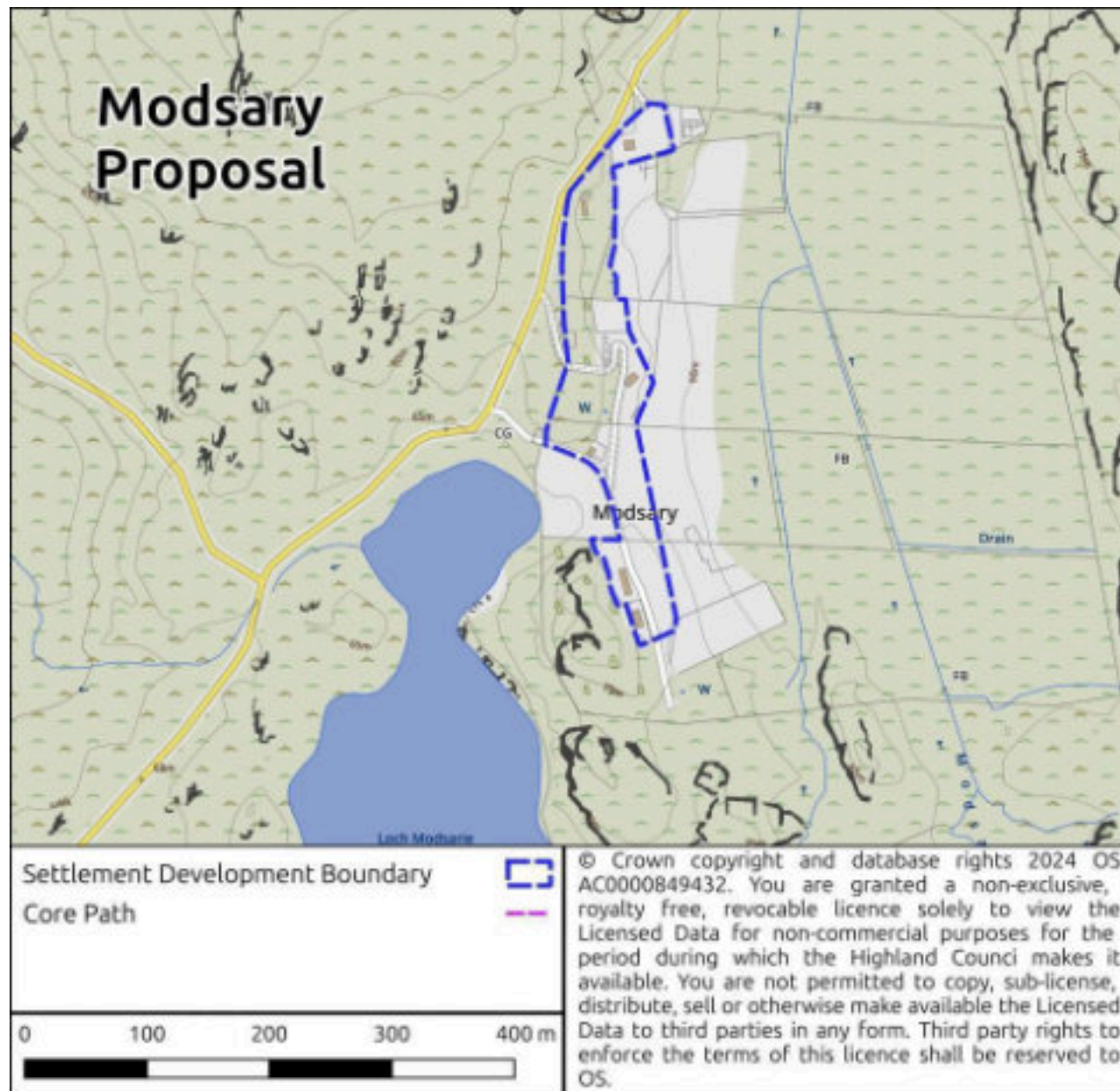


Every voice strengthens our vision. Together, we can meet today's challenges. Please share this important opportunity to take part in building a brighter future with others.

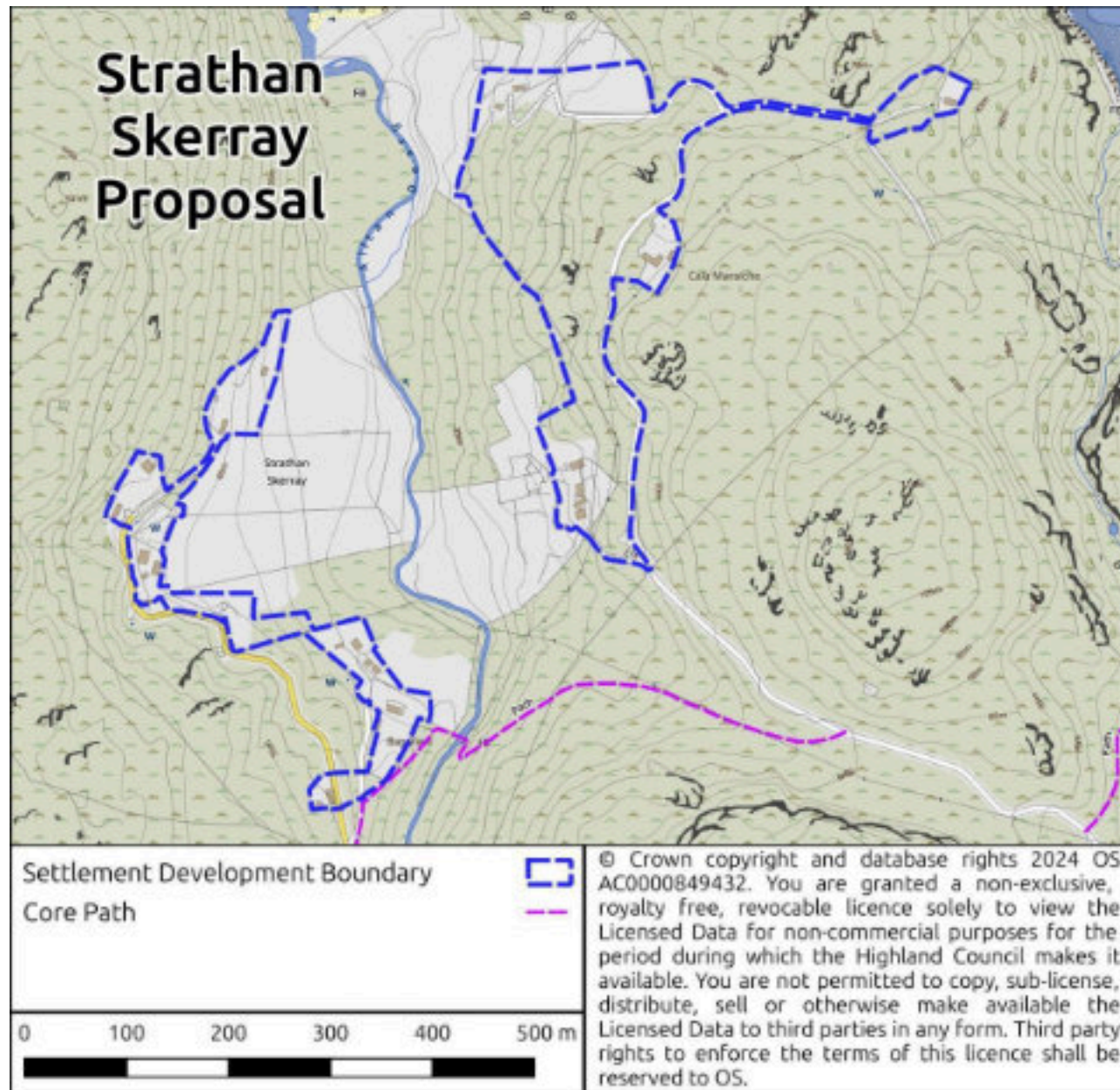
Appendix 2: Blandy & Strathtongue Proposal Map



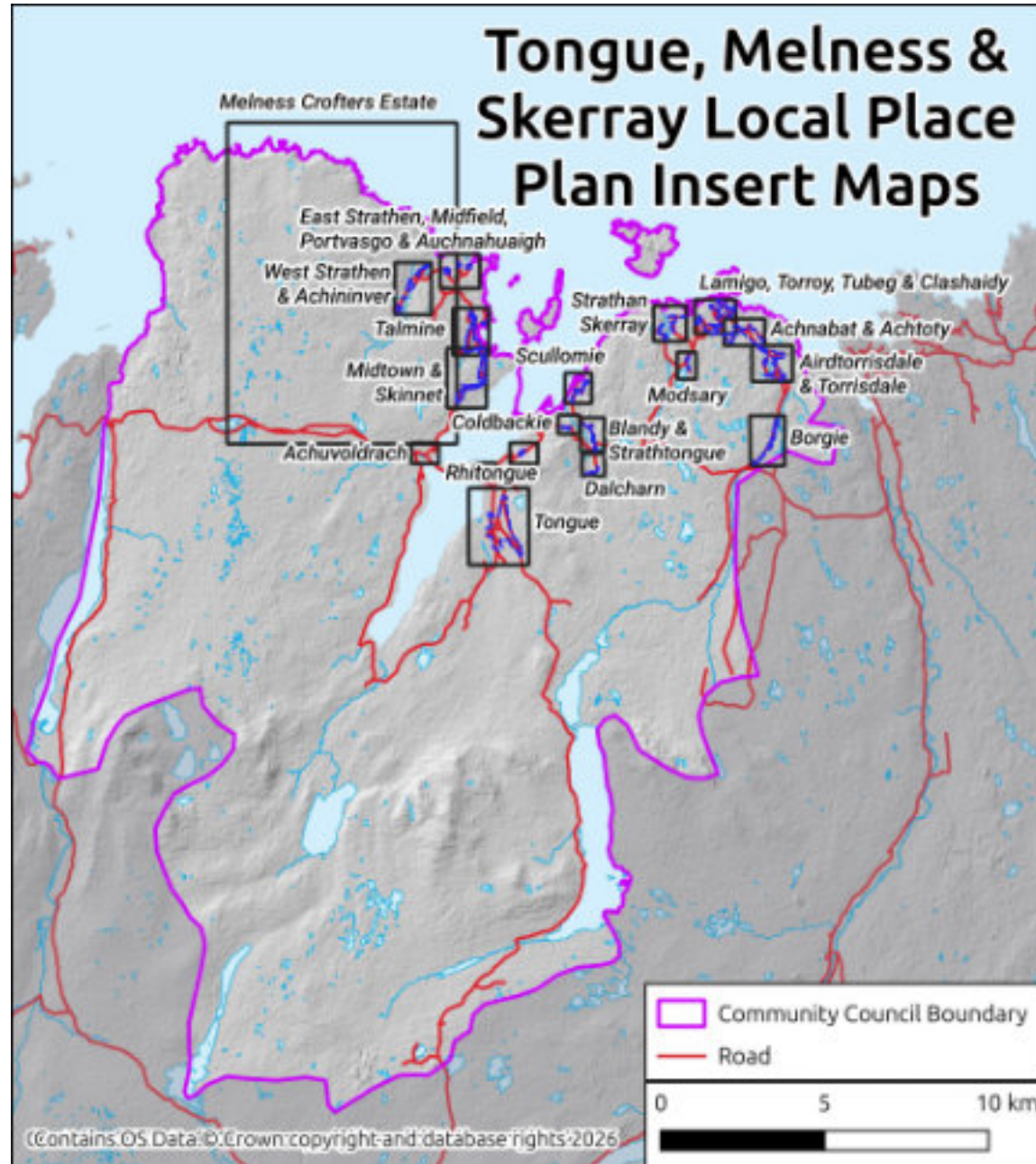
Appendix 3: Skerray Modস্যary Proposal Map



Appendix 4: Strathan Skerry Proposal Map



Appendix 5: Map Showing Inserts



Appendix 6: Information Notice

Information Notice for Community Councils

29.12.26

Dear Community Councils

I am contacting you on behalf of Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council. Our local community has prepared a proposed Local Place Plan for Tongue, Melness and Skerray.

We are legally required to send each Community Council whose area is wholly or partly within our Local Place Plan area, or adjoins it, the information below. This is in order to comply with Section 4 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Place Plans) (Scotland) Regulations 2021. This email constitutes the **Information Notice** to local Community Councils required by those Regulations.

This Information Notice is therefore being sent to the following Community Councils: Bettyhill, Altnaharra and Strathnaver Community Council and Durness Community Council.

1. Proposed Local Place Plan

The proposed Local Place Plan is attached.

2. Brief description of the content and purpose of the proposed Local Place Plan

The proposed Local Place Plan covers the area of Tongue, Melness and Skerray.

The proposed Local Place Plan contains proposals for housing, services and facilities and development opportunities.

The purpose of our proposed Local Place Plan is to identify community strengths, needs, areas for development and aspirations, in order to attract and guide funding and in order to influence the new Highland LDP.

3. Information as to how and to whom any representations on the content of the proposed Local Place Plan should be made and the date by which they should be made

If you have comments on our proposed Local Place Plan, please email them to us.

The deadline for comments is 26.1.26.

Please let us know if you have any queries.

Kind regards

Secretary, TMSCC

Information notice for councillors

29.12.26

Dear Ward 1 Councillors

I am contacting you on behalf of Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council. Our local community has prepared a proposed Local Place Plan for Tongue, Melness and Skerray.

We are legally required to send each local authority Councillor for our Local Place Plan area (which lies in Ward number 1, Ward North, West and Central Sutherland, the information below, to comply with Section 4 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Place Plans) (Scotland) Regulations 2021. This email constitutes the **Information Notice** to local Councillors required by those Regulations.

1. Proposed Local Place Plan

The proposed Local Place Plan is attached.

2. Brief description of the content and purpose of the proposed Local Place Plan

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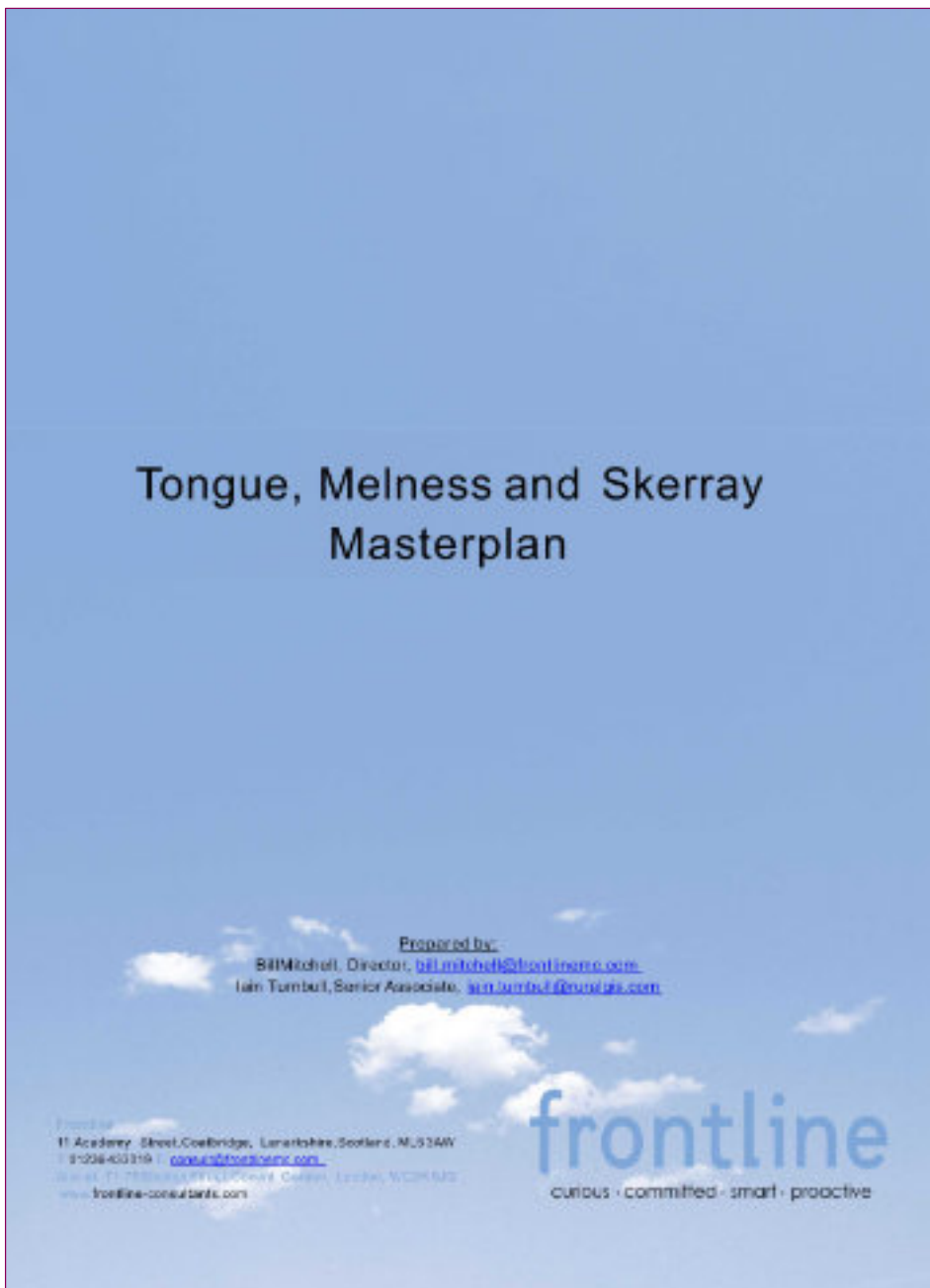
We are sending similar Information Notices to our adjoining, active Community Councils as required by the Local Place Plan Regulations.

Please let us know if you have any queries.

Kind regards

Secretary, TMSCC

Appendix 7: HIE Masterplan



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1 Purpose and Outcome

In common with many other areas in the north Highlands of Scotland the communities of Tongue, Melness and Skerray on the north coast of Sutherland have suffered from generations of population decline and economic and social fragility.

This Masterplan has been produced under the direction of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and it incorporates an assessment of the current socio-economic environment in the area and recommendations with short, medium, and long-term priorities based upon realistic and deliverable aspirations to deliver a sustainable thriving environment for the people in the community.

In producing this Masterplan, a comprehensive review of previous research and reports relating to the area and beyond was undertaken encompassing all aspects of the community. No new research was carried out, but the prevailing validity of the documentation was tested. Where additional work had been conducted this was considered, and the legal position was examined to ensure it remained current.

This is crucial. This Masterplan has been produced based on information available and considered accurate at the time of its publication. It has been deliberately designed to be flexible and adaptable as circumstances evolve. It would be inappropriate to create a Masterplan that was relevant at only one point in time.

Every effort was made to ensure as wide a range of individuals, groups and stakeholders was engaged with, and some 20% of the population were directly involved. This is an exceptional degree of involvement.

The Masterplan recognises that there will be a range of views and opinions, however the number of people involved provides reassurance that the recommendations in the Masterplan are robust and reflective of the community as a whole and this was tested in follow up meetings prior to final publication.



Tongue & Ben Loyal from the Causeway

2 Context

Communities involved

This Masterplan is focused on the Community Council area consisting of the communities of Tongue, Melness and Skerray. However, the infrastructure that supports it is not limited to the geographical boundaries of these and where that is the case (e.g. Schools, leisure facilities, etc.) the communities in which these things are based have been included in our recommendations.

The Community Council area covers an area of 412 sq. km. During the research for this Masterplan the most up to date demographic information that was available came from the 2011 census (the results of the most recent census of 2022 were not yet available), however the proposals are based on a subjective review of the community and represent a robust appreciation of the current situation.

The population in 2011 numbered 535 with the following demographic split:

<16 years	-	12.3%
16-64 years	-	61.7%
>65 years	-	26.0%

Each community is unique, and while there are similarities, each has a crofting heritage for example, there are significant differences.



Tongue

This is the largest of the three communities in terms of population and compared with Melness and Skerray has a much more clearly defined "town centre". This is represented by having two of the biggest hotels in the region located close to one another. The Tongue Hotel has been recently acquired by Highland Coast Hotels Ltd, and is a part of what the group describes as its "Collection". The Ben Loyal Hotel is independent and privately owned, while Lundies House is operated as a luxury catered property by Wildland who are a key landowner in the west of the community council area. Wildland have also financed the retention of the local shop and attached Post Office. Between the three they provide a focus for the community.

In addition, Tongue is a centre for Wildland's development in both leisure and tourism and future community facilities. The village lies within the Tongue Estate, which is owned by trustees on behalf of members of the Sutherland family, although at the time of producing this Masterplan the estate remains in probate following the death of the Countess of Sutherland in 2019.

That is not to understate the importance of crofting, and there is a long and proud heritage of crofting within Tongue, a position shared by the other townships within the Community Council area, and the basis of the Masterplan is designed to support this and to put the evolving needs of the people in the community into the context of maintaining a traditional way of life.

The effect of the size of Tongue and its position on the route of the North Coast 500 (NC500) creates a situation in which the interests of the people of Tongue could be dominant over the Community Council area. To alleviate this, account has been taken of the close similarities in expectation and preference amongst the different township populations.

Meiness

While Tongue presents itself as a broad-based community, Meiness identifies very much as a large crofting community, and the crofting land, excluding private dwellings with appropriate title deeds, is owned by the Meiness Crofters Estate (MCE). This body is therefore a key landowner, and specifically owns the land on which the proposed Space Hub Sutherland (SHS) will be built. This may bring significant financial benefit to Meiness and is detailed elsewhere in the Masterplan.

The community consists of 15 townships, run by one grazing committee, and one common grazing. With approximately 79 crofts, 48 croft tenants and 5 bought crofts, there are around 12 active crofters.

While Tongue has a considerable amount of infrastructure Meiness is less well provided for although there is a Community Centre, Post Office and shop and a Care Home but this is due to close with the residents being moved to the new build facility in Tongue. The hotel is closed and there is some doubt over the owner's intentions for it.



Meiness Crofts

Skerry

Skerry is very much the smallest of the three communities in terms of population with only two identified townships of Skerry and Borgie remaining from the 11 originals. There are 20 crofting households across the two townships. This community is also part of the Tongue Estate with the vast majority of the land area being subject to crofting tenure.

Methodology

The methodology followed in the production of this Masterplan is considered separately, a key factor is that the final report is based not on new research but on a careful assessment of work done over the past few years. It is therefore important to note that the Masterplan reflects community specific input into key analysis by a number of bodies over an extended period of time.

It is very clear that, in nearly all cases, the desires and expectations of the people of the area do not differ in any significant way from those of other similar communities across the Highlands and Islands.

North Coast Redesign

The provision of care facilities and services is one of the key developments identified by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in the brief for this Masterplan. Plans are well advanced for the construction of a new care hub in Tongue, covering the whole area as far east as Melvich and west towards Hope. The North Coast Redesign project remains in development at the time of writing but represents a significant investment in the community by NHS Highland and should boost the level of care provision significantly.

Space Hub Sutherland

Another imminent development that will be of huge significance to the community is the proposed construction of Space Hub Sutherland (SHS). While there are various developments planned for the area, including the new Care Hub in Tongue in collaboration with NHS Highland, a high-quality hotel at Hope, and possible childcare facilities, the possibility is that the single biggest development for the area may be that of the Space Hub that is in the process of being developed on the Moine, on land owned by Meiness Crofters' Estate.

This development is the undertaking of Orbex Ltd, based in Forres, and will provide the area with a significantly different range and number of job opportunities and financial benefit to the community, especially Meiness. However, it must be acknowledged that this has not been met with universal acclaim. The community, as a whole, is generally supportive but there are a notable number of dissenting voices being raised against its place in an area of environmental sensitivity. Wildland has strongly opposed the development through open and accountable process, and while they have taken a pragmatic view, and because they see their role as being supportive of the community's aspirations, there is no doubt that its presence runs contrary to their view of responsible development and protection of the natural capital of the area for future generations.



Moine House & Ben Loyal

Related communities

This Masterplan is specifically focused on Tongue, Melness and Skerry, but it is appropriate to recognise that key services for this Community Council area are provided in Bettyhill and further afield. Bettyhill lies in close proximity to Tongue, Melness and Skerry, indeed Skerry is physically closer to Bettyhill than to either Tongue or Melness.

Acknowledging that the people of Bettyhill have not contributed directly to this Masterplan, their contribution in the undesignated areas means it is important that their interests be considered alongside, and contributing to, those of the Tongue, Melness and Skerry Community. The most significant of these are the:

- + School
- + Leisure facility
- + Museum

3 Methodology

Review of previous research

Highland and Islands Enterprise provided a comprehensive list of documents that were to form the basis of the research into the production of the Masterplan. In addition to the initial list of documents, during the course of the early stages of the project it became clear that there were a number of other significant pieces of information that needed to be considered but there are two that require to be highlighted:

Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan)

This document, along with related research, in theory provides the basis for the regional development plan into which the Tongue, Melness and Skerry Masterplan should fit. This is a comprehensive document that forms the basis for strategic planning across Caithness and Sutherland and as such is a critical component of the planning process.

While it will be subject to review in the near future, at the time of writing it is necessary to point out that the current iteration was produced before the Space Hub development on the Moine, and the Care Hub Development by NHS Highland in Tongue were proposed, therefore that part of the CaSPlan referring to the Tongue, Melness and Skerry Community Council area is no longer current.

As a result, it became clear that there are differing views on the efficacy of this paper, and therefore while we have carefully addressed the contents with a view to ensuring congruity with the Masterplan, we are recommending a cautious approach be taken.

North West 2045 Vision

This is a significant piece of work and provides a framework for the expectations and desires of the different communities across the North West Highlands, showing a considerable degree of congruity.

Engagement

A key element of the brief was to engage with stakeholders, including partner organisations and the local community, building a consensus on the way forward and leading to the formulation of a structure to ensure that the Masterplan's community objectives and outcomes are achieved.

Although an initial list of stakeholders and interest groups (both formally constituted and informal) within the community was provided by Highland and Islands Enterprise and which formed the starting point of this process, it quickly became apparent that there were a great many more interested parties than had initially been suggested.

Every attempt was made to have direct discussions with as many as possible of these stakeholders, and this process provided great insight into the relevance and currency of previous work that had been undertaken, and ongoing and new initiatives across the area. A full list of the stakeholder organisations that have been consulted during this process is presented in Appendix 1.

Most of these stakeholder meetings were held online, although face-to-face meetings were held with the Melness Crofters Estate (including a guided estate tour), the local representatives of UpNorth, Orber and Wildland, and representatives from the Community Council provided invaluable insight into the area including a tour of the Tongue and Skerry areas, and the manager of North Coast Connection and the Kyle Centre. In addition to these formal and semi-formal groups and organisations meetings were held in Tongue, Melness and Skerry to raise awareness of the Masterplan within the community and to allow opportunities for individuals to engage with the planning process. These meetings were relatively well attended, and valuable perspectives were provided.



Kyle of Tongue Causeway

A summary of the engagement process is presented below, with the key points that arose from these discussions being described in more detail in Section 4 below.

Stakeholders

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) identified various key stakeholders, most notably:

- + Community Council
- + Community Development Trust (UpNorth)
- + Local landowners (Melness Crofters Estate (MCE), Tongue Estate and Wildland)
- + North Coast Redesign Project (NHS Highland, Highland Council (HC) and Wildland)
- + Education providers (Schools, Highlife Highland)
- + Space Hub Sutherland (HIE, Orbex, Melness Crofters Estate, NatureScot)

Considerable effort was committed to establishing dialogue with these stakeholders and in the process additional organisations were introduced to the programme (NW2045, The Highland Council, NatureScot – World Heritage Site Bid, Communities Housing Trust (CHT) and The Highland Council Regeneration Team, and their Climate Action Team).

Through these discussions a distillation of the key issues was achieved, along with information on previous and ongoing attempts to address sustainable development.

Community

Several community groups were identified as being relevant to the planning process while perhaps not being key stakeholders. These groups were all specifically sent invitations to the community meetings and offered the alternative of an online meeting if that was preferred, if they could not attend for any reason. Regrettably despite considerable efforts, attendance from these groups was disappointingly low, although many individual members of the community did make time to participate.

Notable by their low numbers in this regard was representation from the crofting community. In response to the low level of engagement with the crofters at the public meetings, extra effort was made to identify possible contacts who might engage with the process. This remained a challenge, and it is vital that every attempt is made throughout the on-going evolution of the implementation of the Masterplan given the rights and responsibilities enjoyed by crofters and the scope they possess to shape the development of the area.

Partner organisations

Beyond consultation on issues and solutions there was also a need to identify the main partner organisations that would be likely to have a role in the delivery of the Masterplan. These are groups that have a wider remit, but perhaps do not have a physical presence, nor any existing plan for action, in the Tongue Melness and Skerray area.

For example, one such group is NW2045 which has adopted the role of developing a vision for the sustainable development and climate action for the far north-west Highlands, from Coigach north to Dumess and eastwards as far as Bettyhill, as well as leading a pilot Rural Land Use Partnership project for the area.

The work they had already undertaken relates in large part to many of the critical issues affecting the Tongue, Melness and Skerray community, which is perhaps no surprise. While their vision is helpful, it does not address the specific needs of the Tongue, Melness and Skerray area, but it is certainly complementary and supportive of many of the ideas outlined in this Masterplan. Other partner organisations, beyond the key stakeholders that may be involved in delivery of the Masterplan include the Community Housing Trust, Transport for Tongue (T4T), High Life Highland, Bettyhill and Farr Community Council, Space Hub Sutherland Community Liaison Group, and Tongue Hotel Community Liaison Group.

Evaluation, analysis and design

There has been an enormous range of information and data provided by individuals, stakeholders and partner groups and organisations, as well as a significant amount of background data sourced by research during the planning process. This information was analysed carefully and assessed in terms of its importance to addressing the key development needs of the community.

Inevitably, the level of detail of much of this issue that while it informs the content of this Masterplan its complexity is beyond the scope of the final document that focuses on implementation and the key issues.

The process of securing interviews with several of the key stakeholders proved to be challenging and will need to be on-going. The analysis has been used to identify the priority issues and to offer solutions within the timeframe for publication. Where this has not been possible recommendations for further investigation, or planning, have been offered.

A major focus has been on developing a management structure that should be introduced and developed to deliver the Masterplan moving forward. It is not uncommon, unfortunately, for plans to sit on shelves, gathering dust, due to a lack of an effective delivery mechanism. The proposed format of this delivery mechanism is described in some detail in Section 7.

It should be noted that it may not fall to this management body to deliver all the recommendations within this Masterplan, but it is anticipated that their role will be to act as a catalyst for delivery, and in some cases, this may indeed involve actual delivery.

As is shown in the section on structure, other examples of organisation design have been reviewed to ensure that what is being proposed for this Masterplan not only reflects current good practice, but also pitfalls have been identified and allowed for.

This has resulted in a proposed structure that, while recognisable, is designed to meet the specific requirements of the Community Council area, in particular to take into account the unusual, if not unique, complexity that the Space Hub Sutherland brings to the area, aligned with the nature of land ownership and the specific philosophy of Wildland. A traditional model would not be appropriate to this, and the quality of job holders must also reflect the political, economic, and social environment.

4 Engagement

The following groups and organisations were identified as having a specific relevance to the Masterplan.

Stakeholders

Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) is the development agency of the Scottish Government with responsibility for the Highlands and Islands area. HIE's broad vision is for "the Highlands and Islands to be a highly successful, inclusive and prosperous region in which increasing numbers of people choose to live, work, study and invest."

In their 2019-22 strategy they identify declining population as being a major issue in Caithness and Sutherland. While the area has the highest unemployment rate in the region, this does not appear to be the case in the Tongue, Melness and Skerry area. The strategy also recognises the plans for satellite launch facilities being developed, as well as the presence of Dounreay and the North West Highlands Geopark as headline features of the area.

The emerging space industry is highlighted as an economic opportunity for the region, emphasising that the area is best placed within a European context for launching satellites into polar and sun-synchronous low Earth orbits. This provides the policy context for the development of Space Hub Sutherland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise's role in promoting that development.

Brexit is identified as a major economic factor but during engagement with the community and local organisations and businesses this has not specifically been raised as a major concern. Perhaps this reflects the macro-scale significance and political impact, where the stakeholders and community have been more focused on matters of immediate local concern. That said, the full impact of Brexit remains to be seen and certain sectors, such as agriculture and fisheries will undoubtedly be affected.

The HIE strategy identifies the following sectors as having the greatest opportunity for development, some of which will be a better fit than others for the Tongue, Melness and Skerry area:

- Energy
- Marine Economy
- Aquaculture
- Food & Drink
- Tourism
- Creative Industries
- Life Sciences
- Space
- Technology, Engineering and Manufacturing

Community-led development lies at the core of the strategy, working in partnership with the respective agencies and other stakeholders.

Highland Council

The Highland Council (HC) is the local authority for the Tongue, Melness and Skerry area and provides the usual range of services and infrastructure. The council has a duty to prepare Local Development Plans (LDPs) which in this area include the Highland-wide Local Development Plan (HwLDP) which sets out general aims and objectives, and planning policies, for the whole region, and more locally, the Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) which was adopted by Highland Council in August 2018 and sets out the vision and development strategy for the area for the next 20 years.

Work is due to commence on the new local development plan in 2023. This will provide opportunity for any potential changes thought to be required to the Local Development Plan, to be proposed to and considered by The Highland Council.

The community will have opportunity to prepare, if it so wishes, a new Local Place Plan for the Tongue, Melness and Skerry area, to inform preparation of The Highland Council's new Local Development Plan. Looking forward, the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), once approved by the Scottish Parliament will also play a role in day-to-day decision-making on planning applications.

The CaSPlan covers a wider area beyond the Tongue, Melness and Skerry Community Council boundary and there are various policies and priorities that apply broadly to the entire extent of the plan, with specific sections which deal with the local priorities in the communities of Tongue, Melness and Skerry.

The key elements of the CaSPlan are discussed in more detail under the Priorities section, particularly in relation to housing. The CaSPlan sets out the broad objectives for the whole of Caithness and Sutherland, seeking to deliver improvements in:

- Growing communities
- Employment
- Connectivity and transport
- Environment and heritage

The plan focuses on larger communities and is used to inform decisions under the statutory planning system as well as shaping priorities for delivery by the Council itself. In the case of Tongue, Melness and Skerry it only sets out anticipated areas for housing and other development, where that could be identified, for Tongue but is not specific across the remainder of the area. Otherwise, the following are the key elements of the plan relating to this Masterplan:

- Development of green network connections across the north-west
- Development of the National Cycle Network
- Enhanced digital fibre network
- Addressing issues relating to the NC500
- Flexible community-led development

Tongue is designated as a Settlement Development Area and as such specific development proposals are mapped out in order to provide certainty that an adequate supply of suitable land is available for development where it is deemed most appropriate. Within the specified Settlement Development Areas other small-scale infill developments are also considered suitable.

The Tongue section recognises the likelihood of increased demand for housing due to emerging industries, presumably the Space Hub Sutherland, and allocates housing sites accordingly. The total allocation amounts to an indicative growth of c. 32 units in three short/medium-term sites, plus an undefined number in the long-term site. However, it is important to acknowledge that these plans have been overtaken somewhat by developments on the ground centred on the new Care Hub and associated housing planned by Wildland, which will utilise the long-term area. This is covered in more detail in the housing section under Priorities.

Melness is designated a Growing Settlement and is covered by the Council's Growing Settlements Policy with no sites specifically allocated. The policy takes into account development type, scale, siting and design, and considers placemaking priorities for the specific settlement.

The placemaking priorities for Melness are:

- Crofting to continue as an important role within the community
- Support development enabling capitalisation of future growth and economic development opportunities
- Developments of more than two houses to be located near existing facilities
- Possible extension of Joseph MacKay Court
- Future development sensitive designations

The Masterplan must reflect the operational delivery processes of The Highland Council as it is important for there to be congruence of aims across the entire area, and as is reflected in the analysis, the

community affected directly by the Masterplan is not an isolated entity and is dependent on other, related communities such as Bettyhill.

Sutherland Community Planning Partnership

Sutherland Community Planning Partnership is working with communities to support the people of Sutherland to live full, healthy lives with opportunity and diversity. They aspire to ensure that everyone living in Sutherland experiences positive outcomes in their lives, with a say over the things that have an impact on them and that services delivered by our public agencies support that. The partnership carried out a community planning exercise in 2018-19 resulting in the Melness, Tongue and Skerry Community Plan. The process included a questionnaire survey and various workshops with 14% of the population responding to the questionnaire. The key issues identified were:

- Transport – need improved services
- Work and Local Economy – childcare, employment and training opportunities
- Housing – lack of affordable options, linked to other issues, e.g. recruitment
- Digital Communications – mobile reception, poor broadband affecting economy
- Young People identified natural environment as an asset, need for meeting places, little to do, better sports facilities
- People with protected characteristics – need leisure activities, transport, GP and respite services, road safety and impact of NC600 raised as concerns

NHS Highland

NHS Highland operate two care facilities serving the area, one at the Caladh Sona Care Unit in Talmire, Melness, and the Melvich Community Care Unit, some 28 miles to the east of Tongue. Each facility has five residential beds and one short-term bed (typically used by local GPs).

There is currently a significant issue with staff retention and recruitment at the Talmire unit. Both facilities are scheduled to close, being replaced by a new integrated care facility in Tongue. The North Coast Redesign project seeks to establish the new North Sutherland Health and Social Care Hub and is being developed through a partnership between The Highland Council, NHS Highland and Wildland.

The project aims to integrate care services and facilities in one location, consisting of a new state-of-the-art residential care facility with a 16-bed capacity, integrated care team services and a new GP surgery, operated by NHS Highland. The plans for the new building were aired to the community in mid-November 2022 and it is expected to be complete by 2025.



The operation of the new facility raises a number of issues for NHS Highland:

- A need for affordable housing for staff (permanent and visiting/short-term)
- A need for accommodation for visiting family members, especially those in palliative care
- Lack of childcare facilities in the area for staff families
- Difficulty in recruiting staff (few young people in the community and relatively poor remuneration). Consideration is being given to Modern Apprenticeships and Foundation Apprenticeships to develop the local workforce, along with work placements for students at Farr High School

Landowners

A map showing approximate boundaries of the main estates is presented at Appendix 3.

Melness Crofters Estate

Melness Crofters Estate is owned and managed by the crofters of Melness since 1995 when the landowner offered it to them. The estate has no formal management plan or strategy but has identified a number of development opportunities, most notably in relation to:

- Provision of affordable housing
- Commercial workshop space
- Redevelopment of the current Care Home (Caladh Sona) and the old schoolhouse as community facilities and accommodation
- Renewable energy production
- Development of the harbour area
- Peatland restoration
- Melness Church

Wildland

Wildland is a landowner with three estates across the Highlands, including substantial holdings in and around Melness, whose 200-year vision is of landscape-scale conservation, working to "let nature heal, grow and thrive."

Wildland is also developing a number of business activities aimed at "contributing to resilient communities" and seeking to show that "nature can pay her way." Climate change action is high on their agenda and their long-term ambition is on reducing grazing pressure through herbivore control aimed at allowing the landscape to regenerate on its own.

In Sutherland they recognise the cultural imprint on the land and want to work with the communities that are resident on their estates. Partnership working lies at the centre of their strategy, aiming to seek conservation at a landscape-scale.

More specifically in the Tongue, Melness and Skerries area, Wildland has been active in developing their built assets, especially at:

- Hope Lodge – where they are seeking to create a luxury hospitality destination and expect to employ c. 32 staff by 2025
- Tongue Bank House – they are continuing to explore options for this building which is located at the heart of the village of Tongue. The aim is to see it used by local businesses
- Tongue Shop and Post Office – this building was under threat of closing and was purchased by Wildland. It is now leased to a local business
- The Burns – an initial development concept for this area has been taken back to the drawing board with an emphasis shifted towards community development, this is ongoing at the time of writing
- Lundies House – has been developed as a luxury catered property
- NC Redesign – Wildland was unhappy with the original proposal and has made available an alternative site. Through collaboration with The Highland Council, NHS Highland and engagement with stakeholders, Wildland has designed a facility that fulfils the vision of an integrated Healthcare Hub, for which a detailed planning application has been submitted. The draft plans were aired at a community meeting in mid-November 2022. The construction cost is anticipated to be some £13.5m with the facility being leased to The Highland Council/NHS Highland at a rent that reflects only the cost of their original proposed development

In terms of their future aspirations and concerns, they identified:

- Need to provide accommodation for the staff they expect to employ at Hope Lodge and on their wider estate
- Need for childcare provision
- Support for local producers, especially aimed at using the produce in Hope Lodge
- Working with the community and see Tongue as their centre of focus

In terms of the wider estate, and their long-term objectives, these are still in development and further survey and planning work is intended to help inform this process.

Tongue Estate

The Tongue Estate is owned by trustees on behalf of the Sutherland family and was formerly managed as part of the wider Sutherland Estates. The Estate is in a period of transition, following the late Countess of Sutherland's death in 2019. The late Countess was always an active supporter of the local community, and we understand that the Trustees of the Estate intend to continue this legacy.

The majority of the estate is subject to crofting tenure with five Townships, each having extensive areas of common grazing. Most other land and the buildings on the estate are leased as long-term residential or business/living units. The management of deer is leased, although the estate does attend Deer Management Group meetings.

Since 1973, the Estate has been subject to a Conservation Agreement with the National Trust for Scotland, covering the coastal strip from Tongue eastwards to Tomisdale Bay (see map at Appendix 4). This type of agreement is based on the NTS Confirmation Acts of 1938, establishing real burdens on property, in favour of the NTS, by agreement with the owner. In addition, the Tongue Estate is subject to Heritage Maintenance Plans that are reviewed every five years with Historic Environment Scotland and NatureScot. The purpose of these plans is to preserve and maintain the outstanding beauty of the Estate's land and listed buildings for the benefit of the public.

The Estate must give special consideration to development of the coastal fringe and associated bays and beaches, sporting land, agricultural land, croft land and woodland (in so far as not to impinge on the statutory rights of crofters and agricultural tenants) and the relevant heritage bodies must be consulted if development might impinge on the quality of the specified area. Seekings such as agreements may restrict

future development in the area, and it would be prudent to involve the relevant heritage bodies in any discussions at an early stage.

The following development issues were highlighted on behalf of the Estate:

- + New housing is required – the Estate is happy in principle to explore options with the crofting community, and they are aware of the CaSP plan allocated areas in Tongue, including area TG02 adjacent to Varich Place
- + Supportive of establishing community business opportunities
- + Provision of community facilities might be possible
- + Need for a diversity of business, beyond tourism
- + Recruitment of staff is a challenge currently
- + Listed buildings have restrictions in place which makes development challenging
- + Tongue Pier is in need of renovation but could offer potential as a community enterprise – possibly linked with developments at Melness, Skerry and Scullomnie piers/harbours
- + The woodland around House of Tongue offers potential as a green space for the community with an enhanced footpath network

Partner organisations

Orbex

Orbex is the company that is delivering the Space Hub to the community. Based in Forres it has two distinct business structures:

- + Rocket production
- + Payload delivery

Rocket design and manufacture is based in Forres and currently employs some 80 people, forecast to grow to some 130 over the first six months of 2025.

They have established a separate business entity that will be based on the Moine in Melness, from which to launch their hardware and associated payloads. This is a wholly owned subsidiary company of their Forres operation. The operation of this facility will create a number of jobs, the current estimate for which totals 40 full-time equivalent roles, with 25 full-time and site based. The remainder will be called upon around launch times, which once at full operational status will be up to 12 launches per annum.

Orbex have funding in place with a forecast capital investment of around £60 million. In addition to the capital expenditure, the commercial operating agreement will generate significant revenue for the community of Melness with 2% of launch fees being paid to the Melness Crofters Estate (with a minimum payment of £100,000 per annum), and a further 1% being paid to the community, although the specific recipient body has yet to be agreed.

This will inevitably have a significant impact on the entire community as it brings a completely different commercial dynamic to the area. This has been promoted as potentially bringing in high tech jobs, however, as is discussed below, when the issue of jobs is explored, the reality appears to be that while there will be technician jobs on site the majority of the rocket technology jobs are likely to be based in the production facility in Forres, and the jobs that relate to launching will be Melness based with technical support being brought in temporarily from Forres for the launches as required.

Orbex has a well-defined vision for the site and will act as a fulcrum for development for the area, however they are operating in a highly competitive environment, and are focused on their commercial objectives that they are understandably unwilling to compromise. Their requirements for staff, housing, short-term accommodation needs will be paramount.

Hotels

In addition to the already significant, and potentially growing, demand from the tourism sector, developments such as SH-Sare creating greater pressure for accommodation in the area for short-term visitors. As described elsewhere there are currently two hotels in the area that operate in that general sector, The Tongue Hotel and the Ben Loyal Hotel. Wildland is developing a unique facility that they intend will operate at world class level.

Tongue Hotel, part of Highland Coast Hotels Group, is undergoing major refurbishment, and its plans are very much to engage the local community and to provide career and training opportunities.

The Ben Loyal Hotel is independently owned and managed and is a mainstay of the community.

In addition, Wildland have opened Lundiesash high end catered accommodation and have developed Kinloch Lodge in similar fashion.

North West 2045

Given that NW2045 offers a vision for the entire north west Highland area it is crucial that the Masterplan takes account of this and the requirements of the Tongue, Melness and Skerry community are considered in context.

Reviewing the findings from NW2045 there is congruence with what is contained in the Masterplan, and it will be important that a close relationship is maintained.

The added value of this relationship will be the range of organisations represented on NW2045 therefore communication will be facilitated through this forum as the group consists of a number of the other key organisations that will impact on the Masterplan.

The NW2045 Vision highlights three key elements:

- + A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work
- + A model for a new diverse and sustainable rural economy
- + A place where communities can determine their own prospects

Community

A number of community specific groups must also be factored into the plan and their interests considered. As has been stated previously, some of these groups have involvement in larger oversight bodies such as NW2045.

UpNorth – the local community development trust has existed since 2008 as the Melness and Tongue Community Development Trust, evolving into UpNorth in 2017. At the time of writing, UpNorth did not have a current plan or strategy, but they clearly have the scope to play a role in the delivery of the Masterplan.

Crofting community – crofting plays an important role in the culture and economy of the area with the vast majority of the Tongue Estate and the Melness Crofters Estate being under crofting tenure. On the Tongue Estate there are 415 townships, each with substantial areas of common grazings. In total there are 63 crofts and 18 townships under the Tongue Conservation Agreement. On the Melness Crofters Estate there are c.52 crofts in several townships which share the one area of common grazings. The crofters and the Melness Crofters Estate have agreed to lease the site of the Space Hub Sutherland to Highland and Islands Enterprise, and this is an important example of how they can play a significant part in the development of the area.

Transport For Tongue – transport is a key issue for the area, and it is explored in detail under Priorities. Provision of transport is supported locally by Transport for Tongue, a Company Limited by Guarantee, run on a not-for-profit basis, with a voluntary board of directors, employing part-time administrative staff and drivers.

Formed in 2009 they began by providing a door-to-door service enabling those without transport to access essential local services and healthcare appointments. It has grown since then and acquired a facility to garage/park vehicles and store essential supplies and equipment which was the old Roads Department Depot in 2013 via the Asset Transfer Scheme. The range and frequency of services has dropped since Covid and is currently restricted to registered bus service to Lairg every Wednesday and to Melness every Friday. They also offer door-to-door services and disabled access.



Transport For Tongue Depot

Kyle Centre – this is a key facility, based in Tongue but serving the wider Tongue, Melness and Skerray community. The Kyle Centre is operated by North Coast Connection, a social enterprise delivering health and well-being activity, including a community lunch group three days a week. The organisation currently employs three part-time staff – a manager, a cook and a support worker who are assisted by a number of volunteers. The building acts as a community hub. Providing a non-aligned facility of this quality is crucial, however as we have outlined elsewhere, its location means that it adds to the dominant position that Tongue has within the Community Council area, but it is a vital resource.

Schools – education provision is delivered through the North Coast Campus consisting of:

- + Tongue Primary School has a roll of 18 in two plus classrooms plus one Gaelic medium
- + Farr High School has a roll of c.74 and covers a catchment including the entire Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council area and beyond, including Bettyhill and Farr, Altnaharra and Melnich. While the capacity of the high school (c.120) its infrastructure consists of a mix of original buildings dating from its founding in 1964, and temporary accommodation

There is no operational hindrance with the high school being outside the Tongue, Melness and Skerray Community Council area, but the challenges in relation to transport require a co-ordinated approach. It is important to maintain close communication with the head teacher at the high school.

Given the forecast increase in population predicted for the school catchment area, consideration must be given to carry out a detailed review of the facilities.

The Farr High School also accommodates the North Coast Leisure Centre which is operated by High Life Highland and offers a swimming pool and an excellent fitness suite.

5. Priorities

There is a remarkable consistency across all the research carried out by the different bodies into the priorities for people living in the Highlands of Scotland. The area that this Masterplan covers, Tongue, Melness and Skerray, reflects precisely the same key issues that are reported within the detailed report from NW2045, the CaSP Plan and all other similar reports.

However, each community has different nuances, and this Masterplan has been devised to take into account a number of influencing factors that, while not necessarily unique to this area, do offer a significantly different perspective.

As reflected in every report the major priority is housing, which is addressed below. What is consistent regardless of who is discussing it, is that it links directly to jobs, and it is in this connection that there is difficulty in determining exactly what form of housing is both required and prioritised.

Specifically for this area, the potential impact of the number of new jobs that is forecast will be significant, but the greater challenge will be providing the range of housing stock to address the needs of the likely demographics relating to incoming workers. As such, the issue of jobs has been addressed first, followed by housing, as this will make it easier to understand the rationale behind the recommendations.

Inevitably all these priorities are interlinked.

Jobs

The demand for appropriate housing is front and centre to the challenge of employment. Throughout the Community Council area there is concern over finding suitable people to fill vacancies because of, in large part but not exclusively, the difficulty of finding housing. Other factors including skills availability, seasonality of roles, pay levels and cost of living, remoteness and poor transport infrastructure, social and cultural facilities and services also need to be considered in relation to businesses' challenges in finding staff.

Notwithstanding that, in line with the national position, there would appear to be little unplanned unemployment in the community. Anecdotally it is considered that everyone who wants to work is in employment. The challenge is determining the quality of those jobs and their sectors.

Hospitality

It is self-evident that one of the key areas is hospitality and there is no question that finding suitable staff for the local hotels is challenging. This is highlighted by Wildland being clear that they will bring in staff and also provide high quality training because of the standards they will expect of their staff, given their projected clientele.

Tongue Hotel have also indicated their plans include apprenticeships and enhanced training and working with the local High School to provide work experience, aimed at providing quality careers for young people within their hotel group. Both are aiming for year-round operation, addressing the issue of seasonality of employment.



Wildland is planning to employ around 35 staff at their new hotel at Hope.

Tongue Hotel is forecasting around 25 staff for their refurbished hotel.

There is a critical issue in relation to this and that is the level of remuneration on offer in a jobs environment that is likely to be disrupted with the advent of the Space Hub Sutherland.

Orbex

There has been considerable debate around exactly the number of jobs that Orbex will be providing in the area, and what these jobs will be. Detailed discussion with the Orbex Chief Executive has now clarified this situation.

As described separately the Orbex operation at the Moine is a subsidiary of the larger company based in Forres where the rocket manufacturing facility is based. SHS is a platform from which rockets will be launched carrying client payload. The Moine site will have its own Profit and Loss accounts therefore will be operating as a stand-alone commercial entity.

The workforce plan for the site therefore reflects the difference in technological complexity within the Orbex operation. The launch site will employ 25 full-time staff engaged in operational activities including:

- Finance
- Security
- Logistics (including fuel and transport)
- Technicians
- Site maintenance
- PR and client care
- Communications

The company will also have its own General Manager/Managing Director based at the site.

In addition to those staff employed on a full-time basis, there will be a requirement for a number of part-time staff leading up to and immediately following a launch. These roles will include enhanced security and stewarding/visitor management, and it is forecast that there could be between 30-40 individuals working 3-4 days around a launch window which, once the site is at full operation, will be 120 times per year. This equates with around 8-9 full-time equivalents and being part-time occasional work could fit well with other part-time roles in the area.

This clarity allows for more effective planning around the support infrastructure that this will require. Orbex are committed to paying well in relation to the jobs on offer and it is likely that these jobs will be attractive to local people already in employment elsewhere. A comparative analysis suggests that it is unlikely that many of these roles will require specialist knowledge, those more technical functions being delivered in Forres.

This will present a challenge to other potential employers, but it may also provide an opportunity to retain people in the community by enhancing income levels through part-time working in addition to self-employment.

Infrastructure development

In addition to their hotel development at Hope Widdland is keen to support community development elsewhere and has been looking at the Burrs area within Tongue as a potential retail site but this has to be confirmed. They have also invested in renovating the former bank building and hope that this will offer community/business facilities.

North Coast Redesign Care Hub

This is outlined below under its own heading, however, the specific challenge in relation to jobs within the health/care sector is finding suitable staff to fill vacancies. There is empirical evidence that the existing care centre manager has struggled to fill numerous positions, not through lack of qualified candidates but because of a shortage of affordable housing. Salary scales also represent a challenge, which is likely to increase if better-paid roles are created at SHS and in the hospitality sector.

Self-employment opportunities

The Tongue Estate will give active consideration to supporting the communities, as far as they are able, including by way of offering facilities or land, on a leased basis. However most of the buildings on the Estate are listed which puts limits on their use, and most of the land is subject either to crofting tenure or undertakings to preserve and maintain its outstanding beauty.

While there is a demand for small workshops that could provide the opportunity for small businesses to locate, there is a challenge in finding appropriate locations and therefore the impact on job numbers is likely to be negligible.

Mohesa Crofters Estate have also identified a few opportunities for small-scale business development, in the form of workshop premises and conversion of the old mill at Talmine for renewable energy production. Whether this is undertaken on a self-employed basis or direct employment by the Estate remains to be confirmed. Also, as part of the ongoing CH Housing assessment (see below), there will be an assessment of other economic and social development needs and opportunities carried out which may lead to additional specific proposals in that community.



Tongue Garage at the Burrs

Recommendations

Unless there is a coherent plan for the area to oversee workforce planning, the challenge will be that the individual organisations will compete for staff from the same potential workforce. While there have been expectations that there would be a number of hi-tech jobs coming into the area through SHS, the reality is that the skills set of the Orbex jobs is unlikely to exceed the existing workforce.

What will impact on income levels and Orbex have stated that their philosophy is to pay well.

One of the differentiating factors in the Operations Manager's job profile (see Delivery Structures section following) must be to oversee and co-ordinate local recruitment, providing a service to the hiring companies in identifying potential candidates. This in effect becomes a recruitment co-ordinator for the Community Council.

This will include closely liaising with local employers, stakeholder groups (e.g. NHS Highland) and schools and colleges across the region to maintain communication between the different parties on opportunities and need.

The Operations Manager will also have an ongoing responsibility for working with the partners and stakeholders to develop specific proposals for economic opportunities.

Education and Training

While the existing school facilities across both primary and secondary are adequate for current purposes, these are likely to be put under pressure as the population grows and a review needs to be carried out of requirements in both education and training in order to service the growing local demand and to provide reassurance to potential new residents that the development of young people can progress within the area.

Several stakeholders have expressed desire to offer work experience and modern apprenticeships, therefore this need requires to be addressed as the community evolves.

Developing appropriate programmes with colleges including UHI North Highland College will contribute to growing the skillbase and capacity to provide the leadership skills necessary to continue the development of the area.

Housing

Regardless of which part of the Highlands and Islands is being considered, the issue of housing is at the top of the list of priorities. This is the case for the Tongue, Melness and Skeray Community Council area. A number of surveys by different bodies (HSCHT, Rural Housing Scotland (RHS), CHT (ongoing), NW2045, HC) have been carried out and the findings have been consistent.

The core challenge is ensuring there will be housing stock that is balanced to meet the needs of the evolving community in the context of an imminently changing employment scenario. According to best estimates, based on our discussion with Orbx, Wildland, NHS Highland and the hospitality sector it is possible that there could be as many as 100 new jobs within this community in the coming 2-5 years.

This is an enormous number within the context of an area that has a total population of fewer than 600 individuals. Considering that the age structure of the current population is shifted towards older age groups than the national and regional averages, this means that these roles can only be filled by people moving into the area or by people commuting to work from neighbouring areas, e.g. Bettyhill, Melvich, Thurso, which would significantly reduce the beneficial impact of these developments on the Tongue, Melness and Skeray community. Thus, resolving the lack of available housing is a critical element in this Masterplan.



TG02 Housing Site

The CaSPlan identified specific housing development areas within Tongue and promoted policies on location, design and type of housing across the wider area. In the case of Tongue four sites were identified for short-term development, with an allocation of up to 32 houses in total (see below). The redesign and relocation of the Care Hub proposals has impacted upon the stated timing and use of these allocations, with the Care Hub moving from TG04 to the bottom half of TG05, the remainder of which will be housing, delivered by Wildland. The long-term housing area above (TG03) will remain available.

TG04 will transfer to Wildland on completion of the Care Hub and will be retained as green space in perpetuity. Wildland will work closely with the community to develop plans for this facility to ensure it becomes a useful asset to the community. Meanwhile, the Tongue Estate will carefully consider any proposal to develop TG02 for more affordable housing. The relevant heritage bodies would have to be consulted before any final decisions are made.

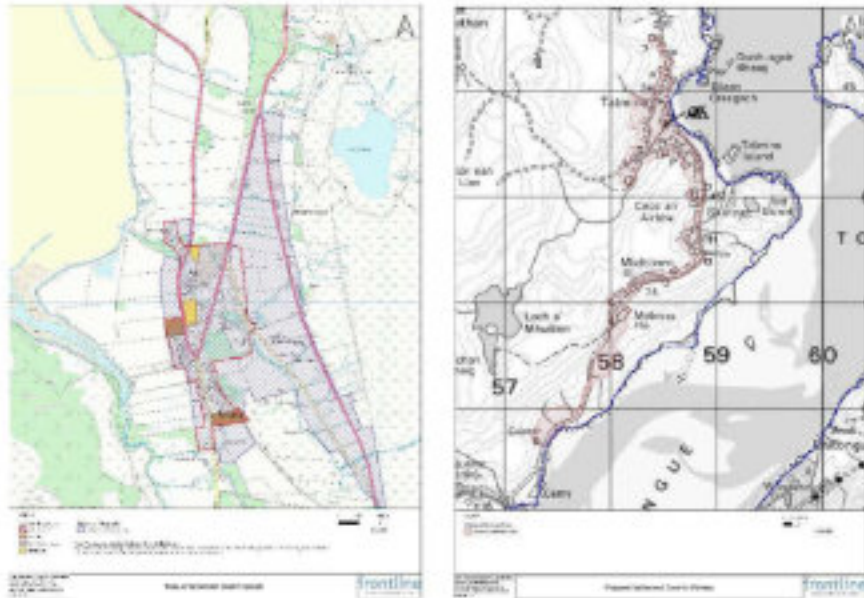


TG04 Site & Lurdies House

The Settlement Development Area (SDA, outlined in red dotted line) is relatively confined to the centre of the village and does not incorporate much of the surrounding croft land. With the agreement of the Tongue Estate (see second map with blue hatched area), there is possibly scope for wider development of some areas within an expanded SDA, and this should be considered as a means of helping to address the shortfall of available sites to meet the anticipated demand.

Most of this land is croft land and the crofters will need to be engaged in that discussion. The HwLDP and the CaSPlan do not preclude all housing development that is outwith Settlement Development Areas and not fitting with the Growing Settlements policy of the CaSPlan, but the Development Plan does seek to steer location, siting and design and to manage effects of development.

Similarly, in Melness and Skeray, there are no clearly specified SDAs within the CaSPlan, and developments are largely led by private developers, typically associated with croft housing. However, Melness Crofters Estate have commissioned Community Housing Trust to undertake a planning study to investigate up to 12 housing units at Talmie, along with possible commercial developments in the area.



Transport

The only access to the area is by road, and the physical infrastructure is in very poor condition, generally, rendering the area that is already geographically remote even more marginalised. The main route north-south is by way of a single-track road to Alnhamra and Lairg and hence onwards to Dingwall/Inverness.

The road to Thurso varies from decent two-lane to very poor single-track, and westward towards Dumess is almost entirely single-track. Added to the poor infrastructure, the impact of increased visit numbers arising from the NC500 has made already long travel times even more extended and frustrating for residents. The advent of new businesses like SHS are likely to place increased pressure on the failing infrastructure and investment is urgently required to support this nationally important economic development.

As with other parts of the north, the Tongue, Melness and Skerry area suffers from a chronic lack of reliable public transport. It would be wrong to assume everyone has access to their own transport. Transport for Tongue is a small, community run, transport company operating from Tongue running minibus services to Melness and Lairg and Thurso, facilitating the ability of people to travel around northwest Sutherland.

The service varies according to days of the week and suffers from lack of investment and inability to access sufficient numbers of qualified drivers. The only other service that operates in the area is very limited and does not even operate on a daily basis.

The lack of decent infrastructure, and poor public transport services is damaging for the community.

Recommendations

The main road passing through the communities is part of the NC500 and regardless of the merits or otherwise of this, the increased utilisation levels are accelerating wear and tear on the road surface.

A fully developed plan for the provision of effective public transport will be produced, recognising that there are limitations on resources, however the evolving situation with Orbex, Wildland and the Care Hub changes the dynamic by creating a legitimate through flow of usage in relation to staffing provision. This will also address climate action priorities aiming to reduce the dependency on private vehicles.

In order for this to be effective a more region wide approach needs to be adopted recognising that individual communities do not exist in isolation and connectivity with the wider area is crucial.

Health and Care Services

Care sector

The North Sutherland Health and Social Care Hub is a new project aimed at bringing all NHS care facilities and services within one Care Hub and closing the current facilities in Melness and Melvich. There will be 15 residential beds including one short-term bed for local GPs.

There is no clearly defined staffing structure yet for the facility but is not expected to be completed until at least 2028. It is expected that there will be a small increase in jobs although some new roles will be offset by economies of scale by bringing the two existing facilities into one location.

The current position is that a number of the Melvich staff may not opt to retain their jobs and travel or relocate to Tongue, opting for retirement instead as some are nearing retirement age. Thus, given the current vacancies in Melness, there are likely to be several vacancies arising from the new development.

NHS Highland is exploring alternatives including Modern Apprenticeships and Foundation Apprenticeships to develop the local workforce and are also looking at increased job placements with the High School in Bettyhill. There is also the option in place for an Open University nursing course allowing staff to develop their career in care and remain local in the community.



New Care Hub Location and Housing Site

The overall aim of the Redesign project is to create a Care Hub that is a community asset, bringing all the NHS services into one location, including community care and social services teams and the GP practice. There will be no other staff residential accommodation included specifically within the project, although Highland is looking at a housing development in the area above the proposed Care Hub.

Other critical elements of healthcare need to be addressed, access to primary medical care is hampered by the challenge of finding doctors willing to move into the area, aligned with the difficulty in finding suitable accommodation.

One gap in the planned provision within the Care Hub is that of Child Care/Nursery. At present there are no private nursery facilities, although there is pre-school provision within the Primary School in Tongue. Options are being explored by The Highland Council and NHS Highland to accommodate some additional Child Care services within the existing facilities in the school, but this will be limited by space and recruitment of suitably qualified care workers may be challenging.

With the potential for up to 100 new jobs in the area, it is inevitable that there will be increased pressure on this service. This may offer opportunity for private business to fill the gap, assuming suitable facilities can be secured in the area. This Masterplan recommends that the delivery of such a facility is prioritised.

Tourism

A common narrative in the community is that tourism is important, but they do not want to be "defined by it". Unquestionably tourism is a major factor in the economic mix of the community however by itself it is not sufficient to provide a sustainable economic environment.

Tourism is the largest economic sector in the area and being located on the NC500 means there is scope for further development of tourism related activity. This sector is complex, incorporating everything from accommodation to food and drink, facilities and services and other infrastructure.

There is clearly intent within the hotel sector to develop the offer in terms of quality improvement but there does not appear to be any coherent strategic approach to managing visitors across the north coast area.

There are four significant piers/jetties within the Tongue, Melness and Skerray area: Talmine, Tongue, Scullomlie and Skerray. Ownership of these facilities is fragmented and in the case of Skerray is causing challenges to community initiatives. There is scope for these to be developed within a coordinated project aimed at developing the leisure and recreation potential of the area, as well as supporting the existing fishing community.

There are several core paths around the Tongue, Melness and Skerray area as well as many other footpaths and undefined walking/cycling routes, including the popular routes to Ben Loyall and Ben Hope. These mountains are popular destinations for hillwalkers, with Ben Hope being the most northerly Munro in Scotland. There are useful guides to walking in the area and consideration should be given to waymarking these routes where they are not already in place. Consideration could also be given to the provision of parking areas, if required, and visitor information, both interpretive and also promoting appropriate behaviour in the context of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Linking communities by footpath and cycle routes should be prioritised to facilitate a reduction in reliance on vehicles, helping to address climate change.

With the proliferation of designated sites, especially for birdlife, there is scope for creating viewing areas/shides, like the existing one at Moine House. This could form a priority action within the plan for the World Heritage Site.

Other similar areas, such as Wester Ross, have developed a Destination Management Plan (DMP) that looks at what infrastructure and services are required to manage visitors and tourism sustainably. Venture North is the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) for Caithness and Sutherland, the role is to develop, promote and manage responsible and sustainable tourism. Venture North aim to provide economic benefit to the region which reflects the needs and values of their communities and businesses. With the advent of the SHS and the potential of the World Heritage Site status there is scope for even more visitors to the area.

The NC500 has undoubtedly already had a significant impact on the communities of the north-west Highlands and there has been little, if any, coordinated approach to mitigation of this. It has also brought significant opportunities to the tourism business sector. Therefore, it is recommended that the relevant organisations, perhaps led by Venture North, develop a Destination Management Plan for the wider north-west coast area (e.g. Lochinver/Scourie to Bettyhill) with prioritised actions to address the impacts and take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the NC500 and these new developments. Key partners in developing the DMP will be:

- Venture North
- The Highland Council
- Highlands and Islands Enterprise
- Visit Scotland
- NatureScot
- UNESCO WHS Partnership
- UNESCO NW Highland Geopark
- North West 2045
- Orbax



Melness Campsite

During the last two years The Highland Council has employed additional seasonal Access Rangers to manage and mitigate the impacts of increased 'wild' and roadside camping/campervans. These services have proved very valuable and have been widely welcomed by communities across the Highlands. However, due to budget constraints, it is possible that these roles may not be continued. The provision of a Ranger Service for the Tongue, Melness and Skerray area, linked with the Museum in Bettyhill as well, would be a valuable contribution to the area.

Leisure

There is a direct correlation between tourism and leisure, but it is important to differentiate the needs of short-term visitors with the needs of the residents. In particular, much of the challenge in retaining young people lies not only with appropriate job opportunities and housing, but with access to leisure activities. This is particularly pertinent when looking to attract people into the area, with a range of age groups and expectations.

Below is a summary of current provision and while it is attractive in and of itself, there is clearly a need to develop the leisure infrastructure. In the past, for example, each community had its own football pitch and there was a thriving football league. These no longer exist.

It is also an example of how issues are interconnected, with access to the leisure centre at Bettyhill requiring transport and the lack of regular public transport making it difficult for non-drivers to access.

Attractions in Tongue

The most obvious leisure facilities in Tongue are the two hotels, both of course having a focus on tourism.

The Ben Loyal Hotel is a small locally owned pub-restaurant-hotel and stag-lamping pods have recently been added to the grounds.

Tongue Hotel has recently been acquired by Highland Coast Hotels and is undergoing a refurbishment programme.

Kyle of Tongue Hostel and Holiday Park was originally constructed in 1891 as a Shooting Lodge. It was acquired by the Scottish Youth Hostel Association in the 1950s and taken into private ownership by the Mackey family in 2014.

From a locals' perspective, while the intention of the Tongue Hotel following refurbishment is to remain open all year round, the potential lack of custom during winter makes that precarious.

Other attractions are very much tourist-focused:

Castle Verrich is situated on a peak of rock which overlooks the Kyle of Tongue and the Village of Tongue; the castle is thought to be over one thousand years old and is the ancestral seat of Clan Mackay. Although in ruins, it is very picturesque and is an ideal spot for picnics and photography enthusiasts. Castle Verrich was conserved by Wildland in partnership with Historic Environment Scotland in recent years and now includes a steel viewing platform.

Meall nan Clach Ruadha is the highest summit of a ridge extending above the Kyle of Tongue; the ridge is best known as Ben Tongue which refers to a lower summit and presents excellent opportunities for walking and hiking.

Attractions in Melness

The Rabbit Islands, a group of three uninhabited small islands, are known for sub-aqua diving and canoeing.

The hotel in Melness is currently closed and there is no clarity around its future.

Attractions in Skerryay

Tigh Hughragh Gallery showcases artwork from local artists.

All three communities have their own Village Hall equipped with stages that could be developed for multiple use. These facilities are well used and host a range of clubs and associations. It was suggested

that funding be used to bring cultural events to these halls rather than residents having to travel to Inverness or further afield to see shows and events.

Bettyhill

While Bettyhill is not within the Community Council area of this Masterplan, it is crucial to leisure provision as it hosts the North Coast Leisure Centre, operated by High Life Highland and provides the area with a swimming pool, spa, sauna facilities and a fitness suite. It is open 3x a week and is well used by the community.

Recommendations

In the short-term developing what currently exists and seeking ways to develop all-year round access to hotel and restaurant facilities.

In the medium-term identifying land to be developed as all-weather sports pitches/tennis courts and developing the footpath/cycle path network.

Long-term, refurbishment of each of the four halls should be considered. This will require substantial investment, but the benefits for local recreation as well as offering the opportunity to encourage sailing is considerable.

6 Environment and Sustainability

The area of Tongue, Melness and Skerry is internationally important in relation to the natural habitats and species that are present, with a huge percentage of the area being designated for one or more reasons. The area also includes a significant part of the Kyle of Tongue National Scenic Area (NSA). In addition to these statutory designations, parts of the community council area lie within Local Landscape Areas and the Ben Hope and Ben Loyal Wildland area. Each of these designations has implications for the possible management of the area, including in some cases significant restrictions on its development.

The area is dominated by extensive areas of blanket bog with rocky outcrops and sporadic areas of better or improved ground which are primarily used as crofts or farmland. There are also two significant mountains within the area, Ben Hope and Ben Loyal, providing montane habitats as well.

There are some plantation woodlands and small areas and corridors of native semi-natural woodland. The area also has significant rivers and fresh water lochs, some of which provide sport fishing opportunities. The marine environment and coastline are important features in the landscape and are also protected as inshore shellfish waters.

The historic environment is also significant with many archaeological sites and monuments with Caisteal Bharraich (Castle Varrich) the only Scheduled Monument in the area. The area around Tongue House, as far as the village, is in the Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes, and as such is subject to planning controls beyond the norm. There are several listed buildings in and around Tongue:

- St Andrew's Church and Graveyard (Category A)
- Tongue Manse, Steadings and Gate Piers (Category B)
- Tongue House (Category A)
- Tongue House Walled Garden, garden walls, sundial and gate piers (all Category B)
- Tongue Manse (Category B) and the Tongue Coach House and Pier (both Category C)
- Melness House is also listed (Category B)

In terms of management priorities, Wildland has a clearly stated objective to manage their holdings in the area according to a long-term vision previously described. At the time of production of this Masterplan their plans were still in development but are likely to focus on bringing deer grazing under control and seeking to restore more natural balance, promoting recovery of the landscape over a 200-year period. Wildland have also taken considerable steps to secure the ownership of some of the older buildings in Tongue and are seeking to protect the amenity and historic elements of the village.

The proposed World Heritage Site plan covers a much wider area than this Masterplan but many of the key aspirations and objectives are relevant to the Tongue, Melness and Skerry area. The protection of the blanket bog, and ideally peatland restoration work, are likely to be priorities and will be taken into account by the planning authorities if the bid is successful. The restoration of the peatland areas offers scope for carbon credits to be secured and this will make a significant contribution to local climate action.

The management structure proposed should work with the landowners and managers to lead on this responsibility and coordinate delivery of the required actions to sustain these commitments.

In relation to sustainability several ideas have been promoted through the discussion with stakeholders, including the above peatland restoration work, development of local food production and making this more available to local residents and businesses, thus at least partially addressing issues of food miles and sustainable land management.

A local food hub could commit to buying produce from crofters and farmers and promote sustainable growing methods. Appropriate branding would facilitate use of such produce in the hospitality sector locally.

Sustainable transport solutions are required, for example developing cyclewalk to work routes between communities, sustainable public transport using electric vehicles, more electric vehicle charging points to tie in with efforts to promote more sustainable vehicle use on the NC600, and tourism generally.

All new housing should be constructed to the highest environmental standards, both in terms of energy performance and efficiency, and in relation to sourcing of materials and construction methods. Consideration should also be given to supporting retrofit insulation and energy performance measures to existing housing and other buildings. Part of the income that is anticipated from the SHS and the local wind farms (existing and planned) could be directed towards some of these measures.

Renewable energy is a sector that has grown enormously in the Highlands and the community is expected to benefit from payments arising from these. There was also consideration being given to creating a small scheme (wind energy) at Melness, but this was never enacted. It is unclear if that option is now beyond future consideration as the SHS may be occupying the site, but there are undoubtedly options elsewhere, such as a micro hydro scheme at the old mill at Talmire, and surely modest scale options elsewhere.

It would be prudent for an integrated approach to be taken to planning any such developments by producing an area strategy/assessment of the energy production opportunities, with the key stakeholders combining to make the most of these opportunities. It would be best if this approach, and any subsequent implementation was carried out by the Operations Manager and the Infrastructure Office tasked as part of the proposed delivery structure set out in the plan, with the proceeds being paid into a larger community fund so that a long-term sustainable means of resourcing community projects and developments could be created. This might appeal to funders, reducing the cost of implementation and maximising the benefit.



Electric Vehicle Charging Point at Tongue Hotel

7 Structure and Delivery Mechanism

The Masterplan has been written to deliver on the requirements of the three communities of Tongue, Melness and Skerry identified through research, analysis and consultation with individuals, organised groups and key stakeholders.

The key elements to achieving a successful outcome are recognising that the Masterplan:

- Has had to compromise in some areas
- Must be able to evolve as circumstances change
- Must be owned by the whole community and is not the tool of a specific interest group

Accepting this will be key, but for it to be the catalyst for successful delivery requires infrastructure and processes that support its purpose. In designing the delivery structure, different models used elsewhere have been looked at in detail, and examined closely at how best to achieve long-term sustainability.

Oversight and governance

Successful implementation of the Masterplan rests in having a delivery mechanism that is facilitative and not obstructive. It must take account of the political environment, specifically that while it is a plan for the Community Council area of Tongue, Melness and Skerry, this is a relatively small area within the Caithness and Sutherland, which in turn is part of The Highland Council area, which is the largest council area in the UK. The area also has international significance from a natural heritage perspective, reflected in numerous designations and the current proposal for UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

The challenge therefore is to ensure that the expectations of the community can be delivered within this political and environmental framework, and the Oversight and Governance structure has been designed to take account of this dynamic.

Steering Group

Accountability for the Masterplan will rest with those bodies tasked with delivering national and regional development strategy. In addition, they are the bodies from which much of the funding will come. Below is outlined the proposed staffing model, which will need to combine public sector funding with the ability to seek commercial support.

Providing access to private sector support is crucial to allow for flexibility but also to extend financial security beyond the normal public sector annual funding cycle.

To capture the wider context of economic development, community services and infrastructure, and in recognition of the natural heritage importance of the area, it is recommended that the steering group consists of representatives from:

- Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE)
- The Highland Council (THC)
- National Health Service (NHS)
- NatureScot (NS)

Oversight Board

A key element of long-term sustainability is operational stability. The proposed structure achieves both, and the primary factor is through ensuring there is a robust oversight mechanism in place that includes all key stakeholders.

It is important that there is a unified vision that is supported by all participants, at the same time recognising that some elements may be better supported by some groups than others.

These differences of opinion impact on many proposed projects across the community, including the Space Hub and the location of the Care Hub. Getting a satisfactory resolution best illustrates the importance of the role of the Oversight Board.

To ensure this is achieved, an Oversight Board consisting of representatives from the key constituencies and stakeholder groups will be established. The fundamental principle will be that this is a body of equals, and their focus will be on ensuring the collective purpose of the organisation is adhered to.

Oversight Board membership

During the development phase of the Masterplan production, it has become clear that there are a number of bodies representing particular interests across all three communities. Included in these are:

- Tongue, Melness and Skerry Community Council
- UpNorth! Community Development Trust
- Melness Crofters Estate
- Wildland
- Tongue Estate
- Crofting Townships
- Tourism sector

The wider community is represented by the Tongue, Melness and Skerry Community Council and the Community Development Trust (UpNorth!); landowners by Melness Crofters Estate, Wildland and Tongue Estate as they are key to release of land for development; Crofting Townships as they control what happens on much of the land; Tourism sector as the largest economic sector.

Membership to the Oversight Board will be decided by the individual stakeholder groups, it would not be appropriate to be prescriptive, as it is the specific interest of the group that they are representing, the constitution outlined below will provide the framework through which delivery will be achieved.

To ensure stability, it is important to recognise that the interests of others, who are not aligned with any particular group, are considered, and it is proposed to introduce a mechanism where individuals can put themselves forward to be appointed to the Oversight Board.

Numbers

While it must be representative, the Oversight Board must also be sufficiently agile to ensure delivery is not hampered by overly restrictive process. In addition, while it is hoped that all actions are agreed unanimously, the likelihood of there being divided opinion is high, so numbers must reflect the occasional need for voting.

One member for each representative body would lead to a Board of seven individuals which is agile but allows for a breadth of experience and specialist knowledge. It is also proposed to make it possible for ex-officio members to be added, at the discretion of the Board to bring appropriate specialist skills as required in particular circumstances.

It is also very important that the interests and views of young people are included. Therefore as the Oversight Board becomes established a Board member to represent this demographic should be added.

Leadership

The proposed process will ensure leadership responsibilities are shared but ensure balance. There will be a Chair, supported by two deputies, all three chosen from within the Board. The Chair will be appointed annually, the deputies will serve for two years. In the first year, one deputy will be appointed for one year, thereafter they will be replaced in alternate years. This will ensure both continuity as well as avoiding the potential for dominance.

Relationship between Steering Group and Oversight Board

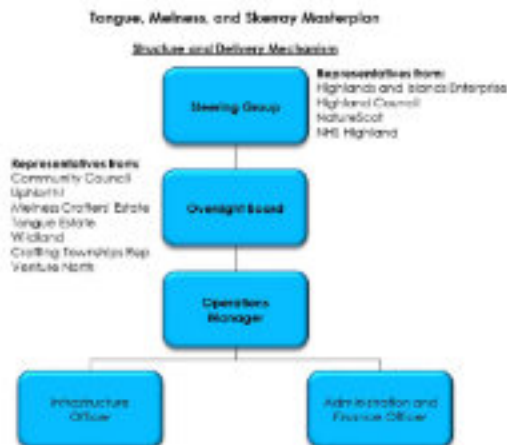
The overall structure has been designed to ensure that the key stakeholders at both the strategic and operational levels maintain effective communication and that delivery is taking place within the overall strategic direction of the different statutory bodies. This will enable responsibility for delivery to remain with the Oversight Board.

In order to administer this relationship effectively it is proposed that the Steering Group meet with the Oversight Board on 3-4 occasions each year, while the Oversight Board will meet monthly on its own to assess operational progress.

Legal status and constitution

It is recommended that the organisation being established to implement the programme be constituted as a Company Limited by Guarantee and registered as a charity enabling it to access multiple funding streams.

The chart below provides detail of the structure.



Funding

We are recommending that funding be determined on as long-term a basis as possible. This is also addressed in the delivery model we are proposing. Underpinning our concerns is the absolute requirement for there to be long-term sustainability within the programme.

The Masterplan is not designed to offer a short-term solution to immediate circumstances, it is a programme that will continue to evolve over time, to take into account the changing political environment and related community requirements.

It is recommended that there be a dual funding model combining accessing public funding alternatives with the freedom to raise funds and operate within a commercial framework.

It will be vital that the organisation looks to develop its asset base. It is recommended that this organisation be the recipient of the community element of the commission launch fees from Space Hub Sutherland (i.e. minimum of £50,000 p.a.) plus any windfarm payments, to facilitate delivery of the masterplan and ensure the widest community benefit.

In addition to this alternative means of commercialising the different offerings across the community need to be explored. Part of the role of the Administration and Finance Officer role outlined in the structure below will be to pursue funding options and to work with the Operations Manager to pursue commercial opportunities.

Management Structure

Several organisations tasked with delivering similar programmes have been examined. This has shown various issues that arise consistently, which can deflect from the ability of the body to deliver over the long-term. The different organisations would also provide potential opportunities for secondment that would enable skill transfer and knowledge sharing.

Finance

One of the principal issues is accessing funding that is not subject to annual budget review. Too often staff spend considerable amounts of time, that should be spent in delivery, seeking future funding.

This creates a short-term delivery mechanism, makes attracting suitably qualified staff difficult, and as a result leads to regular staff turnover.

Authority level

The nature of the region to which this Masterplan applies differs in many significant ways from other similar locations. Specifically, the establishment of the SHS creates a dramatically different dynamic for the area than equivalent communities elsewhere.

Proposed workforce structure

During the research the use of the term "Development Officer" was consistently encountered, and the assumption is that this is understood, and its purpose defined. This is considered to be both inappropriate and undervalued.

Delivery will require an infrastructure and not be dependent on a single individual, as analysis of the span of control alluded to above requires a range of skills and experience.

A radical solution to the structure of the operational delivery mechanism is proposed, including Role Profiles for each of these functions which are available at Appendix 4, but in summary:

In addition to the high-quality jobs being projected for the area, and the revenue potential for the community, specifically Melness, the expectations from a commercial company, such as Orbex, requires identifiable management skills on the part of the team tasked with implementation.

Span of control

In addition to management skills, the range of expertise required will be considerable, and these cannot be contained in sufficient degree within one individual.

Operations Manager

This role will lead on the delivery of the Masterplan. Reporting to the Oversight Board, the role will lead on the development of the implementation strategy, designed to implement the key components of the Plan, develop a delivery plan incorporating a realistic timeframe, controlling the budget allocated from the various sources, and seek ways to augment that budget.

Key to the role will be the ability to maintain both strategic and operational communication channels and dialogue with key stakeholders, both public sector and private commercial bodies and organisations, and to represent the interests of the community with these groups.

Infrastructure Officer

This role will ensure that the local infrastructure, including buildings, power, communication networks and transport networks deliver as required for the community. It is critical to note that this is a liaison role overseeing actual delivery from task specific organisations. It will also provide future planning proposals to ensure the interests of the community are included in regional development strategy.

Administration and Finance Officer

As the intention is to have a long-term funding model, this position will oversee not just compliance with expenditure controls but also budget preparation. In addition, the role will lead on the identification of financial and grant support opportunities.

8 Recommendations

The following is a summary of the detail contained within the Masterplan, broken down into short-term, medium-term and long-term priorities. This Masterplan has been designed to evolve over time as socio-economic circumstances change. As such, these recommendations reflect the priorities identified at the time of production of the plan, but there must be sufficient scope for amendments.

Short-term (Next 12 months)

- Commitment to the structure, including funding
- Establish Governance Framework
- Recruit Operations Team
- Housing Development Plans cover whole community council area
- Develop childcare provision
- Space Hub Sutherland project progresses
- Tongue Hotel refurbishment complete

Medium-term (1-3 years)

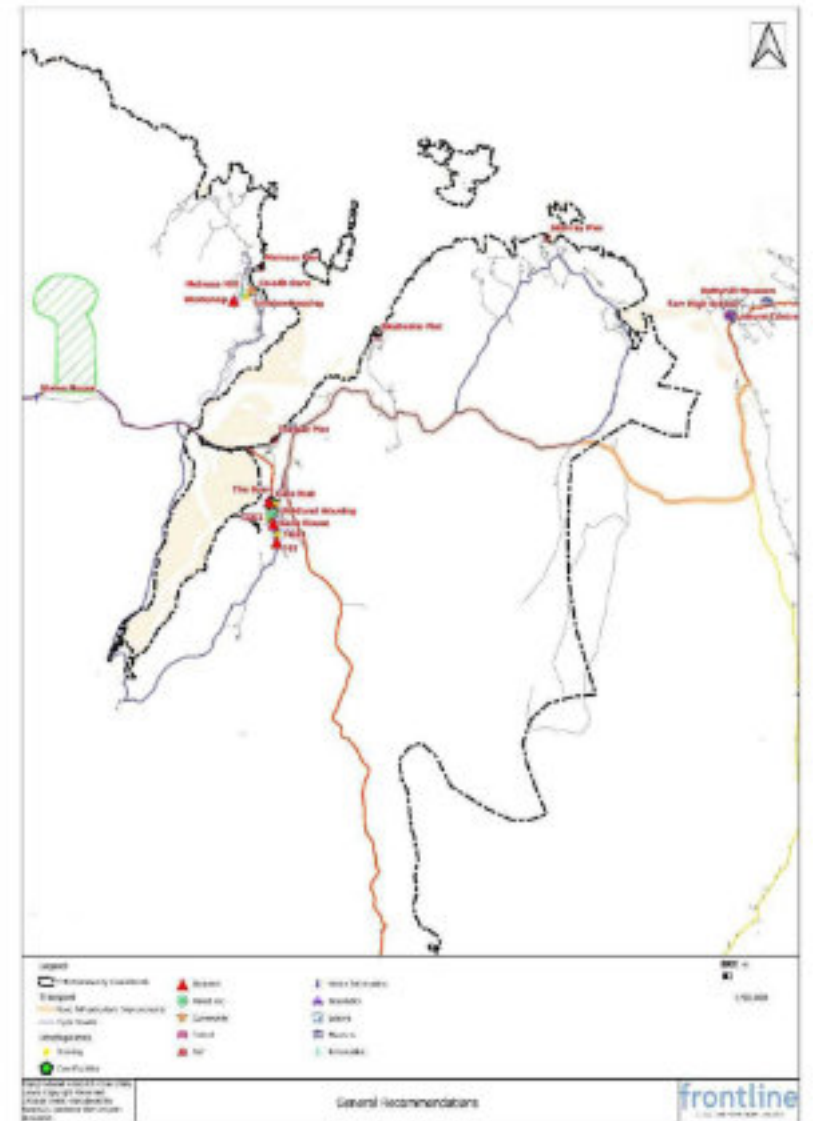
- Develop and implement short-term housing priorities
- Care Hub project delivered
- Transport infrastructure and services
- Commercial business development opportunities, including the Burns, Bank House, self-employment
- Redevelopment of Caladh Sona and the Talmine Schoolhouse as community facilities and accommodation
- Renewable Energy Planning, e.g. Old Mill at Talmine
- Recruitment Coordination Service to incorporate identification of training opportunities
- Develop capacity within the community for future growth and delegation of roles
- Destination Management Plan created
- Ranger Service promoted
- Hope Lodge Development complete
- Develop cycle and core paths work and recreation including signage
- Develop plans for all-weather sports facilities
- Develop climate actions (e.g. Local food, peatland restoration, charging points etc)

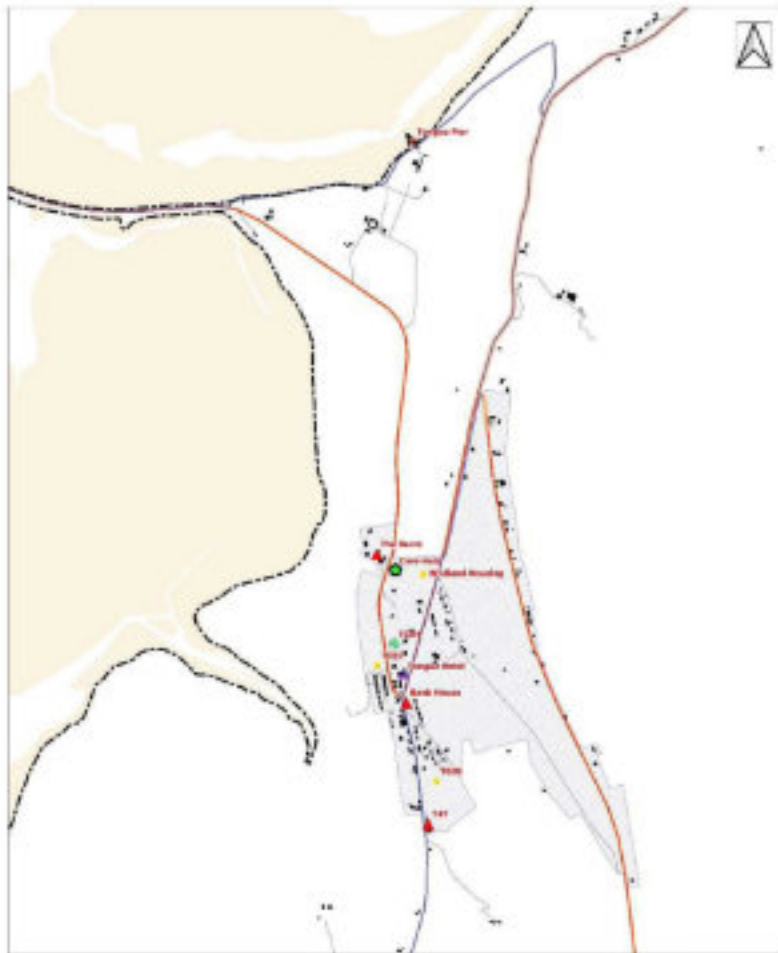
Long-term (3 years onwards)

- Develop and implement long-term housing priorities
- Develop enhanced roads infrastructure
- Develop piers/harbours project
- Wildland environmental restoration
- Review of school provision including infrastructure

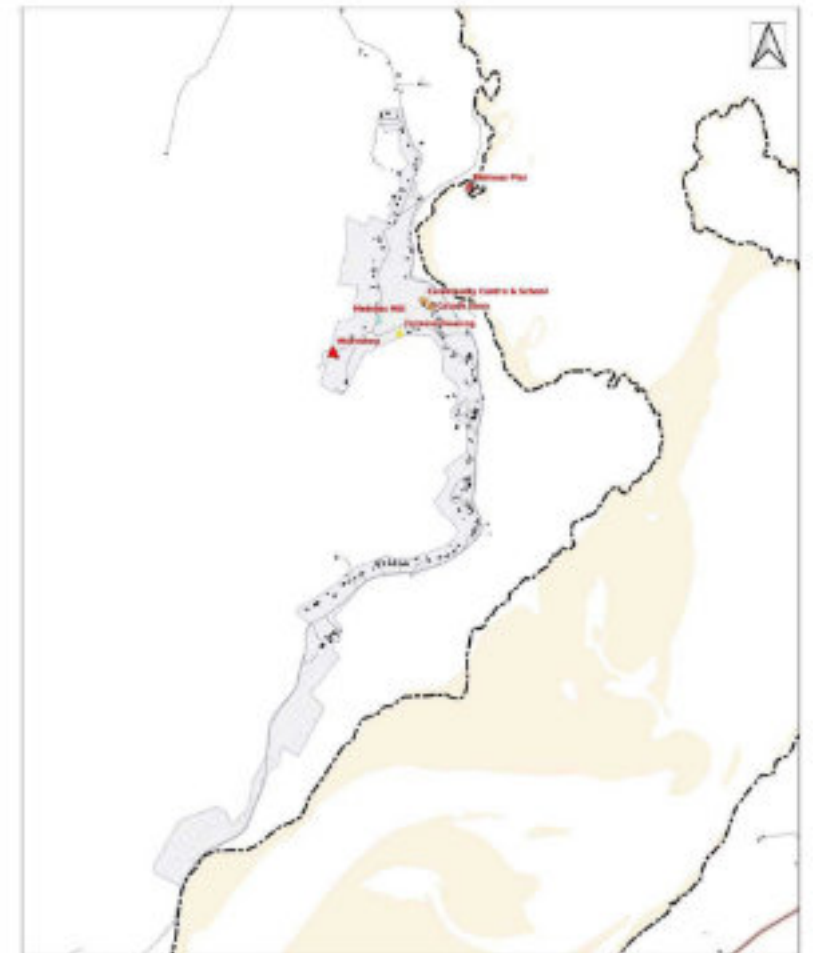
Recommendations Timeline

Action	Responsibility	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Longer-Term
Management Organisation					
Develop management organisation	Steering Group & Stakeholders	█			
Housing					
Undertake comprehensive housing plan	OpManager, HC, MCE, Wildland	█			
Develop short-term housing projects	OpManager, HC, MCE, Wildland	█	█		
Deliver medium-term housing projects	OpManager, HC, MCE, Wildland		█	█	
Deliver long-term housing projects	OpManager, HC, MCE, Wildland				█
Care Provider					
Develop plan for Care Hub	Wildland, HC, NHS Highland	█			
Deliver Care Hub facility	Wildland, HC, NHS Highland	█	█	█	
Develop plan for Children's Provision	OpManager, Board	█			
Deliver improved childcare	OpManager, Private business	█	█	█	
Hospitality & Tourism					
Tongue Hotel Renovations	Highland Coast Hotels Group	█			
Hope Lodge Development	Wildland	█			
Develop Destination Management Plan	OpManager, Vestare North, NW2045	█	█		
Secure Ranger Service	OpManager, HC, NatureScot	█	█		
Cycle/Footpaths development	OpManager, HC, NatureScot	█	█		
Space Hub Suburbans					
Construction	Orbeo, HIE	█	█		
Operation	Orbeo			█	
Recruitment, Education & Training					
Develop Employee Recruitment Service	OpManager, Business Sector, HIE	█	█	█	
Review school facilities	Highland Council	█	█	█	
Develop apprenticeships & work experience models	Highland Council, UH Business, Estates	█	█	█	
Transport Infrastructure & Services					
Navar Bridge Improvements	Highland Council	█	█	█	
Wider transport infrastructure improvements	Highland Council, Scottish Government				█
Develop more sustainable transport services	OpManager, T4T, Highland Council	█	█	█	
Develop more electric vehicle charging points	OpManager, Businesses	█	█	█	
Business Development & Community Facilities					
Bar development	Wildland	█	█	█	
Bank House	Wildland	█	█	█	
Business Units	OpManager, Stakeholders		█	█	█
Develop plan for Caladh Sona	MCE, OpManager		█	█	█
Develop plan for Talmine Schoolhouse & Community Centre	MCE, OpManager		█	█	█
Develop Sports & Leisure Facilities	OpManager, Stakeholders	█	█	█	
Develop Piers Renovation Project	OpManager, Estates	█	█	█	
Climate Change Action					
Local food production & retail	OpManager, Crofters, Fishermen	█	█	█	
Peatland Restoration	OpManager, Estates, Crofters		█	█	
Wildland Landscape Restoration Project	Wildland, Stakeholders, NS				█

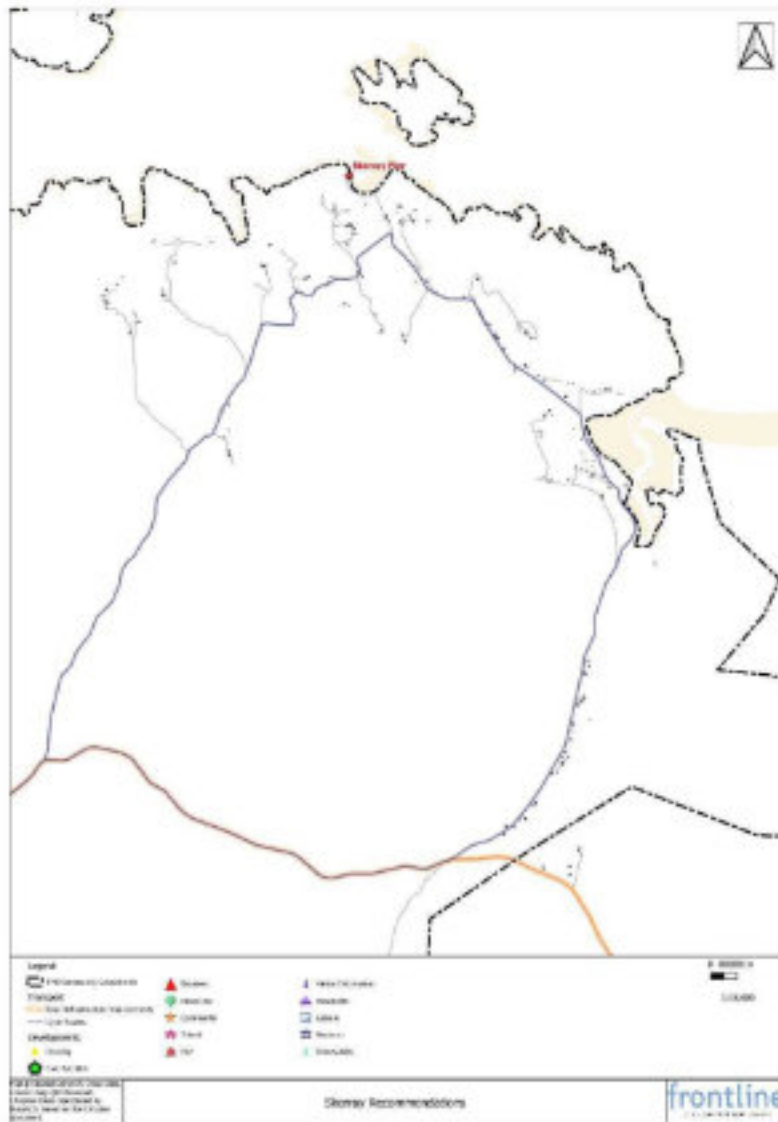




Tongue Recommendations



Nainital Recommendations

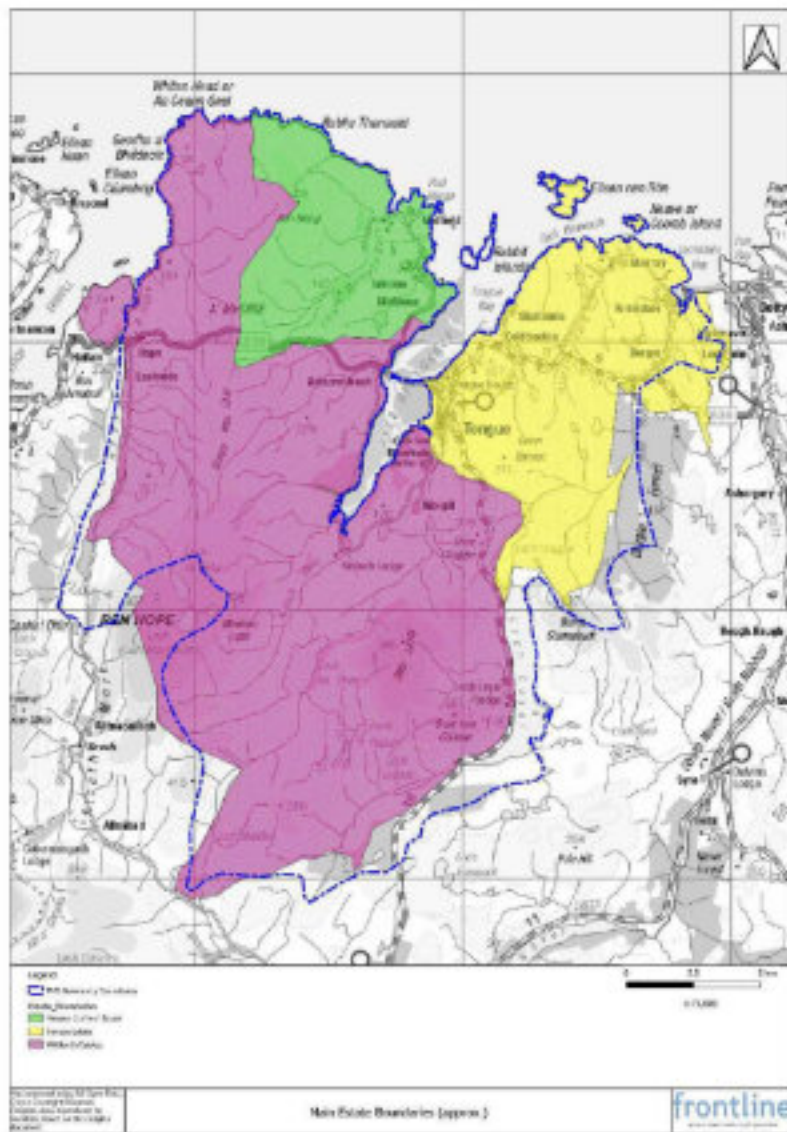


Appendix 1 – Consultees

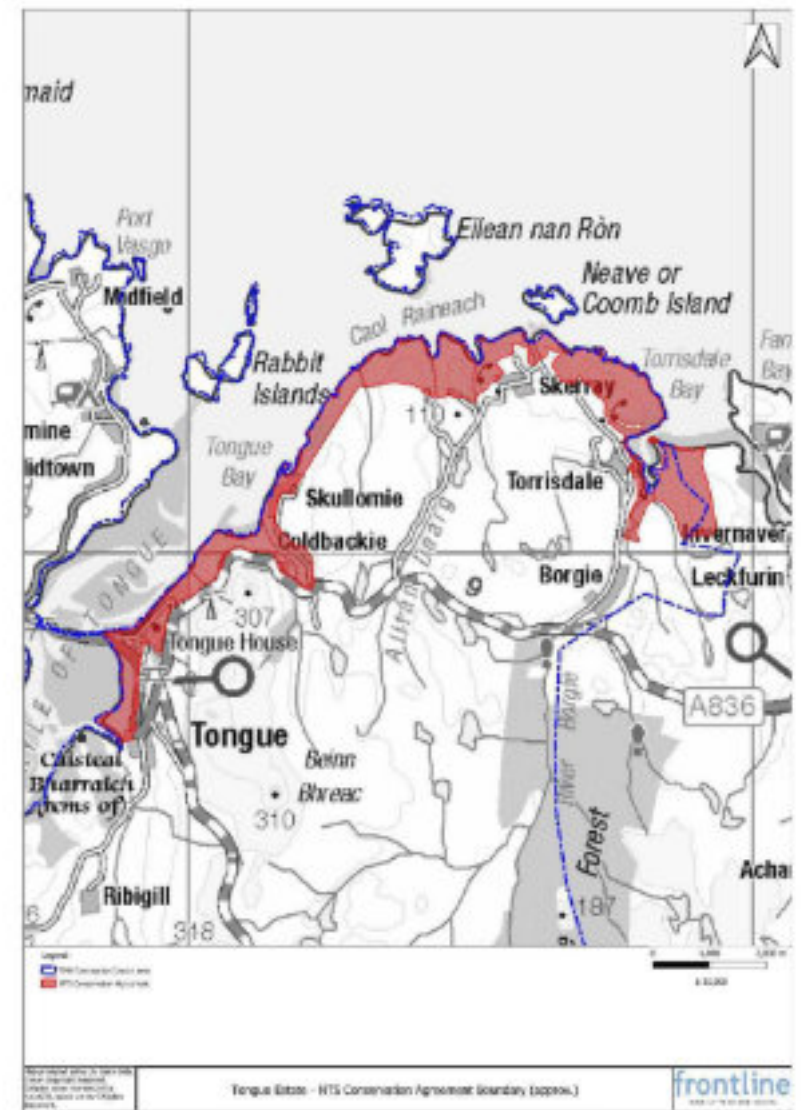
The following groups & organisations were engaged with during the preparation of this Masterplan

Name	Organisation Group
Boyd Alexander	Highland Council
Steven Andrews	Flow Country World Heritage Site Bid Coordinator
Alan Barrow	National Trust for Scotland
David Cowie	Highland Council – Development Planning
Joe Dunn	Wildland – Director of Built Environment
Coffy Earnshaw	Venture North
Frances Gunn	Chair UpNorth! Community Development Trust, NW2045
Pear Guffie	Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Laura Hamlet	NW Highland Geopark
Richard Heggie	Urban Animation
Frodo Innes	Hub North Scotland
Michelle Johnstone	NHS Highland
Kate Kenmore	NHS Highland
Rhoda Kennedy	High Life Highland
Chris Larmour	Orkes – Chief Executive
Joan Lewis	Thurso Community Development Trust
Alan Maguire	Highland Council
John McIndy	Highland Council – Housing
Rosemary Mackintosh	Tourist Information Centre - Bettyhill
Alan MacKay	Croftier, Melness Grazings Clerk
Kirsteen MacKay	ORREX Melness Crofters' Estate, UpNorth!
Fiona MacKenzie	Bettyhill Museum
David MacLeod	Tongue, Melness & Skeraway Community Council – Chair
Malcolm MacLeod	Highland Council Executive Chief Officer - Infrastructure
Joe MacMillan	Highland Council
Ronnie MacRae	Communities Housing Trust
Kate Marston	NHS Highland
Amanda Mossley	Farrigh School
Christian Nicholson	NHS Highland
Gillian Pearson	Highland Council - Planning
Gail Prince	Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Dorothy Pirichard	Melness Crofters' Estate
Wilma Robertson	Melness Crofters' Estate
Mairi Ross-Gwey	Scottish Government - Housing
Aaron Ramsay	Crafting Commission
Eann Sinclair	Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Rachel Skene	NW2045
Rachel Sutherland	Tongue Estate
Martin Thomson	Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Phil Tomlin	Highland Council - Ward Manager
Myraol Wanaen	North Coast Hotels Group
Roddy Watt	Tongue Hotel Community Liaison Group
Valerie Wilson	NatureScot
David Whiteford	North Coast Hotels Group
Erena Whitham	Highland Adapt
	Bayview Caravan & Campsite
	Ben Loyal Hotel
	Farr High School
	Kyle Centre
	Kyle of Tongue Hostel & Caravan Park
	St Andrew's Church
	Sutherland Planning Partnership
	Tateline Skene
	Tongue & Bettyhill First Responders
	Tongue Primary School
	Transport For Tongue
	Voluntary Groups Sutherland

Appendix 2 – Main Estate Boundaries



Appendix 3 – Tongue Estate – NTS Conservation Agreement Boundary



Appendix 4 – Role Profiles

Operations Manager

Purpose

The post holder will lead on the development of the strategy detailed within the Masterplan and will be responsible for ensuring the key components are implemented in the timescale set out within the plan. Core to the role will be the need to maintain communication channels and dialogue with key stakeholders, both public sector and private commercial bodies and organisations, and to represent the interests of the community with these groups. The position will have responsibility for 2 members of staff and report directly to the Chair of the Oversight Board.

Key Tasks

- Establish and maintain constructive relationships with the communities of Tongue, Meiness and Skerryland beyond
- Address all recommendations set out within the Masterplan and establish a timeline and action plan to achieve successful delivery over the short, medium, and long-term
- Identify and manage resource requirements to achieve delivery
- Demonstrate understanding of the objectives and expectations of the key stakeholders
- Produce and deliver a communication framework to ensure engagement with stakeholders
- Responsible for controlling and distributing budgets in most cost effective manner
- Oversee and co-ordinate delivery of Housing Strategy working in close collaboration with other key housing bodies
- Develop and oversee Employment Opportunity Marketing bureau
- Liaise with developers on key infrastructure projects
- Liaise with Orbex and other commercial organisations on provision of infrastructure and tourist management programmes
- Develop and oversee community based transport infrastructure opportunities

Infrastructure Officer

Purpose

To provide technical expertise to the community, acting as liaison between the different delivery organisations and the community in relation to the maintenance of buildings, roads and other existing key infrastructure. To interface with stakeholders on the development of new infrastructure projects including housing, to ensure the interests of the community are kept at the forefront of developments while providing local knowledge and expertise to identify and address possible technical issues. Work in close collaboration with local authorities to co-ordinate the delivery of technical services throughout the area.

Key Tasks

- To have a detailed understanding of the community infrastructure in relation to key services.
- To co-ordinate delivery of community wide repairs and maintenance
- To work in collaboration with different service providers to ensure the community is properly supported
- To ensure community connectivity is maintained with broadband and telecommunications
- To work with builders, architects and other technical specialists on new building projects to ensure community interests are supported
- Develop and oversee service level agreements with suppliers

Administration and Finance Officer

Purpose

To provide full administration support to the delivery team, and to carry out all aspects of financial management and control. In addition to be responsible for identifying additional sources of funding both within the various statutory bodies but also from commercial organisations and working directly with the Operations Manager identify opportunities to commercialise services and products from across the communities.

Key Tasks

- To carry out administration in relation to the provision of services for the Community team including official correspondence
- To produce budgets and monitor expenditure against them
- To deal with all financial transactions including invoicing, banking and credit control
- To produce annual statutory accounts
- To ensure compliance with statutory filings including tax, VAT and Companies House documentation
- To identify potential additional finance sources and to conduct negotiations over levels of potential support

References

National Planning Framework 4

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-framework-4/documents/>

Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) (2018)

https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/178/development_plans/283/caithness_and_sutherland_local_development_plan

Highland-wide Local Development Plan (HwLDP) (2012)

https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/1505/highland-wide_local_development_plan.pdf

North West Sutherland Local Plan – Adopted Plan May 1987

https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/4879/north_west_sutherland_local_plan_written_statement.pdf

Tongue, Melness and Skerray Masterplan (2022)

[Please see Appendix 8](#)

Melness-Tongue-Skerray Community Plan 2019

<https://highlandcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Melness-Tongue-Skerray-Community-Plan.pdf>

Demand and Supply – your housing prospects

https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/925/council_housing/244/apply_for_a_house/5

Scottish Human Rights Commission Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands

https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/2881/main-report_economic-social-and-cultural-rights-in-the-highlands-and-islands.pdf

2017 – 2027 Highland Outcome Improvement Plan

<https://highlandcpp.org.uk/about-hcpp/highland-outcome-improvement-plan/>

NW2045 Socio-Economic Profile

<https://www.northwest2045.scot/publications>