

**Island of Mull – Loch na Keal NSA  
Landscape Capacity for New Housing  
Final Report**

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## **1 Introduction**

This landscape capacity assessment for housing was commissioned by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and Argyll and Bute Council to complement the preparation of Housing Design Guidance being undertaken on behalf of the Council by the architects Anderson, Bell, Christie.

The work was carried out during the period December 2005 to February 2006 by Alison Grant and Carol Anderson, landscape architects.

The principal objective of the studies is to undertake a detailed assessment of the landscape character and outline the opportunities and constraints for new housing development.

The study focuses entirely on the capacity of the landscape, in terms of its landscape character, the scenic quality of the area, and the opportunities provided by the landscape resource to create locations for development which are attractive for future inhabitants.

This study therefore does not take into account land ownership or land availability, nor any other interests, such as infrastructure or archaeological interests. As a result it cannot be used in isolation to allocate sites which are either appropriate or inappropriate for development.

The study represents the views of the consultants, Alison Grant, Landscape Architect and Carol Anderson, Landscape Architect and should not be attributed to either of the sponsor agencies.

## **2 Methodology**

The method developed and used for carrying out this capacity assessment was required to achieve two overall aims.

Firstly, it was expected to explain clearly the thinking process of the consultants, from initial survey of information through to defining opportunities and constraints.

Secondly, the method needed to relate to the type of landscape and settlement pattern which is found on the three islands. Many settlements do not lend themselves to discreet and well defined envelopes. Frequently, the settlements are highly visible and contribute in their own right to landscape character. In addition, land use pattern and settlement pattern is often strongly interrelated.

This methodology therefore needed to embrace a landscape survey that gave equal weight to both the character and pattern of development within the individual settlements and the landscape in terms of land form, land use, vegetation pattern and visual attributes.

A relatively traditional 'opportunities and constraints' approach was used to assessing capacity on the ground. A well explained set of opportunities and constraints was felt to be the clearest way to express the outcome of the study.

The method is summarised below.

## **2.1 Stage One: Strategic Assessment**

An assessment of the landscape character was undertaken at a relatively strategic level. This was used to divide the whole of the area which was to be assessed into manageable study areas, which could be assessed and presented on A3 sheets.

The Strategic assessment was also used to define which areas could be analysed at a relatively strategic scale of 1: 25 000 scale, and which areas should be analysed at a more detailed level, which has been presented at a 1: 10 000 scale.

## **2.2 Stage Two: Detailed Survey**

Detailed survey work was carried out, to analyse the landscape character and the settlement pattern and to assess the existing settlement layout at a more detailed scale where appropriate.

The report presents the findings of the detailed survey undertaken in each strategic area drawn up at 1: 25 000 scale, and also illustrates the site survey and observations for some areas, where settlement is more concentrated, at 1: 10 000 scale. The maps are accompanied by text as appropriate.

## **2.3 Stage Three: Opportunities and Constraints**

Based on the survey work, a map of opportunities and constraints has been produced for each area, at the appropriate scale. When identifying opportunities and constraints, we aimed to identify:

- sites which would maintain and enhance the positive characteristics of the existing settlement pattern. Existing patterns such as linear or dispersed patterns often offered

opportunities which simply emphasised existing character.

- sites which created a new settlement pattern which would have a strong identity. These new patterns would almost always be linked to a key landscape feature, such as a bay or road junction, which already created a potential focal point for settlement

In addition, we identified areas where development should be discouraged. These were generally areas where:

- development would disrupt or obscure views which are important to maintain the area's scenic quality
- development is difficult to accommodate without significantly disrupting the existing distinctive settlement pattern
- development would be unrelated to land form or a well established and maintained land use pattern, which would result in a loss of unity in the landscape
- the existing land form, land use or vegetation pattern contributed positively and significantly to the existing landscape or settlement character and would be compromised by built development

These opportunities and constraints are explained in detail for each area as an annotated key on each map. These form the final recommendations for the capacity of the landscape to accommodate development.

### **3 Identifying Opportunities and Constraints**

Good design begins with well located and appropriately sited development. Good landscape design is based on a thorough understanding of landscape character and taking a creative approach to identifying the positive opportunities for change in the landscape.

Landscape capacity assessment is a process through which the opportunities for development which either enhances the landscape or maintains the existing landscape character and sense of identity can be identified. In addition, landscape capacity assessment also helps identify where and why development would be intrusive in the landscape.

The process of landscape capacity assessment is tailor made each time to address the specific characteristics of the development proposed, and the impacts it will have on the distinctive characteristics of the landscape where the development will be sited.

#### **3.1 Identifying Landscape Opportunities for Housing**

For the purposes of this assessment the following landscape attributes were generally identified in initial survey work as creating positive opportunities for siting new domestic scaled development:

- areas where there were opportunities to create strong visual and physical links with distinctive natural features, such as watercourses, bays or areas of rocky outcrops
- areas of concave land form, particularly on south facing slopes, which created natural containment and often quite subtle shelter
- significant road junctions or river crossings which create both visual and social focal points in the landscape
- areas of distinctive landscape character where the existing settlement pattern contributed to the distinctiveness, and where this characteristic could be maintained or enhanced. These were usually large areas of dispersed croft buildings, or a linear settlement pattern which was associated with a landscape feature.
- areas where the land use pattern, or the infrastructure associated with it, was still visible enough to contribute to the landscape character, and where the pattern could be emphasised with carefully sited new development

- areas where it was possible to reinforce or create a strong sense of arrival by the expansion or consolidation of a settlement

In all cases, the emphasis was to identify sites which are attractive to develop and live in. It is important to consider the needs of future inhabitants. Therefore sites which were south facing, sheltered, had opportunities for extensive views and which were clearly likely to become an integral part of the physical fabric of the settlement and by association therefore, where the inhabitants were likely to feel part of that community, were identified as preferred sites.

### **3.2 Identifying Landscape Constraints to New Housing**

In addition to opportunities, some characteristics of the landscape were likely to be constraints in relation to siting new development. These include:

- convex slopes, which are generally outward facing and both physically and visually exposed
- areas where new building would intrude on extensive panoramas, iconic vistas or important 'slot' views when encountered along a public road, stretch of accessible coastline or access track
- areas of very steep slopes where earthworks would be required to create building platforms and access roads. Such earthworks are likely to be visually intrusive.
- areas which are exposed and physically inhospitable due to their location
- areas which are relatively remote in character and inaccessible, where development and its associated infrastructure would diminish the sense of remoteness and introduce visual clutter into a relatively and sparse simple landscape
- areas where there were no landscape features which would provide the immediate sense of setting and localised sense of place
- areas which were physically or psychologically detached from the existing settlements, where there would be a danger of creating an area of development forever 'in limbo' and never quite part of the main settlement
- areas where the existing land use, land form or settlement pattern contributed significantly to the wider landscape

character and scenic qualities of the islands, and which  
would be removed or significantly compromised by  
development

## **4 Settlement in Loch na Keal NSA: An Overview**

Loch na Keal NSA has been designated because of its spectacular coastal scenery, dominated by juxtaposition of the expansive horizontal scale of the seascape and the dramatic verticality of the interior mountain peaks around Ben More.

It is further enhanced by the variety of interplay between land and sea, the contrast between the tiny scattered skerries and the solid massif of the mountains, the ever changing light conditions, and the presence of specific features, such as the sweep of the cliffs at Gruben and the distinctive silhouettes of the distant Treshnish Isles.

Much of the appeal of the NSA lies in these natural features and characteristics, and the way they are experienced as a sequence of views and vistas from a winding road which ensures that new panoramas are opened up at every corner and crest. Whether travelling on foot, by car or by boat, the alternating experience of small intimate spaces, sheltered by rock, intricate shoreline or woodland, followed by the sense of expanse when space opens out into the far distance, is exhilarating.

Settlement is generally sparse, and the balance between areas where built development is more obvious, and where more semi natural terrain prevails, contributes to the positive experience of the NSA particularly when travelling along the road, which loosely links the settled areas.

### **4.1 Settlements, Landscape Character and Scenic Quality**

Settlements and individual dwellings contribute to the landscape character and scenic quality of the Loch na Keal NSA by:

- creating a pattern of more developed and less developed landscapes which alternate along the length of the northern loch shores
- informing the historic character of the landscape, particularly where buildings are located on the locations which have previously been more intensely managed
- reinforcing the sense of exposure in the landscape, which is demonstrated by the way houses occupy only sheltered locations
- reinforcing the linearity of roads as they wind their way through the landscape

- reinforcing, by association, localised physical characteristics of the landscape, such as a break in slope, a shallow bowl of more accessible land or the shelter of a small glen occupied by a watercourse
- reinforcing the links between human intervention and landscape character types which reflect the 'worked' landscape, most notably the improved grassland

## **4.2 Landscape Change**

Many of the traditional practical reasons for both the siting of housing and the relationship between housing and the land or sea are less relevant today. In the past, the dependency on land and sea for a living, combined with the need for shelter and fresh water influenced site choice. This relationship creates a distinct and recognisable pattern of built development associated with only specific parts of the landscape.

Today, sites are more likely to be chosen for their views and access to services. As a result there is likely to be pressure for sporadic housing development along the most scenic coasts, and also for buildings to be less related to sheltered locations and manageable land. This tends to result in housing being located in more prominent and exposed locations, but this in turn diminishes the integrity of the distinctive character created by the relationship between housing and sheltering landform, managed fields or other natural features. There is a danger that new housing will have a less coherent pattern as a result, and also that it could intrude upon the fine views and panoramic seascapes which this area is recognised.

At present, however, the housing in the NSA is still located where it consolidates the relationship between built development and the managed areas of land. Even new housing is still relatively modest in size, and often adapted from existing buildings or previously occupied sites.

As a contribution to considering how new development can best be taken forward while retaining the scenic qualities for which the NSA has been designated, this report sets out the opportunities provided in the landscape to maintain a coherent and well structured settlement pattern for the future. This pattern builds on the historic evolution of settlement dispersal and advocates how well sited development can contribute to the character, quality and future attraction of Mull as a place to live and work.

## **5 Loch na Keal NSA: Identifying Study Areas**

Four main study areas were identified for Loch na Keal NSA:

- Inner Loch na Keal, which focuses on the inland reaches of the loch, where steep slopes give way to level land created by alluvial deposits
- Outer Loch na Keal, which focuses on the settlements overlooking Ulva and the scattered islands and skerries at the mouth of the loch
- Inner Loch Tuath, which focuses on the settlements along the inner northern shore of the loch
- Outer Loch Tuath, which focuses on the largely linear sporadic settlement at the very western end of the loch