

Unacceptable telecommunications masts (3) – the developers playing cat and mouse in Torridon and the Cairngorms

Description

On Monday objectors to the proposal to build a telecommunications mast in the heart of Torridon ([see here](#)) were informed the application has been withdrawn. A small but significant victory which shows that the roll-out UK Government's Shared Rural Network programme is far from a foregone conclusion.

There had been 92 comments from the public on the application, almost all objections. On Tuesday all the planning papers for the mast were still on Highland Council's Planning Portal but when I looked again today they had been removed

The screenshot shows a planning portal interface with several tabs: 'Details', 'Comments (98)', 'Constraints (15)', 'Documents (0)', 'Related Cases (1)', and 'Ma'. The 'Comments (98)' tab is active, showing 'Make a Comment', 'Public Comments (92)', and 'Consultee Comments (6)'. Below this, statistics are displayed: 'Total Consulted: 100', 'Comments Received: 92', 'Objections: 89', and 'Supporting: 1'. A sorting section includes 'Sort by' (set to 'Added'), 'Direction' (set to 'Descending'), 'Results per page' (set to '10'), and a 'Go' button. A pagination bar shows numbers 1 through 10, with '1' highlighted and a 'Next' button. A red vertical bar highlights a comment by 'National Trust For Scotland Per: Karen Botten', submitted on 'Thu 07 Dec 2023'. The comment text is 'Please see documents tab.', which is underlined in red.

There are now nil documents under the documents tab and the additional public comment lodged by NTS on 7th December which was moved to the documents tab has also been removed from the public record.

While the comments from the public are still on the portal, one wonders for how long? Its not just the

planning papers that have been removed, the objection from the landowner, the National Trust for Scotland, and the responses from other statutory consultees have been too.

It should be a matter of matter of public record whether agencies, such as NatureScot, which has statutory responsibility for the landscape, had commented on the application and if so what they had said. The only way to find out now is through an FOI request

This management of the planning system in Scotland, as I have commented before in respect of the Cairngorms National Park ([see here](#)), is completely rotten and designed to assist developers. The email I received from Highland Council explains why in a nutshell:

“Should any further application be received for this or a similar proposal, it will be necessary for you to write in again to advise the Planning Authority of any concerns that you may still have.”

Even if the developer comes back with a proposal for a mast in exactly the same place, objectors to the original application will have to object all over again or their voice will be simply ignored. What this means is that someone is going to have to keep an eye out, perhaps indefinitely, for a new application. There is a similar situation at Luibeg ([see here](#)), in the heart of the Cairngorms, where another mast application was withdrawn after a large number of objections were lodged.

This system, in which developers can use the planning system to play cat and mouse with the public, means that protected areas are NEVER safe. If a developer does not at first succeed, the system allows them to try, try, again.

It is time planning law in Scotland was changed so that if a developer decides to withdraw a planning application in the face of objections, the planning authority is forced to take a decision in principle about whether the development proposal was appropriate. If not, further applications should then be barred. That would put an end to the cat and mouse. It would also help create certainty for protected areas in Scotland rather than the constant uncertainty that exists at present.

Or better still, increase the protection of wild land so that such applications, like windfarms in National Parks, are ruled out from the start. The Scottish Government could introduce changes to the planning system as part of its commitment to protect 30% of Scotland for nature by 2030 (its so called 30 x 30 objective).

The implications of the objections for the UK Government’s Shared Rural Network plan

While I have only read, not analysed, the objections to the application, the majority have come from people resident around the shores of Loch Torridon, below where the mast was proposed and the wider local area stretching up to Achnasheen. Not only that but the local objections are generally longer and more fully referenced than the objections from further afield (with quotes for example from NatureScot’s landscape assessment for the Wester Ross National Scenic Area).

Many local objections are also full of passion as this example shows:

Comment submitted date: Mon 04 Dec 2023

Dear Sirs

I am writing, in genuine distress, regarding the above proposal. I am conscious today is the deadline at 8.30pm!

Whilst I appreciate that connectivity is crucial for the region, I personally find it to be very good in To

I have been partially living in and visiting Torridon for 57 years, since my grandfather was the ministe

My favourite walk and place of happiness in the entire world, ever since the age of seven, has been to sometimes to climb Beinn Alligen or walk round the back of Liatach, but mostly and upon hundreds of river just below the footbridge where the path splits, and roughly where I believe this proposed mast

In this modern world, with mental health issues at epidemic levels, being in unspoiled nature is science mechanism for anxiety and depression, and the thought of an ugly mast desecrating this utterly stunning currently no evidence of the modern world literally brings me to tears. My entire family feels the same loves the area as I do was in total disbelief when they heard of this proposal.

I brag to my friends about this walk in particular, being a place where you can see unspoiled views for with absolutely no evidence of humans, other than the little rustic footbridge. No pylons, no cars, no smells of nature. It's a place I dream to be when I'm in the city, and go to as often as possible. Even the times of immense stress until my next visit, and it's always my first walk when I arrive again.

I am imploring you not to let this happen. I can't believe there aren't other more discreet and less popular be sited.

It is difficult to put into words how upsetting the thought of this monstrosity of a structure is, but it is remaining wildernesses in the country, with such breathtaking views and total peace, just thinking the beyond depressing and upsetting.

I know I'm not alone with this strength of feeling, and plead with you to overturn this proposal.

Thanks in advance for what I hope will turn out to be a compassionate and sensitive decision, on behalf of Scotland, untouched by, and as a place of escape from frenetic technology and ugly manmade

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All this is brilliant and I would recommend anyone interested in the protection of wild land and landscape in Scotland at the national level to have a read and consider the implications.

In my view the local objections undermine the whole of the UK's Government's rationale for extending the Shared Rural Network programme to remote areas. People living around the shores of Loch Torridon already have good mobile coverage in their homes but what they are effectively saying is they don't need that coverage every time they go out for a walk and they value the landscape more.

Among those local residents are the crofters who have clearly said they value the landscape more than the ability to make a phone call while working on the land:

Inveralligin Grazings Committee Per: Mr S Schnabel Leac Alligin Achnasheen IV22 2HB

Comment submitted date: Sat 18 Nov 2023

The Inveralligin Grazings Committee object strongly to the above application for a mobile phone mast on the following grounds:

- 1) The location is in a very remote area of scenic beauty and magnificent wilderness with no buildings (residences or businesses) anywhere near - our common grazings runs alongside the western border of the National Trust land on which this proposed mast will stand. It should also be noted that the proposed location is surrounded by very high mountains so it is extremely unlikely that a signal will reach anywhere.
- 2) The location has significant historical import to local crofters as this area includes scattered remains of shielings used by Inveralligin crofters for centuries.
- 3) There is no ATV track to the proposed site, merely a footpath used by many walkers and maintained with gravel where necessary by the National Trust. Any work done to "upgrade" this into an ATV track would cause significant damage and be detrimental to those hoping to enjoy a walk in the this beautiful wilderness.
- 4) Noise from a generator which it seems is proposed for the site will be the only manmade sound for miles around creating a significant distraction to walkers in what is otherwise a completely peaceful and beautiful landscape.

This proposal must not be allowed to desecrate one of Scotland's most beautiful and wild areas.

Clerk to Inveralligin Grazings Committee

With the mountaineers who responded to the application saying similar things, public opinion is that there is no case for this mast or similar masts in wild land areas across Scotland.

What this shows is that the Scottish Government needs to start taking a strategic approach to the threats posed by telecommunications masts in wild land rather than sitting on its hands. Among the things it could do now is attempt to engage with the UK Government to amend the Shared Rural Network programme and issue advice to planning authorities that there should be a policy presumption against approving masts in remote areas.

Local people, wild land and Scottish Government control over National Parks

What has happened in Torridon provides good evidence for why the Scottish Government needs to re-think its current proposals to reduce local representation on National Park Boards which it claims will

help National Parks focus more on the restoration of nature.

Actually, the Scottish Government has been extraordinarily slow to show any concern, let alone tackle, the reasons why nature in Scotland has collapsed over the last 30 years. A case in point is telecommunications masts where so far Scottish Ministers have been completely silent not just about the implications of the Shared Rural Network programme for wild land but for its 30 x 30 objective (how are bulldozed tracks, diesel generators and masts going to help nature?).

Local people care and usually know far more about such issues than many of the people whom the Scottish Government appoints to Non-Departmental Public Boards. The problem is they usually have almost no power with government in Scotland being among the most centralised in the world. National Parks, where a third of Board Members are locally elected and accountable, provide a small and unique exception. Instead of building on that and democratising our National Parks further (eg by removing the first past the post system for electing such members) to strengthen local voices and local participation in decision-making, the Scottish Government want to do the opposite. In my view that will make our National Parks even less effective than they are now.

Category

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Tags

1. landscape
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