

Unacceptable Telecommunications masts (21) â?? things donâ??t need to get worse before they get better

Description



Glen Undalainn, just one of the many wild places in Scotland, where the UK Govt is still paying for telecommunications masts to be installed. Photo credit WSP from planning application

Keir Starmer has been widely reported over the last couple of days in the UK media as being likely to say in a speech today that â??things will get worse before they get betterâ?• ([see here](#)). Whatever the truth of this statement as applied to the economy as a whole, it is certainly not the case with the Shared Rural Network programme.

The reasons why were explained to the UK Government 4 weeks ago by an unprecedented coalition of organisations:

Sir Chris Bryant, MP
Minister of State for Digital and Data Infrastructure
Correspondence@dsit.gov.uk

Cc:
The Rt Hon Peter Kyle, MP
Secretary of State for Science, Innovation & Technology
Secretary.State@dsit.gov.uk

1st August 2024

Shared Rural Network Programme

Dear Minister,

We the undersigned write to bring to your attention a significant opportunity to:

- a) Avoid the intrusion in and damage to large areas of some of the wildest places and beautiful landscapes in the UK
- b) Release hundreds of millions of pounds to other Government priorities which will deliver better value for money

We urge you to pause and review the rollout of the Total Not-Spot element of the Shared Rural Network programme.

The start of the letter to the UK Government asking them to scrap the Â£500m public funded programme to eliminate Total Not Spots, gaps in mobile phone coverage which mostly lie in wild unpoilt areas..

The coalition of organisations whcih signed the letter included community councils representing some of the local communities in the Highlands who donâ??t want these masts:

Torrison and District Community Association	Zoe Hudson,	Secretary
Woodland Trust Scotland	Simon Ritchie,	Policy & Advocacy Manager
Fort William Inverlochy & Torlundy Community Council	Patricia Jordan,	Secretary
Glengarry Community Council	George Cross	
Kinlochleven Community Council	Mark Taylor,	Chair
Lochbroom Community Council	Topher Dawson,	Chair
Marybank, Scatwell & Strathconon Community Council	Christine MacKintosh,	Secretary
Scourie and District Community Council	Julie Allen,	Chair
South Knoydart Community Council	Frank Atherly	
Strathpeffer Community Council	Ron McAulay,	Chair
Torrison and Kinlochewe Community Council	Caroline Hamilton,	Chair
Wester Loch Ewe Community Council	John Nicholson,	Secretary

This list, while significant, appears to reflect a greater degree of organisation and co-ordination of concerns about these masts by community councils in the north west. Neither Laggan nor Aviemore and Glenmore Community Council, for example, are included although both have raised similar concerns to those expressed in the letter in objections to phone masts in the Cairngorms National Park (Laggan to a mast in a partial not spot).

The signatories also included Scottish Land and Estates, who mainly represent large landowners in Scotland, and a significant number of individual landowners:

Scottish Land & Estates	Sarah-Jane Laing,	CEO
Achnashellach Estate	Archie Egar	
Andrew Carnes	Andrew Carnes	
Broadland Properties Ltd	David Mosgrove	
Camusrory Estate	Michael Laing,	Factor
Chetwynd Rural	Tom Chetwynd,	Chartered Surveyor
Corrour Estate	Donald Rowantree,	Estate Manager & CEO
Coulin Estate	Philippa Cliff	
Dundonnell Estate	Donald Rice	
Glencarron and Glenuaig Estate	Alasdair Douglas,	Estate Owner
Glenfalloch	David Lowes,	Chairman

Glenfernate Estate	David H Amory	
Grudie & Talladale Estate	John Wills	
Knoydart Foundation	Davie Newton,	Chair
Landowner	Jane Carpenter	
Li Farm & Camusbane Common	Dr Richard Rohde	
Grazing Committee		
North Morar Estate	Ian R S Bond	
Rhidorroch Estate	Charles Harrison,	Landowner
Rhidorroch Estate	Kim Scobie,	Landowner
Strathbran Estate	Edgar Seligman	
Wildland Limited	Tim Kirkwood,	CEO

When I first started to write about the Shared Rural Network programme on Parkswatch I questioned why so few landowners were apparently objecting to masts on their land and suggested that they might be in favour of these masts for estate management purposes. That may still be the case for a few – the landowner at Glen Shiel has not objected to the proposed mast in Glen Undalain (see below) – but the number of landowners who are now aware of the Shared Rural Network programme and are opposed to masts in wild areas is impressive.

While most of these landowners are rich enough to be able to afford now the satellite technology which will rapidly make these masts redundant, they still appear to care far more about Scotland's landscape than the civil servants and mobile operators who designed the Shared Rural Network programme.

Badenoch & Strathspey	Tessa Jones,	Secretary
Conservation Group		
Community Out West Trust	Mary Peart,	Trustee
Friends of Nevis	Claire MacLeod,	Mrs
John Muir Trust	Thomas Widrow,	Head of Campaigns
Lochaber Natural History Society	Tony Laidler,	Chairperson
Mountaineering Scotland	Stuart Younie,	CEO
National Trust for Scotland	William Inglis,	Head of National Estates
Nevis Hillwalking Club	Jane Ollerenshaw,	Chairman
Nevis Landscape Partnership	R W Stewart,	Manager
North East Mountain Trust	David Windle,	Chair of trustees
Ramblers Scotland	Brendan Paddy,	Director
RSPB Scotland	Anne McCall,	Director
The Cairngorms Campaign	Keith Charman,	Director

The list of conservation and recreational organisations signing the letter includes the organisations that have led opposition to these masts nationally (North East Mountain Trust, NTS etc) but also includes local organisations based in the Highlands, mainly around Fort William. Again that is significant: it suggest that the list of local conservation and recreational organisations opposing these masts may be the tip of an iceberg.

The letter is powerful and to the point in its criticism of the programme to eliminate Total Not Spots: it explains the masts will benefit few people, will be very costly to maintain and cause significant and unnecessary damage to the natural environment. So when are Keir Starmer, his ministers and Labour Party MPs going to wake up to the disastrous Shared Network programme, assume responsibility and fix a problem that is clearly in their power to address?

Where I disagree with the letter is it also implies the other part of the Shared Rural programme, funded by the mobile operators, is unreservedly a good thing:

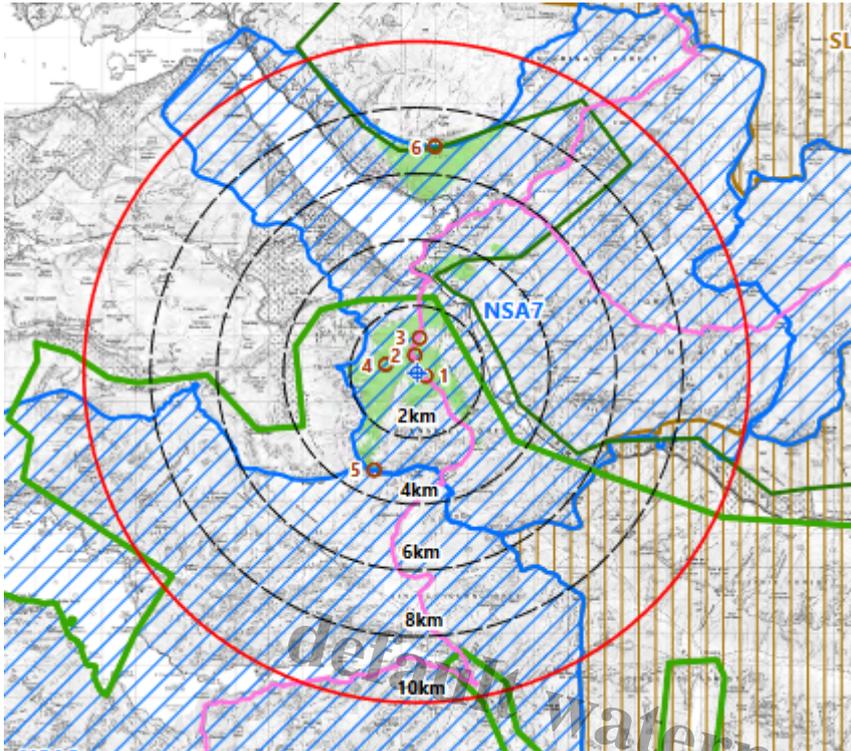
As you will be aware, the Shared Rural Network programme was introduced to bring 4G services to under-served communities and transport corridors. Much of this programme is progressing well. The Partial Not-Spot (PNS) programme, for example, is improving coverage and making seamless connectivity a reality for many users.

The truth, as Parkswatch as shown, is that the four main mobile operators are failing to co-operate with the result that the programme to eliminate partial not spots has made slow progress and is causing unnecessary damage to the landscape and the natural environment. Instead of sharing masts in places like Creag Dhubh and Glenmore, individual mobile operators have been submitting applications for new masts which do not show existing coverage from other operators ([see here](#)). That too lies with the power of the UK Government to fix now.

To return to the main thrust of the letter, a very good illustration of the unacceptable impact of the programme to eliminate Total Not Spots come from a current planning application for a new mast just off Glen Shiel and the road to Skye.

The proposed telecommunications mast in Glen Undalain

The site of this proposed mast is about 3 miles south of Shiel Bridge and north of the Saddle. Glen Undalain forms part of a National Scenic Area so the mast does not count as permitted development and requires full planning permission and the Wild Land Area. In the past the glen was probably rarely visited but the lower part now forms part of the Cape Wrath Trail.



Extract from planning application, the blue hatching shows the National Scenic Area, the green line the boundary of the Knoydart Wild Land Area and the green shading the 4G coverage that would be provided by the mast.

Due to the deep cut and narrow nature of Glen Undalain, the coverage provided by the mast will be limited to a core area of less than 2km in radius, despite the proposed height of the mast being 30m rather than the standard 25m. This mast therefore has even less justification than others being proposed to eliminate 4G Total Not Spots. Moreover, locally it will have even greater impact on what is a wild and unspoilt landscape (see photo above) due to its height and the proposed solar panels. Moreover, as Robert Craig shows in his objection, much of this small area of wild land receives 2G signal from an existing Vodafone mast which allows coverage for emergency purposes.

It would be hard to find a better case to show why the part of the Shared Rural Network programme designed to eliminate Total Not Spots is a complete waste of UK Government money.

A number of excellent objections to the Glen Undalain planning application ([see here](#)), explaining in greater detail what is wrong with the proposed mast, have been submitted by a core of activists who have been leading opposition to the Shared Rural Network programme. Robert Craig, George Allan from the NEMT, Jane Meek and David Jarman have all contributed to parkswatch and their objections deserve to be read by the Rt Honourable Chris Bryant and Peter Kyle. While the deadline for submitting comments on this application is now past, it's not too late for those living in the Highlands to make representations to local councillors.

Others concerned about the impact of the Shared Rural Network programme could use this case and the detailed arguments in the objections to persuade their local MP that if the UK Government scrapped the Total Not Spot programme, Keir Starmer could make things better now. The evidence suggests this would be a popular move in the Highlands, particularly if the money was re-invested in things local communities actually need.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. Other parts Scotland

Tags

1. masts
2. planning
3. UK Government

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