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Case Officer
Highland Council
Highland Council planning reference: 24/01186/FUL and 24/01181/FUL
Sent by email: eplanning@highland.gov.uk

23 April 2024

Dear Sir/Madam,

Installation of telecommunications masts – Loch Affric

We wish to note our concerns about two applications submitted on behalf of Cornerstone seeking planning permission for the construction of telecoms masts and associated equipment in the area around Loch Affric (Highland Council planning references: 24/01186/FUL and 24/01181/FUL) (the ‘Proposed Developments’) as part of the Shared Rural Network programme (‘SRN’).

We are a conservation charity that supports the ambition to improve connectivity for rural communities and businesses. We also support the protection of Scotland’s wild land as a finite national asset that contributes to the health and wellbeing of present and future generations. We have significant concerns about some aspects of how the SRN is being rolled out. This response is necessarily brief as we have limited resources and are trying to consider and respond to a high volume of applications. Our joint position statement with Mountaineering Scotland (attached) outlines our concerns and has been supported by twelve other organisations noted on the last page. We have raised our concerns with the Operators and the SRN.

We disagree with the suggestion in the applications that there is a need which justifies new masts to increase mobile coverage around Loch Affric. We therefore object to these applications because we believe they contravene Policy 4(g) and Policy 24(d) of the National Planning Framework 4 (‘NPF4’). They also fail to consider or apply Policy 3 of NPF4 which requires new development to enhance biodiversity.

Geographic rather than needs-based target

We understand and support the intention behind the SRN to provide 4G coverage to rural communities and businesses. However, as a result of the SRN’s geographical rather than needs-based target, telecom masts, like the Proposed Developments, are being proposed in Wild Land Areas and remote locations where there are very few people (if any) likely to benefit.

The masts are proposed within the Central Highlands Wild Land Area ('WLA'). The developments do not fall within either of the exceptions under Policy 4(g) of NPF4 for development within Wild Land Areas which must either be: in support of meeting renewable energy targets; or directly linked to rural business or required to support a community in a rural area.

Business

As a charity that owns wild land, we are familiar with the requirements of operating in remote locations. In our view it is unlikely that any rural business operating in close proximity to the proposed sites would be reliant on having 4G mobile coverage.

Communities and recreational users of the area

The proposed sites are very remote. In the absence of clear evidence, we cannot see how additional mobile coverage at the proposed sites would benefit any communities or permanent residencies. We therefore believe that the Proposed Developments are in breach of Policy 24(d) which states that development proposals that deliver new connectivity will be supported where there are benefits of this connectivity for communities and the local economy.

It may be suggested that increased 4G coverage could be useful for recreational users of the area. We do not believe that the significant impacts of the Proposed Developments would be outweighed by the potential benefits for recreational users. From our understanding of peoples' enjoyment of wild places, the introduction of digital infrastructure, and any associated development such as access tracks, destroys an aspect of the wild quality that recreational users seek out by venturing to Wild Land Areas in the first place. We are supported in this view by several organisations representing recreational users who are part of a coalition that believe the current approach to the SRN will seriously damage wild places and fail to provide benefits¹.

Landscape impacts

We welcome the inclusion of a Wild Land Impact Assessments ('WLIA') as required by Policy 4(g) of NPF4. The WLIA for the application ref. 24/01181/FUL, fails to consider the wider cumulative impact of SRN masts on the WLA. We are aware of several SRN masts being proposed or considered in close proximity to each other within the WLA. We believe that this poses a serious threat to the integrity of the WLA.

The cumulative impact is briefly considered in the WLIA for the mast with reference 24/01186/FUL. The assessment concludes that there would be no cumulative effects resulting from the masts proposed within the Central Highlands WLA. The scale of a WLA is an important aspect in creating the perceptual feeling of wildness. We believe that the assessment under-estimates the overall cumulative impact of these developments and their attrition of the sense of wildness by introducing infrastructure throughout the area. As there is no obvious need for increased connectivity in the area, we maintain the belief that any impact has not been justified.

¹https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/assets/000/003/422/Final_joint_masts_position_statement_updated_14.2.24_original.pdf?1707911308

The proposed mast with ref. 24/01181/FUL is within the Affric - Cannich Hills SSSI, the Strathglass Complex SAC and the Glen Affric National Scenic Area. The Ecological Assessment states there will be a permanent loss of c.440m² of qualifying feature 'wet heathland with cross-leaved heath' of the Strathglass Complex SAC. We disagree with the conclusion in the Ecological Assessment that an assessment of impact under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017) was not required. The proposed mast with ref. 24/01186/FUL is within the Affric - Cannich Hills SSSI and the Strathglass Complex SAC and is approx. 1.2km from the West Inverness-shire Lochs SPA. The Ecological Assessment states that there will be a permanent loss of 'c.527.4m² of qualifying feature 'wet heathland with cross-leaved heath' of the Strathglass Complex SAC. Again, we disagree with the conclusion in the Ecological Assessment that an assessment of this impact under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017) was not required.

Without any clear evidence of benefits for a rural community or residential property, in addition to the absence of evidence of social, environmental or economic benefits, the permanent damage and impact the Proposed Developments would have on these designated sites is unacceptable.

Lack of detail in planning applications

We would welcome site specific information on how many rural houses and businesses would benefit from the Proposed Developments to help understand the balance of benefits against the significant adverse impact of the development.

The applications also fail to state how the land will be reinstated once the planning permission has expired.

Lack of meaningful community consultation

A lack of community consultation is prevalent in the SRN programme which means that masts are being proposed without any evidence that they will address community needs. This is certainly the case with the Proposed Developments where there is no clear benefit for rural communities and clear evidence of strong opposition.

In conclusion, we object to the Proposed Developments on the basis that they contravene Policy 4(g) and Policy 24(d) of NPF4, in addition to the requirements of Policy 3(a) of NPF4. There is no known specific need for this development which justifies the impact it would have on the Wild Land Area.

Yours sincerely,

The John Muir Trust

Position statement on the development of telecoms masts in remote and wild areas

1. Summary

1.1. There is currently a huge push to expand network connectivity across Scotland with three separate schemes in operation:

- the Shared Rural Network ('SRN');
- the Emergency Services Network ('ESN'); and
- the Scottish 4G Infill Programme.

1.2. We understand the need to update the ESN and improve connectivity for rural communities and businesses. However, we have significant concerns about some aspects of how the programmes, specifically the SRN, are being rolled out:

1.2.1. **Geographic rather than needs-based target** – the SRN's ambition to provide 95% geographical coverage of the UK means that masts are being proposed in wild and remote areas where there will be little to no benefit for rural communities.

1.2.2. **Landscape and wildlife impacts** – extensive new access tracks are being proposed to site masts in wild and remote areas, which will significantly impact the landscape and have the potential to impact the delicate ecology of upland areas. The footprints of the masts themselves also have potential impacts for wildlife and landscape.

1.2.3. **Lack of detail in planning applications** – a proper assessment of the impacts of the developments may be hindered by a lack of site-specific information in the planning applications, particularly regarding construction and restoration methods, how masts will be maintained and powered (e.g. by carbon dioxide-emitting generators) and the resulting pollution (both carbon dioxide and noise); this is compounded by a lack of capacity in local authorities to deal with the high quantity of applications.

1.2.4. **Lack of meaningful community consultation** – the time pressure to deliver the target of 95% coverage by 2025 has resulted in a lack of meaningful community consultation and may mean that the adverse impacts of the developments are not properly considered.

2. Policy Solutions

2.1. A judicious approach to the expansion of network activity would consider the following factors:

- 2.1.1. **Community consultation.** Consultation with rural communities is required to establish their needs; an important consideration in the expansion of network connectivity in Scotland. A local needs assessment as the principal factor in identifying possible mast locations would ensure that new masts are only considered where there is a clear need.
- 2.1.2. **The construction of new access tracks is avoided unless the need is clearly demonstrated and no other method is possible.** New access tracks significantly impact the landscape and so alternative access methods, such as the use of ATV for maintenance, should be used unless totally impractical.
- 2.1.3. **Local Authorities require additional dedicated resources to deal with the increased quantity of planning applications.** Delays to the 2025 deadline are inevitable where Local Authorities are not given the resources to interrogate applications thoroughly.
- 2.1.4. **Avoidance of Wild Land Areas, sensitive areas, irreplaceable habitats¹ and protected areas is best practice².** Our mountains, ancient woodlands and best remaining examples of wild land can be protected by avoiding them as part of the initial investigations undertaken by the Operators.
- 2.1.5. **Operators will share infrastructure wherever possible, new masts will only be considered where there is no viable option of sharing.** Sharing infrastructure is both commercially prudent and environmentally sensible.

3. Context

3.1. The three separate schemes currently working to expand network coverage in Scotland are:

- 3.1.1. the **SRN**, a partnership between the UK Government and four network operators (EE, O2, Vodafone, and Three (the 'Operators')) to improve 4G coverage for people living, working and travelling in areas which have little to no mobile coverage. The programme is intended to provide 95% of geographical coverage of the UK from at least one of the four Operators by the end of 2025;

¹ The National Planning Framework states that development proposals will not be supported where they will result in loss of ancient woodlands, ancient and veteran trees, or adverse impact on their ecological condition. Furthermore, Nature Scot consider ancient woodland an irreplaceable habitat – once lost it is gone forever.

² Scotland has [42 Wild Land Areas](#) which are identified as nationally important in Scottish Planning Policy. Protected sites are areas of land that have special legal protection to conserve important habitats and species, e.g. Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Special Areas of Conservation. [National Scenic Areas](#) (NSAs) also protect the quality or character of the landscape through the planning system.

- 3.1.2. the **ESN**, a UK Government scheme managed by the Home Office to replace the current Airwave service used by the emergency services in England, Wales and Scotland; and
 - 3.1.3. the **Scottish 4G Infill Programme**, run by the Scottish Government to deliver service in “not-spots” (areas without any network service). Initiated in 2017, this programme is coming to its final stages with all masts either live or being built.
- 3.2. We understand the need to expand 4G coverage to improve connectivity for rural communities and businesses, and the need for infrastructure (with appropriate consideration of landscape and biodiversity) to deliver this.
 - 3.3. Although we understand the potential value for transient users like hillwalkers, of 4G rollout in remote areas, we support the ethos of equipping people with the skills to be safe in the mountains, rather than making the mountains safe for people. Telecoms masts in remote and wild areas are not generally seen as an essential contribution to this, although there may be some locations where it could be desirable.
 - 3.4. We are concerned about the top-down approach which appears to have been taken in the SRN. We understand sites are first identified relying on desk-based surveys using a geographic approach rather than the actual needs of the community and the potential impact on sensitive wild land.
 - 3.5. This is in contrast to the approach taken by the Scottish Government in the roll out of the Scottish 4G Infill Programme. In this programme public consultation led to the identification of appropriate locations for masts in non-commercial areas based on the need of rural communities.

4. The problem as we see it

4.1. Geographic rather than needs-based target

- 4.1.1. The 95% target coverage set by the SRN is based on geography rather than how the population is dispersed. Consequently, new masts are being proposed in wild and remote areas where there are very few people (if any) likely to benefit. This puts into question whether there is sufficient demand to justify the cost of installation and ongoing maintenance, which is publicly funded. We understand that masts in remote locations may require servicing and re-fuelling by helicopter which would come at significant cost.
- 4.1.2. We are supportive of the need to increase mobile connection in areas where there is currently no connectivity to enable socio-economic development in rural areas and contact with emergency services. It is not clear why there is a

need for new masts in “partial not-spots” (areas where there is only coverage from one provider). Where there is coverage from one provider Operators should be required to mast share and only when there is no viable option of sharing should new masts be considered.

- 4.1.3. Further, we are aware that local communities are concerned about the detrimental impact masts (which are not improving community coverage) will have on the local economy and the natural environment, as well as the significant public expense which does not appear to be justified.

4.2. Access tracks

- 4.2.1. The SRN’s ambition for 95% geographical coverage of the UK is intended to enable people to be connected whilst they are moving through the landscape. As a result, new masts are being proposed in remote areas currently free from infrastructure. One of the impacts of this is that many applications for proposed masts include access tracks for ‘routine maintenance’³
- 4.2.2. Vehicle access tracks significantly impact areas of wild land, in terms of their visual impact but also by changing the character of the area as well as impacting the integrity of peatland. Remoteness is an important wild land quality and features in many of our finest examples of wild land across the UK. Vehicle access tracks can destroy this feeling of remoteness, as well as potentially acting as a precursor for further development. A concern over the impact of access tracks was what led to the formation of Scottish Environment LINK’s Hilltracks group, which has been campaigning for stronger oversight of “out of control” tracks.⁴
- 4.2.3. The construction and operation of access tracks can negatively impact biodiversity, resulting in a loss of habitat, including nationally important peatlands. In addition, if design and the timing of access tracks is not carefully monitored, it can negatively impact breeding birds and sensitive sites for nature. The necessity and design of new access tracks should be considered in the context of the Scottish Government’s ambition to halt biodiversity loss.
- 4.2.4. The proposed access tracks required for routine maintenance will only be used for a ‘handful of visits... each year’⁵. We believe that the significant impacts that these tracks would have on sensitive areas of wild land are not

³ Highland Council planning portal ref. 23/00894/FUL – ‘Site Specific Supplementary Information’

⁴ <https://www.scotlink.org/link-campaigns/help-us-protect-iconic-landscapes/>

⁵ Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park planning portal ref. 2022/0354/DET – ‘Design and Access Statement’

justified and we would like to see Operators propose alternative options, such as sharing existing infrastructure.

4.3. Lack of detail in planning applications and lack of resource to manage the increase in applications

- 4.3.1. Every new mast proposed must go through the planning process. We have noticed a lack of site-specific information in the SRN planning applications. Although some duplication is to be expected considering the nature of the projects (numerous developments of a similar nature), in many of the applications, the justifications are repeated for the design and siting, the description of the visual impact of the infrastructure in the landscape and the need for the specific mast. There is a lack of consideration of site-specific factors, for example the local need for a mast in a specific remote location.
- 4.3.2. Proper assessment of the impacts of proposed developments is wholly dependent on sufficient information being provided in planning applications and on Local Authorities having sufficient resource to fully assess the information. Without sufficient information being provided on a case-by-case basis Local Authorities are not able to determine what the impact will be on our landscapes and fragile biodiversity.
- 4.3.3. Three important site-specific issues which do not seem to be addressed are:
- 4.3.3.1. **Impact on protected areas** - where the development is likely to impact protected and/or nationally important areas such as Wild Land Areas⁶, National Scenic Areas⁷ and National Parks there appears to be a lack of consideration of what impact there will be on both the landscape and local biodiversity and if and how such impacts could be avoided or significantly mitigated.
 - 4.3.3.2. **Access tracks** – as covered in section 4.2, access tracks can significantly impact the surrounding area, yet where access tracks are required for mast sites there is a lack of information on how the track will be constructed and the surrounding area reinstated (as is good practice with other developments). Most SRN applications only detail that the access tracks will be comprised of crushed stone and suitable for 4x4/ATV access.
 - 4.3.3.3. **Design** – we have not seen any evidence of the sensitivity of a specific site resulting in an alternative mast design to lessen the impact

⁶ Scotland has 42 Wild Land Areas which are identified as nationally important in Scottish Planning Policy

⁷ National Scenic Areas (NSAs) also protect the quality or character of the landscape through the planning system

on the surrounding area. There is also a lack of information of the sustainability of the materials being used for the proposed developments.

4.3.4. The SRN applications we have reviewed do not demonstrate careful consideration for development in sensitive areas, to ensure that they are constructed in a way that avoids and reduces the impact on the surrounding area.

4.4. Lack of meaningful community consultation

4.1. To achieve 95% of geographical coverage across Scotland through the SRN may require c.300 new masts. Each mast will require desk-based studies, site visits, planning applications and construction. To carry out a project of this scale by 2025 puts a huge amount of pressure on all those involved, including the Operators, the Government and Local Authorities.

4.2. We are concerned that the time pressure has led to a lack of consultation on community needs and may mean that the adverse impacts of the developments are not properly recognised or considered. This is particularly a risk where Local Authorities have not been given sufficient resources to handle the huge quantity of applications being submitted.

This statement is supported by:

Action to Protect Rural Scotland
Association of Mountaineering Instructors
Community Land Scotland
John Muir Trust
Mountaineering Scotland
North-East Mountain Trust
Ramblers Scotland
Scottish Wild Land Group
The Knoydart Foundation
The Munro Society
The National Trust for Scotland
Woodland Trust Scotland
RSPB
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Scottish Raptor Study Group