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Case Officer
Highland Council
Highland Council planning reference: 23/04209/FUL
Sent by email: eplanning@highland.gov.uk

1 November 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

Installation of telecommunications mast - Land 1150M SW of Bendronaig Lodge, Attadale, Strathcarron

It is with regret that we note our concerns about the application submitted on behalf of VMO2 seeking planning permission for the construction of a 25m telecoms mast and associated equipment (Highland Council planning ref. 23/04209/FUL) (the 'Proposed Development') 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 continued 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. Our joint position statement with Mountaineering Scotland (attached) outlines our concerns and has been supported by nine other organisations noted on the last page. We have raised our concerns with the Operators and the SRN.

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 Development, are being proposed in Wild Land Areas and remote locations where there are very few people (if any) likely to benefit.

The mast is proposed within the Central Highlands Wild Land Area ('WLA'). It does 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.

The proposed site is extremely remote in the heart of the WLA; there do not appear to be any populated areas within approximately 7km. It does not seem that the Proposed Development would provide any meaningful benefit for any rural communities.

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

It is suggested that increased 4G coverage may be useful for recreational users of the area. We do not believe that the significant impact the Proposed Development would have is outweighed by the potential benefits for recreational users. The introduction of infrastructure, particularly access tracks, destroys the very wild quality that brings recreational users to Wild Land Areas.

Landscape impacts

The lack of information on the visual impact of SRN masts is a wider issue we have identified with the programme. The Proposed Development is within the Strathconon, Monar and Mullardoch Special Landscape Area. Only with a Visual Impact Assessment can the adverse impacts of the Proposed Development be balanced against the possible benefits. We would therefore expect the Applicant to provide such an assessment to enable stakeholders to properly engage with the planning process. We also believe that an assessment of the cumulative impact of all the Shared Rural Network masts proposed within the Central Highland Wild Land Area (including ref. 23/04105/TPNO, 23/04110/TPNO, 23/04108/FUL, 23/04212/TPNO, 23/04108/FUL and 23/04722/FUL) should be provided.

The application includes the proposal for approximately 150m of new ATV access track and a parking area at the mast. As stated in our attached position statement, vehicle access tracks significantly impact areas of wild land, in terms of their visual impact but also by changing the character of the area. Remoteness is an important wild land quality and features in many of our finest examples of wild land across the UK, including the Central Highlands WLA. Vehicle access tracks can destroy this feeling of remoteness, as well as potentially acting as a precursor for further development. Further, the necessity for a parking area at the proposed mast has not been demonstrated. We believe the inclusion of a parking area demonstrates the Applicant's failure to ensure that the design of the development minimises the impact on the surrounded area as far as possible.

Lack of detail in planning applications

The proposed site is within the Central Highland Wild Land Area, but no Wild Land Impact Assessment has been provided as per Policy 4(g) of the NPF4; this is essential to properly understand the impact of the development. For instance, we understand that a fossil fuel generator will be used to power the proposed mast. The noise pollution from a generator would certainly adversely impact the sense of wildness in the area.

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 Development where there is no clear benefit for rural communities.

In conclusion, the Applicant has failed to provide any site-specific demonstration of the need for the Proposed Development and has not stated how the proposal satisfies NPF4 policies. In our view, the application should be refused because the Proposed Development contravenes NPF4 Policy 4(g), the Applicant has not provided the relevant impact assessments and the significant detrimental impact of the Proposed Development on the WLA is not justified. We would be grateful if the Proposed Development could be considered against the concerns we have outlined above and the attached position statement.

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 impacts** – extensive new access tracks are being proposed to site masts in wild and remote areas, which will significantly impact the 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;
- 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

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.

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

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'

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

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

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

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