

By email: julia.lopez.mp@parliament.uk

Rt Hon Julia Lopez MP,
Minister of State,
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology,
100 Parliament Street,
London SW1A 2BQ

4 January 2024

Dear Ms Lopez,

Telecoms masts set to damage Scotland's most beautiful areas and its rural economy

Recent proposals from Shared Rural Network for a massive expansion of telecommunications masts across the Highlands need to be seriously re-examined. We wholeheartedly support the stated aim of improving broadband for communities and businesses in rural areas – however, what is proposed will **not deliver** this.

As currently envisaged, the masts will despoil some of our most remote and beautiful landscapes and cause significant environmental damage. This in turn will harm the economy which, as the Highland Council's own planning framework emphasises, relies on our reputation as a heritage tourism destination and as a place where the outstanding environment and natural heritage is celebrated and valued assets are safeguarded (West Highland and Islands Local Development Plan, p6, Sept 2019; <http://highland.gov.uk/whildp>).

Rather than pushing for 95% 4G coverage by population (which would make sense) the Government is going for 95% geographical coverage, and for the elimination of 'not-spots' (areas of no connectivity) or partial 'not-spots' (where only one operator is present). But the reason we have these not-spots is that the North West Highlands has hundreds of square miles of complete wilderness. Proposals to site masts in remote glens bounded by high mountains will offer little or no improvement in connectivity to any of our local communities.

Wester Ross is designated as a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO, and within this alone there have been over 30 pre-planning notifications by Virgin Media O2 to put telecoms masts in some of our most stunning wilderness areas. While the benefits will be minimal if any, the damage will be enormous. The construction process will turn walkers' footpaths into ugly tracks; the masts and the infrastructure needed for them to function, including proposed diesel generators, will ruin some the Highland's most spectacular views; and rare plants and wildlife, including protected species, will in many places be endangered.

Many of the proposals involve support by helicopter, a scandalous expense for masts that are not providing any connectivity benefit for local communities. If the intention is to provide emergency coverage for walkers, we note the technology will be obsolete very soon – new iphones for example, automatically divert to satellite if there is no mobile signal.

Recently, a planning application was submitted for a 25m mast in Coire Mhic Nobuil (Highland Council planning ref 23/04138/FUL). This location lies within a legally designated National Scenic Area, is surrounded by four mountains over 900m – Beinn Alligin, Beinn Dearg, Beinn Eighe and Liathach – and is 3.8km from the road. There is no track access, only a walkers' footpath. We are

pleased to see this application has been withdrawn, however we have already heard that the developers have signalled their intention to re-submit it.

We are requesting three key changes to current practice:

- There must be a proper dialogue with communities before these masts are instigated, rather than wasting time and taxpayers' money fighting objections to planning applications. As part of this, the mobile operators should be clear what each mast is for, who it will benefit and how it fits with any other submissions for the area. Masts should be shared wherever possible.
- In line with normal good practice, a thorough cost benefit analysis must be undertaken for each and every mast proposed, including assessment of the damage to the environment and tourism.
- To allow these things to happen, and to allow the Highland Council to be able properly to exercise its oversight responsibilities, the timelines for completion of the Shared Rural Network project must be extended and mobile operators must commission and publish landscape impact assessments, using a standard format, to inform their applications.

We are not against better connectivity as it enables people to live and work here, but there needs to be a sensible process to identify and fill any gaps - not an arbitrary set of targets that make no sense in a remote rural area, that will ruin some superb landscapes, and that will come at great expense to the taxpayer.

We look forward to meeting you at your earliest convenience to discuss the way forward on these important issues. Please contact Caroline Hamilton, Chair of Torridon and Kinlochewe Community Council – chair@tkcc.scot, 07956 318332.

Yours sincerely,

Torridon and Kinlochewe Community Council
Torridon District Community Association
Gairloch Community Council
Lochbroom Community Council
Lochcarron Community Council
Shieldaig Community Council
Wester Loch Ewe Community Council
Community Out West Trust

John Muir Trust
Mountaineering Scotland
Munro Society
National Trust for Scotland
Ramblers Scotland
Scottish Wild Land Group
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