



Briefing for Self-Catering Operators

Responding to Highland Council's Planning Control Area Consultations

Highland Rural STLCA and Inverness City STLCA

Highland Council is currently consulting on proposed new Planning Control Areas (PCAs) covering:

- the Highland Rural STLCA; and
- the Inverness City STLCA.

These proposals could have significant consequences for existing and future self-catering operators across Highland.

It Is Critical That Operators Respond

The ASSC strongly encourages all operators across Highland to respond to BOTH consultations, regardless of:

- whether you are located directly within the currently proposed areas;
- whether you operate one property or several;
- or whether you believe you may already be unaffected.

These proposals may set a precedent for wider rollout across Highland and potentially beyond.

A number of organised campaign and housing advocacy groups are already actively encouraging supporters to respond in favour of expanded Planning Control Areas.

That means it is absolutely critical that Highland self-catering operators, families, local businesses and tourism supporters also make their voices heard.

If operators do not respond:

- Highland Council may assume there is limited concern within the sector;
- the positive contribution of self-catering businesses may be overlooked;
- and the consultation risks becoming dominated by broad assumptions, negative narratives and generalised statistics rather than lived experience, evidence and local reality.

This consultation is not simply about tourism policy.

It is about:

- local livelihoods;
- rural sustainability;
- family businesses;

- local jobs;
- community viability;
- and the future of lawful self-catering businesses across Highland.

Self-Catering Businesses Are Vital to the Highlands

Self-catering accommodation is not a marginal activity in Highland.

It is a vital part of the Highlands' tourism and economic infrastructure.

Self-catering businesses:

- support local shops and hospitality;
- sustain restaurants and cafés;
- support cleaners, plumbers, electricians and tradespeople;
- sustain visitor attractions and activity providers;
- support local employment;
- enable tourism in areas without hotels;
- and contribute significantly to community sustainability and rural resilience.

Many self-catering businesses are:

- family-run;
- female-led;
- owner-operated;
- rural diversification projects;
- restored crofts and former empty homes;
- or essential supplementary income for local households.

In many communities, tourism income helps:

- keep people living locally;
- sustain local services;
- support viable year-round communities;
- and create economic resilience in fragile rural areas.

The ASSC is increasingly concerned that a negative narrative around “STLs” risks overlooking the enormous positive contribution that self-catering businesses make to Highland communities and economies.

Most Important Advice: Make Your Response Personal

The strongest responses will not simply repeat policy arguments.

They will explain:

- who you are;
- why you started your business;
- what your business contributes;
- who relies on it;
- and how further planning uncertainty could affect your future.

Highland Council needs to hear from real people, not just statistics.

You are not just:

- a “short-term let”;
- a planning category;
- or a data point.

You are:

- a Highland resident;
- a local employer;
- a business owner;
- and part of your local community.

Explain Your Story

Operators should consider explaining:

- how long they have operated;
- whether the property was inherited or restored;
- whether the property was previously empty or derelict;
- whether the accommodation forms part of your home or an annex;
- whether the unit is croft diversification or purpose-built tourism accommodation;
- whether the property would realistically become permanent housing;
- how many local suppliers they use;
- what local spending guests generate;
- and how the income supports their household or family.

Examples might include:

- supporting retirement income;
- enabling rural living;
- helping care for children or elderly relatives;
- supporting flexible employment;
- keeping a family property viable;
- or allowing diversification after agricultural decline.

These are real Highland stories and they matter.

Key Messages Operators Should Raise

1. There Is No Clear Evidence That Planning Control Areas Solve Housing Problems

Highland Council has not demonstrated:

- increased housing availability;
- reduced rents;
- improved affordability;
- or measurable housing benefit arising from the existing Badenoch and Strathspey Control Area.

It is important to stress:

housing pressures are real, but there is currently no robust evidence that these measures will solve them.

2. Self-Catering Businesses Support Local Communities

Self-catering businesses:

- support local jobs;
- sustain local economies;
- support year-round visitor spend;
- sustain local services;
- and support rural resilience.

Many communities across Highland rely heavily upon tourism infrastructure to remain economically viable.

3. Tourism and Community Sustainability Are Connected

The consultation materials increasingly link:

- depopulation;
- school decline;
- and fragile communities

to self-catering accommodation.

Operators should respectfully explain that:

- these are long-term structural issues;
- many factors contribute to rural depopulation;
- and tourism businesses may actually help sustain communities by supporting jobs and economic activity.

4. Existing Operators Need Fairness, Certainty and Grandfathering

Many operators:

- started operating lawfully years ago;
- were never told planning permission was required;
- were often explicitly advised that permission was unnecessary;
- and are now fully compliant with licensing requirements.

Operators should explain:

- the uncertainty this now creates;
- the stress and financial risk involved;
- and the unfairness of changing interpretation after years of lawful operation.

The ASSC's position is clear:

- if existing lawful operators are expressly protected through proper grandfathering arrangements, the industry can engage constructively with a future framework;

- however, if longstanding lawful operators remain exposed to uncertain planning risk and retrospective procedural burden, the industry cannot support the proposals in their current form.

Operators should strongly encourage Highland Council and Scottish Ministers to provide:

- clear legal certainty;
- explicit protection for pre-2022 operators;
- and assurance that lawful existing businesses will not be unfairly penalised.

5. Language, Definitions and Perception Matter

Operators should be aware that the consultation repeatedly uses the broad term “short-term let” or “STL”.

However, many people understand and experience:

- “self-catering accommodation” very differently from;
- “short-term lets”.

This distinction matters.

“Self-catering accommodation” is often associated with:

- holidays;
- hospitality;
- tourism;
- local businesses;
- family memories;
- and rural economic sustainability.

By contrast, the term “STL” is increasingly used in public debate as shorthand for:

- housing loss;
- speculative investment;
- or community harm.

Yet these terms are often being used to describe exactly the same property.

Operators should therefore:

- consistently describe themselves as self-catering businesses or visitor accommodation providers;
- explain the hospitality and tourism function of their business;
- and avoid language which unintentionally reinforces negative stereotypes.

It is also important to explain where your accommodation:

- was purpose-built for tourism;
- forms part of your home or an annex;
- was previously empty or derelict;
- supports diversification of crofting or farming;
- or would never realistically become mainstream residential housing.

The consultation process should be based on accurate definitions and evidence, not broad assumptions or emotionally loaded terminology.

Strongly Recommended: Upload Supporting Information as a PDF

At the end of the consultation, operators can upload supporting documents.

The ASSC strongly encourages operators to upload a short PDF including:

- photographs of the property;
- guest reviews;
- business history;
- local supplier information;
- evidence of local employment supported;
- examples of community contribution;
- and details of visitor spending supported locally.

This is extremely important.

Human stories and real-world evidence are far more persuasive than short survey responses alone.

Suggested Information to Include in Your PDF

You may wish to include:

- how many years you have operated;
- whether the property was previously empty or unused;
- why guests choose your accommodation;
- how many local contractors or suppliers you use;
- local recommendations you provide to guests;
- examples of repeat visitors;
- examples of workers or displaced residents accommodated;
- and how your income supports your household.

You can also include:

- website links;
- photographs;
- reviews;
- social media;
- and evidence of awards or quality assurance.

Guidance on Specific Consultation Questions

HIGHLAND RURAL STLCA

“Do you agree with the proposal to establish the Highland Rural Short Term Let Control Area?”

The ASSC recommends operators consider responding:

No

Possible points to include:

- no clear evidence of measurable housing benefit;
- broad rural designation risks overreach;
- rural Highland is highly diverse;
- many self-catering units are not conventional housing;
- existing planning powers already exist;
- tourism businesses support fragile rural economies;
- and the proposals risk creating uncertainty for lawful existing operators.

“Do you agree with the Statement of Reasons?”

Possible points:

- the document relies heavily on broad STL statistics;
- it does not adequately distinguish between different accommodation types;
- it implies causation without sufficient evidence;
- it underweights tourism and economic contribution;
- and the tone risks pre-empting the outcome of the consultation.

Guidance on Specific Consultation Questions

INVERNESS CITY STLCA

“Do you agree with the proposal to establish the Inverness City Short Term Let Control Area?”

Operators may wish to explain:

- the importance of visitor accommodation in Inverness;
- the role of self-catering in supporting tourism and business travel;
- lack of demonstrated evidence that PCAs improve affordability;
- and the need for balanced and proportionate policy.

“Do you agree with the Statement of Reasons?”

Possible points:

- insufficient evidence of direct causation;
- insufficient economic assessment;
- over-reliance on broad STL statistics;
- lack of distinction between different types of accommodation;
- and lack of clarity regarding treatment of existing lawful operators.

Questions About Positive Impacts

The consultation asks about positive impacts of self-catering accommodation.

Operators should answer these strongly and confidently.

Possible points:

- supports local jobs;

- supports local businesses;
- sustains tourism;
- encourages investment;
- supports flexible accommodation;
- supports contractors and workers;
- reduces empty properties;
- supports dispersed tourism;
- and contributes significantly to local economies.

Final Message

Please respond.

This is one of the most important consultations affecting Highland self-catering businesses in recent years.

The consultation process must hear not only from organised campaign groups, but also from the thousands of local residents, workers, families and businesses whose livelihoods and communities depend upon a thriving and sustainable visitor economy.

The strongest thing operators can do is:

- respond personally;
- explain local impact;
- provide evidence;
- upload supporting information;
- and make visible the real people, families and communities behind self-catering businesses across Highland.

Without operator responses, the consultation risks becoming dominated by broad assumptions, negative narratives and generalised statistics rather than lived experience, evidence and local reality.

[Respond to the Highland Rural STLCA Consultation](#)

[Respond to the Inverness City STLCA Consultation](#)