



Location and Context

The *Sandy Beaches and Dunes* Landscape Character Type consistently occurs along the east Sutherland coast between the Dornoch Firth and Brora. Areas at the mouths of Loch Fleet and the Dornoch Firth are particularly extensive. They also occur sporadically around the north and west coasts of Caithness.

Key Characteristics

- Near continuous stretch of sandy beach between the Dornoch Firth and Brora.
- Low shingle ridges backing many of these sandy beaches and forming the base for dune systems.
- Large sand banks, splayed sandy beach and spit occurring at the mouth of the Dornoch Firth, backed by low dunes and expansive grassy links.
- Wide plain covered with gorse, heather and rough grazing land at Cuthill Links in the Dornoch Firth,
- Shingle bars at the mouth of Loch Fleet.
- Undulating machair abutting dunes and dune slacks along parts of the east Sutherland coast, with golf courses occupying some of these areas.
- Post-glacial raised shorelines backed by relict cliffs to the north of Brora with the sandy beach being narrow in this area.
- Long gently curved sandy arcs of Sinclairs Bay and Dunnet Bay in Caithness.
- Striking complex landscape pattern at Torrisdale Bay
- The long sandy beach at Balnakeil, with extensive dune system and machair.
- Remoteness of Sandwood Bay in west Sutherland.
- Focus for recreation with camp sites, caravan parks and car parks located close to more accessible areas of coast with golf courses present where links and machair areas are more extensive.
- Many small crofting communities located on the fringes of beaches, particularly in north and west Sutherland.
- Castles with historic gardens and designed landscapes, as well as prehistoric brochs and cists, cairns, and hut circles.
- Strong sense of space, light and exposure, and extensive visibility on the larger and more open stretches of sandy beach.
- Contained smaller beaches on the north coast with views focused along the beach to

rocky headlands and out to sea to near shore islands.

- Strong contrast of the white/pale pink sands of the beaches in the north-west with surrounding darker cliffs and moorland.
- Wildness character to of all these seascapes, more intensely experienced on the more remote beaches along the north and west coasts of Sutherland.

Landscape Character Description

Landform and Landcover

Sandy beaches and Dunes consistently occur along the east Sutherland coast between the Dornoch Firth and Brora. Sand accumulation is particularly extensive at the mouths of Loch Fleet and the Dornoch Firth where estuarine and marine sedimentation processes have produced diverse coastal features including broad beaches, spits, sand banks, dunes and links. This is a dynamic coastline with sand accretion, dune shifting and changes to vegetation cover constantly occurring. Shingle bars at mouth of Loch Fleet have encouraged the build-up of sand and mud flats and saltmarsh within the outer loch which attract flocks of wildfowl and seals. Coul Links on the south side of Loch Fleet features particularly complex swirling delta spits and dune systems. Dunes are covered with a diverse mosaic of marram grass, mosses and heather with some scrub occurring in wetter dune slacks.

The remote Sandwood Bay in west Sutherland is located at the end of Strath Shinary, a flooded, glacially modified depression, with the beach, high dunes and machair separating Loch Sandwood from the sea. Contained by eroded sandstone cliffs and a prominent stack, this dramatic bay has a strong sense of wildness, heightened by the long walk in, absence of development and extreme exposure to the elements.

Sandy beaches are a rarer feature along the predominantly rocky coastline of Caithness and north and west Sutherland where they usually occur at the mouths of rivers or along the coastlines of the outer Kyles of Tongue and Durness. The beaches on these coasts are relatively small, contained by rocky headlands and, in north-west Sutherland, they are often back-dropped by craggy coastal hills. In contrast, the long sandy beaches of Sinclair's Bay and Dunnet Bay have a simple visual composition of sky, expansive sea and beach and a relatively narrow band of dunes backed by well-managed agricultural land and some remnant coniferous woodland. In common with the sandy beaches found in the north and west, these bays are contained by rocky headlands.

Areas of notably complex landscape pattern occur at Torrisdale Bay between the mouths of the Rivers Navar and Borgie, and Melvich, where sand dunes and machair has accumulated over, and against, large splays of sand and gravel outwash. There is a huge expanse of beach, saltmarsh and dunes, and a richly diverse vegetation cover. The coast at Melvich is similarly striking, especially when seen in elevated views from the A836, due to the presence of interlocking spits and dunes which constrict the mouth of the River Halladale.

The long sandy beach at Balnakeil has formed on the west side of the isthmus joining the rocky Faraid Head to the mainland at Durness. The dune system and machair associated with this beach is extensive while the shallowness of the Kyle of Durness results in extensive sand flats being exposed at low tide.

Settlement

Today settlement is limited to a number of small crofting communities located on the fringes of beaches, particularly in north and west Sutherland. There are, however, a number of prehistoric and historic sites in this LCT. In the Dornoch area including a chambered cairn at Embo, and Skibo castle with its historic garden and designed landscape. At Golspie and

Brora there are further buildings of note, for example Dunrobin Castle, again with its historic garden and designed landscape. The prehistoric Carn Liath broch is also in this area. In Sinclair Bay in Caithness Castle Lingas broch sits at Keiss Links, and at Dunnet Bay there are two cairns. At Torrisdale Bay there is a large archaeological site at Invernaver which includes cairns, cists, hut circles and an associated field system.

The sandy beaches of Caithness and Sutherland are a focus for recreation and the larger and more accessible coasts have caravan and camp sites, golf courses and car parks located within links areas. North of Brora a section of coast is hemmed in by the railway and backed by agricultural land. The smaller beaches in north Sutherland, which are often highly visible from the coast road, are less developed and beaches such as Sandwood Bay on the north-west coast are extremely remote due to their isolation, absence of development and extreme exposure to the elements.

Perception

Despite modification natural qualities of sea, beach and dunes and the dynamism of coastal processes gives all these seascapes a degree of wild character but with this being more intensely experienced in the more remote beaches along the north and west coasts of Sutherland.

The strong contrast of the white/pale pink sands of the beaches in the north-west with surrounding darker cliffs and moorland increases their attraction and contribution to these scenically diverse coastlines.



This is one of 390 Landscape Character Types identified at a scale of 1:50 000 as part of a national programme of Landscape Character Assessment republished in 2019.

The area covered by this Landscape Character Type was originally included in the Caithness and Sutherland LCA (Stanton, C) published 1998; and Caithness and Sutherland Landscape Character Review (Carol Anderson Landscape Associates), published 2015.