



Location and Context

The *High Cliffs & Sheltered Bays* Landscape Character Type is found along much of the coastline of north and west Sutherland and Caithness. The cliffs are particularly high and/or dramatic, distinguishing the areas from other Landscape Character Types which abut the coast which have lower, more isolated cliff features.

Key Characteristics

- Duncansby Head, with high, fissured and blocky cliffs, jagged asymmetric rock stacks, arches and geos.
- Dunnet Head, with towering cliffs edged by low rocky reefs.
- Occasional inlets and coves, often with very deep and sheltered waters, and sometimes containing tiny harbours tucked between cliffs and not readily visible from the main coast road and settlement.
- Harbours on the east Caithness coast which have a strong association with settlements which are perched above the cliff.
- Moorland largely abutting this Landscape Character Type which is particularly open and sweeping to the east and north within Caithness.
- The most prominent and exposed headlands marked by lighthouses.
- Exhilarating experience of being precariously perched upon a high edge on the cliff tops, offering open elevated views and a perception of huge space.
- Views of turbulent currents at the juncture of the Pentland Firth and North Sea, heightening the sense of wildness experienced from the headland.
- The absence of development along the remote stretches of coast and a strong sense of naturalness creating a wild landscape character.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The *High Cliffs & Sheltered Bays* Landscape Character Type forms a relatively even coastline of cliffs and small inlets lying between Helmsdale and Ulbster. Although in some stretches the cliffs are less vertiginous than those found on the more exposed headlands of Caithness and Sutherland, the contrast of small bays and inlets, some of these accommodating harbours, with sheer cliff faces is striking. Prominent headlands on the north coast of Caithness are rimmed by high cliffs while a more fragmented indented coastline with

many narrow headlands, inlets and small bays occurs between Strathy Point and the Kyle of Tongue, reflecting a particularly complex geology. Broader headlands lie between the deeply indented kyles in the north-west to Cape Wrath. The majority of these coastal areas feature an intricate coastline of fissured cliffs, ravines, caves and stacks with small coves and narrow inlets regularly interrupting cliffs.

Variations in geology produce different coastal rock features. The Old Red Sandstone cliffs found in east Caithness feature distinct horizontal banding and the increased occurrence of caves, stacks and arches associated with Caithness Flagstone, as found, for example at Duncansby Head. Harder gneisses at Strathy Head produce sheer cliffs and an outcrop of limestone culminates in the headland of Whiten Head on the north coast of Sutherland where high, light-coloured cliffs, caves and sea stacks are present.

Landcover

Moorland abuts this Landscape Character Type. A very short mat of vegetation tends to cover the top edge of the cliffs and small ledges. Some of the more slumped cliffs along the north-east Caithness coast are partially vegetated with banks of bracken, gorse and short grasses.

Settlement

In some of the inlets and coves there are tiny harbours which are tucked between cliffs, not visible from the main coast road or settlement. Some of the harbours on the east Caithness coast have a strong association with settlements such as the planned villages of Latheronwheel and Lybster which are perched above the cliff. The harbours are reached by narrow roads or even by stone steps carved into cliff sides as at Whaligoe. The most prominent headlands are marked by lighthouses, making them a focal point for visitors. While these headlands can be reached by public road, the remote Cape Wrath and its lighthouse also attract visitors, despite the difficulties of access. Historic environment features include Borve Castle near Farr Point on the northern coast and lighthouses at Durness, Duncansby and Strathy.

Perception

This character type has an elemental character influenced by the proximity of often turbulent seas, especially at the junction between the Pentland Firth and the North Sea from Duncansby Head. This is heightened by the dramatic rugged character and sheer height of the cliffs. A strong sense of wild character is particularly associated with the more remote stretches of coast. This is heightened by the sight and sound of soaring and nesting seabirds.

The cliff tops offer open, elevated views, yet views of this coastline from adjacent inland areas are often restricted due to convex slopes and sheer cliffs. Views tend to be directed along the coast and out to sea, especially where there are offshore foci such as islands, rigs or boats.

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.