

North Assynt: Area Profile

Glaciers, grinding West, gouged out
these valleys, rasping the brown sandstone,
and left, on the hard rock below – the
ruffled foreland –
this frieze of mountains, filed
on the blue air – Stac Polly,
Cul Beag, Cul Mor, Suilven,
Canisp – a frieze and
a | litany.”¹

3.1 What is an Area Profile?

An Area Profile summarises the key social, economic and environmental aspects of the local area and compares these local aspects with patterns and trends at the county, regional and national level. The purpose of this is to see in what ways local circumstances, strengths and challenges differ from or mirror regional and national concerns. With this information it is then possible to develop projects and policies which fit local circumstances and to explain using statistics, when applying for funding, why and in what ways local circumstances merit local solutions. By providing information in this form you make it easy for policy makers and public agencies to quickly understand your local circumstances because you have translated your local knowledge into a form or language which is familiar to planners and policy makers. You also make it easy for your local group – Assynt Crofters Trust – to track changes in those local circumstances by referring back to the Area Profile as the years go by. This puts the Assynt Crofters Trust in a good position to then make representations on behalf of the community if circumstances do not change for the better – or to take action on behalf of the community to change things for the better. The statistical information presented here will be augmented at a later stage with up to date information gathered in the course of the current consultation work.

3.1.1 What is a ‘Fragile Area’?

Across the HIE and Highland Region areas, a range of aspects characteristic of fragile rural areas are regularly examined to establish the relative fragility of each sub area.

The seven indicators used by Highland Council are:

- population density, by Highland Council settlement zone
- % population change between 1981 - 1991, by Highland Council settlement zone
- % change in population aged 0-15 years, between 1981 - 1991, by Highland Council settlement zone
- % people aged over 18 claiming income support, by 1996 Ward
- % of long term unemployment, by District Ward
- 10 minute drive time to 5 key services - PO; Food Shop; GP; Primary school; Petrol facility
- areas outwith 1.5 hr drive time of Inverness

¹ From ‘A Man in Assynt’ by Norman MacCaig – pp303- in F. & A. Rennie *The Land Out There*

The ACT area exhibits the presence of four or five of the seven indicators in most of the area and two or three nearer Lochinver. HIE uses a slightly different method of ascertaining fragility, but the same core areas emerge as most fragile. HIE uses the following to define fragility:

Geographic

- Islands which lie off other islands and are not linked by a causeway
- A distance of more than 50 miles from a population centre of 5000
- Over 70% of roads are single track

Demographic

- Islands with a population of less than 2,500
- Population density less than the HIE area average (9 persons per square kilometre)
- More than 20% of the population is of pensionable age
- Population loss between last two censuses
- In-migration of economically active below the HIE average

Economic

- Economic activity rate below the HIE area average
- High average and/or seasonal unemployment
- Long term unemployment more than 25% above the HIE average
- High dependency on primary sector employment²

Many people find the description of areas like North Assynt as ‘fragile’ and ‘remote’ irritating and at times offensive. This is because these types of descriptions are very negative and ignore all the good things about a place like this. As one person said recently people sometimes overlook the fact that North Assynt is ‘*A land of rock and water, but what a land!*’.³

3.1.2 North Assynt: ‘It’s Home’

North Assynt has a rich and challenging cultural heritage. The traditions of music and Gaelic song are carried on across the townships. In Drumbeg half a dozen musicians of various ages meet every Tuesday night in the old School to play together. They and other musicians in the area keep in contact with a network of musicians across the County. The regular traditional ceilidhs in Stoer Hall ensure that old songs keep being sung and ‘new’ favourites join the old ones as the years go by. In 1995 – the tenth anniversary of the new ‘Library’ or Stoer Hall- this vibrancy inspired Duncan Chisholm to write the tune ‘*Leaving Stoer*’ as a testament to his sorrow at leaving the 10th Anniversary Ceilidh at which he and Ivan Drever played. The poet, the late Norman MacCaig, spent his summers in Achmelvich and a very large part of his work is inspired by the Assynt area. It was he who famously wrote a poem raising the issue of landownership patterns in the Highlands and personal relationships to land:

“Who owns this landscape –
The millionaire who bought it or

²HIE - Network Strategy Office

³ Fieldwork Interview 2002

The poacher staggering downhill in the early morning
With a deer on his back?
Who possesses this landscape? –
The man who bought it or
Or I who am possessed by it?”⁴

North Assynt is a beautiful place offering fine scenery, sparkling lochs, outstanding beaches, rich seas, exciting wildlife and birdlife, world famous views and the opportunity of some very good ceilidhs. The trout fishing is outstanding as is the hill walking, bird watching and botany. It is a place which gets a hold of people and stays in their thoughts no matter where they may end up in the world. Ancient peoples have left their mark in the form of the Clachtoll Broch, the Clashmore Crannog and the Culkein Stoer Dun:

“The wildness remains. People have been here for thousands of years and the ghosts are still here. It’s a living, breathing thing. It would be horrendous to loose that.”⁵

It is as a result of the crofting system that communities have been maintained to this day in North Assynt. For many generations the struggle to survive here was quite desperate and many were forced to leave looking for work in the southern cities or emigrating to places like Canada and South Africa. The wrench of leaving experienced by far too many people down the years is summed up in the haunting song ‘*Cuir Culaibh Ri Asiante*’:⁶

“Di-sathuirne rinn sinn seoladh
Bho’n Bhroomilaw ‘n Glasachu
Measg treubhan le gach seorsa
Air bord ‘n Southwark Shasunnach.”

For some emigration during the 18th and 19th centuries was a form of resistance and protest. A rejection of current circumstances and a search for a freer land, or in the case of religiously motivated emigrants perhaps a promised land.⁷ The departure of Reverend Norman MacLeod, a native of Clachtoll, with a band of followers bound for Cape Breton in 1817 is a good example. The ‘*Normanites*’, as they became known, developed their own brand of Presbyterianism which attracted many beset by hardship and the uncertainty of early Clearances.⁸ This religious dissent was a forerunner of the Disruption of 1843. The rise of evangelical Presbyterianism in Sutherland was linked with protest at the changes brought by clearance and improvement. The history of Clearance and landownership is addressed in Professor MacLeod’s song ‘*Airigh Culkein*’:

⁴ From ‘*A Man in Assynt*’ by **Norman MacCaig** – various publications including **F and A Rennie** *The Land Out There*

⁵ Fieldwork quote.

⁶ *Turning Your Back on Assynt*

⁷ For an example early in the Clearances, involving religious beliefs see discussion of the Reverend Norman MacLeod.

⁸ For more information see for instance **McPherson F** 1993 *Watchman Against the World* Breton Books Cape Breton.

Verse 5

Sibhse tha cho fiosarach am Palamiad na Tir
Thoiribh dhuinn nan àirighean, na mullaichean 'na frith
'S théid mi fhéin an urras dhubh, mar dhuine 's fhaide chi
Dannsaidh sinn, is seinnidh sinn, 'G am fada beò an Rìgh!

The Professor - Iain MacLeod - had been born and brought up in Culkein and had left as a young man to pursue an academic career. On graduation he attained a senior mastership in the Grammar School of Arminster, England. A congested left lung forced MacLeod to give up the post. On his recovery he worked as a tutor for a number of 'noblemen', including "*Sir Charles Tennant of the Glen, Sir Frederick Graham of Netherby Hall and Lord Lawrence, late Governor-general of India*".⁹ MacLeod then gained a place in London as Lecturer in English Literature, Philology and Constitutional History.¹⁰ Again he fell ill, this time much more seriously. When ill health forced him into a very early retirement, he moved back home. He was active in the community and managed to secure funding from the Congested Districts Board to build a decent pier at Culkein Stoer. In addition:

"from the Government of the late Lord Salisbury I got a daily local postman for the different townships of the district."¹¹

Much of his time had been spent writing poems and songs, mainly in Gaelic. Although he left behind a fairly large collection, '*Airigh a Chulchinn*' is the one sung most often. It tells of the joys of the arigh of his boyhood.¹² There is much laughter and sunshine - and a remarkable lack of rain and midges. Yet there is more to this song. In the last verse the singer beseeches all those who are so knowledgeable about the Parliament of the Land to make an effort to return the land to the people. The singer promises that if this were to be achieved, '*man*' will dance and sing '*Long Live the King*' as long as he (man) lives. The Professor, like many in the area, was active in The Land League.

In the parish of Assynt some fifty townships were cleared and coastal settlements overcrowded by the relocation of cleared tenants. During the 19th century there were a number of riots or disturbances in reaction to the policy of Clearance. For instance at Inchnadamph in 1813 there was great resistance and uproar over the appointment of a Minister who had been previously in Strathnaver and was reported to be supportive of the 'improvements' or Clearance underway in Sutherland between 1812 and 1821. During this time the area we know today as North Assynt was a significant 'resettlement area' for families cleared from inland straths and glens.¹³ Raffin was the last township to be

⁹p8 **MacLeod I.** 1907 *Dain Agus Orain* Northern Counties Newspaper and Printing and Publishing Company Limited, Inverness.

¹⁰p8 **MacLeod I.** 1907 *Dain Agus Orain* Northern Counties Newspaper and Printing and Publishing Company Limited, Inverness.

¹¹p9 **MacLeod I.** 1907 *Dain Agus Orain* Northern Counties Newspaper and Printing and Publishing Company Limited, Inverness.

¹² The arigh is the hill pasture and stone bothy used in the summer months, when in the past the younger girls took the cattle to hill pasture for the summer. It was central to past practise of transhumance and was a great ceilidh place for the younger generations.

¹³ See **Bangor Jones M.** 1998 *The Assynt Clearances* Assynt Press for a detailed study.

created. The layout of crofts and townships we see today was created by Sutherland Estates in the early 19th century and many of the families of today are descendants of those cleared families. The Napier Commission took evidence here in 1884. In 1887 the Clashmore Land Raids and Riots resulted in imprisonment for several people and led to the press dubbing Hugh Kerr *'The Sutherland Rob Roy'* when he remained on the run for a year. The women of Clashmore played a strong role in the resistance which in the 20th century earned them a mention in John McGrath's play *'The Cheviot, The Stag and The Black, Black Oil'*.

The early 20th century was a difficult time when depopulation continued and the crofting system proved crucial in helping families to survive and remain. Over time new families settled in the area, boosting falling school roles and contributing to township and parish life in a wide range of ways. Eventually the 20th century brought electricity, improved roads and transport, new incomes from tourism and a much expanded fishing industry focused on Lochinver. School roles in North Assynt have reduced and now there is only one Primary School – Stoer School – serving 11 townships, while children in Achmelvich and Torbreck attend Lochinver Primary School. In the 1980s Ullapool School was upgraded to a full Secondary School and today local children travel daily to Ullapool instead of travelling weekly to Golspie and boarding there. Assynt people played an important role in the 1980s in the creation of the Scottish Crofters Union which was created by crofters all across the Highlands and Islands 100 years after the 1886 Act. In the past century crofting agriculture has changed greatly becoming more reliant on sheep. As cattle numbers continued to drop fewer people grew winter feed of any kind. Today there is a much greater reliance on paid employment off the croft, particularly as agricultural incomes have fallen in the last few years. Through all of these ups and downs North Assynt in the 21st century has retained its 'spirit' and drive:

“There's a future in the place.”¹⁴

For all that people will always say that *'crofters can never agree'* what drives this place along today is a tenacious dedication to the community and its future and present well being by those who live here. There are few enough places now in the world where a person can dare to leave a door unlocked. The communities of North Assynt are unbelievably fortunate in living somewhere with such a low crime rate where the everyday threat of burglaries, muggings, car thefts and attacks on elderly people faced by many people elsewhere is entirely absent.

North Assynt is well known for the strength of its voluntary efforts and tremendous fund raising for causes like the Highland Hospice. The Drumbeg Development Group, the Stoer Hall Committee, Comunn Eachdraidh Asiante, ten Grazings Committees and the Assynt Crofters Trust itself are examples of voluntary organisations run almost exclusively by the population of some 300 people in North Assynt itself. In addition the North Assynt communities also contribute to parish wide organisations like the Community Council, Assynt Games Committee, Assynt Field Club, Culag Community Wood, Red Cross collections, Save The Children fundraising, Friends of Assynt, Wildlife

¹⁴ Fieldwork interview.

Watch Club, Assynt Tourism Group, Assynt Footpaths Group, the Panto and the Assynt Branch of the Scottish Crofting Foundation. With all this voluntary activity it is surprising to ever find anyone at home at all.

When talking about what they like about the place '*the people*' comes top of everyone's list. People may hold a range of views about how best to proceed but everyone feels passionately about the place.

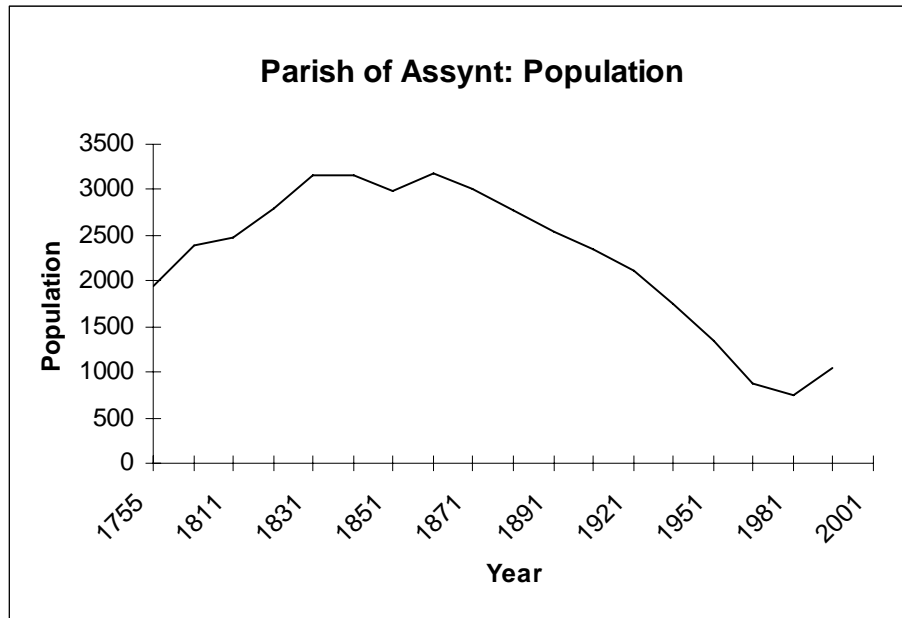
3.2 Demography

What is demography? Demography involves recording and analysing information about the local population - what sort of work people do, what sort of housing people live in and what number of people are retired, of school age or of working age. Why do we need this kind of information? Demographic information illustrates very simply the key issues and challenges faced by the local communities. For instance by using demographic information to show that there is a lack of young people in the community, it is possible to make a strong argument for funding applications aimed at projects to support younger generations and make North Assynt a better place for younger people to live.

The North Assynt Estate is situated in the parish of Assynt. In the West Highland Survey, it was described as '*the disintegrating parish of Assynt*'.¹⁵

¹⁵p162 **Darling F. F. (ed.)** 1955 Report of the West Highland Survey: A Study in Human Ecology Oxford

Figure .2: Population Change in the Parish of Assynt
 Source: West Highland Survey and Highland Council Statistics



As with so many rural places in the Highlands and Islands, Assynt has seen a decline in population since the mid-19th century. Figure 2 illustrates the population change since 1755. This shows that at the time of publication of the West Highland Survey (1955), Assynt had experienced persistent depopulation for some one hundred years, through a combination of natural decrease and out-migration. In common with the average for the Highlands and Islands, the parish began to experience a change in this trend in the mid-1970s, when population levels began gradually to stop falling and to rise in some localities. However in some townships population continued to fall and the average age to increase.

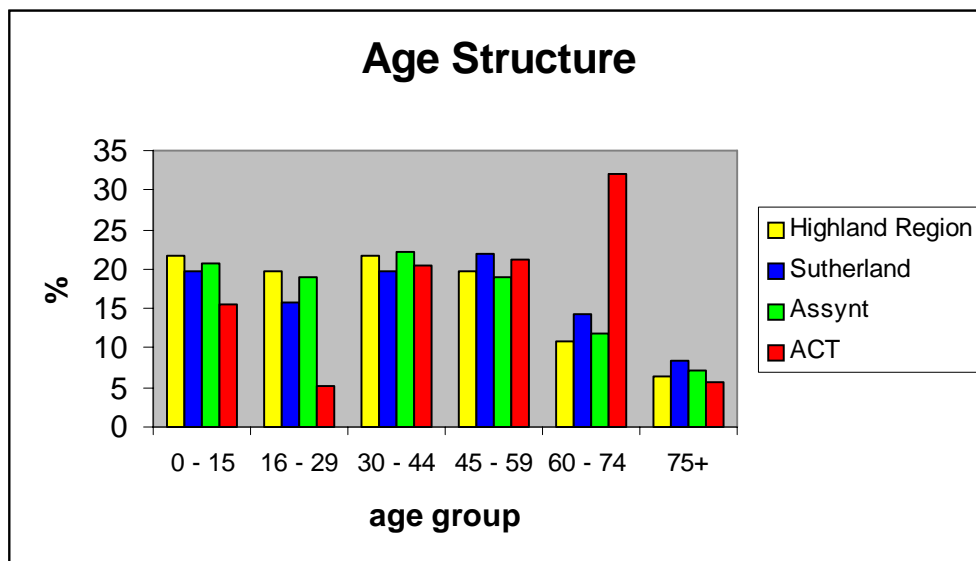
It is clear from Figure 2 that historically, in terms of folk memory and current experience, out-migration and depopulation has dominated culturally, psychologically and economically. The total population for the parish of Assynt in 1991 had risen to 1,049 - close to the levels in the late 1950s, and just over one third of the level in 1871.

In Figure 3, which compares age structure in for Highland Region, Sutherland, Assynt and North Assynt spatial variation in age structures emerge. The age distribution in North Assynt illustrates some of the key characteristics of a fragile area more intensely than that of Assynt parish or Highland Region. Based on current information the proportion of the population over retirement age is 37.5% in North Assynt and 18.9% in Assynt compared to a Highland average of 17.5%. The proportion of the population under 16 years is 15.5% in North Assynt and 20.6% in Assynt compared to a Highland average of 21.5%.

In 1996, in the townships of Culkein Stoer, Clashnessie, Culkein Drumbeg and Nedd the proportion of the population over 65 years was calculated to be 33% compared to a Highland and national average of some 16%. The proportion of the population under 15 years is very low. It was 16% in 1981, 15% in 1991 and 14.5% in 1996. This compares very unfavourably with a Highland Region average in 1991 of 21% and a parish figure in 1991 of 20.6%. In the village of Lochinver, in 1991, the proportion of under 16 year olds was 25%. This shows very clearly that the problems of depopulation and ageing persist in the crofting townships in North Assynt. Figure 4 shows the age structure by township in late 2002.

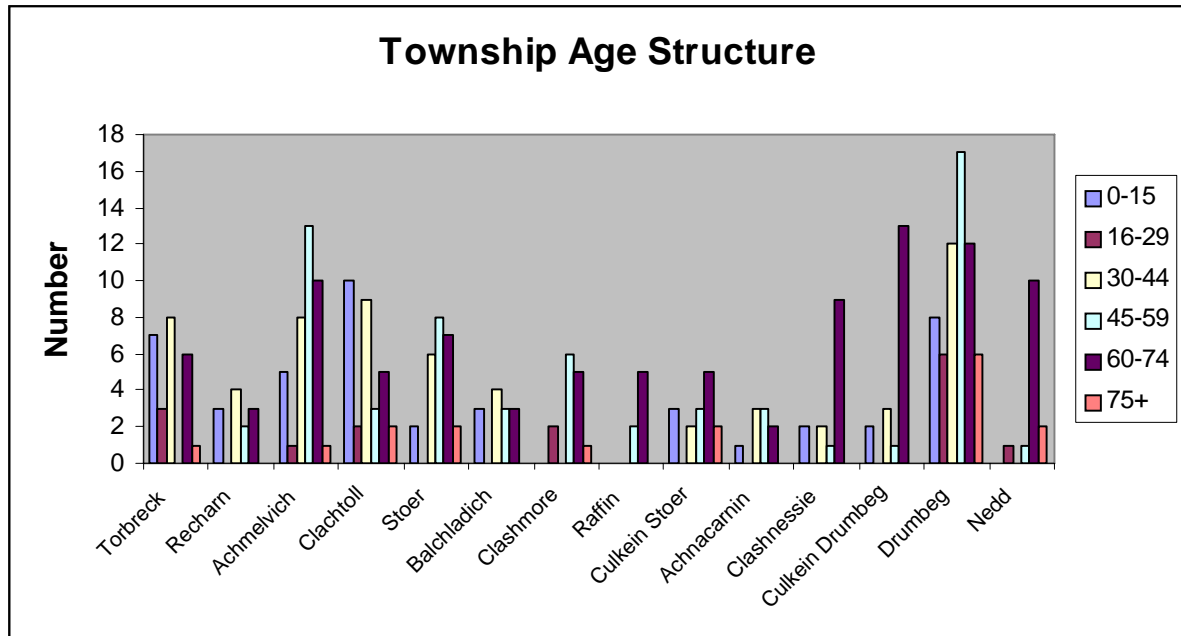
At a township level, on the North Assynt Estate, the Drumbeg/Nedd area has had an ageing and declining population, while the townships closer to Lochinver - Achmelvich, Torbreck and Clachtoll have been growing and are better demographically balanced. The remaining townships have been 'ageing' but are maintaining population. In 1981 24% of the North Assynt population lived in the three townships nearest Lochinver; by 1996 that had risen to 36%. In 1996, in a local survey, the population of the North Assynt Estate was calculated to be 297.¹⁶ The same figure was found during survey work in late 2002 as part of this study. In the 1981 census it was 302 and in 1991 it was 296, indicating that the total population is fairly steady.

Figure 3: Highland, Sutherland & Assynt: Comparison of Age Structure
Source: Highland Council Statistics - 1991 census and fieldwork 2002



¹⁶Alexander D. 1996 *North Assynt Housing Study: A Report on a Survey of Housing Needs, Preferences and Supply Issues in the Townships of North Assynt* for ACT and Scottish Homes

Figure 4: Township Age Structure
Source: Fieldwork 2002



3.3 Housing and Households

At the time of the 1991 census there were 456 permanent households in Assynt. Some 6% of the population were living in what Highland Council classifies as ‘non-permanent’ accommodation – caravans, in the main. In 1991 25.7% of the housing stock in Assynt comprised of ‘second/holiday homes’. The Highland Region average is 7.2% and the Scottish average is 1.7%. There may be some inaccuracy in this figure since some houses will be let as a business run by local people. That type of ‘holiday home’ has a different social and economic impact from that of a second home. The North West Demographic Survey in 1989 found that 31% of the housing stock was holiday homes and 2% was vacant.¹⁷ Even allowing for some discrepancies in these figures, Assynt has a very high percentage of holiday homes. The next highest in the north west, in the 1989 survey, was Eddrachilles with 14%. However the 1991 census returns indicate high levels throughout the north west. It is important to note that at a local scale the distribution of holiday homes is uneven. In Assynt for instance they are concentrated in the crofting communities rather than Lochinver. Therefore the very local impact - economically, socially and psychologically - can be very significant. Certain townships end up having very few permanent residents and higher than average house prices. The 1996 housing needs survey indicates that 34% of the housing stock in North Assynt Estate is ‘holiday/second home’ accommodation.¹⁸ In the coastal townships of

¹⁷MacKay Consultants 1989 North West Demographic Survey

¹⁸Alexander D. 1996 North Assynt Housing Study: A Report on a Survey of Housing Needs, Preferences and Supply Issues in the Townships of North Assynt for ACT and Scottish Homes.

Balchladich, Raffin, Clashmore and Clashnessie, the proportion is much higher, at 50%. The demographic profiling carried out as part of this community consultation in late 2002 indicates that 106 houses, including chalets are holiday homes, second homes or letting properties. That is almost 50% of the housing stock. Among those who are permanently resident in Assynt and North Assynt, the housing pattern is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Comparison of Housing Types in Assynt and North Assynt
Source: 1996 Housing Needs Survey

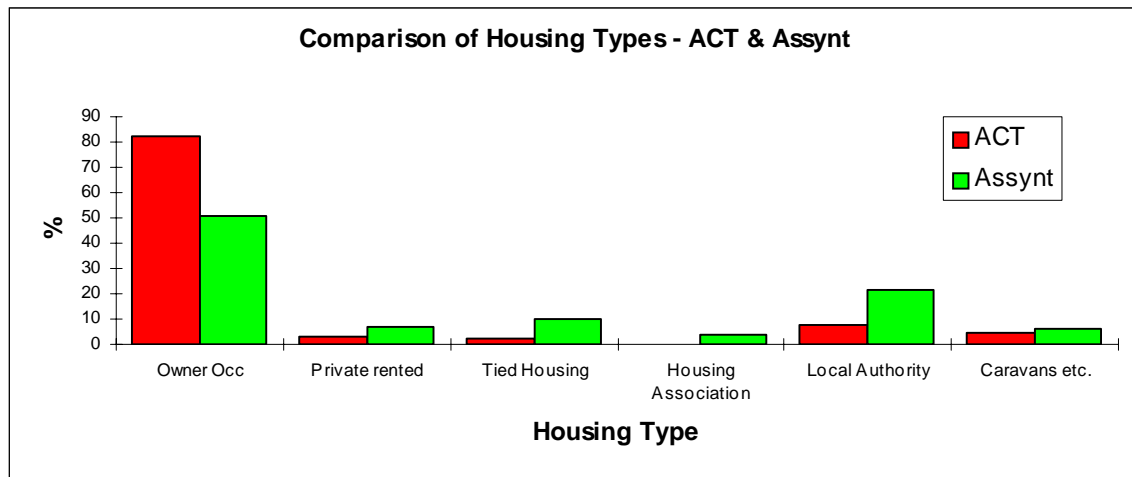


Figure 6 compares housing type in Highland Region, the Parish of Assynt and the North Assynt Estate. Tied housing is more important in Assynt than in Highland Region generally (4.4%). Housing association properties in 1991 were just below the regional average. The housing situation has changed somewhat since 1991, in that by 1996 the number of housing association properties in Lochinver had more than doubled from fifteen to thirty-three.

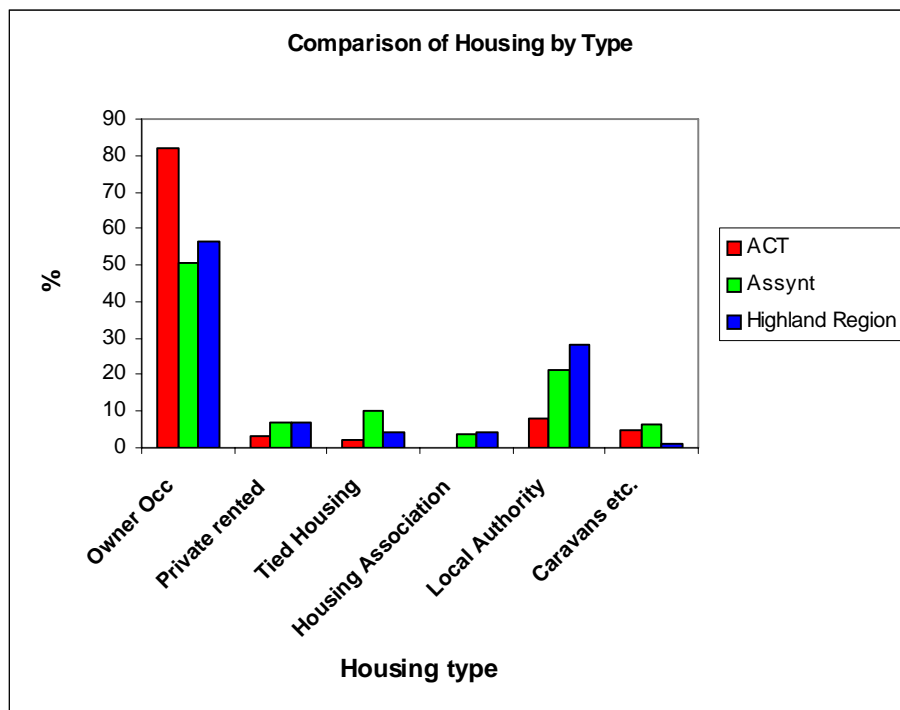
As can be seen from Figure 6, owner-occupation in the ACT area is higher than the regional average and than that of the parish as a whole. The higher than average owner-occupation reflects the influence of crofting tenure and the '76 Act, which allowed tenants to buy their house and garden ground for fifteen times the annual rent. The 1996 housing needs survey indicates that on the North Assynt Estate 82% of housing is owner-occupied.

In this category, 46% are in fact owner-occupied croft houses and 36% are ordinary owner-occupied houses. Among permanently resident households, 23% (34 houses) lived in *Below Tolerable Standard* (BTS) housing at the time of the survey. Of these, fifteen had pensioners living in them and thirteen were exclusively pensioners, while most were registered crofters. The remaining nineteen were occupied by younger households, four of whom were in private rented and fifteen of whom were owner-occupiers. In 1996, in the ACT area, there were five households resident in caravans and two in sub-standard chalets. The Highland Region average for caravan dwelling and

other forms of housing, not deemed to be permanent, was 1.1% in 1991. In the parish of Assynt it was 6.2%, while in North Assynt in 1996 it was 5%.

In the North Assynt Estate in 1996 there were 149 households and 297 residents. This implies an average household size in the North Assynt Estate of 1.99 persons. This is another indicator of the unbalanced age structure and lack of children in the ACT area. The average household size in 1991 in the parish of Assynt was 2.3 persons. This average did not change greatly between 1991 and 1996 and if anything, as the 2001 census results are likely to reveal, will have improved. By 2002 there were 141 households in North Assynt but still 297 residents.

Figure 6: Comparison of Housing Types in ACT area, Assynt and Highland Region
Source: 1991 Census and 1996 North Assynt Housing Survey



3.4 Local Economy

In the parish of Assynt, the economy continues to rely very heavily on primary industries and tourism. Figure 7 illustrates this sectorally when compared to the Highland region averages, through employment in each sector.

The economically active population constitutes 61.9% of the total population in the parish of Assynt and compares favourably with the Highland Region rate of 62.4%, but only 46.8% in North Assynt in 2002 due to the ageing population. . In 1996 average incomes in Assynt were often in the region of £8,000 - £12,000 p.a. and the cost of living

was - and still is - higher than the national average.¹⁹ The result is a lower than average disposable income.²⁰ For Summer 2000, according to the *Rural Scotland Price Survey*, the cost of living in Assynt was just ahead of Edinburgh.²¹ In 1996, the average Scottish wage was £17,420 p.a., while the Highland Region average was £16,380 p.a. The majority of households supplement incomes with other part-time work or crofting agriculture.

The local economy is dominated by three main sources of employment. These are Highland Stoneware, Ardvar Salmon and Fishing/ancillary activities. Public sector employment is also very significant. Tourism is important too, both as a full-time and a part-time income. A significant number of households rely on crofting agriculture for part of their income. In Assynt in 1991, 24.3% of the economically active population were self-employed. In 2002 in North Assynt 29.4% of the economically active population were self-employed. This compares to a Highland average of 13.3% and a Scottish average of 8.6%. It is typical of 'fragile' areas that self-employment is higher than average.

The Stoer Post Office and Shop shut in 2000 leaving North Assynt with only one Shop/PO at the north end in Drumbeg. The Royal Bank of Scotland provides a weekly mobile bank in North Assynt. The townships are served by a fish van and a fruit & veg van but the full mobile shop run by the Vestey family from their shop, Lochinver Stores, stopped in the 1970s. The Assynt Centre in Lochinver provides a bus twice weekly to take elderly residents to Lochinver and lunch at the Centre with others form around the parish. A network of Home Helps, run from the Lochinver base, help to support elderly residents in their own homes. The nearest Sheltered Housing is in Lochinver as are the medical services – GPs, visiting dentist, chiropodist and nurses. The closest petrol station is also in Lochinver. The Stoer facility closed in the 1970s. A Post Bus runs from Drumbeg to Lochinver and on to Lairg (the nearest railway station) and back 6 days a week and the KSM Bus runs twice daily 6 days a week from Drumbeg to Ullapool via Lochinver. The addition of the KSM Bus has improved transport links. Last year a Community Taxi Service was also introduced. This runs 3 days a week from 9 –5 at very cheap rates but is unfortunately not available in the evenings and weekends. This is unfortunate since in particular younger and more elderly residents find it difficult to have a social life without transport in the evenings. In 2002 it was found that 14 North Assynt households had no car. Drumbeg Hall and Stoer Hall provide facilities for community events. Stoer School is not usually available for events.

In terms of tourist accommodation North Assynt has 1 Hotel with X beds, 1 Guest House with X beds and some 26 B&B spaces in 7 homes. B&B provision has fallen in the past

¹⁹This is monitored on an on-going basis through the Rural Scotland Price Survey carried out quarterly by MacKay Consultants on behalf of HIE.

²⁰**Alexander D.** 1996 *North Assynt Housing Study: A Report on a Survey of Housing Needs, Preferences and Supply Issues in the Townships of North Assynt* for ACT and Scottish Homes.

²¹³ This is monitored on an on-going basis through the Rural Scotland Price Survey carried out quarterly by MacKay Consultants on behalf of HIE. This is based on Ullapool, though in fact due to transport, costs in Assynt will be higher.

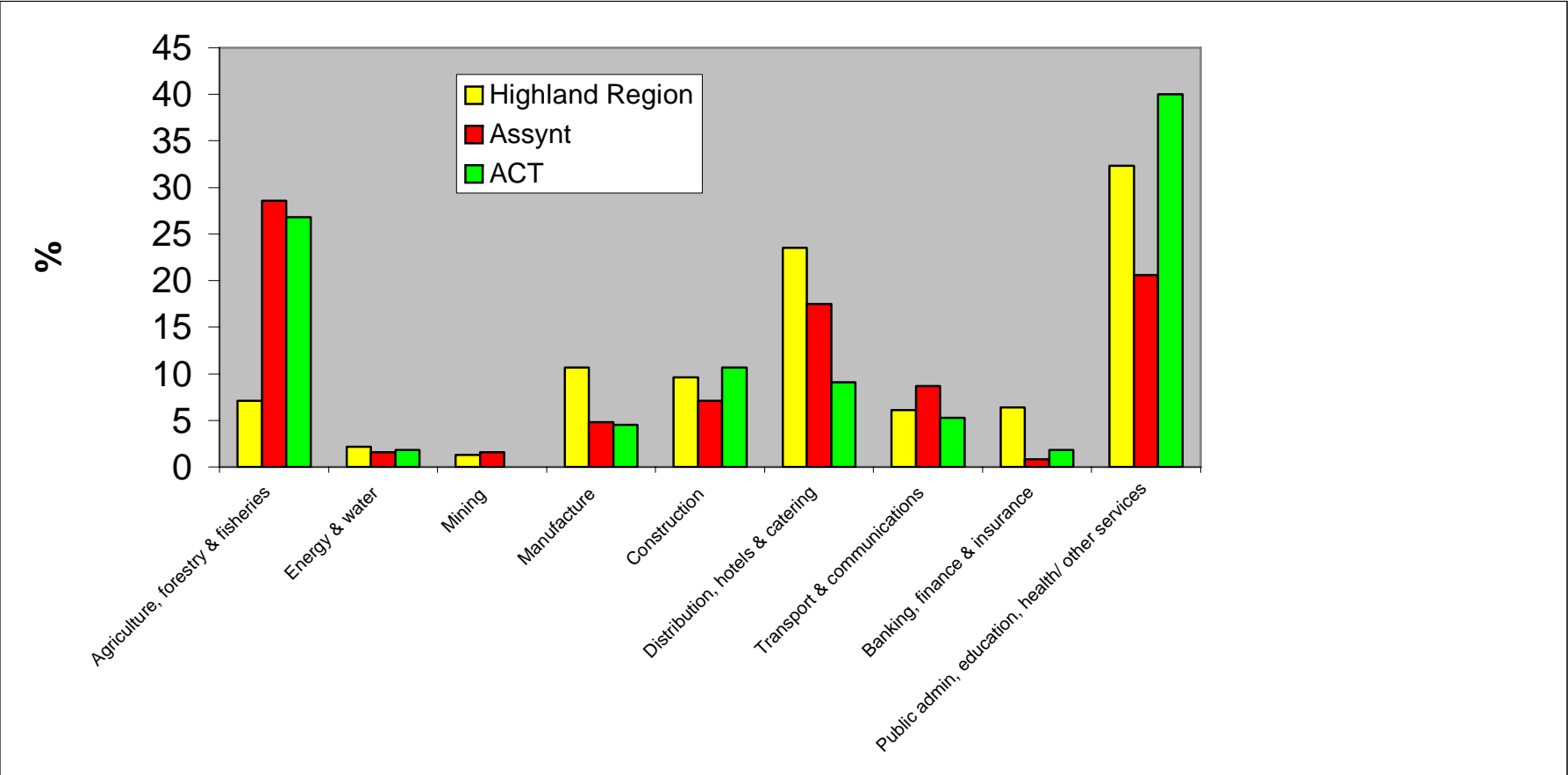
ten years. There are 30 self-catering properties in North Assynt providing some 120 bedspaces. In addition there are at least 6 residential caravans to let and a campsite at Achmelvich offering 45 touring pitches. Informal camping is also available in a variety of corners.

North Assynt produces a range of high quality natural products foremost among them being lamb, prawns and beef. This an important asset in today's market:

“There is a change in the way people eat in Britain. People want quality produce and natural hill sheep and cattle. Farming is a fundamental part of this. There should be more aid to crofters to market their produce.”²²

²² Fieldwork interview.

Figure 7: Comparison of Employment by Sector
 Source: Highland Council – 1991 census and 2002 fieldwork



3.5 Crofting

In 1951 there were 352 crofts and 343 croft tenants in the parish of Assynt and the population had halved between 1931 and 1951 giving an average of 1.03 crofts per crofting household.²³ The landlord had many vacant crofts in hand, a situation unthinkable in today's land hungry climate. In 1991, on what became the North Assynt Estate, there were 140 tenants, of whom 97 were male and 43 were female. This indicates an average of 1.3 crofts per crofting household, but when absentee tenants are taken into account the more realistic figure is 1.82 crofts being used per crofting household. By 2001, on the North Assynt Estate, there were 182 crofts and 137 tenants. Of these, 96 were male and 41 were female. In 2001 when absentee tenants are taken into account the average number of crofts used by each crofting household was 1.98²⁴.

Figure 8 illustrates the proportion of male and female tenants and the absentee rate in 1991 and 2001. On average, in the past ten years, 30% of croft tenancies in North Assynt have been held by women. The number of female absentee tenants has fallen slightly in the last ten years, while the number of male absentee tenants has risen. The total number of absentees has risen from 30% in 1991 to 33% in 2001.

Analysis of the demographic information and information on croft tenancies shows that in 2002 only 22% of the population in North Assynt live in a household where no-one has or ever had a croft tenancy. In short 78% of the North Assynt residents live in a household where at least one member of the household currently has or used to have a croft tenancy.²⁵

Figure 8: Gender of Tenants, Absentee Rates and Average Number of crofts used per Household in North Assynt

Source: ACT records

	TOTAL Croft Tenants	Male	Female	Total Absentee	Male Absentee	Female Absentee	% Absentee	Average No. of crofts per household	Average adjusted for absentee rate
1991	140	97	43	42	26	16	30%	1.30	1.82
2001	137	96	41	45	32	13	33%	1.33	1.98

3.6 Gaelic and Culture in Assynt

It is a reflection of the circumstances some fifty years ago that in Assynt today only 13.8% of the population today (1991) speak, reads or writes Gaelic. While this compares favourably with the Highland Region average of 7.5%, it compares very unfavourably

²³p200 **Darling F. F. (ed.)** 1955 *Report of the West Highland Survey: A Study in Human Ecology* Oxford.

²⁴ The figures for the average number of crofts used per crofting household have not been adjusted to allow for resident retired tenants and tenants with no stock which means that the actual average number of crofts used per crofting household is still higher.

²⁵ This calculation was done by checking the Voters role, correcting any omissions and identifying from this all households with a current or past croft tenancy.

with othercrofting areas. In the Trotternish peninsula in Skye for instance, 50% of the population speak, read or write Gaelic. In north Sutherland the rate is 17.9%, while particular Settlement Zones show higher rates. The Tongue Settlement Zone has a rate of 21.3%. During fieldwork in 2002 only 10% of the population was identified as speaking, reading or writing Gaelic.

It is often forgotten that in the past the Gaidhealtachd was closely linked to and involved in European affairs. The legacy of this way of seeing ourselves and our relationships beyond these shores can be seen today in programmes like Eorpa, a current affairs programme with a firm grasp of European, Scandinavian and global relations. Today the Gaidhealtachd is global and there is constant exchange between places like Cape Breton, Scotland and Ireland, particularly in their fields of music, art and literature.

This year one of the most important collaborative ventures for years has taken place – *An Leabhar Mòr* or The Great Book of Gaelic. This ‘Book’ focus on 100 poems Gaelic poems nominated by a range of leading poets and writers including Seamus Heaney and Hamish Henderson. A team of 100 artists and calligraphers – 50 from Ireland and 50 from Scotland have interpreted these poems which date from the 6th century to the present day. The result is a 21st century Book of Kells. At present the 100 art works form a touring exhibition which started in Dublin and is currently in Glasgow for the winter. The works have also been made into a book. The tone of this ambitious collaborative venture which took 5 years to come to fruition is set through the words of Sorley MacLean:

An fhéilethe humanity
Nach do reub an cuan,	That the sea did not tear,
Nach do mhill mìle bliadhna;	That a thousand years did not spoil:
Buiadh a’ Ghàidheil buan.	The quality of the Gael permanent. ²⁶

Through the work of John Murray, Barvas, Lewis (Iain Moireach) Assynt has its place in this historic event. Poem 99 is ‘*Turas an Asiante*’ or ‘*Once in Assynt*’. The first verse goes like this:

Gàire tro Ghleann Lèireag,	Laughter through Glen Leireag,
Seanachas sa Chaolos Chumhang,	Story telling across Kylesku,
Dà cheud raith a’ tuiteam dhìot;	Two hundred seasons falling off you;
Beòthail faileas d’oige	Lively shadow of your youth
Ait am measg thaibhsean	Joyful amongst ghosts
Air gainmheach Sgobharaidh;	On the sand in Scourie;
Nad leum that nan crìochan	In your leap over the boundaries
Ghlac creathail mo làimhe	The cradle of my hand caught
Eòin chlis do chuimhne.	Your memory’s darting birds.

²⁶ M. MacLean and T. Dorgan 2002 *An Leabhar Mòr* Cannongate Books

3.7 Natural Environment: Species and Habitats

In common with all crofting areas, Assynt and the North Assynt Estate enjoys a very high quality of natural environment, created in the coastal areas by historic crofting agricultural practises. The range of terrain within the parish results in a broad range of habitat types, from coast and cliff to montane. Geology contributes to this variety resulting in the Inchnadamph National Nature Reserve and Knockan Cliff National Nature Reserve. Machair dune systems are present at Clachtoll/Stoer and Achmelvich. The sandstone seacliffs of Rhu Stoer support breeding colonies of fulmar, gannets, razorbills, guillemots and kittewake. In addition these cliff areas provide some excellent examples of ungrazed sub-maritime vegetation.

The 'cnoc' an lochan' landscapes inland are also important for birds. Red and Black throated divers nest and feed there. Other important birds breeding in Assynt include redwing, greenshank, merlin, peregrine, golden eagles and greylag geese. In the past few years there have been several sightings of sea eagles and osprey. In terms of species included in the Red Data Book, the area also has Water Vole, Azure Hawker dragonfly and fresh water mussels.

Important local flora includes a range of orchids, including lesser twayblade. Also present are pyramidal bugle, great fen sedge and wood bitter vetch. A range of interesting species are found on the limestone inland at Inchnadamph. Globe flower has however been found in coastal locations too.

On the North Assynt Estate, remnant ancient woodland is found in the Achmelvich/Torbreck area and the Nedd/Drumbeg area. Small pockets exist elsewhere too. For many of the species present, this is their most significant northerly location. These woodlands include birch, aspen, rowan, hazel, willow, alder, wych elm, oak, holly and bird cherry.

3.7.1 Environmental Designations

Assynt and Coigach form a designated National Scenic Area. Figure 9 lists the environmental designations in the Assynt parish. Only three of the SSSIs are within - or partly within - the North Assynt Estate. These are Assynt Lochs, Loch Beannach Islands and Ardvar Woods. Surveys indicate a range of other high quality and undesignated habitats within the North Assynt Estate and the parish more generally.

Figure 9: Environmental Designations Source: SNH

Date of Creation	Name	Designation	Ha	Description
2000	Abhainn Clais an Eas Alt a Mhuilinn	SAC		fresh water mussels
1975	Ardvar Woodlands	SSSI/ part of Ardvar Loch & A'Mhuillin Woods SAC (805.99ha) – proposed 2001	710.5	relict north western forest esp bryohpytes and ferns
1978	Assynt & Coigach	National Scenic Area	90,200	
2000	Assynt Lochs	SSSI/SPA – proposed and accepted 2001	1156.39	Group of 7 oligotrophic lochs and associated islands with relict deciduous woods. Breeding site for 4% of <i>Gavia artica</i>
1956 - parts 1987 - whole	Ben Mor Assynt	SSSI – SAC status in 2000 under name, Inchnadamp	9118.75	Calcerous plant communities on site astride the Moine Thrust. Limestone pavement, eutrophic loch and river and rich fauna.
1975 - Eilean na Gartaig current boundary 1987	Cam Loch	SSSI/SPA - part of Inverpolly & nearby Lochs - incs Loch Awe, Loch Ailsh, Urigill	360.3	Ancient ungrazed woodland on islands
1956	Inchnadamp	NNR /SAC within Ben Mor Assynt SSSI	1323	Karst landforms and associated vegetation
1971 boundary change - 1986	Inverpolly	NNR/SAC	11,946.3	Range of habitats characteristic of region – from sea to mountain, including woodland.
1963 1975 boundary change 1987 - legislation & boundary change	Knockan Cliff	SSSI/part NNR	361.73	Cambrian limestones, classic Moine Thrust window
1999	Loch Awe & Loch Ailsh	SSSI/ SPA	146.03	Oligotrophic lochs, water plants. 1% of British breeding population of <i>Gavia artica</i>
1963	Loch Beannach Islands	SSSI/ SPA Assynt Lochs includes this site Specially Protected Area	32.5 ha	Birch-Rowan Woodland; ground flora like an oakwood. Schedule 1 bird nesting site
1963 1984 boundary change	Loch Glencoul	SSSI	1094.5	Mixed deciduous woodland; maritime zonation.
1996	Loch Urigill	SSSI/ SPA	322	Herb rich field layer; woodland; birds.