

Community Council Meeting 27/03/07 – HIFAR

Mr. Chairman,

Six months ago, a single letter in the Arran Banner touched a nerve with many people. The letter was written by Henry Murdo and his passion and fears concerning the housing situation on Arran were redolent throughout.

A small group of like-minded islanders met to discuss the issues raised by Henry and from that meeting emerged HIFAR, the Housing Initiative for Arran Residents.

Subsequent meetings of the group, in particular one with Derek Logie from Communities Scotland (the Scottish Executive's housing policy agency) convinced us that the way forward was to move towards becoming a legally recognised community body.

This situation provides two major positives – a focal point for the people of Arran to document their fears, hopes, needs and wants; and an increased level of influence on government bodies.

Such a body has legal recourse to provide at least the opportunity for the community to purchase land for housing, through the Community Right To Buy section of the Land Reform Act 2003. This allows for a body to register an interest in land made available for sale and to request a period of time (not exceeding 6 months) to raise the necessary funds to purchase it. Such a move is obviously dependent upon the appropriateness of the land.

With the required level of support from the local community, such a body can justifiably claim to represent that community and will carry greater weight in its arguments at an official level, from simple dialogue to “gentle persuasion” to outright campaigning.

The defined level of demonstrable community support is at least 10% of the total population.

As of yesterday, our campaign for support has collected 583 signatories – already exceeding that requirement and still growing.

HIFAR is now a registered company, limited by guarantee.

The possibility of achieving Trust status would render us capable of acquiring public funding, thus enabling us to act upon government policy changes with regard to, for example, Forestry Commission land.

Why do we exist?

Bottom line – people who live and work on Arran, and those who wish to come and live and work here, are increasingly unable to do so for want of a house that they can afford, at a standard that should be expected in the 21st century.

Young people who, ten years ago, would have been looking forward to acquiring their first mortgage, are today looking at the possibility of emigrating for want of their own accommodation.

Older people, with skills that are in short supply on Arran, are turning down job offers because they cannot find anywhere to live that suits their potential salaries.

Income scales on Arran do not and will never reach the levels needed to afford an “average” price house, currently accepted as being £200,000.

As of now, those who could afford mortgages, shared ownership or rents on good, sensible, individualistic homes are forced to join a council waiting list.

The need for affordable housing is at crisis point. The need for that housing to add to communities, even to create new ones, is equally critical. Solving a number puzzle by throwing up row after row of identical, mass-produced “living modules” will come back to haunt us all in a few short years, if it doesn’t already fill us with dread.

The time for decrying previous failures is passed.

HIFAR wants to ensure that action is taken quickly, but such action is appropriate for Arran and its people. In other words, let’s build lots of houses, but let’s build the right houses, in the right places.

So, what are our plans?

The level of support already expressed is not an end in itself. Indeed it places greater emphasis on our primary goal – empowerment of the community in the decision-making process with regard to housing.

It is imperative that we do not work in isolation from, or against other existing organisations. Village Improvement Groups, the Civic Trust, Community Councillors and Arran Homes all have vital contributions to make, and all views must be heard. We want HIFAR to act as a conduit for this.

We see the need to concentrate on 4 key points:

- Acquiring suitable land at prices that facilitate the building of low-cost, energy-efficient, attractive homes.
- Ensuring that those homes remain affordable in perpetuity, by invoking the Rural Housing Burden, a buy-back right incorporated into the Title Deeds of any house sold by a designated Rural Housing Body. This is covered by the Titles Conditions (Scotland) Act 2003, and caps the future selling price of a house to what it would cost to rebuild at that date.
- Utilising existing neglected buildings for renovation or conversion into housing at affordable rents. This is likely to involve negotiation with the owners and possibly the offer of grant funded assistance, but we see it as a cost-effective means of providing housing and “cleaning up our act” at the same time.
- And finally the most contentious but, we feel, crucial point. The reservation of ALL affordable houses for locals. The definition of local can be debated elsewhere – suffice to say that this point goes back to the basic reason that HIFAR exists, that of providing homes for those who want to live and work here.

We believe that all future building, most especially community projects, should fulfil certain criteria:

Environmental Sensitivity.

Wherever possible, locations, building materials and building methods should be chosen to have minimal impact upon both the developed area and the natural resources used.

Sustainability.

Thinking about the future: the kind of world we want to live in and the legacy we want to leave behind for future generations.
Maximising the potential of our renewable energy sources.
Creating a low-carbon economy (Yes, we are talking about wind power, as well as solar).
Providing a quality environment for today and tomorrow.

Variety of design.

We contest the premise that the “low-cost” houses currently being built by Arran Homes are the most cost-effective available.
We accept that current planning regulations place a serious restriction on available plots, hence the need to squeeze a quart into a pint pot (a subject I shall come back to shortly) but, while acknowledging the very fact of their existence and the gratitude of their occupants, we are certain that “better, nicer and roomier” dwellings could house as many people in the same space.
We want to encourage discussion in design.

To encourage discussion on these criteria, we are in the early stages of planning an exhibition – projected for sometime in June. This we hope will showcase what is possible, what has been achieved elsewhere and what we as a community should be demanding of our planners, in terms of structural design, land use, communal building and energy conservation.
Positive responses to enquiries so far have come from house manufacturers (both log and brick), 2 award-winning community architects and 2 community housing trusts who have gone a long way down these paths themselves.

Other community housing bodies are doing these things. Why should we not?

I think we can all agree on one topic:

The existing planning regulations, and in particular the Arran Local Plan, place unnecessary (not to say ludicrous) restrictions on building development on the island. We can all cite examples.

These strictures have to change – and there is some indication that this about to happen.

In a written reply to Henry Murdo dated 24th November 2006, Allan Wilson MSP stated the following:

“As you may be aware, a recently approved Planning Bill introduced a hierarchy into the planning system where planning applications will be dealt with differently depending on whether their developments are of national, major or local or minor significance. As well as introducing a range of measures for introducing opportunities for communities to participate in development planning and on individual planning applications, it also introduces new provision for the decision making and appeals to be devolved to a local level in certain cases.”

We believe that such devolution of planning powers must apply to Arran.

We cannot allow the present town planning approach to ruin our rural community.

Rest assured that HIFAR will be lobbying hard, at local and national levels, to bring this about.

To conclude, Mr. Chairman:

If the eagerly awaited Craigforth report recommends anything less than funding for hundreds of houses for Arran, it will have failed this community.

But quantity is only half of the issue.

Variety, liveability, location and not least beauty are key. Houses that sit well in, even blend into, their surroundings can add so much to the island's ambience. On this island where tourism is the major industry, let us not short-change visitors or residents.

If we are to build homes (as we must) let us insure that they are places that their owners (or tenants) look forward to coming home to and are proud to occupy.

HIFAR exists to assist the people of Arran in having a say in their own destiny. With the possibility, come May, that the island will be deprived of its representative within North Ayrshire Council, Arran is in danger of becoming disenfranchised.

We want to work with all community groups to ensure that Arran has input into all levels of the decision-making process, that our views are not only heard, but incorporated into what, after all, is our home.

We want your involvement and your support.

Thank you.