

**RURAL HOUSING CONFERENCE held at Birnam Institute,  
Dunkeld on Feb 25<sup>th</sup> 2011  
Report**

There were about 60 delegates from a variety of organisations RSLs, Housing Trusts, Community organisations, Shelter, Educational institutions, Councils, architects, commercial enterprises with a rural interest and housing officers of various sorts plus four MSPs

**Holly Sims for Calor Gas** (sponsor) Surprisingly supportive of gas (LPG and Calor) as a sustainable, efficient fuel. In a rapidly read report some interesting facts -. 3.2 million homes supplied by Calor. Homes in Scotland require considerably more heat than in England as a result of climatic differences. In the contest between gas and electric she pointed out huge loss in the transmission of electricity as opposed to gas. Electricity efficiency 35% as opposed to gas 80-90%. She stressed the huge expenditure required for grid renewal but did not want to deal with the question of gas prices.

**Lesley Riddoch (broadcaster) Empowered Communities.**

Compared Scotland unfavourably with Nordic countries where communities enjoy more control over their resources. “Big Society” doomed as a policy because communities do not have control of assets, this being the starting point for communities to do more for themselves. Local authority is not “local” since average population in a local authority is about 200,000. She produced statistics from other European countries which showed governing bodies on a far smaller scale than in Scotland. They, therefore, have assets to control, thus the basis for doing things for themselves.

CPO s are used for roads so why not for housing land? Coastal based renewables as in the Pentland Firth should not be controlled by the Crown Commissioners and the financial benefit should accrue to the local coastal communities or Trusts. She criticised the long council house tradition in Scotland of “take what you get and like it” but this was due to a systemic lack of empowerment. Diversity of tenure was required.

**Rural homes for rent – our experience so far**

Jamie Carruthers, Dormont Estate (Dumfries and Galloway)

Angel Williams, Knoydart Foundation

Jamie Carruthers, estate owner, main business landlord with about a dozen cottages renovated and fitted with air and ground source

heat pumps. Jamie has built an additional 8 affordable homes for locals, 4-3bed and 4-2bed with the help of Rural Homes For Rent scheme. These are “Passive houses” known as Pssivhaus as seen at Housing Expo ie they are so well insulated they need no heating. This is the standard set for 2016. They have solar water heating panels. They are 1 1/2 stories, triple glazed with slate and timber cladding, fitting in with the locality. The extra cost of the passive element (I asked) was £20,000 but the estimated saving was £1000 per year. The insulated panels were made by CCG of Cambuslang and they hope to be geared up for mass production and consequent price drop. These houses are a lot cheaper if built in a rectangle rather than with dormers which Jamie opted for. If you have to live on an estate he seems the best sort of owner.

Angela Williams, heartening story of the Gigha and Eigg sort. The community building and renovating with grant assistance (Rural Homes for Rent) but also a great deal of self help with population rising and skilled people settling. Constant theme of conference, as in this case, funding a mixture of mortgages, soft loans and some asset selling. Allocation policy inevitably provoked some dispute.

**Political Hustings** – 4 MSP’s from the four larger Scottish parties, chaired by Lesley Riddoch

Main theme – “what would you do for rural housing ?” A lot of crossfire from chair to politicians to audience. Points raised – when are we going to have a fully unplugged house ? Land access – why not a land tax based on an independent valuation of the land and paid by the owner until the land was employed in its valued function ie. a disincentive to land banking. More local control called for. Planning consent or land allocation to be conditional on affordable housing. Planning to be designed to suit local need ie “horses for courses”. Rural communities need small developments, not housing schemes. A promise from Government to build 5000 new homes met with scepticism. Widespread objection to allocated £10 mill( double last year but only a tiny fraction of total housing allocation) for rural housing to be open to bids from anyone rather than access being restricted to RSL’s and local housing trusts. Holiday homes – desultory discussion on how to limit them in small communities ie. thresholds, special governance etc.

**Bar talk** Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust are trying to assemble finance for a nationwide competition to design

a good, cheap kit house for use in rural areas. They are thinking of a £60,000 ceiling on building cost.

**Workshops running parallel to the ones I attended**

Empty Homes – Opportunities for Action Kirsten Miller, Shelter

New Ideas in Housing Finance – Neil Clapperton Grampian HA

The End of Homelessness – Alastair Cameron Scottish Churches Action.

Hopefully there will be something on the Rural Housing Service website about these.

Jl.