

North Ayrshire Council Development Plan

Response from the Isle of Arran Community Council

Following the circulation of a draft response and the holding of public meetings in every village on Arran, the Community Council can now summarise a considered summary of our own and the island's response to the Development Plan.

Housing and Planning

As a recent survey conducted by Katy Clark MP revealed, housing is by far the most important concern to Arran people. 60% put it at the top of the list, whereas in the North Ayrshire mainland it ranked equal seventh with transport, at 35.1%. This finding highlights the vital importance of affordable housing on the island, which NAC representatives will have realised from the opinions so firmly expressed at the meeting held on Arran in early March this year.

Housing provision underpins the whole future of Arran as a viable community. If our young people cannot find anywhere to live, they are forced to leave the island, and this is happening with increasing frequency. Unless something is done to halt this damaging drift, we face a future with a depleted work force and without the support of the rising generation to service the tourist industry and to supply the skilled trades and professions that stabilise a community.

There is a huge need for housing for Arran people. The problem is difficult to remedy because land is expensive and most of the plentiful land allocated for building is held by very few people and remains undeveloped. Land 'banking' is a pernicious practice that should be halted as quickly as possible. The free market that sees land held, often for years, in a limbo while it accrues cash value works against all Arran's needs. Present allocations of building land should be cancelled and future allocations must be time-limited and conditional on priority of need. In situations of real urgency, compulsory purchase orders should be considered.

The discredited restriction on building outwith the village envelopes must end and an effort be made to retain some green areas within the villages. At the same time the notion that a beautiful landscape has to be devoid of houses needs to be rethought. Careful guidelines which cover design, size, materials, setting and appropriateness are needed when building in the countryside and a rural 'burden' used to discourage proliferation and speculation. Small new housing settlements are needed in villages that are declining in population or are populated mainly by elderly retirees.

Many people feel that Arran needs more houses available to rent. Since a proportion of Arran people in need of a house could afford to pay a commercial rent, some Isle of Arran Homes (IOAH) houses should be built to accommodate this sector, thus housing people without cost to the public purse. A similar arrangement operated in the days of council house building on the mainland. This could be very important as future funding for subsidised rental will inevitably be cut in the current economic climate. There is a

growing tendency among younger people to see mortgaged home ownership as increasingly impossible, and from the sociological point of view, there is much to be said for the mobility that results from an increase in rented accommodation.

IOAH is run by Trust Housing, a huge organisation based in Edinburgh, and this makes for difficulties in establishing effective local representation. Arran needs a significant say in the manner in which Trust housing controls IOAH. A single public representative on the committee of IOAH is not sufficient, and Arran Community Council has long protested about the refusal to allow a member to attend IOAH meetings. Arran needs some element of control built into the constitution of its own housing association.

Brodick, as the island's largest village (few people think of it as a town) needs a locally developed plan rather than continuing its expansion in a piecemeal fashion. The same is true of Lamlash, Whiting Bay and the smaller villages, but in Brodick the need is critical. The Glen Cloy site, running from the inland side of Shore Road at the Post Office end and linking through to Alma Road, has lain derelict for years, yet its potential as an attractive area for small-scale shops, cafes and crafts outlets is outstanding. Developed as a traffic-free pedestrian area, it could double the attractiveness of Brodick. We have in mind that Britain's top tourist area is the Shambles in York, which has of course the benefit of long history but offers exactly the kind of attractions that could be replicated on a small scale in this ideal Brodick site.

At the other end of the scale, there is an urgent need for a brown-field site on the west of the island for commercial use. Market Road in Brodick provides the only available facility of this kind, and it is fully occupied, offering no potential for further development.

Business and Tourism

Arran's dependence on tourism is very evident, but scant attention is paid to a wide range of other medium-to-small businesses on the island whose importance is not sufficiently recognised. These include farming, fishing, forestry, food, drink, soaps and scent, arts and crafts, printing and publishing and alternative medicines and treatment. These are either independent of tourism or partly so, since they deal with locals or export to the mainland. Rather than be content with the label of a 'one-industry' island we need to think about how existing small business can be helped and how others can be encouraged to start.

The way our tourist industry develops can have a huge effect on the island's future. Mass-market tourism could mean huge infrastructure change, large scale drafted-in labour and a consequent transformation of Arran. We need to look carefully at our island assets, the coast, scenery, walking, cycling, sailing, geology, archaeology and gear our tourist planning to those resources.

Arran's tourism should be run locally by local people. We need good quality, small-scale facilities spread throughout the island employing trained staff and providing services based on the assets mentioned above, all year round. This would relieve pressure on our existing infrastructure and slow the undesirable growth in road traffic, which results in constant damage to the roads.

Sustainability and renewables

Arran has a huge potential to generate clean power by wind and biomass, though this is constricted by absence of adequate grid connections to export electricity thus produced. Alternative energy could be a very profitable business for the island, bearing in mind that the Isle of Gigha earns £150,000 per year with three second-hand wind turbines. The principle of a payback to the producer or for community benefit is accepted at government level, but Arran desperately needs a new cable to the mainland that could cope with the electricity that could be produced.

New housing developed on cheaper forestry land could use far less electricity and would be independent of conventional infrastructure. NAC has taken initial steps in this direction, and proposals are being developed by at least two independent bodies. This needs to be pursued further.

Arran exports all waste for landfill or recycling on the mainland. While being the cheapest short-term option, in the wider picture this is extremely expensive. The waste includes tree trimmings and grass cuttings, but these materials could well be composted on the island and put to good use. A projected biomass plant could provide enclosed, high-temperature incineration that could also deal with the island's waste paper and cardboard, potentially linking this to a heating system for affordable houses near the site.

Transport

Many people stress the need for a more frequent bus service, perhaps with smaller buses more suited to Arran roads. The roads have deteriorated faster under the impact of heavy traffic such as the timber trucks, and at some point they will need a fundamental rebuild, dealing with the road 'bottoming' and hardcore to bring them up to an acceptable standard. We appreciate that this is impossible at a time of economic hardship, but at some point, a decision will have to be made to tackle a small stretch at a time and gradually upgrade the road system.

Ferry traffic is increasing, with consequent difficulty in booking vehicles. The proposal from Western Ferries to duplicate the Brodick-Ardrossan service will solve that problem but in turn will increase traffic and produce more need for road repairs.

There is a strong demand for the Lochranza/Claonaig service to run at least a minimal return service to Kintyre throughout the winter. At present, contact for both Arran residents and visitors is extremely limited, and the effect on many businesses is damaging

Plans to provide a round-Arran cycling and walking path are in place but need a boost. Increased road traffic discourages walkers and cyclists, for whom the use of roads becomes increasingly dangerous.

Many people have objected to an insistent deployment of insensitive paving, kerbstones, tarmac and lights, not wanted by village residents who like the natural rural setting. Signage, too, can be visually intrusive, and needs to be kept to an uncluttered minimum.

Communities

For local democracy at village level to work, villages need some real control over their own futures. This is difficult for an 'overseas' authority to facilitate, but the provision of a high-level officer with a particular responsibility to report back on Arran would be extremely helpful. Too often, consultation about NAC-initiated developments in villages has been minimal or nil, and this militates against mutual co-operation.

Coast

Despite the great success of 'COAST' in achieving a No Take Zone in Lamlash Bay, our coastal seas are devoid of fish. This is largely due to destructive methods of fishing for shellfish, flagrantly continued by some skippers within the legally ascribed set-aside area. We would appreciate the help of NAC in reinforcing an insistence that this practice must end.

Health

Arran is fortunate in having excellent primary care but is in great need of the long promised new hospital. The design for this should include: isolation and palliative care rooms situated away from the main wards with beds for relatives, single rooms with private facilities and small single-sex en-suite wards. There should be improved communication facilities for patients, better storage space and up-to-date hand-washing facilities, plus a shop for newspapers etc and well thought-out transport and parking. Staff should be involved in the design and planning.

Summary

Arran in the future should remain a beautiful island that has retained its rural aspect, since that is the basis of its tourist industry and the main source of contentment among its residents, but it needs to broaden its economic base and improve its transport system. It will continue to be an all-the-year round visitor attraction providing high quality service based on Arran's natural assets, but we need to be aware that increasing mass volume beyond a sustainable level will inevitably have adverse effects.

Above all, Arran must develop innovative, sustainable new housing, so as to stabilise its future working population. It also needs to diversify its income and step up the generating of its own power, contributing to the grid by sustainable means. It should reduce and recycle its own waste as far as possible.

Arran's future could see an island populated by settled communities, offering good reasons for the young to stay and incentives for business of every size and kind to flourish. To achieve this, it needs both good relationships with its local authority and a strong input into deciding its own development.