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SUSTAINABLE HOUSING DESIGN AND AFFORDABILITY IN RURAL NW SCOTLAND

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Introduction

There has been concern expressed in recent years by government and academics in Scotland that design of new housing, in remote rural areas particularly, does not relate well enough to its landscape setting (Scottish Office, 1998, Shucksmith, 1993 and Moir, 1995) and, increasingly, affordability problems are becoming acute. Some local authority housing and planning studies and policies provide evidence of the affordability issue. Despite this official recognition of the problems ways to address them are still being sought.

This paper seeks to examine the nature of the problems and ongoing initiatives to address these by various organisations in NW Scotland, and to suggest further ways forward. For the purpose of this study NW Scotland includes Argyll and Bute district council (population: 91,000), Highland council (population: 209,000) and Western Isles council (population 26,000). Also for the purpose of this study “rural” excludes settlements over 3000 population (a figure used by the Scottish Executive). A literature review and findings from a postal and telephone interview survey are presented as the first stage in assessing the current situation. A further paper will examine case studies demonstrating good practice and the relative importance of key factors contributing to success.

An extended community right to buy embodied in Part 2 of the Land Reform Act 2003 has opened up further opportunities for local communities to benefit from the development potential in their areas (Scottish Executive, 2004). It also provides potential for development that is more recognisable as sustainable as the values of community organisations usually relate to meeting local needs. Evidence of this already exists from recent community land purchases and sustainable building projects. The extended community right to buy, together with evolving planning and design policy enlightened architectural practice, and improved funding opportunities indicate that change is happening.

The literature available on recent policy and legislation includes reports and guidance by the Scottish Executive, Highland Council, Argyll and Bute Council and Western Isles Council, Communities Scotland, journal articles by academics and consultant reports by the Caledonia Centre for Social Development.

Selected references to the English experience will also be made, particularly the Countryside Agency (CA), the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and Carmona, M on ways to improve design quality through planning.

Design Policies

The Scottish Executive (2004) in their draft Scottish Planning Policy: Planning for Rural Development stress the importance of positive planning policies on rural design and that these should be prepared building on themes such as countryside character, village plans and design statements. This has not always been the case in practice, although most local authorities have some design policies. Where design policies exist they are not always followed in practice. This appears particularly so in the Western Isles, and indeed a recent study commissioned by Western Isles council specifically looked at the extent to which planning policy seemed to have been followed in permissions granted. It found significant departures from policy, and even concluded that the character of the Western Isles is changing at a rate of 25% in 10 years (based on planning decisions departing from design policy over a 10 year period, Western Isles council, 2003).

Moir, J et al (1997) examined how Scottish Planning Authorities have responded to the challenge of providing new housing in the countryside with sensitive design that respects local landscape, especially at a time when planning is being encouraged to be more flexible. Moir et al note that traditionally planners have been encouraged to minimise visual impacts by channelling housing into existing settlements and applying strict controls on development in the open countryside. By the 1970's however there was greater concern about the regressive effects this had on housing and employment opportunities and during the 1980's Thatcher's government questioned the validity of aesthetic control on housing design. The government tide has now swung back in favour of planning authorities encouraging good design but there is still lack of clarity on how this must be weighed against economic factors.

In 1998 the Scottish Office considered that the design of new housing in the Scottish countryside was improving only slowly and there was too much conformity and lack of local distinctiveness. Since that time official guidance on the subject has increased further and should contribute to more sustainable design. One example is a lengthy guide produced for Scottish Homes in 2000 by Stevenson, F and Williams, N on sustainable housing design. Another more recent example is design guidance by Highland Council (2004) that includes a high level of detail with checklists, a stated requirement for design statements to be submitted with planning applications as well as illustrations of recent good contextual design presumably to inspire future applicants. This contrasts with Western Isles Council that has no separate design guidance and only more general design policies in the local plan. Argyll and Bute Council have some separate design guidance from the local plan but it is not so comprehensive as the recent Highland Council guidance.

Moir, J et al (1995) undertook a study of the local plan and design guide policies prepared by 24 District and 3 Unitary Authorities in Scotland relating to housing in the countryside and countryside protection. Some common themes ran through most authority policies: restriction of scale and location of development in the countryside and concentration of new development in existing settlements. However, a willingness to allow small scale, infill or individual housing in the countryside and a relaxed approach outside designated areas was also common. This flexibility has perhaps been too great in some areas from the point of view of ensuring high design standards and has been most obvious in more remote areas experiencing demographic and economic decline. Moir concludes that the local plan appears to be an inadequate mechanism for securing improvements in design standards, although there is recognition that design guides are becoming more effective. It should be noted that all except 3 district authorities in Scotland had no design guidance, separate from the local plan, before the Scottish Office Planning Advice Note 36 (1991) that suggested all local authorities should produce such guides. The content of design guides does, of course, vary but common items include siting criteria including landscape setting, the relationship of the proposed development to the skyline, building and roof form, proportion, window door and chimney details, materials and boundary treatment.

Looking at current local plan design policies these show varying degrees of sophistication with the Western Isles showing the least and Highland the greatest. The draft Wester Ross local plan, for example, in the Highland area, demonstrates some commitment to improving design quality but is perhaps let down by the way it uses categories of landscape sensitivity. It specifies that planning applications will be judged against a "design for sustainability" statement which developers need to produce in line with the Highland Council's overall policy (2004) on the same. Wester Ross arguably contains the highest quality landscape in the Highland Council area and has been considered for National Park status, and perhaps in the light of this 3 categories (high, medium and low sensitivity) of countryside are set out in the draft local plan. These categories are used to assess impact of new development with high being important at European level e.g. Ramsar sites, and medium being important at national level. Low sensitivity appears to refer to the local level but includes many areas that in any other part of the UK would very likely be labelled high or medium sensitivity including Conservation Areas, categories B and C Listed Buildings, areas of great landscape value, views over open water and remote landscapes of value for recreation. Although the principle of having categories is good and accords with national guidance in Scotland and England, it seems that the way categories have been devised here is only relative within the area of Wester Ross rather than taking a wider view, so underplaying the importance of the landscape overall. This is perhaps due to fear of over regulation and not leaving sufficient flexibility to allow new development including the much-needed affordable housing, even if this means impacting on quality landscape. The nature of the impact of course varies with the design quality of the new housing, but it could be said that any impact is not justified in some of the most sensitive areas. This may reflect conflicting political priorities referred to by Shucksmith, M et al (1993) between councillors, housing officials and planning officials. It also points again to the importance of a clear joined up hierarchy of design guidance between local and national levels, as Carmona (2000) advocates.

Implementation of design policy

Attitudes to residential development in the Scottish countryside were investigated by Shucksmith, M et al (1993) and in particular the problems with policy implementation. Semi structured interviews were conducted with householders, farmers, landowners, developers, builders, councillors, interest groups and local officials. The findings indicated that at a national level in Scotland the most potent influence on policy was found to be the professional ideologies of planners opposing house building in the countryside and this being challenged (sometimes successfully) by housing professionals whose main concern is provision of low cost housing regardless of the impact on landscape. Scottish Homes were identified as a key player in helping to develop relations that may lead to a new negotiated order. Shucksmith refers to Moore and Booth (1989) who found "that the values and culture of decision making elites in Scotland do help sustain a distinctive set of institutions and relationships which influence bargaining and policy outcomes". At the local level policies and their implementation can be the outcome of a conflict between individual councillors acting "parochially" on behalf of their constituents (notably high status home owners, landowners and farmers who frequently believe they should be able to build anywhere) and planning officials acting in accordance with dominant professional planning ideologies to oppose rural residential development. In terms of social theory as propounded by Saunders, P (1986) this equates to a pluralistic conception of local policy formulation and implementation. This pluralistic conception has, in practice, often meant that councillors have overruled officers' views, usually with the effect of granting poorly sited or designed development.

Lessons from England

Turning to the English literature and experience for some possible lessons Carmona, M (2001) recounts his advice given to the ODPM on the re-working of PPG 3 (2000) on Planning and Housing, and in particular the part relating to design. Some of this advice was taken on board by the ODPM at a national policy level but arguably not explicitly enough. The advice covered the importance of having a clear hierarchy of design guidance and policy from national, to authority wide to specialist or thematic design guidance. All levels of design policy and guidance should be capable of being read together rather than in isolation from each other to facilitate a more holistic understanding of its' purpose or intention. Interpretation of design language can be problematic too, especially in negotiation between various parties, so Carmona recommends a glossary of terms to accompany guidance. Adequate time to negotiate design should be more firmly built in to the process and local authorities should monitor the results of their efforts as a means to ensure that practice is consistently delivering the high quality outcomes desired.

A study by Paterson, E (2004) on new development in English historic towns came to similar conclusions and additionally stressed the importance of clear officer roles relating to design aligned with political will to place design high on the agenda. It appears that in NW Scotland design issues have been seen as a low political priority set against the pressing need for jobs and population retention, and there has been a political failure to perceive any link between good design and better economic prospects. Indeed in England this link has not been concertedly promoted until the advent of CABE in 1999.

The importance of partnerships between house builders and local authorities with inclusion of local views was also seen as important by Carmona: a role that Scottish Homes (now Communities Scotland) is in a good position to facilitate, especially given its significant role in funding new housing.

The Countryside Agency (CA) for England and Wales (1999) have promoted the idea of village design statements (VDS) prepared by local communities (with funding assistance from the agency) and then adopted by local planning authorities as supplementary planning guidance. In parallel with VDS local planning authorities are encouraged to prepare Countryside Design Summaries to provide an analysis of landscape, settlements and buildings for their entire area as another tool to assist in assessing planning applications. Various national organisations have given their support for these initiatives including the Civic Trust, Action with Communities in Rural England, the National Association of Local Councils and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. The CA note particularly that the House Builders Federation have reported that the VDS process has reduced negative reaction by local residents to development thus reducing conflicts, the need for appeals and builders time and expense. Indirect benefits are also evident including increased consciousness of design issues, greater understanding of the planning system by local communities, improved relationships between local communities and a greater sense of ownership of decisions by local residents. It is significant that the Scottish Executive (2004), in the light of the English experience, mention the potential benefits of using VDS in Scotland as a way to better involve local communities in the design process.

Link between design and local economy

Given the increasing complexity of patterns of household composition, it is coming to be recognised that flexible and adaptable housing design can help sustain communities where otherwise people would have to move on as the composition of their household changed (Rudlin and Falk, 1995). As moving on may mean moving out of the area altogether and contributing to depopulation this is an important point politically when considering the worth of sustainable housing design and the political priority it should be accorded. This connection between sustainable design and economy is not always recognised, especially by local councillors. The link between protecting the countryside, through planning policy on siting, for the benefit of the tourist economy is also poorly understood. The lack of empirical evidence on this is problematic.

The Scottish Office (1998) observed that visitors have a high expectation about what rural Scotland should look like. This is especially true in NW Scotland as it contains the most extensive areas of high quality landscape. New housing is the major form of development there and it is often prominent, and it follows that if well designed and sited it has the potential for beneficial implications for tourism and inward investment.

Affordable housing policies

The literature relating to affordable or social housing in the UK is extensive but only some of that relating to the link with sustainability, social land ownership and design in NW rural Scotland will be examined here. All three local authorities covering the area being studied have local plans and housing strategies that state there is an affordability problem. None appear to have a definition of affordable, but Argyll and Bute refer to the somewhat bland and unhelpful "definition" as in Scottish Planning Policy Guidance (SPPG) 3 on Planning and Housing that states "those households who cannot afford to buy or rent accommodation generally available on the open market". There appears to be a particular problem in the main towns and in the most scenic areas and also in some of the most remote areas where incomes are lowest. The Highland housing strategy points to a shortage of affordable housing of around 5000 units over the next 5 years. Local plans relating to Argyll and Bute and Highland council areas all contain some policies specifying that some sites or areas should have a proportion of affordable units in new housing schemes (usually between 25%-30%), and in one case specifying schemes with 4 or more houses. Western Isles council has such an

affordability problem that 75% of all new housing receives direct subsidy. As development costs usually exceed sale price planning gain policies for affordable housing have no relevance (Western Isles Housing Strategy, 2004).

Morgan and Talbot in Williams, K (ed) (2000) discuss whether sustainable social housing needs to cost more and conclude that it does not, but that in practice the agencies funding social housing have cost systems that often constrain housing quality and sustainability as well as being compromised through competing for grants. More pro-activity on the part of grant giving bodies to tie grant aid to design quality would assist implementation and complement council design policy. This is recognised in a recent study commissioned by Western Isles council (2003) on a proposed strategy for siting and design guidance.

There are many aspects of sustainable housing but Morgan and Talbot point to a combination of respect for ecological and design context, energy consumption awareness and all stakeholders working together as a team. They note that these principles, in an elaborated form, were developed by the Edinburgh Sustainable Architecture Unit to produce the Sustainable Housing Performance Assessment Method. This method has been used by researchers and Scottish Homes to arrive at “sustainability ratings” of schemes (Scottish Homes, 1998). There is another standard used by some Scottish councils, including Highland Council, called the Scottish Housing Quality Standard but this is also limited and covers health and safety and internal quality only (Highland Council Housing Business Plan, 2004). These methods do not cover affordability as an element of sustainability and the design considerations do not seem to cover external design and its relationship with the wider context. It appears, therefore that the official attempts to measure sustainability of new housing may be insufficiently holistic so the impression given from official monitoring may provide an incomplete picture, even though affordability data is available separately. It is hoped that this research may help to demonstrate the important link between affordable housing and design issues.

A New Opportunity: The Land Reform Act 2003

The Land Reform Act (2003) may result in more community buy outs which might in turn generate housing schemes of a more sustainable nature on *both* the design (contextual and ecological) and affordability fronts.

One intention of the Act (as in Part 2) is to facilitate community purchases of land (part 3 of the Act builds on the crofting right to buy which was introduced in 1976) and to that extent it is expected to encourage more community and crofting buy outs. The crofting right to buy differs from the community right to buy in that the former can be exercised at any time and does not depend on the land being for sale. With the community right to buy an interest must be registered by the organisation in advance of the land being for sale but if it becomes available on the market the community organisation has first option, based on a government valuation. For both types of right to buy Scottish Ministers must decide in each case whether the exercise of the right will be compatible with sustainable development and the public interest, both of which are not defined precisely. It should be noted that crofting organisations (often favouring traditional scattered housing location) and other community organisations may disagree and this may hinder implementation of the right to buy, especially if incomers are involved with new ideas (Warren, 2002).

The Act attempts to tackle injustice arising from the unusually concentrated pattern of private land ownership in Scotland which can constrain the life chances of people in remote rural communities and to this extent it is in line with European Directives concerning sustainable communities (Dressler, 2002). It is, however, also politically contentious within the Scottish context as it potentially shifts at least some power from the private to the social sphere. As McIntosh, A and Nicolas, V (2001) note “In 2000 the Scottish Parliament voted unanimously to abolish feudal tenure in Scotland”.

Wightman (2001), however, has doubts as to how effective the new legislation will actually be as it will still be hard for community organisations to exercise the right to buy especially due to the obligation to buy the whole parcel of land which may be for sale rather than just the small portion the community might want and registers for, or could afford. Currently (Jan 2005) the Register of Interests (available on line) has only 12 entries all but 3 of which are in NW Scotland. The Western Isles Council does, however, seem to be expecting a significant take up by community organisations, stating that 3 community led trusts in the Western Isles owns 15% of the land mass now and that within a decade up to half could be under community ownership with the overall structure of the social rented sector possibly changing as a result (W Isles Council Housing Strategy, 2004).

Warren (2002) notes that some community organisations, with grant assistance, are able to explore innovative approaches to land use and design which cash-strapped and often tradition-bound private owners are unwilling or unable to risk. Also, according to Warren, crofters in Assynt (Lewis), for example, believe that the transition from tenants to owners has brought about spiritual change in the community, engendering a sense of freedom. This freedom is likely to encourage more innovative thought and new ways of doing things (it inspired the Assynt Community Trust to initiate its own housing need research which was carried out by a Highland based contractor in 1996), although it can clearly be difficult for voluntary groups to sustain commitment over long periods.

The history of attempts by community groups and conservation organisations in NW Scotland to own land on a not for profit basis is a long one (Reid, 1999). Between 1840 and 1890 pre-co-operative club farm and smallholding land purchase schemes took place and in the 1920's the first community land trust was set up. The 1970's saw many conservation organisations acquire properties with wildlife interest, and in the 1980's and 1990's a diverse range of community organisations emerged. Reid concludes, “social ownership of land by civic organisations is now emerging as the radical alternative to both the lottery of private ownership and the benign bureaucratic state”.

Wightman and Boyd (2001) provide a useful profile of the not-for-profit or community organisations operating in the Highlands and Islands. In 2001 there were 45 such organisations (almost double the number in 1996) owning, leasing or managing 6.58% of the highlands and Islands. Wightman defines not-for-profit organisations as bodies set up to pursue social, environmental, economic and democratic aims for their local population. Profits or surpluses cannot be distributed to members and a board that is elected periodically by an equal vote of the membership governs the affairs. The organisation is therefore accountable to a wider social grouping than is the case with a private for profit company or private trust. Not-for-profit bodies range from local organisations with only a few members to large bodies with thousands of member's e.g. National Trust for Scotland.

There have been some high profile community buy outs in recent years which have been successful and paved the way for the new Act, notably the community purchases of the Isle of Eigg and Isle of Gigha from negligent private landlords who have let property deteriorate leading to population loss. This represents a further step away from the legacy of feudal tenure in NW Scotland where only 85 privately owned estates account for one third of the total land mass in the Highlands and Islands (Scottish Islands Network newsletter, March 2003).

The Act requires that the right to buy is compatible with the furtherance of sustainable development, although it is not clear how this will be assessed and without official indicators of sustainability relating to design and affordability the Act may be less effective than it could be.

Nonetheless the furtherance of sustainable development requirement in the Act alongside prevailing values within community organisations, together with better government design guidance and engagement of innovative architects might collectively contribute to progress. This is investigated further through primary research. It is the combination of initiatives, together with the ability of the key players to work well together, which is likely to produce good practice.

Making the Land Reform Act work: Financial assistance

There are 4 main grant schemes available to crofters and community organisations to help with construction:

- rural home ownership grants scheme, run by Communities Scotland
- the future builders fund, run by Communities Scotland
- the Scottish the crofters building grants and loans scheme ,run by the Scottish Executive
- the Land Fund run by the Community Land Unit of Highlands and Islands Enterprise

The grant schemes do not impose any conditions regarding design or affordability, but it might help reinforce planning policy if there were conditions.

The largest single grant to a community organisation since 2001 was £3.5 million from the Scottish Land Fund to assist with the Gigha community buy out 2002 (Scottish Islands Network newsletter, March 2003). As a result of this buy out Fyne Homes Housing Association is constructing 10 new houses and 6 plots are available to private purchasers. This is expected to add 35 new residents to the existing 110. In total the Scottish Land Fund has given £8.5 million to 95 different projects since 2001 so the share to Gigha was considerable and indicates the perceived importance of their work.

Most houses built by crofters with grant assistance so far are modern kit bungalows (usually finished in harling with concrete roof tiles and UPVC windows) that take advantage of the large areas of cheap land available on crofts. In some areas (particularly the Western Isles) the original generations of croft are left derelict sitting alongside the new (partly due to the costs of demolition and clearing rubble, but sometimes for sentimental reasons) resulting in unnecessary clutter and new build that jars with the landscape and any sense of tradition. It appears that neither traditional designs in the style of the original blackhouse with thatched roof nor innovative contextually sympathetic modern designs (perhaps using largely timber and glass) are popular with crofters. Crofters' budgets are often small, architects are rarely employed and a distrust or ignorance of planning policy means little if any pre-application discussion takes place. Applications are made with a time-limited grant available and implementation of planning policy is inevitably compromised.

Method for Primary Research

Postal questionnaires were sent to eighteen not-for-profit community organisations. These organisations were selected on the basis of the likelihood of each being involved with or intending to carry out housing development (some are only concerned with land management or conservation). The list of organisations was obtained from www.whoownsScotland.org.uk that has a separate category for not-for-profit community organisations including a definition of these (see reference to Wightman above).

Thirty similar postal questionnaire was sent to planning and housing officers and councillors of the three main local authorities in the Highlands and Island, several key housing associations working in the study area and key national bodies (Communities Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Executive, the Caledonia Centre for Social Development and the Royal Town Planning Institute).

A further variation on the questionnaire was sent to thirty regular architects working in the study area, listed in the RIAS. A total of seventy-eight questionnaires were posted and telephone interviews were carried out in some cases where postal questionnaires were not returned or to clarify points in postal returns.

The purpose of the questionnaires was firstly to examine a wide range of views towards existing policy and practice on design and affordability. The second purpose was to investigate ongoing and possible future changes to policy and practice. The questionnaire responses were also intended to corroborate certain points or assumptions from the literature.

Affordability is usually viewed separately to design issues (both contextual and ecological) and this probably mirrors the separate functions at government level and/or varying views on what constitutes sustainability, the definition of which is of course problematic. A definition of sustainability is deliberately not attempted in this study, in favour of examining key well understood aspects or indicators of the concept. This study looks at design and affordability together as the link is seen to be important and these are, perhaps, the prime concerns on rural housing in NW Scotland.

Aspects of policy and practice that the questionnaires sought to examine included the nature of the various relevant policies and guidance used currently, funding sources, whether certain types of developers are more likely to adhere to sustainability principles, the relative importance of architect involvement, the relationship between architects and planners, the relationship between design quality and tourism, and what new policy, practice or other assistance is most needed to make a difference including opinions on the recent community right to buy.

The nature of the questionnaires is deliberately broad to test the relative importance of various issues.

Findings from the questionnaires

Overall the response rate to the questionnaires was 54%. This includes returns by post and telephone interviews. The response from architects was 50%, community organisations 60% and government officers, housing associations and councillors taken together, 51%. There was only one full response from a councillor however (out of a possible 9) with 2 other councillors stating it was more appropriate for officers to respond.

This response rate is considered sufficient to gain useful qualitative insights on views of key players, although it is disappointing that councillors, as the ultimate decision makers in many cases, were poorly represented. Some councillors referred to officers as the experts as a reason for non-completion of the questionnaire.

The responses indicate the following:

On existing policy there appears to be much current activity both on design and affordability with several new guides and policies in the pipeline. This is encouraging in that it is clear the problems are being worked on, but the downside seems to be the lack of co-ordination of these initiatives and the danger that Carmona points to of having lack of clarity or priority, especially on design.

From the architects' response it appears that their use of local design guidance is minimal. Indeed 25% did not use any government design guidance and the most frequently used guidance is national, either by Communities Scotland or the Scottish Executive. Only 15% of architects indicated they had a positive relationship with their local planning department and this might contribute to a reluctance to use local guidance. Architects referred to planners and planning policy as being too rigid, lacking in imagination, too focussed on traditional design, having a lack of consistency and being too negative. This is unfortunately in line with the traditional architect- planner relationship stereotype. Despite the negative perception of planning, however, most architects did appear, however, to hold principles relevant to sustainable design and affordable housing which prevail in planning policy albeit using different language.

Principles cited as being held by architects include:

- should reflect history and culture of Scotland
- should be site specific and sensitive
- be ecologically sound using natural materials with climate awareness
- be low maintenance and have high insulation
- one respondent said there should be no intervention such that "an artist would no longer wish to paint the landscape" which is a colourful comment nicely complementing the intentions of much government policy

The main problem on the affordable housing issue seems to be the lack of a useful working definition (apart from the bland one found in SPPG3), although it is encouraging and perhaps surprising to see fairly widespread use of quota policies in areas where fear of losing investment opportunities is great. The use of quota policies was not seen as a problem or unrealistic except by almost a quarter of the architect respondents (perhaps as they are often closer to the private developer viewpoint). The affordability issue touches many organisations including those not directly responsible for housing e.g. Highlands and Islands Enterprise, as they see lack of affordable homes adversely affecting the vision for a growing economy. This perhaps has added impetus to the recent move by the Scottish Parliament in setting up a cross party working group on affordable housing, which has yet to report.

On existing practice the perception by a large majority (85%) of the respondents was that most new rural housing in NW Scotland was not sustainable but was improving with respect to contextual and environmentally aware design as well as affordability.

Reasons for the perceived gap between policy intention and implementation fell into six categories:

- Conflicting political priorities and councillors overruling officers in planning decision making (most frequently mentioned overall)
- Inadequate government funding and high building costs in remote locations (next most frequently mentioned overall)
- The tradition ofcroft housing being scattered rather than concentrated within settlements (mentioned by many government officials and housing associations)
- The planning authority not negotiating enough to secure design improvements (mentioned by many government officials and housing associations)
- Policy not strong enough (mentioned mainly by architects)
- Affordability (quota) policy unrealistic (mentioned only by architects)

A very clear majority of non architects (96%) considered that Housing Associations and Not for Profit organisations (compared to private organisations, private individuals or others) were most likely to produce a development that includes affordable housing and is of good quality, environmentally aware design. There was little difference between Housing Associations and Not for Profit organisations as the most favoured. Architects agreed that Housing Associations were ahead but were equal with private individuals and, surprisingly, that Not for Profit organisations had little aspiration for affordable well designed housing. This is perhaps because many architects have not worked directly with community organisations.

Engagement of an architect, sometimes seen as the way to address a prevalence of mediocre or poor design, was seen as important but not the complete answer. The most frequent response amongst non-architects was that an architect can help design quality but it depends on the architect and the brief to the architect (35%). Only 19% thought that engagement of an architect could improve design quality significantly. Half of the architects themselves thought that the community saw architect involvement as significant or very significant and about half thought planners were positive but councillors were negative on architect involvement. Overall this is a less than convincing picture that architect involvement is significant and positive. Cost may play a part as well as design being a low political priority and inter-professional mistrust.

There was a much more mixed response on whether housing design might have any effect on tourism in terms of visitor experience or repeat visits. Community organisations were most sceptical or lacking in knowledge of a link with only two perceiving such a link, but about half overall felt there was a link but there was little evidence for it. Objections to the design and location of new housing at the planning stage on the basis of impact on tourism appears to be the closest to evidence, albeit unquantified, that there is on this matter. Some architect respondents observed a discrepancy between lay views on kit houses (kits generally representing the poorest design) and views of built environment professionals, with the latter being far more critical. One respondent believed poor design was a “let down” but the summer “midge” factor was more likely to deter visitors. Another thought wind farms would be a bigger deterrent to visitors than poorly designed houses.

On possible policy or practice changes many suggestions were offered with no clear priority. Housing need information was seen as important for community organisations. More staff, including specialists, was mentioned marginally more frequently by government respondents compared with other suggestions. Other suggestions included more detailed and strongly worded design and green building guidance, more negotiation on design and more public funding. Yet more suggestions, but only mentioned once each, include housing stock transfer, more education and constraining second homes.

On the Land Reform Act the most frequent response, representing a significant minority (35%), thought that community buy outs would increase either by a large or small amount and about half thought there would be more affordable housing development as a result. A slightly smaller number thought design would improve too if carried out by community organisations (including 20% of the architects). Only six respondents (including 33% of architects) thought there would be little difference overall.

There is clearly some doubt as to whether this legislation will make a difference, with some being much more optimistic than others. Some architects were particularly sceptical with comments such as “it may only help selected rural communities” and the legislation won’t work as there is “too much in-fighting within the community”. The latter comment does corroborate some of the literature e.g. Wightman (2001). On the other hand there was a particularly positive comment from an architect about working with the Gigha Trust and planners on a design guide for the island, but these occasions seem to be exceptions rather than the rule.

One respondent thought that a new provision in the Title Conditions (Scotland) Act 2003 would be more significant in respect of affordable housing. The new provision includes a “rural housing burden” clause (applying to any rural housing body, including community organisations) that can limit price inflation of the affordable housing element of a scheme in perpetuity. Under the terms of the rural housing burden a rural housing body may buy back a property, when it comes up for sale, at a similar price to that of the original sale.

Conclusions

Both the literature and the questionnaire survey confirm that there is clearly a rural housing problem in NW Scotland in terms of design and affordability. Currently the prevailing view is that this is not a sustainable situation but there are signs of improvement, with some interesting examples of recent progress. Indeed design policy progress has been considerable given that only three authorities had any before 1991.

Much central and local government design policy and guidance appears similar to that for rural England although perhaps less well developed, but implementation of this seems more problematic in NW Scotland largely due to problems associated with remote location and the land issue.

The setting up of Communities Scotland in 2001 has helped in providing more funding, as has the advent of the Scottish Land Fund (run by Highlands and Islands Enterprise) in the same year. These funds support community organisations and this should facilitate the implementation of the community right to buy provision in the Land Reform Act 2003, although other factors still conspire to limit the potential of this new legislation. Community organisations that carry out housing development generally have affordability as a high priority (and this may be further encouraged through the “rural housing burden” provision in the Title Conditions (Scotland) Act) but there is less likelihood that community organisations will produce more sensitive design. Such organisations might benefit from involvement in the Village Design Statement (VDS) exercises recently carried out in some parts of England as these can be educational, improve relationships between various key players and enable communities to have more ownership of design policies. The extent of distrust or lack of accord between planners and politicians as well as between architects and planners, politicians and community organisations, evident from this study, creates several barriers to implementation. Production of joint documents such as VDS, generated by lay people with expert advice and endorsed by officials, can be an important way forward.

Policies relating to affordable housing are in place albeit without a commonly used definition of affordable (other than a rather too general one in the Scottish Executive guidance SPPG3) and with local housing need information still fairly thin. But the need to provide homes that are both affordable and well designed is increasingly being recognised.

There is quite widespread concern, both from the questionnaire survey and some of the literature from the Scottish Executive that poorly located and designed housing must have a detrimental effect on tourism and hence local economies. Dedicated empirical evidence, however, to substantiate this is not available, nor does there appear to be any relevant official research programme, to seek views of tourists for example. The value of seeking empirical evidence might be to influence political prioritisation of design issues, and this prioritisation has been identified as crucial.

This study has helped to establish the nature of sustainable rural housing problems in NW Scotland as well as investigating some of the relevant policy and legislative changes that might help address the problems. The Western Isles appear to have some of the most acute problems in terms of both affordability and visual intrusion in open landscapes and the least well developed policies to address these so far. Highland Council, and to some extent Argyll and Bute, are more diverse, arguably contain some of the most sensitive landscapes and have more development pressure but only traditional crofting in some parts. Highland’s recent design guidance is the most detailed and practical of all such guidance available in NW Scotland.

Data is lacking to establish the detailed extent of the affordability and design problems. More work on housing needs, design perception and the relationship between design and tourism is required to assist in refining policies further. Incorporation of these factors into official indices of sustainability might help to prompt this. Barriers are largely political and financial but also to some extent lack of awareness and education on possibilities, especially ways to create sympathetically designed affordable housing on low budgets. Some exceptions to the prevailing situation have emerged through this study and provide examples of good practice. Good practice, illustrated through case studies, can make a significant contribution to improved policy implementation and this will be explored in a separate paper.

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