

## **Local Government and Regeneration Committee**

**Fort William - community engagement event – 24 November 2014**

### **Notes of workshop sessions with community groups**

**MSP Chair: John Wilson MSP**

**Scribe: Seán Wixted**

**NB** – these notes are not intended to be an exhaustive account of every aspect of the group's discussion, but are an attempt to capture the main points which arose.

The main points from the group's discussion were as follows:

#### **Community planning / participation requests (also Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Bill – Taxis)**

##### **CPPs**

- The local community in Caol had a very bad experience of dealing with the planning application for the GaelScoil in Caol as Highland Council undertook very little consultation with the public. As a result the community had just established a new Community Council for the area as it didn't have one.
- People don't know who is involved in community planning. In Doura just now the Forestry Commission is objecting to a local farmer who has applied for planning permission for a visitor attraction around his farm business. This is widely supported by the local community. Forestry Commission forced him to change his plans as his farm was visible from Forestry Commission land. This was done under an SRDP bid. There was a lot of disagreement between the Forestry Commission, SNH and HIE on this and it caused a lot of local disagreement. So don't know how this shows community planning is working.
- Need to ensure the right CPP representative are around the table as just now the local Third Sector Interface (TSI) representative may not be truly representative of a specific locale to a thematic group of interest. Reps may need to be plugged in as CPP sub-group level as that is these the strategic decisions are discussed in their impact on local development plans.
- More things should be localised as people in the community know what's best and what's need for their communities. The TSI representatives don't engage with local people. Questions need to be asked as to how they engage with local people and how representative they are?
- It is very hard for ordinary people to understand consultation document on plans and developments, especially in terms of getting a sense of the scale of a development from technical drawing and graphic images. This is especially true for older people. The GaelScoil has had a major impact on the homes of four elderly people. Highland Council should have gone to the lowest level possible to

explain the proposals to them, instead of such sending them official consultation document.

- Highland Council is very Inverness-centric in its decision making and most of the critical planning and development decision for all of Highland is made in are around the Moray Firth. Because of the population base in Inverness, Moray Firth representatives are disproportionately over representative on the Council, especially on committees making critical decisions for other ward areas like Lochaber.
- There seems to be a CPP level missing at community council area which can feed up to area CPPs and then council-wide CPP.

### **Community right to buy**

- Community right to buy should be extended Scotland wide.
- If public bodies are proposing to sell land, they should at least be required to inform the local community – of not have a duty placed on them to offer first refusal to the local community to buy.
- Public land could be used for affordable housing land rather than selling it off to private interests with local community knowledge.

### **Participation requests**

- How does a local community put in a participation request if they are unaware that a particular event or development is happening or a service changing?
- Participation requests under the Bill must be an effective system and not lead to “death by bureaucracy”. It must have a very streamlined process.
- Funding organisations are disconnected from local communities today much more so that they were, say 20 – 25 years ago. The LEADER programme is managed by business gateway and other funds are managed differently. So it is very hard for local communities and community groups to track where funding is coming from or from what it might be available.
- There used to be a local advice centre called ‘Lochaber Ltd’ which had all the information on all funding streams under one roof, e.g. Rural Development Fund, LEADER Fund etc. This was a great local resource but at some point the Council and (HIE we think?) got rid of it.

*In response to this comment, John Wilson MSP gave an undertaking the Committee would highlight the complex and confusing nature of the funding landscape for local communities in our Stage 1 report on the Bill.*

- It was also recognised that different public agencies can have different priorities for the same communities and often these priorities, and the funding and plans that go with them, can actually act in opposition to each other.

- Common Good
- The new GaelScoil in Caol was built on land which was part of the local Common Good fund and this caused “uproar” in the local community.
- Some common good land is so old that there is nobody alive locally who know anything about the terms on which the land came into the trust of the old burghs (now the council). So a public register of common good assets would be welcome.

### **Allotments**

- A lot of people in Caol would like to have access to an allotment but there is not enough land available so public waiting lists for allotment applications would be good. This would show the level of demand.
- People don't necessarily need a fixed size of plot; they should be given a starter size as a “taster”. However, there should be a standard plot size defined so that people could work up to a ‘full’ plot size and they developed.
- Local groups should be allowed to sell food and produce from their allotment sites via market stalls and the like. The allotment rules should be amended to allow allotment users to develop orchards and keep bees for honey and some animals/poultry as well. Allotment law doesn't allow this just now.
- Groups spoke about the Skye Food Network. People were ¼ acre sites and this was very successful. There are very few local food producers in the Lochaber area and there is not enough growing. Highlands and Islands local food network should work to ensure that allotments and a stepping stone for local communities in the H+I to develop their own local networks into a food growing economy.
- The Lochaber area needs a food growing strategy which includes targets for people to grow food for themselves but also moved them up to food producer status.

### **Other issues**

- The CE Bill need to ensure there are community action plans in place and this needs to be a “bottom up” approach in the Bill with local accountability for the plan build into the Bill.
- The Scottish Rural Parliament has just been established and hopefully this will help focus on a bottom up approach to these issues, especially in areas like the H+I.
- Where are strategies plans published? How can ‘Joe Punter’ be aware of what's in his local community plans and how to influence it?
- The Independence referendum led to a huge upsurge in public meetings in the Lochaber area. Members of the group attended many meeting and were

surprised at the level of interest amongst young people about what's happening in their local community and how to get involved.

- The issue of how active (or inactive) local community councils are needs to be addressed (maybe by the Bill)?
- Often people are "informed" about what their local plan is (especially in terms of the Council's local development plans in the planning system). This is not good enough.
- Adverts should be put in local newspapers and local media to explain to people how local plans are drawn up and what's in them and how people can find them.
- Years ago the old Highlands and Islands Forum has a great initiative of public engagement and consultation called 'Planning for Real' where they asked local communities what they wanted. But then Highland Council started its own version, also called 'Planning for Real' and this ruined the Highlands and Islands Forum initiative, because whereas the H+I Forum version was a true bottom up initiative run by volunteers, the Council version was totally top down and run by officials from Inverness. This ruined the level of public engagement and people lost interest. This left a void in real community-driven engagement. Hopefully the Scottish Rural Parliament will address this void?
- One size does not fit all for a rural area like Lochaber.
- There was a lot of discussion around care services, especially for the elderly. The overriding question asked was "who ultimately decided on care services for the elderly in Lochaber"?
- Care workers in Lochaber often only work as care workers during the winter months, as during the summer months there is more money to be earned in the local tourist industry. This is a big problem for the area.
- The local Lochaber area needs more control of budgets at local community level, if the Bill delivers this then local communities will have more power to deliver their own local services.

### **Air Weapons and Licensing (S) Bill**

- Having an air weapons licensing system for air weapons is a good thing as long as it is not too cumbersome a system
- One member of the groups has children in a pony club who do decathlons, which involve using air weapons, so they wondered how this would work under the bill?
- Given the nature of the Lochaber economy, and the number of police, it was felt it will be very hard for the police to enforce a licensing system for air weapons in the Lochaber area given the volumes of people using air weapons.
- The group did not feel there was a major issue with public safety and air weapons in the Lochaber area. One of the group was GP who had just retired,

and in 20 years of practice in the Lochaber area he had only had to remove air gun pellets twice from patients.

- The group ran out of time to discuss any of the other provisions of the Bill.

### **MSP Chair – Anne McTaggart**

### **Scribe – Allan Campbell**

**NB** – these notes are not intended to be an exhaustive account of every aspect of the group’s discussion, but are an attempt to capture the main points which arose.

### **The main points from the group’s discussion were as follows—**

- The success of a number of valuable local community projects, including “men’s sheds”, projects for disadvantaged children, and “nimble fingers”. The group also talked about a project involving experienced knitters learning to join together fibre optic cables as a good example of using the skills of the community to deal with local issues.
- The group had a long and detailed discussion about the role of community councils, especially given the wide coverage of the community councils in the Highland Council area compared to the rest of the country. It was suggested that the regional associations of community councils could be included as mandatory community planning partners in Part 2 of the Bill. However, some participants warned that this could lead to further burdens on already stretched volunteers. And, it was recognised that community councils were not as prevalent across the country.
- The group also highlighted perceived anomalies in the treatment of community councils – that they could not own assets nor apply for lottery funding. By giving them these powers, the group’s view was that community councils would become more interesting and relevant to the local community.
- Specific issues with the current consultation practices of Scottish Canals were raised. As with other consultations it was felt that the community was not listened to, despite three separate consultation exercises on the same topic.
- On a similar topic, the group also talked about Highland Council’s consultation practices, and noted that the current budget consultation was very poorly set up. There was also the sense, as the Committee heard elsewhere, that Inverness was seen as a remote centre by those in the periphery of the council area.

## **MSP Chair: Cameron Buchanan MSP**

### **Scribe: Claire Menzies-Smith**

**NB** – these notes are not intended to be an exhaustive account of every aspect of the group’s discussion, but are an attempt to capture the main points which arose.

The main points from the group’s discussion were as follows:

### **Community planning / participation requests (also Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Bill – Taxis)**

- Lochaber Action on Disability (LAD) was concerned to ensure members were aware as regards taxis “one size doesn’t fit all” - taxis in rural areas were essential life lines. Representative disability organisation within the central belt did not always reflect this rural dimension in their submissions.
- Eligibility criteria for patient transport was having an impact on the service provided by LAD and community taxis. Many more people were being assessed as not requiring patient transport which increased reliance on public transport or community transport to get to hospital, for example, the journey from Mallaig to Raigmore Hospital in Inverness. There were not enough taxis to cope with the demand.
- Further complications were highlighted in respect of this particular journey: firstly lack of integration between the bus and rail timetables; inadequate accessibility for disabled people by public transport to the hospital.
- LAD explained buses from Mallaig to Fort William arrived 10 minutes after the train from Fort William to Inverness had left. On investigation, it was identified by LAD public transport operators were willing to amend their timetables but Highlands and Islands Regional Transport Partnership (HITRANS) would need to be involved. LAD had written to HITRANS seeking better integration of the route but had had no response.
- Other examples of transport issues were discussed including the lack of transport available afterschool in the Argyll and Bute Council area which meant children could not attend afterschool activities. Another was given of an 18 year old non-driver who lived in Plockton and worked in Applecross. There were no buses and so he was reliant on community transport, should this service be cut he would be unable to work.
- Each community taxi operates according to different criteria depending on the nature of the funding, so for instance some may only provide a service for older people or within a certain geographical area. If a community taxi was to take on a bigger role such as transporting non-emergency patients to hospital this would require more funding but it was considered in any event demand would exceed capacity.

- There was some discussion about whether community planning partnerships could play a greater role in planning services for communities. It was also suggested the new Participation Request powers in the Community Empowerment Bill might offer a solution. There was a concern public bodies were not accountable, and a myriad of legislation already exists but not enforced, e.g. the Blue Badges Scheme.
- The inclusion of Skill Development Scotland (SDS) as a statutory partner on Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) was welcomed as currently SDS were only represented on around 20 of the 32 CPP's
- Accessibility of public transport was discussed. It was suggested operators were using the definition of "accessibility" as set out the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 rather than the Equality Act 2010 in order to delay updating the facilities available to disabled people, including toilet facilities.
- Taxi apps were discussed briefly and whether it was considered these would affect the Highland area. It was believed Inverness could face an issue as there was already increased numbers of unlicensed taxis during festivals i.e. Rockness.
- It was also highlighted that taxi drivers were already finding it difficult to make a living, as those who had day jobs would work at night as part-time drivers making it more difficult for full-time taxi drivers to make a living.