

# Petitioner submission of 15 February 2024

## PE2075/B: Prioritise local participation in planning decisions

Helensburgh Community Council reply to the [Scottish Government submission of 31st January](#).

### **Actual decision-taking versus box-ticking exercises.**

The introductory paragraphs of the Scottish Government submission talk about such concepts as ‘engagement’, ‘greater empowerment’, ‘opportunity to comment’, ‘taking local place plans into account’, and ‘participation’ – but none of this means actual decision-taking by Community Councils. There is a danger that too often lip service is paid to these concepts, and they become just part of a box-ticking exercise.

### **The Importance of Defining "Local".**

In terms of mileage and/or travel time, we in Helensburgh are (for example) more local to Edinburgh than we are to much of Argyll & Bute. Does this mean that we in Helensburgh could or should be involved in planning decisions for Edinburgh? Of course not! But why should a councillor from, say, Campbeltown (much further away from us than Edinburgh) be deemed to be “local” when it comes to planning decisions for Helensburgh?

Furthermore, might the outcomes of the 3 controversial planning applications (see below) have been different if only truly "local" people had been decision-makers?

The Scottish Government submission asserts that “it is a long-standing tenet of the planning system that planning applications are considered, in the first instance, at the most local administrative level, i.e. the local planning authority.” The problems that we in Helensburgh have been experiencing would indicate that the time to review and alter this “long-standing tent” has most definitely arrived.

### **The Three controversial planning applications.**

Our petition refers to “three controversial Helensburgh planning applications [which] have been decided by the Planning Committee [of Argyll & Bute Council]. All 3 were opposed by Helensburgh Community

Council and by the majority of Helensburgh and Lomond Area councillors serving on the Planning Committee. Nevertheless, they were passed by a majority of councillors from other areas, none of whom could be considered truly local.”

Helensburgh Community Council's opposition to the 3 controversial planning applications was in every case based on our understanding of the local development plan; nevertheless, we were overruled. We did not object to any of these planning applications per se, but the legislation does not allow us to give qualified support – hence our only option was to oppose them. Here are the details:

1. Housing on the former Ardencaple Garden Centre site. Community Council opposition was because the number of houses in the application was well in excess of the number specified in the Local Development Plan.
2. Care home in the former works depot of Hermitage Park. Community Council opposition was on account of its size, and in particular because of (i) its proximity to Grade A listed structures (the War Memorial, etc), (ii) its proximity to sheltered housing, and (iii) the volume of traffic which it might generate.
3. Leisure Centre beside the pier. Community Council opposition was because it was to be built on an area of infilled land beside the sea which was prone to regular flooding. We were concerned about the cost of raising the land sufficiently to prevent flooding, and would have preferred to have seen the leisure centre sited further from the sea.

### **Decision-taking by Area Committees.**

In the case of Argyll & Bute Council, we suggested to senior council officials that the much more local Area Committees would be more appropriate for considering planning applications than a committee drawn from the whole of the Council area. We were however told by them that this would mean “turning back the clock”. But what is wrong with such a move if it means that better decisions are taken?

### **How Community Councils might be included in planning decisions.**

It is not being proposed by Helensburgh Community Council that Community Councils be the ultimate and sole arbiters of planning applications; rather that the option should exist for a number of

community councillors with full voting powers to become members of a local authority planning committee for planning applications within their Community Council area.

### **The statutory right to be ignored.**

If Community Councils were to become part of the actual decision-taking process (as suggested above), and if this were to lead to the removal of their role as statutory consultees, our view (in contrast to the view of the Scottish Government in their submission) is that it would not "in fact reduce [the] opportunity for community participation", simply because as matters currently stand Community Council views may too often be ignored.