**Argyll and Bute Roundtable – Monday 16th May 2016, notes**

**Attendees**: AT, Jim Hunter, Lorne MacLeod, Linsey Chalmers, Calum MacLeod

Helen Macdonald, James Waugh, Kevin Smith, Fergus Waters

1. Has community buy out been successful?

Yes!

Fergus – difference in the state of the community – population size, businesses, the asset and investment - the opportunity that arises.

Helen – very early stage; land for housing – to bring in lots of benefits.

Ballachulish – community hydro and forestry – can be hard to dampen enthusiasm; involvement – especially among the younger generation and the business communities and small estate owners. 800 population – community action plan.

Managing expectations?

Enthusiasm waning after a few years in Mull/Iona; meeting turnouts etc; a bit of them and us around certain projects – could have more cohesion; a bit of caution because folk thought that things would happen quicker on the housing front.

Sustaining engagement can be a problem; over expectation and reality – open communication required but can be risky. The whole community – not just the individuals; if you can find a common basis based on reality – instead of blame game. Transparency is key.

Volunteer basis of the skills and engagement so not an easy path of governance but one that opens out many opportunities. Presentation of the work being done and why is key to buy in – a feeling of ‘ownership’.

Folk can get exhausted and drop away; and then they expect the trust/board to do everything, as under the old landownership model. This is an issue with succession too.

Long term thinking required and to be understood by the community.

Changing engagement on Gigha? A lot of enthusiasm at the start and business development but sustaining that is a major challenge. Gigha is a whole island ecology with hugely diversified activities and not all the skills are available on the island and so this costs to buy in – a ‘can you afford it’ model.

Getting the right advice; the board being seen as not having an agenda

What is the purpose of buying the land – this is the essential question.

Lorne: sees the enthusiasm as a ‘curve’ – pre-buy out very little engagement; then massive enthusiasm and expectation; then year 5 complaints etc – a huge lead in time then concentrated period where projects took place. A question of perspective too; and a tendency to burnout due to commitments.

1b. Does ownership matter? Or is land use more important?

Who makes the decisions matter; sustainability and planning/viability – lack of understanding from the authorities. Liabilities if you take on projects/ownership.

Yes, it is the fundamental line – it creates opportunities.

It does depend a lot on the landowner; can be suspicion over owners especially over pulling out last minute.

For Balla: the struggle is with state authorities/planners/local government and charities, not private landowners. Funders drive the agendas and how they are structured.

Ownership – gives security when going for funding; and this allows investment.

2. How do you define success; has this changed over time?

Quantifiable: but must avoid a ‘tick box’ approach!

* The scale of volunteering capacity
* School rolls
* Population/demographic profile
* Jobs, especially key workers.

*Housing* – a big discussion here: especially social housing; although this is controversial too. And the on-going costs are key – not just to build but to keep the running costs down e.g. fuel poverty a massive problem. The quality of housing is key and have had to fight off criticism about the high quality of the housing from HIE and others e.g. local housing associations. Allocation schemes – can set up own or work with housing associations, in consultation with the community. Good quality housing will be sustainable for the long term. Have to get housing right or the rest of the spin-offs will not happen. The types of housing leases are vital too: short assured, social, long term assured secure.

This comes from historical factors – Scotland’s housing was so bad, and so the pressure has been for quantity not quality.

* The distinction between private landlords and community/social housing policies – this is key, and this is a difference with the private economy e.g. the Scottish Association of Landlords.
* The long term view is required here – save on repairs etc.
* The number of people wishing to live in a community – a key performance/success indicator – once good housing has been put in place.
* Number of businesses established
* Facilities, health, broadband etc – under threat from centralisation; a key priority is the protection of the sustainability and individuality of the communities.

Is your community still going to be there in 100 years – this is the fundamental question. The long term

3. What have been the most important factors in your economic stability/growth?

Must have a revenue source; cannot live on grants forever for sustainability – to service the loans and debts; have a big asset base but revenue is critical.

The grants create a short term mindset too.

Growth and plans – being able to deliver plans; the dream has to be underpinned by financial sustainability; a bit of realism and transparency in communicating that. It is a commercial enterprise and balancing that against the ‘dream.’

4. What are your expenditure priorities and why?

* More high quality social housing for youngsters and the elderly. The number one priority. Has a huge regenerative effect. Measuring housing demand can be quite difficult and the housing departments for the councils do not measure the need for social housing. Misconceptions about how housing lists work from people via Home Argyll.
* Concerns that all the housing is focused on the urban areas e.g. Stornoway, Portree, Oban etc – CLS needs to work with the policy makers; also build this into education in schools. Continuity is an issue too, especially with planners.
* Also an issue with housing for short term needs e.g. builders – do you hold houses for these or not?
* Then the rest follows – businesses, jobs, entrepreneurial.

Renewables?

* Gigha – drives cash into the system; the energy is sold for £ rather than put into the community and looking to extend due to falling energy prices. Also looking at solar energy for houses – and were able to put some in when grants were available. But is a big lead in, big funding commitment and vulnerable to policy change for the big projects; unlike the individual renewable projects.
* Balla: got a hydro scheme ready to go out to tender, but have been hit by the FITS reduction and it is now pretty knife edge. Again, is very front loaded project but is an 80- year minimum scheme; £2 million loan. But the asset will belong to the community.

5. What would most improve your economic stability/growth, what obstacles could be removed?

* Argyll and Bute/Highland Council – policies and measuring; suffer from being a rural/peripheral areas; plus major cuts over the last few and next few years; they are also far too big and too varied. A lack of understanding of the real scene; e.g. housing council consultation meetings, packed with council employees. The planning office – poor response times and poor decision making; assessments etc. Statutory 8 weeks is never met – miles over and planning officers are too stretched. Worried about setting precedents in terms of commercial developers. There is a ‘we know best’ attitude in the councils at all levels – and this runs up against the community democracy already met. They will consult but not listen. Some of them work hard, but they are too stretched and have lost autonomy. They should be assisting communities, but they do not view their role in that way.
* How could this be made to work better? Communities could take the pressure off the council by leading on these projects and carrying them on – turn it into a positive. Local government and democracy needs to be reformed to keep up with community landowners; where the local decisions/democracy takes place.
* Has worked better in the past so there is a model.
* The way that community counsellors are not so linked to people has been disadvantageous; have also seen power hollowed out of community councils.
* How networked do the community landowners feel amongst each other? Not via the Highland Council – the community council model is blocked by data protection and lethargy. Would be interested to see the development of a link between the community councils and the owners.
* More of a community dynamic in the Highlands/Islands region than the rest of Scotland? Probably as a result of the culture developed around community effort from the days of the HIDB/HIE. That the rest of rural Scotland feels relatively unsupported in terms of knowledge and experience. It helps to meet people and socialise at events such as CLS AGM etc; a support network and understanding the wider environment and retain perspective; the bigger political issues, lobbying government, law and regulation.
* Perceptions of the Highlands – that they are a problem area, instead of an exemplar, especially for the rural Borders and South West; this needs to be broken down – breaking down perceptions and traditional economic models from the central belt. Comes back to the historical tradition that if you don’t do it, it won’t get done. The right mind set in the community – horizon scanning and working together and having the confidence to do it. This is a very strong message – the networking across out and everywhere.

6. What about other markers of success e.g. social, demographic, cultural?

The intangibles:

* Making a community look better – community pride.
* Grass cutting! A wind sock of community engagement
* Volunteer hours – the time measured. Vast hours and almost impossible to measure
* Confidence and community pride

7. How do your governance structures effect how you make decisions?

Sometimes decisions have to be made very quickly, particularly in the run up to buy outs, and this affects the nature/focus of governance.

The open democracy means that dissent and opposition can be very strong e.g. against social housing in different areas. Is a wide perception that social housing beneficiaries will be ‘incomers’; despite this not often being the case e.g. Gigha.

Always a challenge (*Gigha*); 160 people and 200 opinions! A personal opinion is very different to a community opinion.

Governance is a struggle – to get the right skills; a simple project will always be easier in this sense; keeping people on board, with the right skills who will not burn out; strategic knowledge and skills.

How to engage? Lots of ways – newsletters, meetings, gossips – depending on what folk prefer – do need leadership in the middle and feeding back to the community all the time.

Regular board meetings, minutes sent out, newsletters go out as and when, members meetings (4 x per year), informal feedback and conversations.

Mull & Iona: the trust have bought the land and will manage the houses – a steering group; and for the housing project another board. Is volunteer fatigue due to small numbers of people locally e.g. the chair wants to step down but no one to replace her; succession issues. Meetings, newsletters, emails, facebook, phone calls.

The volunteer capacity is crucial – Helen notes: is there an argument that when community owners/trusts come in is that the responsibility/ownership is left to the trusts and their development officers and the communities are not really engaging? The pressure is increased when the community is very small scale or dispersed e.g. Ulva ferry versus Tobermory.

Incomers? Can have high expectations but they also have ideas and energy sometimes. But some move into areas because they don’t want things to change – but communities have to ‘future-proof’ themselves. Cohesion needs to develop.

Need to remember the immense responsibilities these groups are taking on; very daunting.

Balla: everything has to be community-driven and they have to come with an idea or show a commitment to it; got to be bottom up; very time consuming and the same folk do a lot of the work, and do try to get the younger generations involved. Works via websites too to help with this. An organic growth from the village hall and then expanded. And if they have an idea they are encouraged to take it forward themselves as groups.

At each AGM 1/3 stand down and the longest term is 6 years.

So they can all learn – dip their toes in the water.

And after the 2014 Referendum did help get many folk engaged in the whole local governance processes.

The most problematic demographic for engagement is the 18-24 year olds – across the Highlands. Part of a capacity issue, which is a wider issue too

8. Anything we have missed?

* Access to finance and credit and sustainable revenue sources
* Tough to get finance on the open market and build a deal; hamstrung by the nature of community landowning and this needs greater recognition.
* Need a social investment bank – recognise the special circumstances of community owning. Otherwise it won’t get off the ground or go bankrupt
* In the universities there are huge reservoirs of expertise that hardly ever is accessible and this could change.
* What is in the community you have to use to the best of their ability but every community needs expert opinion in some cases – so you do not reinvent the wheel
* Community legal service; community accounting services; community IT systems – things that cost a fortune to buy in privately.
* Changing a mind set; an educational process – a long term process.