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SUSTAINABLE HOUSING DESIGN AND AFFORDABILITY IN RURAL NW SCOTLAND

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Abstract

The design and location of much recent house building in NW Scotland, and particularly some of the islands, appears unsympathetic in its context of a very high quality landscape. This landscape attracts tourism, but it is being adversely affected to the extent that in some areas it may detract from the visitor experience. Although there are some notable good examples, this appears to be happening despite well-intentioned design policies in Development Plans and government design guidance.

Lack of affordable housing is also a key problem in NW Scotland and is linked with the design issue in that design quality can suffer when affordability of housing, and stemming depopulation, assume greater political priority. The result is often perceived to be unsustainable.

Views of key government decision makers, architects and community organisations are explored to provide an overview of the nature of development decisions in respect of housing design and affordability.

Development decisions are influenced by many factors, the most important of which appear to be the relatively low political priority accorded to design, the quality of design guidance available, the level of design expertise or awareness and the lack of funding to secure good quality design which is also affordable.

The study examines initiatives that might address these issues, and concludes that recent legislative, policy and organisational changes may contribute to progress. These include: the “community right to buy” in the Land Reform Act 2003, together with improved funding from the Scottish Land Fund, which together could facilitate more affordable housing; the rural housing burden clause in the Title Conditions (Scotland) Act 2003 which aims to keep affordable housing in perpetuity; improved design guidance and proposed use of village design statements; some tentative recognition of the relationship between design quality and tourism and some awareness of the communication and power balance difficulties between key players in decision making.

Keywords

Housing design

Affordable housing

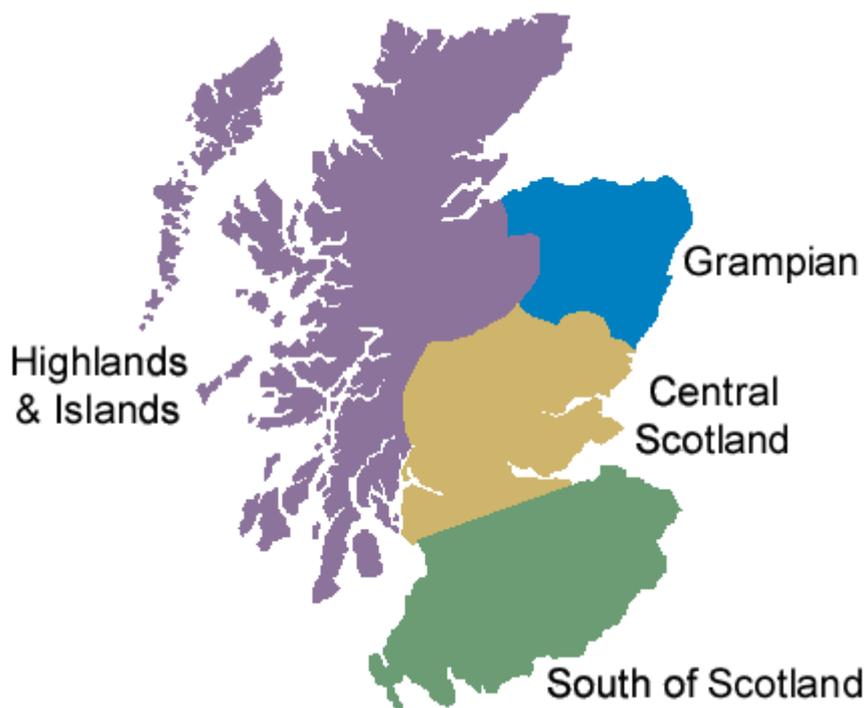
Sustainable housing

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, M. 1993 and Moir, J. 1995) and, increasingly, affordability problems are becoming acute. 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 the geographical areas covered by Argyll and Bute district council (population: 91,000), Highland council (population: 209,000) and Western Isles council (population 26,000). See fig 1 for map of Scotland: Highlands and Islands denotes the entire study area. Also for the purpose of this study “rural” excludes settlements over 3000 population (a figure used by the Scottish Executive).

Figure 1 Location of Highlands and Islands within Scotland



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 (an agency of the Scottish Executive, one of whose objectives is to ensure provision of affordable housing), journal articles by academics and consultant reports by the Caledonia Centre for Social Development (an international network, registered as a company in Scotland, providing educational,

funding and research skills in pursuit of the relief of poverty). This literature is reviewed before some primary research material from questionnaire responses is considered.

Selected references to the English experience are 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. The ongoing inquiries into the rural affordable housing problem in England are briefly considered too. The English references are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to provide some examples of good practice in the wider UK context. The study focuses on NW Scotland, and as Scotland has its own law and policy the Scottish literature is most relevant.

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). Grant assisted kit bungalows with a pebbledash finish, concrete roof tiles and plastic windows have been the most common type of new build residential in recent years. These jar with the landscape, make no reference to tradition and conflict with planning policy. To compound the visual intrusion and underline the lack of sustainability inherent in this approach, it is common to find a derelict traditional stone cottage, not necessarily beyond repair, adjacent to the new bungalows. Disposal or reuse of these traditional stone cottages are frequently considered uneconomic, and there are no grant incentives for refurbishment except in rare instances where the building is Listed.

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. They 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 and location. 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 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 lack of robustness in policy may reflect conflicting political priorities referred to by Shucksmith, M et al (1993) between councillors, housing officials and planning officials.

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, M et al (1993) 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 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on the re-working of Planning Policy Guidance (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, M 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 had not been concertededly 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, M: 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 prepared by local communities (with funding assistance from the agency) and then adopted by local planning authorities as supplementary planning guidance. In parallel with village design statements 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 village design statement 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 village design statements in Scotland as a way to better involve local communities in the design process.

Ways in which to create well designed affordable rural housing in England have recently been set out effectively by the Prince's Foundation (2006) through illustrations of good design with the build cost per sq m against each example. A design and cost database, or even pattern book, could be developed from this approach, but would have to be relevant to local conditions, including transportation costs for remote locations.

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. 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. Firstly, however, it should be noted that in England some major studies on rural affordable housing are ongoing, and these may make recommendations that could be applied in Scotland. The largest of these ongoing studies is the Affordable Rural Housing Commission set up by the Department of Food and Rural Affairs in July 2005, due to report in 2006, to look at good practice in the private, government and voluntary sectors. Two major contributors to the Commission will be the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Rural Housing Policy Forum and the Chartered Institute of Housing. The latter has noted a possible unfortunate impact of the Barker Report on Housing (2004) pointing out that Barker's emphasis on planning being more responsive to urban markets might mean less focus on rural needs.

Another Rural Housing Inquiry, also set up in 2005 and due to report in 2006, by the Commission for Rural Communities aims to gather views and experience of communities on rural housing.

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, J and Talbot, R 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.

Consideration was given to carrying out cost per sq m comparisons of typical kit bungalows with some more sustainable sympathetically designed housing, but these are difficult to obtain and use with confidence and rigour. There are so many variables involved ranging from location, client type, whether infrastructure is included or not and which costing model is used. Communities Scotland (one of the major funding bodies for kit houses) use a new indicative cost system dating from 2003 that incorporates elements of whole life costing that could be the key to addressing design issues. The two main measurable cost benefits in this system, however, are maintenance and energy costs. Non-cash benefits are not currently addressed. As maintenance and energy savings lead to a reduced grant requirement this may mean that the use of maintenance hungry, but sympathetic, materials like timber is not supported or that unsympathetic materials like upvc which might be perceived as energy efficient are supported. Inadvertently, therefore, an attempt to be more sustainable on one front might lead to lack of sustainability on another in the absence of costing systems being truly holistic (including the less easily measured variables). Exactly how the less easily measured variables, including the impact of design in the landscape, could be taken into account needs to be the subject of further research; this paper only attempts to analyse the problems and provide pointers for further work.

Besides costing systems there are also various measurement systems attempting to assess how sustainable a development might be. They do not appear to be linked. Morgan, J and Talbot, R (2000) note that the Edinburgh Sustainable Architecture Unit has produced a Sustainable Housing Performance Assessment Method that covers some aspects of design as well as energy awareness. 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 very 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, like Communities Scotland costing system for grants, may be insufficiently holistic. Consequently the results of official monitoring are likely to provide an incomplete picture.

A recent initiative by the Construction Industry Council (2003) to produce a holistic set of indicators for overall quality of new building might potentially be useful. A set of Design Quality Indicators were produced by the Construction Industry Council in 2003, and cover all aspects of build quality including construction, form and materials, access, use and social integration. The various elements are set out diagrammatically and illustrate the relative design strengths of a project from conception to completion. The Construction Industry Council network does operate in Scotland, although the indicators appear to have been applied only in England so far.

A New Opportunity: The Land Reform Act 2003

The Land Reform Act (2003) may result in more community buy outs that 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.

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, C 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, A (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. 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, C (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, C 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. Two notable recent community purchases, which received wide national press coverage, include the Isle of Eigg and Isle of Gigha, both of which have led to some innovative affordable housing schemes. The Isle of Gigha community received £3.5million in grant assistance from the Scottish Land Fund, to assist with the community purchase and associated projects. One of these projects was provision of 18 affordable houses, carried out in partnership with Fyne Homes Housing Association.

There will be increasing demands for grant assistance for land purchase as community organisations continue to grow. In 2005 there were 45 community organisations leasing or managing 6.5% of the Highlands and Islands (Wightman, A 2001). There are three main grant schemes available to community organisations to help make the Land Reform Act work. These are the Scottish Land Fund (run by Highlands and Islands Enterprise), the Future Builders Fund (run by Communities Scotland) and the rural home ownership grants scheme (run by Communities Scotland). The grant schemes do not impose any conditions regarding design or affordability, but if they did it would certainly help with planning policy implementation and would send a more coordinated message on sustainable development from the various government bodies involved.

The furtherance of sustainable development, required in the Land Reform Act, alongside improved grant schemes and 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.

Method for Primary Research

A largely qualitative approach was adopted, seeking a wide range of views from key players on existing relevant housing and design policy and possible changes, in NW Scotland. Postal questionnaires (a total of 78), followed up with telephone interviews where necessary, were used to enable a reasonable quantity of responses over a wide area and from varying groups of players. The main purpose was to gather overall impressions of existing policy from primary sources rather than in depth case study information, together with ideas for future progress. The questionnaire responses were also intended to corroborate, or elaborate upon, certain points or assumptions from the literature.

Postal questionnaires were sent to eighteen 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.

Thirty similar postal questionnaires were sent to planning and housing officers and councillors of the three main local authorities in the Highlands and Islands, 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 architects regularly working in the study area, listed in the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS).

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 deliver affordable and good quality design, the relative importance of architect involvement, the relationship between architects and planners, and the relationship between design quality and tourism. Views on what new policy, practice or other assistance is most needed to make a difference, including opinions on the recent community right to buy, were also sought.

The questionnaires were semi-structured with largely closed questions. Choices were given to select from or an agree-disagree scale was used. This facilitated analysis of the responses. An option to provide an alternative to the choices offered was given with some questions, to encourage further comments and ideas.

The questionnaire began by asking for views on existing policy, followed by views on the perceived gap between policy intention and implementation. Finally views on possible policy or practice changes were sought. Analysis of the responses was carried out manually by counting the frequency of mention, or agreement/disagreement, of options put forward in the questions. Other comments made, in response to the open parts of some questions, were summarised and were useful in adding to ideas from the literature. This type of analysis inevitably involved a degree of judgement in categorising responses, but the use of closed questions minimised the researcher interpretation required. Another potential difficulty with the questionnaires was the coverage of both design and affordability together, when many of the respondents may not have responsibility for both areas. This proved to be an insignificant problem in practice, probably because individuals working in this geographic location are less compartmentalised compared to those in denser urban areas in larger bureaucracies. A further problem was that of definition of terms, especially “affordability” and “sustainability”. Given that national bodies in both England and Scotland have yet to formulate appropriate and meaningful definitions, especially applying to rural areas, and both terms are in wide but varied usage, individual respondents were left to make their own interpretation. There was no certainty, therefore, that respondents were interpreting the questions in the same way.

Findings from the questionnaires

Overall the response rate to the questionnaires was good at 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, but very well informed, from a councillor however (out of a possible 9).

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 findings are given in narrative form, under headings corresponding to the broad areas within the questionnaire. The qualitative nature of the data does not lend itself to tabular or box form representation, although some bullet point lists are given for simplification.

Response on existing design policy

There appears to be much current activity on design 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, M points to of having lack of clarity or priority.

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 most architects did appear, however, to hold similar design principles to those that prevail in planning policy, albeit using different language.

Design principles for new rural housing, cited by architects include:

- History and culture of Scotland should be reflected
- Proposals should be site specific and sensitive
- Proposals should be ecologically sound using natural materials with climate awareness
- Low maintenance and high insulation should be integral
- 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

Response on existing affordable housing 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 (that is policies specifying a certain percentage of affordable housing within a proposed development) 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 on both design and affordability fell into seven categories, in the following order of significance:

- 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 of croft housing being scattered rather than concentrated within settlements, hence planning policy working against tradition (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)
- Design policy not strong enough (mentioned mainly by architects)
- Affordability (quota) policy unrealistic (mentioned only by architects)
- Private developers deliver most new housing but most are not convinced of the value of good design and the objective of affordable housing provision can conflict with maximising profits. Most respondents agreed that housing associations and community organisations are most likely to produce affordable housing of good design.

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 in the current climate, and shows the diversity of perceptions and some inter-professional mistrust on the subject. One comment from an architect working in the Highland area helps to explain factors which might hinder architects in their endeavour, and illustrates the importance of the roles of many players: “Clients commonly demand certainty (in terms of time and cost) before innovative or highly original design. Contractors are limited in this area and commonly want to build what they are familiar with and avoid contractual risk and uncertainty that they may associate with one off, client-bespoke, site specific buildings. Mortgage lenders, insurance companies and valuation surveyors need encouragement and experience to recognise the higher money value of good and sustainable design.”

Response on the link between design and tourism

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 of the respondents 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.

Response 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 50% 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, A (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 local authorities in Scotland had any substantial design policy before 1991.

Much central and local government design policy and guidance appears similar to that for rural England although generally less well developed, but implementation of this seems more problematic in NW Scotland largely due to problems associated with costs in a remote location and associated political priorities. The questionnaire responses confirm and add some points to those from the literature, but the responses are more useful in adding qualitative comment than quantitative confirmation.

The setting up of Communities Scotland in 2001 has helped in providing more funding (albeit with costing system problems), 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, and subsequent affordable housing development, 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 community organisations may not necessarily produce more sensitive design. Such organisations might benefit from involvement in the village design statement 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 village design statements, generated by lay people with expert advice and endorsed by officials, can be an important way forward in effecting some power redistribution towards communities and establishing a new balance of governance. Indeed the community right to buy has itself helped to create more power at the community level.

There is quite widespread concern evident, 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 explore the reasons behind the housing design and affordability problems in NW Scotland. Political power balance and priorities as well as funding issues appear to be most important, with poor communication and education being integral too. So change in governance and in perceptions is required.

Changes most likely to help progress include the use of vehicles such as village design statements to improve communication and power balance, creative use of new legislation that could also impact upon power balance, and holistic inclusion of external design and affordability into costing and measurement systems.

Other changes that may be significant include establishment of a clear hierarchy of design guidance between local and national levels so all players act on appropriate advice at key stages, and improved connections between funders and planners, especially on conditions of grants and planning permission. Finally, development of stronger planning design policy and negotiating skills on design are needed, facilitated through improved education.

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