

RUM BYRE - PLANNING FOR REAL EVENT - NOVEMBER 2011



Ken Johnston Planning

RUM BYRE - PLANNING FOR REAL EVENT - NOVEMBER 2011

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Isle of Rum Community Trust has taken ownership and control of many of the built, property and land assets in and around Kinloch Village from the government's natural environment agency Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The Trust and the directors are striving to achieve a viable and sustainable community on the island and to this end SNH has also offered to transfer the old centrally located byre within the village subject to the Trust putting forward viable proposals for the byre and also demonstrating that these proposals have the support of the local community. To this end the Trust arranged for a mini Planning for Real exercise to be carried out on Wednesday 9 November from 2 till 8pm in the community hall, and the next paragraph summarises the outcomes together with further conclusions and recommendations.

2. SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

1. There is very strong community support for the Trust to take ownership of the old byre and excitement at its potential for both the economic and social life of the island.
2. There is very strong community support for the refurbishment, conversion and, if necessary, extension of the byre to accommodate the following uses:-
 - a. Visitor Centre
 - b. Licensed Café / Tearoom (not a pub)
 - c. Village Shop
 - d. Self-catering holiday apartments
 - e. Small craft/food workshops/retail outlets
 - f. IRCT Offices / Ranger Base

1. There is a degree of support for other uses, depending on capacity of the byre and its environs, including toilets (if not within the visitor centre), showers (for visitors), bunkhouse (but see 4 below), education space/laboratory, mini clinic, affordable housing, laundry (for visitors), accommodation for contractors, luxury hotel accommodation.
2. If, structurally, a further floor can be introduced within the byre (albeit in coomb or mezzanine) then there is potentially up to 600 sq m of floorspace and this could comfortably accommodate all the aspirations set out at 2 above plus possibly the teaching space.
3. There is a very strong view from the community that provision of replacement hostel accommodation is urgent, it requires to be built and operational by April 2013, and cannot await the Byre Project.
4. On balance, the community opposes the inclusion of bunkhouse accommodation at the byre but strongly supports such a development at the old pier site. There is also very explicit support for a temporary or rapid-build structure.
5. The community would also support a licensed café / tearoom with an evening restaurant license.
6. There is broad support for the removal of the green shed and other ancillary structures adjacent to the hall, and for the general enhancement of the open community space enclosed by the byre, the hall, the old farmhouse and the pine wood.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 The byre, which is single storey courtyard building and extends to c350 square metres of internal floorspace, is a robust and imposing 19th century stone and slate building with white painted walls over coursed red sandstone, hipped slated roof with galvanised ridging, and many valuable heritage features such as an old smiddy and firestack, original horse stalls and a wooden door with ecclesiastical openings. It is currently used by SNH as a multi-purpose facility with uses including stabling, tack store, animal welfare space, hay and feed

store, estate garage, fire station, tractor garage, chemical store and tool and general storage, mainly set around an enclosed courtyard.

3.2 SNH intends to relocate its operations to a purpose-designed building about 300m to the west on the north side of the Kinloch River and have currently lodged a planning application for erection of a 450 square metre building there. This is likely to be approved by the planning authority thus releasing the byre for community use. SNH will also vacate their existing mechanics workshop (a steel framed and clad 1970s utilitarian structure) together with open and wooded land to the north, east and west of the byre. The Trust already own land and property (village hall and shop, storage sheds, The Farmhouse Bothy Block) in front of and adjacent to the byre.

3.3 The Feasibility Study Brief fully describes the difficulties prevailing in respect of the existing shop, the café currently housed within the village hall, the inadequate and poorly located visitor centre, the cramped castle basement training room / teaching space and the lack of accommodation for visitors. The intention is that the byre will address these issues.

3.4 There is a further factor that bears on the exercise - the likely closure of the castle hostel (58 beds) and bar and bistro restaurant also housed within the castle. For understandable reasons of health and safety, SNH is committed to closing all these facilities most possibly by end of the 2012 season. The Trust, and indeed most (but not all) of the community, strongly supported by SNH officers, are concerned about the likely loss (possibly irreversible) of business that may occur if alternative hostel accommodation is not provided on the island in time for the opening of the April 2013 season. To put this in perspective, the hostel currently runs at full occupancy (58 bedspaces) during April, May, September and October and is 66% full from June to August. Over 3,000 visitors overnight on the island every year and this is with minimum advertising. The concern is that many of the university field trips that come year on year will go elsewhere, establish strong bonds with their new providers, and may not easily be persuaded to return. This would be disastrous for the economy of the island.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE & ORGANISATION OF THE EVENT

4.1 Therefore, the purpose of the exercise was to enable the community to participate in a low key Planning for Real event to ascertain the community's views on:-

- Likely uses for the byre and its environs resulting in a
- Masterplan for the village centre
- How best to replace, either on a temporary or permanent basis, the 58-bedspace hostel currently housed in the castle once it closes (anticipated for October 2012) .

4.2 The event, which was widely pre-advertised, was held in the Community Hall on 9th November over a period of 6 hours from 2 until 8. The island has a population of 31 adults and 7 children and it is estimated that about two-thirds of the adults attended and participated. Nine completed and placed cards on the maps on the table and also participated in discussion with the facilitator Ken Johnston. Extensive notes were taken of all the discussions and further interviews were held with other islanders and these have helped to inform the conclusions set out below.

5. OUTCOMES FROM THE PLANNING FOR REAL EVENT

5.1 A simple compilation of the suggestions/aspirations/ideas set out on the placed cards reveals the following:-

Potential Uses for the Byre

- Visitor Centre - this was suggested and endorsed by almost all of the participants (about 25+) who attended and by 7 of the 9 participants who completed cards and left them on the table
- Licensed Café/Tearoom with good weather outdoor seating area - 6
- Shop - 5
- Self-catering holiday apartments - 5
- Small Craft/Food Workshops with Retail Outlets - 4

- Trust Offices/Ranger Base/Guided Walk Meeting Area - 4
- Toilets (if not within visitor centre or within café) - 3
- Showers for outdoor activities/visiting yachtsmen - 3
- Bunkhouse (either within or immediately adjacent) - 2

- Affordable Housing - 1
- Education Room/Laboratory - 1
- Laundry of visitors - 1
- Medical Consulting Room/Mini-Clinic - 1
- Luxury Hotel to be run by IRCT - 1
- Self-catering accommodation for contractors

Other inputs

- Consider providing a clear glass roof over the internal courtyard - 1
- Any new bunkhouse should be located at the byre not at the old pier - 3
- Provision of replacement bunkhouse is urgent and should be prioritised - 2
- "Temporary" bunkhouse should be provided at the old pier - 1
- The mechanics' workshop should be retained for community storage -1
- The mechanics' workshop should be demolished but its foundations retained for future use - 1
- An upper floor patio decking feature could be created above the tractor shed -1
- Need to provide good views outward from the byre to the sea / mountains - 1
- Consider installing moorings in Loch Scresort Bay -1
- Press Highland Council to adopt the road albeit not to adoptive standard - 1
- Demolish and clear old green shed - 1
- Site at old Back Bothy could accommodate a house plot or a semi-detached house plot possibly with its occupancy tied to the craft units - 1
- Provide alternative parking so as to free-up the open community space in front of the byre - 1
- The development of the Byre must include energy efficient solutions -1
- Concern about "overdevelopment" possibly creating inappropriate suburbia - this is a reference to the perceived combined proposed chalet beside

Tattie House, the new croft house at Croft No 1, and the prospects of additional development at Back Bothy, or behind or on the site of the current SNH workshop.

5.2 The formal written outputs from the PFR event, set out above, can be augmented by my interviews with the participants both at the event itself and during the three days from 6 to 8 October. The main points made to me were as follows:-

- There is a firm belief in the community that the castle hostel will definitely close by end October 2012 and possibly sooner if any health and safety issues or major repair cost items arise
- The community view is that the continued provision of this hostel accommodation (58 bed-spaces) is central to the local economy, therefore, alternative provision must be ready by April 2013. There is a view that, having built up a strong liaison with various universities and training providers over the years, if no alternative accommodation is immediately available, the island may lose this trade for the long term.
- There is a clear and substantial majority view that timeous replacement can only be achieved by importing and installing temporary buildings or static caravans (currently known by the islanders to be available second-hand from Annat, Corpach) although there is a recognition that these structures are alien to the character and landscape of the island. However, it is felt that this can be mitigated by methods such as screening, timber cladding and sensitive siting.
- There is a firm belief in the community that the transfer of the byre and its land parcel from SNH to the IRCT will take up to 18 months meaning that, given the timescale for closure of the castle hostel, the byre is not an option for use as bunkhouse/hostel accommodation.
- There is a strong view that the byre project represents an exceptional opportunity to create a top quality visitor and social hub to the village and that it is more important to get it right than to rush it. This gives added impetus and justification to locating the replacement bunkhouse elsewhere.
- It was pointed out to me that a bunkhouse near the old pier would benefit from linkages to the campsite/camping-cabins development and would still

help to underpin the Byre Project. It is only about 850m distant - a negligible walking or cycling distance for outdoor enthusiasts. Several participants suggested a second prospective site for a bunkhouse - within the woodland seaward of the SNH Office building between the two roads.

- There are very strong local views that a pub or bar facility would not be appropriate to the Byre Project. When I asked if this may be acceptable if it were a family-friendly facility, participants clearly favoured a licensed café or tearoom, possibly operating in the evenings with a restaurant license.
- Several residents pointed out the prospects of selective thinning of the woodland to the east to achieve views of the bay (they are impressive !) and indeed one suggested creating a walk-out patio decking above the tractor shed (see 5.1 above). It was also pointed out to me that midges are a problem and that any outdoor seating area should be carefully located.
- The community also were very much alive to the prospects of creating an attractive community space / civic village square by enhancing the existing space and linking it to the community ranger's riverside wildlife garden.
- Many participants mentioned the need to protect the character of the old byre and retain as many original features as possible. There was general agreement that the "fire station" and "chemical store" lean-to structures should be removed.
- While supportive of the principle, there are concerns from some nearby residents that any noisy or late night activities established in the byre would adversely impact on their privacy, tranquillity and amenity.
- One couple suggested that a room be allocated in the byre project for a clinic consultancy for visiting GPs, district nurse, dentist, and specialist health care staff. [could costs be sourced from NHS?]
- Many residents were clearly of the view that a range of visitor accommodation - camping-bunkhouse-B & B-self-catering-guest house - was required but that the accommodation type most suited to the byre was self-catering apartments.
- One couple suggested that further residential accommodation, in the form of affordable social housing, should be provided in or around the site of the former Back Bothy.

- There was a general view, in response to my question, that the IRCT should act as a facilitator/provider in terms of the Byre Project, and then franchise out the various spaces / elements for others to operate as businesses.
- Many residents pointed out that development of two hostels/bunkhouses (each of 25 or 30 bed-spaces) would be viable in Kinloch. They also advised that in earlier days a great many of the local houses operated as seasonal bed and breakfast and many ran as 6 or 8 bed-space bunkhouse facilities. In the 1980s, as many as 120 visitors would overnight on the island.
- Several residents drew attention to the capacity of electric power being a constraint to any future development in and around Kinloch, stressing the need for innovative energy solutions.
- Whole range of other verbal inputs including need for accommodation to be dog-friendly, prospects of "Isle of Rum" branding particularly for venison, need to attract more yachtsmen and sailors, etc

5.3 Of course the masterplan that evolves from the above consultation inputs must fairly represent the views of the community and that is what the next paragraph endeavours to do.

6. MASTERPLAN FOR VILLAGE CENTRE

6.1 The IRCT has already prepared and issued a good and comprehensive Feasibility Study Brief to several architects inviting them to tender for the project, subject of course to the IRCT's funding applications being successful. The uses mooted in the brief - shop, café, visitor centre, teaching space and self-contained accommodation - fit with the suggestions emanating from the PFR event.

6.2 The byre is a central focus within the village. Arriving from the ferry and approaching the building after crossing the old stone bridge, the building itself is framed by the traditional old farmhouse with its lawned frontage on the east and by the attractive stand of Scots Pine trees to the west. The byre is a focal point at the end of this vista and readily offers itself to a use and purpose that equals this prominence - this again endorses the proposed mix of commercial

and community uses. The building frontage could be significantly enhanced by removing the lean-to structures (old fire station) on its frontage and consideration should be given to sandblasting the frontage and taking it back to the original stonework. The proposed new uses would require a substantial number of new openings - windows, patios and doorways.

6.2 It is important not to prejudge or unduly constrain the architects' freedom and artistry to design the use of space functionally and creatively, but it is clear, from a quick floor area calculation, that the existing ground floor could readily accommodate a visitor centre, licensed café, village shop, teaching space, small retail craft/food units and an IRCT office. An upper floor could be provided within the structure and, aided by insertion of sensitively designed dormer windows, could accommodate four self-catering units each of about 60 square metres with possibly two shared access stairways onto the internal courtyard. Again, I would be cautious about influencing or encroaching on the architects' skills to design and spatially arrange.

6.3 Externally there is significant scope to create a village community space in front of the byre. The extensive existing space can be expanded and upgraded by removal of the byre lean-to's, removal of the green shed, and relocation of the two sheds alongside the shop. The hall, with its eroded grass surface, requires improved access (including disabled access), and a new drystone dyke or an extension of the woven screen fence with frontage planting between the old farmhouse and the shop, would help to give the space good containment, while providing an access down to the wildlife garden at the riverside. The oil tank should also be screened, and the attractive rustic benches and tables given an early coat of preservative. Some selective thinning of the woodland to the east of the byre would allow good outward views to sea to be created.

6.4 The majority community view was to remove the mechanics' workshop and simply plant the area to act as a buffer between the byre and the adjacent housing but, see below, I would urge the community to consider this further. There is scope for both a bunkhouse (to the west) and a house (for local need) near or on the site of the former Back Bothy. However, as I indicated, this view is not shared by the majority of participants at the PFR event.

7. CONCLUSIONS & ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 As indicated at 5.3 above, I am very conscious that this report must faithfully represent the islanders' own suggestions and I have ensured that it does. However, having studied the area and the residents' inputs fairly extensively I would like to add my own views for consideration.

7.2 The Byre Project is an exceptional opportunity to create a vibrant commercial and community development and I would concur with many of the participants' inputs that it needs careful planning and designing to ensure we achieve the best outcome for the community and the island. Therefore, it is important that it is not prepared with undue haste.

7.2 There is a market for a minimum of 60 bunkhouse bedspaces and this should be aimed for. To avoid creating a large out-of-scale urban-type building this could be proved by two separate buildings - one at the old pier site and a second in the vicinity of the old byre. The second would help with achieving a critical economic mass at and around the byre. This could be sited within the woodland to the west of the byre, either as a stand-alone building, or, preferably, as an extension to the existing building. Service access could be taken via the existing hard-standing (with the mechanics' workshop demolished) and with additional reinforced buffer planting to protect the amenity of Rock and Lea Cottages and the Tattie House. Customer access would be taken via the low level garden west of the byre so as to separate and to minimise any impact on the residential property.

7.3 If there is an urgency to replace the hostel accommodation such that there is a limited timescale to organise and develop a traditional or timber-frame new build hostel, consideration should be given to a "rapid build" construction. A number of construction companies specialise in this and employ skilled architects to "design" the building to fit local circumstance and setting and, given the drive-on ferry access this is certainly worth pursuing.

7.4 There is an opportunity to create a further house plot within the soft ground in the vicinity of the former Back Bothy. With careful siting this could achieve good separation so as to safeguard the amenities currently enjoyed by the nearby housing. With the two existing houses, plus the Tattie House and the proposed chalet, and the proposed croft house for the new tenants at Croft No.1, it would be appropriate to introduce a further house - either a single house or a semi-detached unit.

8. HIGHLAND COUNCIL PLANS & POLICIES

8.1 The proposals set out at paragraph's 6 and 7 above and, with the likely exception noted at paragraph 8.3 below, and subject to detailing and site specific considerations, generally comply with the Council's Local Plan which shows the whole area to be within a *Settlement Development Area* where development would normally be supported subject to compliance with Structure Plan policy G2. This policy advises that planning applications will be assessed in accordance with a wide range of criteria including, *inter alia*, design and location, provision of utilities, energy utilisation, flooding potential, impact on amenity, and the extent to which they contribute to the social and economic development of the community.

8.2 I have also checked the proposals against the various safeguards/constraints - National Nature Reserve, National Scenic Area, Special Area of Conservation, Special Protection Area, Designed Landscape (Kinloch Castle Gardens), Site of Special Scientific Interest, and can see no conflicts.

8.3 It is likely that temporary structures such as portable buildings, static caravans and other box shaped modular, possibly alien, structures, could be interpreted by the planning authority as being contrary to policy G2 unless major mitigation measures were employed to soften their impact within this important government-designated National Scenic Area.

Ken Johnston
14 November 2011