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Pursuing development through community connection

Spotlight Session – Housing Leverburgh Community Hub 6th May 2024

David Macdonald (Harris Forum Development Officer) opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and explaining that the Harris Forum was in the process of updating the Harris Plan to be, less of a list of projects, and more an objective based document that would be based on the National Islands Plan.

Everyone present then introduced themselves and noted any group affiliation they may have in Harris.

Mairi Maciver (Community Learning & Development) described the Place Based Toolkit and how the session would work.

The first question was: **Is there a good mix of housing types in your place?**

Responders felt that, particularly in Leverburgh, there is too many air BnB properties in the area calling it the 'Air BnB Capital of Scotland'. Others noted this is most keenly felt in the winter when only sporadic lights are on as your drive through the area.

It was noted that of the 22 crofts only 7 were residents all year round which is only 32%.

Other respondents noted that the result of this was that there were very few young people housed in the area which was having a direct impact on the economy of the community.

Another result of the number of houses being used as short-term accommodation is that it reduces the supply on the market and increases the price. One responder said that not a single property in Leverburgh hasn't doubled in value over the past ten years whilst salaries have not followed suit.

It was also noted that there aren't enough supported living properties. There is no rehabilitation and no stepping stone into full-time care.

With regards to the social housing stock time was spent discussing the scoring system and responders felt that this was deeply flawed and not supporting the housing crisis.



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The second question was: **Are resident areas attractive (well maintained, well laid out with communal areas?)**

Some time was spent discussing the infrastructure that is linked to housing, particularly infrastructure relating to children. It is noted that a fully functioning nursery and playpark are two examples of linked infrastructure that is crucial to be progressed alongside any affordable housing programme. An objective was raised with this in regard to housing especially in Leverburgh.

It was also noted that the burden for maintaining and upgrading resident areas was falling onto volunteer boards rather than statutory bodies.

However, positive comments were made about the local Dunmore Crescent area of social housing that has recently been upgraded and makes the village of Leverburgh much more visually pleasing.

Most responders were clear in their concerns that the energy efficiency of the housing stock was more important than their physical appearance. It was noted that the cost of upgrades with regard to insulation and energy efficiency is much higher on Harris than it is on the mainland.

The third question was: **Are homes and places able to adapt?**

Responders' reaction to this question was mainly in relation to public services. Can our current public service offer cope with an increase in social and affordable housing stock? Most in the room felt that it couldn't and that there would need to be an increase in school sizes, staffing, health care etc. for the increased housing provision.

With specific reference to Leverburgh it was noted that there was a real need for year round employment rather than season based employment to attract people to live there and for the area to truly adapt.

The final question was: **Is there a good community spirit?**

The overwhelming majority of responders felt that our Harris communities were welcoming and supportive of each other. Many specific examples were provided with reference given to the renaissance of the Harris Football club which has united the community through events etc.

It was also noted that it is a different community to even a decade ago and that changes have impacted the community and the types of events that brought people together. For example, crofting and the cutting of peats used to be a uniting event for the community which is now no longer so readily practiced.

It was noted that church numbers are dwindling and yet the local church in Leverburgh runs a well-attended café that has brought the community together.



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Other community events, such as community dances, have disappeared from the calendar which was noted with disappointment from certain responders.

A final note was made that often it is the same volunteers who are having to volunteer on numerous groups and boards to ensure the high levels of community spirit and engagement.

When asked to sum up the scale of housing provision out of 7 (with seven being the best) the general feeling in the room was that currently Harris is 3 out of 7.

David Macdonald (Harris Forum Development Officer) thanked everyone for coming and for their contributions. He also thanked Mairi Maciver (CLD) for facilitating and the meeting was ended.