

Land Reform Review Group Call for Evidence

Response by Blair Atholl & Struan Community Council

January 2013

Introduction

Blair Atholl & Struan Community Council represents a large area of Highland Perthshire. The Council's area is predominantly rural, much of this upland farm land and deer forest. The main settlement is Blair Atholl which provides limited services. The main employers are Atholl Estates and House of Bruar, although a large number of residents are retired or semi-retired, while others travel outside the area to work in places such as Pitlochry or Perth.

Land for Housing

We are aware of some demand for "affordable" rented housing in and immediately around the village of Blair Atholl. Some of those seeking this accommodation are currently in houses rented from one of the estates, and are seeking to move because their current house is either unsuitable for their needs or outside the main settlement.

There are several private properties which have been on the market for some time and we therefore assume that currently there is no significant demand for housing for purchase. The settlement boundaries of Blair Atholl have been more or less the same for over 100 years, and now, apart from a small site which is under investigation and possibly a few plots within large gardens, there does not appear to be any land for further building within that boundary. The available land in the immediate vicinity of the village is also constrained by the Category A listing of Blair Castle and its surrounding policies.

Further expansion will have to come from the surrounding farmland. The Community Council is concerned that any decision as to which land to sell will be taken by one of the estates and that there will be no opportunity for consultation until a planning application is submitted, with the consequent problems of short timescales to gather community views and submit a balanced response. In general, developers tend to deal directly with the Planning Authorities (in our case Perth & Kinross Council and Cairngorms National Park Authority) when drawing up their plans. We believe that the Community Council has an important role to play in the early stages of drawing up plans so that the community is actively involved and the final plans help to meet the aspirations and reduce the concerns of the area.

Management of Estates

On the death of the 10th Duke of Atholl the title passed overseas. However, he made arrangements to ensure that management of the estates would remain locally. We do not know how this will continue in future, but are pleased that it is not in the hands of an absentee landlord.

The other local estates are all privately owned. Most, if not all, of the larger ones are owned and managed by private individuals who spend most of their time in the area, although some have other business interests.

We recognise that all estates are businesses that must generate an income in order to survive. Except when a specific issue arises, the Community Council has no formal contact with land owners. However, we have good informal links, particularly with those whose activities and responsibilities have a significant impact on the wider community. We hope that this can continue. However, the current arrangements give no guarantee that local views will be considered in any major decisions. In particular, there is nothing to prevent an estate being sold to a party who has no interest in or connection with the local community or to prevent such a party managing the estate in a way that inflicts serious damage on the long-term viability of the estate and its surrounding area. Any solution to this issue would inevitably be political in nature and it is therefore inappropriate for the Community Council to offer an opinion except to the extent that it is identifying advantages and disadvantages of alternative ways forward.

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