

## **AREA CAPACITY EVALUATION RELATIVE TO ARDTUN, ISLE OF MULL**

### Area Capacity Evaluation in respect of Cul A Mhill, Ardtun, Buessan, Isle of Mull

#### a) Purpose of the assessment

This assessment has been undertaken in accordance with the Supplementary Planning Guidance approved by the Council on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2009.

In this case, the evaluation is triggered on the basis of a house for a bareland croft, on land that has been subdivided with four house plots having been separated from a larger croft in the past (formerly known as Torr Na Locha Croft). Plots subdivided off have references 02/01478/OUT, 03/01460/OUT, 05/00564/OUT, and 05/00567/OUT. All of those plots have been subject to subsequent detailed applications running between 2005 and 2009. None of those plots were submitted with a claim of locational or operational need, nor was such justification sought prior to granting the initial outline applications.

Two different designs have been submitted for a house on the same proposed site, because the applicants seek a decision on both prospective designs. The site lies within a 'rural opportunity area', refined by the adopted Landscape Capacity Study of December 2009 (LCS), which identifies the site within a 'Red Area' not recommended for development. On such land, the Planning Authority assesses applications on the basis of the land being 'sensitive countryside'. Although single croft houses, and single additional houses on crofts, are supported in principle by Argyll and Bute Structure Plan 2002 Policy STRAT DC5 part (A) (subject also to compliance with STRAT AC1), the existence of more than one previous additional house on croft land necessitates assessment of the current proposal as a 'special case' under STRAT DC5 part (B) which includes a requirement for a formal area capacity evaluation (ACE).

The Council's adopted guidance requires that the findings should be made available to applicants and/or agents and to Members in advance of the determination of any related planning application(s) in order that, if necessary, there is an opportunity to prepare a response to the findings for consideration by Committee at the time the application(s) is/are determined and the ACE is given consideration as part of that determination process.

The area to be assessed should be identified as a wider 'area of common landscape character' within which the prospective development site(s) is/are located. ACE's will be considered by Members at the same time as the related development proposal(s) is/are being determined, and once endorsed will become a material consideration in respect of any future applications within that ACE compartment.

#### b) Area of Common Landscape Character

The application site and bareland croft lie within the northern section of an expansive 'rural opportunity area' (ROA), encompassing Ardtun in the centre and north, Knockan to the east, Loch Assapol to the south, and almost reaching Eorabus to the west. The Landscape Capacity Study recognises that the settlement pattern forms distinct clusters of development that are separated from each other within the wider ROA. The ACE compartment to be reviewed through this process may legitimately be restricted to the land spurring north from the Knockan to Lower Ardtun public road. The compartment straddles land rising from the foreshore in the east, crossing the settled area and includes improved fields and contained grazing fields as far as their boundary with open moorland to the west. The eastern and western boundaries follow

existing mapped fence lines. The north of the compartment is defined by a raised knoll. The entire site and croft are visually perceived within this northern settled part of the ROA.

The ROA was identified through the local plan as a generally homogenous and relatively low lying area with some potential to absorb small scale development which would be capable of reinforcing the established settlement pattern in the locality and which could be accommodated without compromising the landscape character of the area. Its character is distinct from the lower lying shore to the east and from the slightly more elevated undeveloped land which bounds the ROA to the north and west, which is included within the 'sensitive countryside' zone. The public road forms the southern compartment boundary.

The local plan allocation was refined by the 2009 LCS, because the ROA also lies within an Area of Panoramic Quality. The study identifies large areas of the ROA which are not considered appropriate for development (Red Areas), whilst identifying a number of opportunities for strengthening the established clusters of development spread throughout the ROA (Orange Areas).

The ACE compartment is in an area categorised by the Scottish Natural Heritage *Landscape Assessment of Argyll and the Firth of Clyde 1996* as 'Basalt Lowlands', characterised by:

- Indented coastline – low headlands with a distinctive stepped profile
- Open moorland broken by rocky outcrops and ledges
- Scattered small-holdings and cottages on the edge of the moor
- Gently undulating landform, between 20m and 60m AOD, with numerous rocky outcrops of varying height and size.

Within the ACE compartment, there are different areas of common landscape character as illustrated on the plans attached to this evaluation, and detailed in the matrix below. The application site lies beyond the northern edge of the gently sloping grazed fields that constitute the majority of the croft, and occupies a slightly steeper, more rugged landscape with bracken vegetation cover, leading into scrub vegetation across the raised rocky knoll further north.

### c) Key Environmental Features

Most of the ACE compartment is open moorland comprising rough grazing and areas of bracken and heather, along with substantial areas of grazed fields on similar, gently sloping low lying land. There is very little tree cover. Existing housing development is made up of two patterns of development. The main development has a linear form, staggered on both sides of the private track that runs from the end of the public road and bounds the west of the croft. Housing here is a mixture of ages with orientations running both parallel with and perpendicular to the private track which gives visual interest. 'Achnahard Mobile Home' marks the start of the linear development, which then comprises three modern houses (2006, 2008 and 2009) and a barn within the croft boundary, before terminating at 'Highfields' at the northern end of the settlement. A second arc of three houses occupies lower lying land around the eastern fringe of the croft. Two of these houses are fairly recent (2006 – 2008) and one appears to be much older. Of the housing within the compartment, four units all dating since 2006, have been separated from the former Torr Na Lochs croft and the remaining croft has a significantly reduced boundary.

The key environmental features comprise open moorland, improved fields and fenced rough grazing fields throughout the majority of the ACE compartment. The shoreline and foreshore strip is a smaller key environmental feature to the east, and a slightly raised knoll to the north acts as a containing feature. Open views exist across much of the site toward the Treshnish Isles and Ardmeanach to the north and north-east. Existing housing is collectively perceived as a settlement.

The overall character of development in this area of Ardtun is one of scattered housing, but it is made up of the distinctive elements of staggered linear development along a private track running north south through the compartment, where the varied orientation of the houses disguises the linear arrangement; and the lower lying arc of three houses occupying a less prominent part of the landscape when viewed from the east. Perception of these three houses changes to one of greater isolation from the rest of the settlement as you approach the site from the south. Housing is generally well spaced out, traditionally styled and finished, set within a loose cluster that gives a cohesive appearance at present.

#### d) Capacity to Absorb Development Successfully

The character of this rural area is one of a moorland with rough grazing and grazed fields and a low density settlement. Development historically has been laid out in a linear fashion along two parallel access tracks, one relatively close to the coast, and the other further inland terminating at the property known as Highfields. In both cases, buildings have been sited close to the linear means of access serving the buildings. Better agricultural land has been avoided, including the fields separating the development along each of the two access tracks. This has led to the maintenance of open views out over the sea across this undeveloped land on the approach to the buildings at Ardtun from the south.

Of the five houses approved in the area since 2006, three follow the line of the track running to 'Highfields' and two occupy lower lying land closer to the shore. Four of these houses have been segregated from the former Torr Na Locha croft and the remaining 'bareland croft' is considerably smaller than previously existed.

The largely linear north – south alignment of property has, however, been disrupted latterly by the permission and construction of a substantial dwelling known as Tigh Aigan Oir. This breaks away from the established pattern of settlement, being located out in the open, orientated to take advantage of commanding sea views, and accessed by a long driveway from the track which serves other property. It is a prominent and discordant feature in the landscape which attracts disproportionate attention by the manner in which it intrudes into the openness of the intervening fields separating the two fingers of development at Artun, and by the way in which it interrupts views available out over the sea. This house has disrupted the established predominantly north – south alignment of buildings and has created a horseshoe shaped loose grouping of properties. Whilst spacing between buildings has been maintained, it has resulted in a less rigid and more organic grouping of dwellings which lends itself to the consideration of further opportunities to be able to insert additional buildings without compromising the current pattern of settlement.

e) Alternative Development Opportunities

Having regard to the current layout of buildings in a loose horseshoe shaped arrangement with relatively even spacing, it is evident that there is opportunity to site an additional house in the above average spacing remaining between Tigh Aigan Oir, Highfields to the north-west and the remaining buildings along the track leading to Highfields. This would replicate the existing settlement pattern by consolidating the horseshoe shaped form of development and would allow for the siting of a further house without breaking out into areas hitherto undeveloped, and without locating buildings uncharacteristically close together. Whilst a dwelling in this location would impinge upon views out over the sea, this aspect across the settlement of Ardtun has already been compromised by the presence of Tigh Aigan Oir and accordingly the introduction of a further dwelling, particularly if it were to be of a lesser scale and less imposing upon its surroundings, would not seriously worsen the situation which already exists, and which has been compromised by the siting of a prominent building out in the open fields away from the two historic access tracks..

The development of a property in this location would respect and reinforce the current settlement pattern as influenced by the building of Tigh Aigan Oir, and would maintain an appropriate distribution and spacing of properties, thereby maintaining and reinforcing the loose cluster of development at Ardtun. Were it to be built, it would however represent the limit of the development potential of the croft, and there would be no remaining development potential within the ACE compartment to the east of the road leading to Highfields. Any other potential for development within the ACE compartment would be confined to the west of the road leading to Highfields, within the orange area identified by the Mull Landscape Capacity Study, being limited to one or two further dwellings, at which point the development capacity of Ardtun would then have been reached.