

John McLuckie 0:22

Hello and welcome to this episode of The Argyll and Bute Community Planning Podcast. I'm John McLuckie, Partnerships Lead for Community Planning in Argyll and Bute, and with the next Community Planning Partnership event focusing on housing, joining me today is Douglas Whyte, Housing Strategy Manager with Argyll and Bute Council. Douglas, welcome to the podcast.

Douglas Whyte 0:40

Thanks John.

John McLuckie 0:42

Can we start Douglas just by asking you about your role and how the role of your team links into local community planning.

Douglas Whyte 0:50

Yeah, well, I'm the team lead for housing strategy with Argyll and Bute Council. As most people will know, the Council doesn't have any housing stock anymore, but we're still the strategic Housing Authority within Argyll and Bute and have various statutory duties to fulfil, including Local Housing Strategy, Strategic Housing Investment Plan, which coordinates all the delivery of new build affordable housing through the Housing Associations, and we've worked quite closely with yourself, John and colleagues in terms of the Outcomes Improvement Plan. Obviously, housing is one of the three key priorities, so I think that's enabled closer working with yourselves and colleagues within Community Planning.

John McLuckie 1:35

Yeah, yeah, so just interested in yourself and if you could tell us a bit about your sort of background in housing?

Douglas Whyte 1:43

Well, I've been working in housing for 25 years now. From Oban, like yourself.

John McLuckie 1:49

Long service award.

Douglas Whyte 1:51

Yes, I've been in our working in housing in Argyll and Bute for over 20 years. I came back to this area and started off with a focus on the homeless service within Argyll, but the good thing about working in housing in Argyll and Bute is that because we don't have the housing stock, there's all sorts of different housing issues that come up that we get involved in. So, I've dealt with private sector housing grants, we deal with the Area-based Scheme in terms of delivering energy efficiency to houses in the private sector. We deal with housing support, so we work with third sector partners like Carr Gomm and the HELP Project to deliver housing support to people who've come through the homeless route, and also to people to try and help them sustain their accommodation. We've also got Empty Homes Officers, and we'll maybe talk a little bit later about the Empty Homes Officer working with the Health and Social Care Partnership.

John McLuckie 2:48

Well that's quite a wide-ranging and comprehensive background you've just articulated there. So that's really interesting, thank you. Can I just ask why you think housing is so critical to community planning in Argyll and Bute?

Douglas Whyte 3:01

Yeah, I mean I think it's really critical and obviously the communities within Argyll and Bute have identified that because it's one of the top three priorities that they want us to address. I think you need suitable housing in the right places in communities, and Argyll and Bute's a vast Local Authority area. We've got nine Housing Market Areas within the Local Authority and an example of that would be, you know, Mull and Iona or Cowal or Bute, so even the Housing Market Areas cover reasonable areas of Argyll and Bute. So, we work at that level to get agreement with the Scottish Government in terms of bringing in finance so that houses can be built through the housing associations, but we also work with community groups and community trusts within Housing Market Areas, because there could be parts of a Housing Market Area where there may not be so much pressure on housing, but within the Housing Market Area, community groups come forward to us with specific requirements within their, kind of, villages or specific areas. So, we've got a Community Housing Network group that meets on a quarterly basis, and there's a lot of community trusts like Mull and Iona, Colonsay, Lismore. We're getting new groups all

the time because I think the reputation of that group is good, but all we're doing is coordinating services and being a single point of contact, but we realise that if you're outside the Council, it can be quite a daunting experience trying to speak to planning and roads and housing and trying to work out how you can actually deliver houses and make a meaningful difference, and I think the Health and Social Care Empty Homes post is a good example of how housing is so critical to communities because we've got lots of islands in Argyll and Bute and care and health provision needs to be delivered in those areas, and we need to help Health and Social Care to find proper housing solutions and that could be short term accommodation, but good quality accommodation for maybe people coming over for two to three-four weeks at a time to deliver essential services within communities. So, we're just looking at all different angles of housing and how we can help enable essential services to be delivered across the area.

John McLuckie 5:26

Absolutely, a lot of key points that you were talking about there, and I wanted to ask as well in terms of Argyll and Bute Council being the first Local Authority in Scotland to declare a housing emergency, how do you think that declaration ties in with what community's priorities are?

Douglas Whyte 5:43

Yeah, well, Argyll and Bute declared a housing emergency, the first in Scotland. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing, but I think it's a good thing to recognise that the pressures that the housing system was under and we managed to have our partner day in Dunbeg. That was a while ago now, but it was good to have Community Planning Partnership reps there and different partners, not necessarily directly related to housing, but housing had an impact on their businesses or the way they worked, so I think pulling through from that was the Housing Emergency Action Plan, so we were able to speak to partners and get agreement on what different actions they could assist with.

So, I think having that structure around tackling the housing emergency has been very helpful and it's probably led to some better understanding of different roles of partners in relation to housing and how different partners can bring potential innovative solutions to the table, and I think, you know, we've managed to get, a good example, I guess is there were two empty properties on the island of Coll. Empty for a good number of years, NHS owned, but there was a real requirement for health and social care staff to be on that island delivering services, so we managed to get agreement, a funding package together to bring those properties back into use, and I think one of them is now occupied and the other one well on its way, and I think the housing emergency just pulled together lots of different agencies and everyone said, well, what can we do? What do we need?

How can we look at this in a different way and deliver solutions that will contribute to the delivery of more suitable housing to try and ease the pressure on the housing market?

John McLuckie 7:32

Yeah and I think as well that you've touched on some of the areas of focus for the Community Planning Partnership which is to work to address inequalities.

So in terms of housing, are there other examples of some of the housing inequalities that your team is helping to address?

Douglas Whyte 7:46

Yeah. I mean, I think one good example would be the work we're doing with the Gypsy travelling community in Argyll and Bute. We've got a working group set up with community representatives on that group. Again, accommodation was quite a key theme for them within the sites. There's two official sites within Argyll and Bute, and the, the residents on those sites were keen to see improvements and potentially deliver more pitches on those sites to meet demand.

So, we are working with ACHA, Argyll Community Housing Association, and the Scottish Government and I think we've managed to secure agreement from the Government that improvements to pitches and sites could be included in the overall housing supply programme as a recognition that it is accommodation, permanent accommodation for people. So, I think that's a really good example and there's been a lot of good work carried out through that group, Community Planning Partners. We've had a couple of events in Oban and we've met up in Lochgilphead as well, just to get communities involved, and again, it's breaking down barriers, isn't it? It's trying to have services available to chat and, and explain what they can do, because we're all here to help. So, I think that's a good example and I think there's Equalities Impact Assessments run right through the, the local housing strategy and you know we're trying to deliver houses that are affordable. We're also trying to make best use of houses that are already here in terms of delivering the energy efficiency improvements, which is, you can see marked reductions in heating bills which will help everyone in those households. So, there's quite a lot of different examples across housing where we're trying to address inequalities.

John McLuckie 9:36

Yeah, absolutely, thanks very much, I was going to ask you as well. I'm quite interested to find out what do you think some of the kind of key developments in housing that residents of Argyll

and Bute can expect to see in the next few years. Is there anything, you know interesting and innovative coming up?

Douglas Whyte 9:52

Yeah. I mean, I think we're always working with the housing associations to try and deliver new housing, new build housing. People will know there's planning in for the next phase of Dunbeg for example. We're going round the Community Planning Partnerships, highlighting the different developments in, in each area. I think we'll hopefully continue to work with community groups and particularly on some of the islands like Lismore and Luing. You know, we just feel in Argyll and Bute, delivering two or three houses can make a real impact and an improvement in communities. I think the Housing Emergency Action Plan was put in four main themes or priorities, and one of them was to deliver more housing for workers and also to make best use of existing homes in Argyll and Bute, and again, the health and social care, empty homes work that's going on there is delivering solutions across the board. We're looking at a property near Oban which ACHA own, which we're maybe, we're hoping to turn into a house of multiple occupation for workers to come to the area to deliver services. Because I think in the west of Argyll, it's that bit more difficult to travel, and if you don't have staff in the area that have got the skills. And that's another part of the housing emergency, how do we, kind of deliver training and make the communities or help communities of Argyll become more, kind of self-sufficient or resilient in terms of what skills are required to help a community, kind of function and look after each other when required?

John McLuckie 11:25

Important points, absolutely, and just touching on some of the aspects, I guess, that the Community Planning Partnership are considering in terms of housing, is there an example you can give around the topic of land and partner assets?

Douglas Whyte 11:41

Yeah. You would imagine that Argyll and Bute being such a big area there wouldn't be any problems with identifying land for, for building houses and the Local Development Plan does identify land, but there can still be issues in terms of delivering housing on that land and it can take a long time and we might have partners within the Community Planning Partnership, not just land, but maybe buildings that are no longer being used and could we convert existing buildings into residential accommodation, and one example of that is in Bowmore on Islay,

where there was a dental surgery that's been lying vacant for a number of years, and we've now got approval, well planning approval for change of use and also the funding package in place to convert that into two en-suite rooms within walking distance of the hospital in Bowmore. I think another example would be when we've got the Rural Growth Deal within Argyll and Bute and one of the housing projects is in Tobermory, where we're hoping to deliver housing for workers. So, if somebody gets a job on Mull and they can't take it because there's no housing, we're going to try and deliver, kind of landing pad accommodation where people stay there and then we identify more long-term housing options. Now, that land that we're using was Council-owned, so having a knowledge and awareness of land that might be available is really important, and I also think as well as land, you've said buildings, and just for people and different community planning partners to have a good think about what they might have in terms of assets that we could actually use and turn into affordable housing.

John McLuckie 13:28

Mmmhmm, mmmhmm, that's great, thanks very much for that, and it's certainly something that the Committee Planning Partnership working with yourselves will be developing and working on for the duration of Outcomes Improvement Plan, which is over the next nine years. And I think as well, I'd be interested in terms of how the communities in a wider sense can input to the discussion on housing. Is there a sort of mechanism that they can feedback to yourselves as a housing team on what some of the issues are?

Douglas Whyte 13:57

Yeah. I mean, at the moment we're actually carrying out a Housing Need and Demand Assessment. There is the first stage of that and that's the household surveys. So, we've identified a good percentage of households across Argyll and Bute who will have been subjected to a, like, questionnaire, but that's all really important for us to get below the surface of what the real housing need and demand is across the area. But at the moment there's also the follow up to that, is there is an ability for any interested household or individual to participate in that and I think there's QR codes and information on the website and the Council social media channels as to how you can do that. So, we're really keen for anybody to input and I guess the other way of feeding back is through Local Place Plans. You know, but it's quite important that, you know, housing could become a priority within Local Place Plans, but it's really important that if communities are looking at housing as a priority, that they speak to us as well because we've got a Community Housing Assessment Toolkit process, which we've used with a couple of communities and it's just so that we can understand what communities are saying and individuals are saying and maybe sometimes give realistic expectations around what can be delivered, but we always want to hear from communities as to what their views are

because people in communities will have the best idea of what is going on in their area. So, it's really, really important and hopefully people can look at the website and find ways of contacting us.

John McLuckie 15:32

Fantastic, and I think that's a really pertinent point to finish the conversation on at the moment, but it'd be great to have you back in future episodes, Douglas, and we could just have a further conversation and see how things have progressed, as we all look at taking all these myriad housing issues forward.

Douglas Whyte 15:48

Yeah, I'd be delighted to come back.

John McLuckie 15:50

Fantastic, so just to say thank you very much for joining me for this episode of the Argyll and Bute Community Planning Podcast. Thank you.

Douglas Whyte 15:58

Thanks John