
From:
Subject:

West Highlands and Islands Local Development Plan
FW: West Highland and Islands Local Development Plan [#239]

Section Alan Donald

**1: Your
personal
and
contact
details**

1.1

Name *

1.2 Are a member of the public
you? *

Select a Tell us your vision for the area
topic to
comment
on

4.2 What do you think are the best, existing assets and characteristics of the area? Think of your favourite landscapes, settlements, journeys, events and meeting places.

I am writing to express some opinions on the proposed West Highlands and Islands Local Development Plan revision, which has only just been brought to my attention, & in particular how this is going to impact on East Sleat.

It seems that each household in Sleat should have been notified in writing by the Planning Department about the proposals, but I, & others locally I have spoken with have not received anything so far.

My feeling for some time has been that the main, though not the only, spur to the push for an artificially accelerated development plan for Sleat has been the expansionist tendencies of Sabhal Mor Ostaig in recent years together with an associated lack of checks & balances to fully objectively assess whether such expansion is necessary or desirable & also what long term impacts this might have on Sleat generally. The latest culmination of Sabhal Mor's increasing influence (in conjunction with the Clan Donald Land Trust) has been the (in my opinion wholly unnecessary) granting of planning approval for the concentrated development at Kilbeg.

There is a very real risk that any institution or organisation which is perceived to be starting to serve itself rather than the wider communities of which it is a part will gradually become desensitised to the negative aspects of its own

growing impact & eventually succumb to the accepted (though fallacious) mantra that development (& the economic growth which it is hoped will accompany it) is of itself, by definition, a good thing. I think this is already starting to happen. This mantra, if repeated often enough, can morph into a self-fulfilling prophecy which, though frequently illusory & transient, appears to justify its repetition & promotion.

Kilbeg & its associated new Sabhal Mor campus building is not the only development happening in Sleat at the moment of course, but it is the one which has the potential to be the most problematical & has serious ramifications for the whole of East Sleat. A lack of awareness of these issues was neatly expressed by a proponent of the new Kilbeg village who described it as having the capacity to be transformational for Sleat once all the phases had been completed. He was oblivious to the possibility of transformations having negative as well as positive effects & the former can be glossed over, sometimes wilfully, in the process of exaggerating the latter.

It appears that the building of the new Kilbeg village & other big projects envisaged by planners in East Sleat will necessitate several disturbing infrastructure developments, including new roads, sewage treatment works, street lighting & other features most often associated with a built up urban environment. Whilst there are, of course, large villages & towns on Skye with long-established street-lighting Sleat's settlements are still at present small & dispersed enough to not warrant being encroached upon by some of these trappings of urbanisation. The new Kilbeg village will certainly change this situation (the car park behind the latest college building is going to be brightly lit & no doubt, as the building of the rest of the village progresses other lighting will need to be erected to conform to statutory regulations).

Whilst I remain mystified as to why a completely new & large (in the context of Sleat) planted village was ever regarded as being in Sleat's best interests rather than carefully modifying over time the structured & closely monitored planning model already in place, where houses are built in small numbers here & there as land becomes available (a process of considered evolution rather than a rapid development suiting, primarily, vested interests) the fact remains that it is probably too late to do anything about Kilbeg now. However, it is crucially important that any similar (even if smaller) future proposals for further dense housing builds, whether College connected or not, are strenuously opposed on the solid basis that Sleat's (including East Sleat) fundamental character is not, has never been & should never be one of creeping urbanisation. This holds true despite Sabhal Mor's continual expansion which, in fact, makes this imperative all the more vital. We lose sight of this at our (& Sleat's) peril – constant vigilance against the excesses & often less than transparent motives of developers & their clients, & of other vested interests is now more important than ever. We trust that our planners will always be equally vigilant & will always focus their attention on the bigger picture in terms of what is in the best interests of Sleat as a whole rather than the narrower & sometimes shorter term priorities of a relatively few, but vocal, concerns & individuals.

The historic (& still existing) underlying feudal system of land ownership in the Highlands has always tended to

concentrate large tracts of land in the hands of relatively few landowners, who often have great wealth (in Sleat there are two such large private landowners). With land ownership & wealth inevitably comes power & influence so it is more vital than ever, with increasing demands from developers, individuals & institutions, that our planners are able to exercise complete independence of scrutiny & judgement in resisting any temptation to afford the biggest players, historically used to being able to exert disproportionate pressure on planning authorities, any greater influence than the smallest.

These days, even though the still archaic, arcane & Byzantine complexities of crofting regulations have been reviewed & tightened up, some individual crofters are also able to attempt to influence planners, made possible, in part, by plots of land for development sometimes being able to command asking prices in excess of £100,000 each. It is hoped, therefore, that planners are also constantly alert to the relatively recent possibility of undue pressure from this traditionally exploited (rather than opportunistic) group of people in the development jigsaw.

The effects of intensive &/or concentrated development on the small strip of land which makes up East Sleat are obvious. The peninsula is an overwhelmingly rural, dispersed environment & this is one of its greatest attractions – dense clusters of new builds have, until Kilbeg was mooted, been non-existent. I hope that the planning authorities are sufficiently aware of the strength of feeling amongst local residents that Kilbeg is not allowed to set a precedent for other similar proposals, & that their views are taken on board at least as seriously as representations by the more vocal groups & individuals I referred to earlier. Concerned residents comprise Sleat folk whose families have been here for many generations as well as those who have moved into the area from other, more urban parts of Britain & Europe, so it is not the case that the only people who want to save Sleat from certain types of development are idealistic ‘townies’ who have moved in, as some local councillors & MSPs would have us believe. Indigenous Sleiteachs care every bit as deeply about the spoiling of their part of Skye by agencies from within (& without) their communities as do tourists & those more recently arrived.

Tourism, in its many guises, is what the economy of Sleat & Skye (& the Highlands more generally) depends on to flourish & thrive &, of the many activities which tourists engage in whilst here, those which take advantage of our very special outdoor environment (hill walking, mountaineering, climbing, camping, fishing, sailing, canoeing, cycling, photography etc) contribute most to the economy. This unique landscape is the single biggest reason why tourists want to come to Skye & why residents continue to stay & to move here. It is critical, therefore, that those qualities which visitors & the majority of residents value most highly are not negatively impacted by planning decisions which are less than fully thought through or which are made as a result of any outside influences being brought to bear. The landscape of Sleat is exquisitely sensitive to even small revisions to the local development plans (& to other individual developments also) & a mp; once the rural feel & character of an area is lost because of unnecessary new villages, too rapidly expanding institutions, new road construction and associated light pollution from urbanisation & street lamps (making “dark sky” viewing of the night sky & aurora borealis difficult or even impossible) it is lost, effectively, for

ever.

A corollary of any change of a local development plan, especially an accelerated one such as that proposed for East Sleat, is that there is always a danger that a growing population can easily outstrip what existing services & facilities can provide. Whilst this should not preclude sympathetic & appropriately scaled development (which is not, unfortunately, what the WHILDP seems to propose) from taking place, it is important that the local school, medical centre, water & other utilities provision, supply of telephone & broadband services etc are never compromised by an increasing demand which has not been thoroughly factored in or properly evaluated.

I hope, therefore, in the light of what I have written that the proposed revision to the WHILDP to implement the imposition of accelerated, concentrated & urbanised developments on East Sleat will be itself considerably revised or, preferably, withdrawn.