

## Achnamara's Future – Progress So Far and Next Steps

August 2019

The Committee felt it was a good opportunity to give the community an update on what has been happening on developing ideas for acquiring some of the forestry around Achnamara. Whilst things might have seemed quiet, there has been lots of work going on in the background to establish feasibility, a business case and what support we are going to need. Once again, we would stress that no decisions have been taken – only that there is a lot of background work and due diligence to do to make sure that an acquisition of land will deliver the benefits that the community identified in the two surveys they wanted to see delivered.

Following on from the last survey, it became clear that buying a piece of forest from Forestry and Land Scotland would be the best way of allowing our community to develop:

1. A new Village Hall. The structural survey we commissioned confirmed that there is limited life in the existing Hall. Keeping the Hall was the number one priority for the community, so we need to find ways of building a new one. In the short term we have a maintenance plan to keep the old one ticking over.
2. A community owned hydro scheme.
3. Community led affordable housing and, longer term, possibly plots for self-build housing (with a rural burden to keep them as full time homes.)
4. Facilities down at the pier – which might include better parking, toilets and shower facilities for water users, possible camper van parking points to try and encourage the increasing number of camper vans on our road to park properly, not dump waste and hopefully bring some income to the community.
5. In the longer-term, forest crofts and woodlots in the forest to give local people access to working in the forest or using its timber.

The last survey identified that ensuring we have a fit-for-purpose Village Hall, affordable housing for local people, developing loch side facilities and a community hydro were all priorities for the community. It confirmed that buying and developing the school building was **NOT** a priority.

### ***So - what has been happening?***

1. We have been working with Gordon Gray Stephens to establish what might be a good area of forestry to buy; the income it might offer to the community; the risks and challenges this might bring; and how we might manage it.
2. We have been speaking to the Forestry Commission (now Forestry and Land Scotland) about the various ideas to gain their approval in principle to what it is we want to do. We are shortly to commission a joint valuation with Forestry and Land Scotland to see what the area of forest would be worth.
3. We commissioned consultants to look at the various options and give us recommendations as to which would be best to pursue, in terms of delivering what the survey results said the community wanted and to ensure long term financial sustainability.
4. We have been speaking to housing and woodland croft specialists so we can provide details to the community of what is possible.
5. We have been speaking to Planners to see what might be acceptable to them in Planning terms.

6. We have commissioned a hydro feasibility report which has confirmed a hydro scheme on Barnagad Burn is technically feasible and could produce up to 200KW of power. We are now speaking to SSE about potential grid connections and exploring other uses for the power that will be generated. We are also exploring ways to ensure it does not impact in noise terms on the houses in the village.

**Next steps:**

1. Once we have finalised the above, we plan to hold an open session during Café Connect on **Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> September 10.30 – 12.30** to share what we have learnt so far and get feedback from the whole community. We will look to invite people who know about developing affordable housing, woodland crofts, hydros and community forestry ownership along to talk.
2. We will then hold a whole community meeting on the evening of **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> October at 7.00** so everyone has time to consider the ideas and let us know their thoughts. The consensus of that meeting will advise the Committee how best to go forward.
3. This will then allow us to finalise the proposals and present these to Forestry and Land Scotland and the Scottish Land Fund to see if we can get support. The Scottish Land Fund will fund the costs of buying the forest so locally we don't have to fundraise for this. This could take up to 6 months so we are unlikely to know whether we have been successful until next Spring/ Summer.
4. If we are successful, then we will look to buy an area of forestry to help us deliver the above ideas. We have a current group working on the project but would really welcome others who want to get involved – either on the Management Committee or on individual elements such as the new Village Hall or developing the hydro or housing.
5. If all of the above goes to plan, it is unlikely that we would be owners of all or any part of the forest until late 2020. This gives us plenty of time to start thinking about how the community hydro might develop, what new housing might look like and how it would be funded, and starting a project to deliver a new Village Hall.
6. In the meantime, we will continue to keep the Village Hall as well maintained as we can, continue our work on getting the Council to keep the road maintained, broadband and 4G and small projects like getting the defibrillator installed and supporting the skiff group. If anyone has ideas for other small projects or events, get in touch.

**Remind us again – why are we doing this!**

You will appreciate from the above that this is all a huge amount of work and effort, with at the minute nothing to show for it! However, we recently thought it would be useful to sit down and remind ourselves what it is we are trying to achieve and why.

We started this whole ball rolling with two surveys of the whole community (from Barnluasgan to Kilmory Knap.) This was in response to the ongoing loss of services – the shop, school and Church and the declining state of the Village Hall. Some of the questions we posed – and that came back to us - were:

1. What did we want our peninsula to look like in 20 years? We all recognise that we are an aging community.
2. Do we want to try and attract more young people to fill some of the jobs? And help provide some of the essential services in the future.

3. Do we want to ensure we have services for us as the population ages? For example home care, a well-maintained social space, a community bus etc.
4. How do we benefit from all the forestry activity planned for the next 10-15 years? At the moment we suffer from the traffic and visual impact of loss of forestry, but don't gain anything economically or via a say in what is replanted.
5. How can the community benefit from the natural resources we have – especially as more and more people are keener to become more environmentally friendly and make the best use of local resources. If we are all having to move to electric cars over the next 25 years how can we as a community use the resources around us to make it easy for us to live and stay here?
6. And finally – we live in a beautiful place – how do we ensure the whole community has a say in keeping it how we like it – beautiful and peaceful?

As a group we feel that buying some of the forestry land will help us to do this by:

Build a new Village Hall	The area of land we are looking at includes the site of the existing Village Hall and the site of new Hall that was favourite in the latest survey – opposite the pier. By including within the acquisition an area of commercial forestry, this will generate an income and capital receipts from timber sales that will provide some of the funding necessary to build a new Hall. Funding for Village Halls is very difficult to come by at the moment, so the more money we can raise ourselves to do this, the better. And potluck suppers won't get us to the £500,000 plus it will cost to build a new Hall!
Generate income to provide services for our community – such as a community bus, help with care, help with insulating people's houses, other services and events	We need to find ways of generating income to support our community in the future. As Council services continue to reduce, we must be aware that more and more of the services and facilities that make living life in a community like ours possible, might fall to the community. How will we ensure these continue unless we have income to do that? Buying and managing forestry and running a community hydro will help us do this.
Make better use of our beautiful natural environment	At the minute local people swim, kayak, boat and fish in the Loch and walk and cycle in the forest. These are important reasons why people like living here. It would be good if we could provide facilities at the pier such as better parking, showers and toilets for Loch users, better signed access through the forest and in the longer term a new slip for launching boats, and pontoons. The community need to own the land to do all of this.
Ensure the community benefits from our natural environment	At the moment all timber extracted from the forest that surrounds us goes away from Argyll. Unlike in the past, the forest provides very few jobs for local people and all the economic benefit is lost to our area. If we owned the forest, the community would get the income from the timber, could work with forestry specialists to decide when woodland was felled and what it was replanted with. Owning the forest would also allow us to get the best return from a hydro scheme.
Becoming a greener community	We have fantastic natural resources all around us. How can we make sure local people get access to wood fuel locally, can benefit from locally produced electricity and can develop businesses

	based on our natural environment? Society is moving towards use of more local rather than global resources and communities trying to become more self-sufficient. Could this be the future for Achnamara?
Encourage more young families to our community	At the moment we have an aging population. Who will care for us in the future? We all know neighbours who have had real difficulty in getting care to their homes. Who will take local jobs on farms? Who will keep the Hall and other facilities going when we are all too old to take them on? We are seeing more houses go for holiday and second homes. Whilst often these owners contribute actively and positively to our community, house prices are continuing to rise and it is very likely our children won't be able to afford to come back, if they want to. Buying land and developing community housing will allow us to design the houses and have a local allocations policy to prioritise tenants with a local connection.
How do we make sure our community is still an attractive and viable place to live?	To ensure local house prices for local people (as opposed to becoming holiday homes) stay strong, we need to make sure our community is vibrant and resilient. So younger people can come and build their lives here – through being able to develop and grow local businesses; and older people feel there are services and facilities here that will enable them to stay here in their old age. As a community we need to have the resources – money, assets, skills – to do this. Anything we do has got to be about making our community more sustainable and resilient in the future.
How do we protect what we love about living on the peninsula?	A lot of this is around services and facilities to make sure we can stay here as we age. But we are also seeing more and more visitors to our peninsula. Most of these are very welcome but increasing numbers mean increasing impact. How can we manage increasing numbers to ensure our environment is protected? We feel we can do this by providing facilities (parking/ showers/ toilets/ camper van hook ups) in a single location. This then allows local landowners to direct people looking for facilities to a single point and prevent inappropriate and unauthorised parking and leaving of waste (of all types.) If we own land and have access to funding, we can do this by a new Village Hall at the pier.

**So.....**

There has been lots done and lots more to do. Including:

- Thinking about how we would manage the forestry in detail and what skills we need to do that?
- How we would prioritise projects for action?
- How we can get more people involved?

We hope to keep working on these issues and will share further at the planned Open Session and Community Meeting.

Thanks for your time

Achnamara Village Hall Committee