

RURAL HOUSING MODELS: THE OLD CONVENT, FORT AUGUSTUS

Completion date:
Summer 2021



Housing Need

In 2018 the Community Company commissioned a wide-ranging survey which would form the basis of a community action plan for the village and identify priorities for the organisation to tackle. The survey and resulting community action plan confirmed what many on the area already knew, that there was a need for affordable housing for local families and workers. This was further backed up by a housing needs survey undertaken by Rural Housing Scotland which identified a requirement for 24 affordable homes for rent.

Accessing Land

The community purchased the Old Convent Land in 2018 with assistance from the Scottish Land Fund (SLF). The site had previously been the subject of a potential huge housing development of more than 60 houses but was also important for informal recreation by the local community. Following a consultation, it was agreed that building a small number of homes for affordable rent and allowing the rest of the site to be managed for informal recreation by local community was the preferred way to progress.

Community builds from wind farm funds

The New Homes for Old Convent Land project began in 2018 when The Fort Augustus & Glenmoriston Community Company purchased the site for community use. Fort Augustus is a small village half-way between Inverness and Fort William with a population of 650 people. The Community Company has generated over a million pounds for projects supporting the local community, including a grant-giving scheme, running the village hall, an apprenticeship scheme, employing community caretakers, owning a flat and building a new health centre which is now leased to the NHS. The housing project is its latest and most ambitious initiative.

The Homes

Following extensive consultation, the Community Company decided that they would build 12 homes of different sizes for affordable rent on the site, comprising four flats, two bungalows, four two-bed villas, and two three-bed villas.

The homes will all be owned and let out by the Community Company and will meet a variety of housing needs in the community.

Work got under way in June 2020 with the houses scheduled for completion in late summer 2021, providing homes for 12 local families. Such is the interest in the scheme that there are 60 households on a waiting list for information.

Funding

The land was bought by the community with assistance from the Scottish Land Fund. The cost of the development of the project is just under £3 million. Funding was received from the Scottish Government's Rural Housing Fund, Stronelaig Windfarm LTD (administered by SSE Renewables on behalf of Stronelaig Windfarm LTD), Fern Community Funds, Falck Renewables, and the SSE sustainable development fund, as well as a bank loan and the Community Company's own reserves.

The Community Company is also looking for further funding to reduce the amount of the loan for the development.

Community and Infrastructure Delivery Plan:
www.communitycompany.co.uk/consultation



Support Organisations and Funders

The Scottish Government's Rural Housing Fund aims to increase the supply of affordable homes of all tenures and contribute to the national target of creating 50,000 affordable homes.

The Scottish Land Fund (SLF) supports rural and urban communities to become more resilient and sustainable through the ownership and management of land.

Designing the Homes

One of the key features in designing the homes was that they were energy efficient. This would in turn ensure that they would be cost-effective to run. As such they were designed to use Mitsubishi Ecodan air source heat pumps. Air source heat pumps are a reliable, renewable, low carbon alternative to traditional high carbon heating systems that deliver efficient and sustainable space heating and hot water all year round, which is particularly important in areas such as the Highlands of Scotland where overnight temperatures can often fall below zero for weeks at a time.

It was also important that future maintenance costs were kept to a minimum and this is achieved by ensuring that the homes are well built from the outset.

Two of the properties have been designed to have improved accessibility, and the homes are being built by Compass Building and Construction Services.

Accessing Expertise

The Community Company has a professional quantity surveyor, architect and engineer on board, and while they benefitted from that expertise, as a community organisation run primarily by volunteers, those involved say that they were sometimes expected to have more

knowledge on certain issues than they did, and that more support in some key areas – particularly with regard to 'hidden' costs for example - would have been useful.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is an integral part of the company's work.

The new homes project came about through the community's understanding of the issues it faces, the wider community consultation process as part of developing the community action plan, and a Rural Housing Scotland survey of specific housing needs, all of which were important elements of community engagement.

Other aspects of community engagement including regular meetings and updates with local groups and organisations, newsletters and a dedicated social media presence.

Top tips for community organisations tackling local housing need

"As a community owner you may well have a different view to a private developer or a housing association so make sure your professional team understand how you operate, particularly in terms of decision making and consultation. Be clear on your brief, on roles and on what you want.

"Make sure you understand the process and how the different permissions work so you are not caught on the hoof having to make decisions that, if you had had the whole picture, you might have made differently. Keep local councillors on board. you may need them to make things happen.

"And have a contingency. No matter how detailed a feasibility you undertake, things will still appear."

Angela Williams,
Chief Executive Officer, The Fort Augustus & Glenmoriston Community Company

Affordable Homes

As well as ensuring that the homes are as energy efficient as possible and therefore cost-effective for tenants to run – and that future maintenance costs are kept to a minimum so rents can remain affordable. The Community Company has a housing policy which enshrines the affordable rent element of the project which

Ensuring the homes remain as affordable rental properties was also a condition of receiving assistance from the Rural Housing Fund

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