

Holmehill Ltd

Annual General Meeting: September 2nd 2013

Chairman's Report

When I wrote my Chairman's report last year, we had been heavily involved in two main areas for much of the previous year - reviewing and commenting on the various elements of the emerging proposed Stirling Local Development Plan; and at the same time responding rapidly and comprehensively to the various planning applications on the hill put in by Allanwater Developments. In writing this, my fourth such report, in a very real sense, these two issues have remained at the top of our agenda, though in each case they and we have moved on, whilst also trying to cover other matters of importance to members and the community at large.

At a strategic level, we have continued to positively contribute to the development of the Stirling Proposed Local Development Plan. This in its final form was eventually published and we made our final formal response at the start of December. In it we supported the thrust of the Plan and repeated our aspirations for the hill, while seeking minor alterations to strengthen the designation of Holmehill as *Open Green Space* in the Settlement Statement for Dunblane. A separate response was submitted concerning the proposed building of affordable housing units on the adjacent land owned by the Council at Bogside. This emphasised the importance of retaining the vista and landscape features of the hill. As with all our actions and consultations, we made our responses freely available on our website www.holmehillblog.org so that others are able to share. We also encouraged others to contribute their own thoughts and views, in their own words. The process has moved forward, and following the report to Stirling Council in May 2013, the Proposed Plan and all unresolved representations are now with the Scottish Government's Department of Planning and Environmental Appeals, and will go forward to the Examination Reporter for consideration.

We have also responded during this last year to two other important national consultations where we felt our experiences and voice could be an important asset to the debate. The first was the Government's consultation on Community Empowerment, for which David Prescott was able to attend the Communities Day in the Scottish Parliament on our behalf on 26th April. The second was the on-going Review of Land Reform Legislation. In both cases, David Prescott prepared our responses, building on our experiences of the original community buy-out proposals and the challenges we faced in trying to take this forward. David also met with our local representative, Keith Brown MSP early in April to outline the history of the Holmehill campaign, including the court case and appeal. In our submission, we stressed that the 'Right to buy' registration should be simplified; that if a developer registers an option to sell land, there should be an obligation to de-register that option; and just how onerous and costly the OSCR process is.

The other main area of activity was developing our response to the application for outline planning permission for a large office development with car parking and access road on the top of the hill, with access off Smithy Loan, which was submitted in August 2012. Along with many other residents of Dunblane, the Community

Council, Dunblane Kirk Session and others, we submitted a very strong objection to the proposals. We were thus delighted when Stirling Council officials refused the application, thus supporting both the terms of the existing Stirling Local Plan 1999, and the current proposed Stirling Local Development Plan. Importantly, the decision recognises that the proposed office block will not improve the environmental quality of Dunblane; will intrude on the skyline; will not enhance the *Open Space* of Holmehill and will adversely impact on local amenity, recreation, wildlife and landscape. Further unacceptable areas included the traffic proposals and the lack of any need for this type of development within the community anyhow.

Whether in response to this reversal, or for whatever reason, we were astounded by the next actions by the owners of Holmehill, the Stirling family, when extensive tree felling at this precise location took place on Friday and Saturday 28/29th June 2013. This illegal activity was done without permission of the Council (as required by planning designation of the site as a Conservation area), and within the bird breeding season (against the Wildlife and Countryside Act). We also learned that ownership of the hill had been passed from Allanwater Developments (managed by Mr David Stirling) to Wardlaw Gardens Ltd, a company owned by his father, Mr Ian Stirling, and registered offshore in the Isle of Man.

Members of the Holmehill Group and many other members of the Community were outraged by these actions – described as ‘tree management’ by the Stirling’s (and denounced as such by the Forestry Commission later), and a ‘stand-off’ developed on site with, eventually both the police and Council officials in attendance. It also led to extensive press coverage and the Holmehill Group called an open public meeting on July 4th, chaired extremely well by David Prescott. Although at only two days notice, over 100 people came, representing all age groups and sections of the community, brought together by a common horror at the actions of the owners. Many local representatives, Stirling Councillors, Dunblane Community Councillors and the Head of Planning also attended, as did the owner, Mr Ian Stirling. The outcome was clear support in the community for the Holmehill Group, and we were assured that the Council would hold the owners to account.

As I write, the chaos of the tree felling remains on the ground, and we are hoping to have an update from Stirling Council’s Head of Planning for the AGM, as to what actions will be taken. Meanwhile, the Secretary, acting Vice Chairman and I attended the most recent meeting of the Dunblane Community Council, at which we were able to give a brief presentation about the work of the Holmehill Group, and were delighted to receive positive backing and support from the Community Council.

This event has had one very heartening element, in that it showed the enthusiasm and support we have received not just from Committee members, but from other residents and concerned folk who have helped us in our work. This includes our elected representatives with, again well-appreciated support from Keith Brown MSP and Anne McGuire MP, as well as Mike Robbins, Mark Ruskell and Graham Houston. It has been good too to work more closely with Dunblane Community Council and I acknowledge the support of Terence O’Byrne in this respect in particular. Where relevant, we shall also look to extend our connections with others including, for example the Dunblane Development Trust.

It would be wrong though to portray the year as being all about fire-fighting and countering the actions (legal and otherwise) of the owners and developers. We have tried to remain positive and undertake the 'usual' range of activities to promote and extend appreciation and use of the hill by all sectors of the local community. Sometimes these aspects get a little lost in the melee of reactions, but I would draw members attention to our presence at such community events as the Doune and Dunblane Fling, and the continuing sale of cards and distribution of maps and other literature about the hill. We have 'adopted' the Core path that runs across the hill, and provided the Council with updates on its condition and upkeep of signage.

We have also again held our regular 'Dawn Chorus' event in May, helping to promote the wildlife on the hill and surrounding green areas of Dunblane. And I have continued with the monthly Wildlife surveys which have then been uploaded on the web. Highlights from the year to date have included the breeding of Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and the 'arrival' of Nuthatches as new residents – a species that has been moving northwards throughout the UK in recent decades. A single Waxwing at the end of the year was one of many seen locally during the winter, while summer brought Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs, Garden and Willow Warblers. The colony of rooks was reduced slightly in number, not least due to the illegal felling of several trees overlooking Ramoyle in late March.

As ever, I should end by thanking members of the Board, not least our highly efficient secretary Libby Hughes, and my acting Vice Chairman Dave Prescott, as well as Claire Watt, our Company Secretary. Treasurer's matters have again been dealt with by Steve Mason, and we now need to investigate whether we wish to remain as a charity or seek a new, similar (but cheaper) alternative status. A particularly important role has also been played by Richard Bland in his role as 'keeper' and manager of our Website which, as ever has been a vital part of the communication process and promotional activities on which we rely. So, on behalf of all members, I extend my thanks to them and others who have supported our activities this year. We are always looking for new ideas – so please feel free to come and along and get involved.

Finally, this will be my fourth report as Chairman and, as I have said to colleagues, I am a strong believer that any organisation must look to ensure its governance is kept fresh and that there is no risk that long-standing Board members start to see the organisation as 'theirs'. I have therefore decided that I shall stand down shortly to enable others to take over the leadership. Our current acting Vice-Chairman, David Prescott has indicated that he would be willing to put himself forward as the next Chairman and, with the continuing support of our current Secretary and other Board members, I am sure that would be an excellent choice.

I have been delighted to have had the opportunity to lead the Group these past four years and wish it well for the future, while personally remaining a Board member.

Professor Chris J Spray MBE
Chairman of Holmehill Ltd.

September 1st 2013