**Feedback summary**

NWMCWC Community Meeting on Ulva

**Tuesday 6th August 2024**

Purpose:

In partnership with Tracy and Anne from NWMCWC Board, DTAS hosted the meeting as a pre-AGM (planned for Sept 9th 2024) community engagement meeting. There is recognition that relationships have soured to the point of personal damage to on-going wellbeing and low morale in the NWMCWC Board and in the community. For the trust to continue to be meaningful as a community anchor organisation, being led fully by the members, a reset is needed. The relationship with the island of Ulva is crucial to that.

The assets that the trust owns are extremely important and have embedded potential to transform the economic lives of people, particularly on Ulva. The current Trustees have worked very hard to get the trust to where it is. These meetings (one on Ulva and one in Dervaig) are focussed around the core question- ‘What is the best way forward for the communities of Ulva and NW Mull?’ and ‘How can the trust best support that mission?’

Attendees:

Rebecca Munro; Rhuri Munro; Jenny Melling; Barry; Brendan (Boathouse); Ro (future Ulva House tenant); Anne Cleave (NWMCWC Chair); Tracy Mayo (NWMCWC Director); Amber Scott (NWMCWC staff (Administrator. New employee); Lynn Molleson (DTAS) and Laura Worku (DTAS)

Apologies:

Nicholas Wallen; Tom Fahey (written statement submitted on Tom’s behalf)

Context for discussion

The question of what happens on Ulva in the future needs to take account of the issues and difficulties that the islanders, as tenants of the trust, are experiencing now.

The buyout is ‘ground zero’. From that point on NWMCWC became the defacto managers of Ulva and the residents became their tenants. A recognition of the change in the power dynamics was perhaps missed at the time. The decision-making, legal and funding complexities for the volunteer Board at the time would have been enormous and with the complexities of a large woodland business, struggling with a stalled harvest, was already a lot for a small team of volunteer Directors. The great deal of public and political interest in Ulva would not have helped. A future exercise could be to explore the impact of the buy-out, both practically and emotionally, on everyone involved, drawing on experiences from Eigg in particular, to create a vision for going forward in partnership [this could be a CLE hosted by DTAS]

**At the core of everything is communication**, often misconstrued or rushed, against the backdrop of the tenant/landowner relationship, leading to a deep mistrust where written communication is too easily misconstrued. The theme of how to improve communication came up repeatedly.

A Comms Agreement is needed. Where clear comms has been absent, rumour has filled the void. This was the first ‘on island’ meeting called by the trust for many years. No one could identify a date when a previous one had taken place.

There is a deep feeling that the decisions for Ulva residents are made ‘off island’ and imposed upon them. This is doubly compounded by the tenant – landlord relationship.

Summary of issues raised in the room:

The power and decision-making processes were not clarified. Tenants are not clear how to raise their issues directly with the Board or what happens if things remain unresolved.

Who are the community? This is defined by post codes in the trust’s governing document, but there was not clarity in the room of where the line on a map actually is. A map would be very helpful. People would then be clear about whether or not they can join as members and have the right to vote at AGMs etc. It would also be clear that if the boundary as it stood did not make sense, there would be the opportunity for the members to vote to change it [a change to the definition of the community would need OSCR approval]

**The Water supply (and associated sewage issues)** – This is the number one priority. Islanders came to the meeting with videos of brackish water coming out of their taps and jars with samples of brown ‘drinking water’. This has a huge impact on businesses like The Boathouse and on families with kids in particular, but everyone is deeply affected.

To grow the population of Ulva (as planned and as part of the buy-out mission) there needs to be future proofing of the water supply and the factoring in of the increasing use by on-island businesses (The Boathouse, the hostel and a planned hotel use for Ulva House).

Tenants are still paying for disrupted and undrinkable water.

In terms of sewage, The Boathouse business is experiencing a lot of stress. A recent visit from SEPA pointed out to them that their sewage outlet is going straight into the sea (apparently this has always been the case due to the ongoing failure of a septic tank embedded in the pier). Raw sewage has been running through Jenny and Tom’s property for some time. They communicated this to the Ulva Dev Manager and followed their remedial advice. The issue is still on-going. If action is being taken, this has not been communicated properly back to the tenants.

[would a technical ‘factor’ external to the Board and a formal comms and complaints procedure be helpful?]

**The impact of the Buyout** – this is linked to the next ‘big issue’ of the landlord and tenant relationship

There are new residents on Ulva who were not part of the buyout process.

The buyout changed the balance of power between Ulva residents and the NWMCWC Board. The consequences of that have undoubtedly affected the communication.

What were the expectations of those who took part in the buyout?

What has the emotional cost been? (to the Board and the residents of Ulva and the wider NWM community)

Is the funding pathway for Ulva that was in place at the time and the escalating costs post Covid fully and more widely understood?

**Landlord and tenant relationship**

How do the tenants communicate best with the Board?

Previous comms have gone through the Ulva Development Manager but there were examples given in the room where Board minutes cited a task as addressed, but that was different to the reality on the ground. Raising complaints then had people either ignored or labelled as ‘difficult’.

The objectives of that funded role were to develop the properties and lay the ground to increase the population of Ulva. An Operations Manager was later recruited and this post too ran into problems.

How can the comms be clearer and the outcomes actively monitored in the future?

[people came to the meeting well prepared with a list of issues that would fall under tenancy management. These were given to Lynn Molleson and it was agreed that they would be sent via email to Tracy and Anne for raising with the Board, particularly following the AGM where new Directors will need on-boarding to address outstanding issues]

**Comments captured the discussion in the room and in conversion with Ulva residents who were unable to make the evening meeting:**

**Issues:**

Accountability – who will check that tasks are completed to the correct standard on the island?

Complaints and Issues – a clear complaints procedure to raise issues and a timeframe for responses. Possibly an external manager to deal with issues in a timely manner.

Water supply and sewage – must be resolved before new plots are marketed and new tenants encouraged.

Transport to the island – the current ferry provision does not operate at weekends and only for the school run in the winter.

Business development on Ulva – has not happened since the buy-out. Current contracts and leases are not transparent. Some tenants feel they have been left unsupported and not respected when they do raise an issue.

Transparency – on leases being offered; on the use of the island’s wood (and other resources) and how decisions are made that directly affect Ulva residents.

**Ideas:**

Having an Ulva sub-committee? – Having someone from Ulva on the NWMCWC Board may not be a good idea as whoever represents Ulva on that committee will be in a different role to other islanders and open to misunderstandings/disruption to their private life.

An Ulva sub-committee made up of residents and hosted regularly by the Board (or their nominated party) might work better

A list of practical issues is needed with meetings to review progress. Review by suitably qualified builder. Some practical issues would be quicker to resolve: paths and signage for visitors; a map of the island with points of interest marked

Focus is needed on the church and Sheila’s cottage – deep affection for these in NW Mull community and a draw for tourists. [Sheila’s cottage currently in a state of disrepair]. More general review needed of the Ulva Action Plan that doesn’t focus on simply increasing the population, but reviews what has happened since the buy-out and rectifies outstanding issues.

Transparency – work to restore trust. Visible and regular. Fact-checking around perceptions of privileged treatment.

Revisiting the core message – what would sustainable development on Ulva look like? What changes would be needed to achieve this? Who would be most affected? [as trust has broken down to a very low level, these conversations are very difficult to hold].

Human level- learning from others in a similar context. Community Learning Exchange with Eigg (going there and a delegation coming to Ulva). Exploring the emotional cost of the buy-out (to the more established Ulva residents; to the new residents and to the Board and staff of NWMCWC).