

Berneray Community Council Meeting

Meeting 6th June 2024
Berneray Hall – 7.00pm

Minutes of planning application for Campsite, 8 Rushgarry, Berneray, Isle of North Uist, HS6 5BQ

Present: Margaret MacLean (Chair), Donald MacLean (Vice chair), Sharon MacPherson (Treasurer), Lorna MacKillop (Clerk), Eilidh Carr, Willie Fraser, Councillor Uisdean Robertson, Councillor Mustapha Hocine, Rachel Apsey, Scott Apsey and Ruairidh Nicholson.

Members of public: 54 present.

Apologies: None

Agenda: Planning Application for Campsite, 8 Rushgarry, Berneray, North Uist HS6 5BQ

Correspondence received: Handwritten letter from Theresa & Peter Roberts and email from Mhairi and Duncan Morter.

(*Amendments have been made to the original copy of these minutes as requested by a small number of local residents who attended the meeting on 6th June. These amendments have been added in as *italics* for clarity. Not all requested amendments or additions were possible*)

This special one item agenda meeting was hosted after concerns and questions were asked regarding the campsite planning application on Berneray. Local residents from Rushgarry area requested a meeting to take place within the community with BCC committee members, Councillors, planning applicants and local residents present. Berneray Community Council held this public meeting as a result.

Margaret Maclean (Chair) opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. She introduced the Berneray Community Council Committee and Councillors. The Chair then set out the format for the meeting i.e. rising of hands, one person speaking and listening with respect.

The Chair welcomed Ruairidh Nicholson, Scott Apsey and Rachel Apsey (Business partners). Rachel led an on screen presentation to express ideas and documentations of the proposed campsite at Rushgarry.

Rachel explained using the slides the five main missions: 1 - To create a sustainable, controlled campsite that provides an organised approach and improves the area. 2 - To reinvest in the area to halt and control land erosion / prevent flooding. 3 – Apply terms and conditions to control who and what vehicle visits – a clear code of conduct. 4 – Community engagement, on an ongoing basis to ensure the site is managed to protect all. 5 – Local job creation and to support other businesses.

Rachel explained ‘What if we do nothing?’

Wild camping will continue as sales of campervans and tents have risen and continue to do so. Tourism is increasing and people will always visit the area. Uncontrolled campfires,

digging, messing and scrambling on dunes will continue. Dogs are currently not controlled or no facilities for dog walkers / poo bins / youth hostel overflow. *It was noted that in recent years other crofters along Traigh Bheasdaire have taken action and with advice from the Comhairle erected discreet signs regarding overnight stays and stating it was croft land.*

Rachel described their green approach for a sustainable, controlled campsite. This would be done by controlling campervans and tent numbers, allowing a mix of both tents and vans to reduce overcrowding. Proper waste management and cleaning up after visitors would be implemented. To provide education boards to educate visitors to have a responsible attitude to the environment around them. Also, the use of rubber matting with growing grass to protect the land and secure damage. The biggest structure of the campsite – the facilities building will be low and long tucked into the hill side, complete with a grass roof to fit in with the surrounding landscape.

Rachel further explains their plans to reinvest in the area. Collective challenge – land erosion which easterly winds have increased along with high tide issues. Uncontrolled visitor numbers will hamper this. Marram grass plays a vital role in stabilising the dunes, a plan to reinvest back into the area by planting and protecting marram grass. Other ideas of sand banks to help birds nesting and plans to link with the Hebridean Tree Ark Project to prevent flooding in the area.

Terms and conditions of the campsite were explained. All visitors will be bound by contract to be responsible and adhere to a code of conduct for example: dog control, beach rules, rubbish and waste instructions, noise levels and more.

Rachel expressed that the thoughts of the community were very important throughout the move forward.

The presentation shown is available for anyone who requires a copy. Please email: admin@berneraysands.com

Power cut at 7.19pm

Ruairidh Nicholson described the site using paper plans. He explained where the bins would be located, that the access road would follow the current and original track, the campsite design would follow the marram grass areas and the tents would be hidden from view. The area would be fenced, and sign posted for access to the beach. The main building would be long and low, with wooden cladding with ground taken away to use on the roof and growing seedlings. Outside decking space for people to sit.

Rachel listed key points – full pre application process has happened and concluded. Carefully selected position – not to disrupt views. No extensive digging during the construction. Safest position chosen in terms of coastal erosion and flood risk. Proper management in a sustainable and controlled way. Currently the planning application is going through planning – all opinions will be looked at.

Margaret Maclean (Chair) opened the meeting to members of the public. They were invited to raise hands to ask questions regarding the campsite proposal or to express their thoughts and ideas on the plans.

Comments were made that people enjoy camping on Berneray and that it does exist, both in the past & in many years to come and a change in additional facilities / provisions is welcomed on the island to help improve the area.

It was explained Borge township has stopped campervans staying overnight in the area. This was due to preserving Machair land etc., due to mess left and visitor numbers increasing. Suggestions were made, is it better to have a controlled campsite or nothing at all (allow it unmanaged)? *It was noted that Rushgarry Crofters had previously discussed other strategies to move forward regarding the number of campers in the area etc.*

Questions were raised on the use of 'Berneray Sands' as a name for the campsite. Concerns that people were being shown empty beaches on social media and encouraged to visit in vast numbers. Genuine concerns regarding quote online *in news article – residents offended with use of words*. Ruairidh explained that the area was already known to many visitors and that people would continue to visit. The campsite plans would control these numbers and managed the overcrowding of motorhomes and tent that can occur whilst preserving the area and allowing people to continue to visit and enjoy the island.

Concerns were expressed regarding the level and speed of erosion of the dunes and beach area. It was suggested people visit the beach to see this damage first-hand and for these erosion issues to be looked at first before the campsite begins. Rachel responded that they have walked the beach numerous times to see the current erosion. The campsite intends to reinvest back into the island to combat the effects of erosion. One method planned is to plant more marram grass / seedlings in specific areas and the use of rubber matting to protect the Machair land from vehicles and people, where currently has no erosion preventatives are in place. *It is noted in January 2024, Berneray Community Council received an email with concerns and questions regarding the erosion at Traigh Bheasdaire from a number of island residents. This topic was discussed at following meetings in the year and action taken to discuss further with crofters in the area.*

Comments regarding the causes of erosion were brought forward. Other factors suggested to be involved in the erosion of the beach were for example the causeway, changing tides / currents and sand being removed in vast quantities from the beach. Ruairidh stated there are more easterly winds and high tides, leading to more erosion happening quicker.

Concerns were expressed of the planned location of the campsite and suggestions of alternative locations on the island were given, e.g. near the ferry terminal or away from the beach / Machair area. Also concerns were raised about the size of the campsite - too big for the area and suggestions of something smaller in size / more discreet. Rachel explained the current location of the proposed campsite fitted in with the type of landscape, working around the shape of marram grass and current access routes. A member of public highlighted that most of the land around Ardmaree are croft or allotments and are currently used for crofting purposes only.

Further comments agreed Berneray does need change and a campsite. It is a good plan moving forward. Occasional bad practice from some visitors at the beach has been witnessed; new toilet facilities, waste management and bins etc. would stop this problem.

Reference was made to a news story in the Stornoway Gazette regarding E. coli in the Luskentyre area on Harris due to pollution in the sea. Questions were asked of the type of

waste treatment system that would be used at the Berneray campsite. Scott Apsey explained that a wastewater treatment plant would be installed instead of a septic tank system. Sea water samples from the beach area would also be taken before, during and after the campsite construction to monitor levels.

Rachel and Scott Apsey were asked of their background. Scott replied they have a business background and currently deal with hospital equipment. Both have become involved in the running of Lochmaddy Marina in recent years. They also have connections to Sollas and North Uist.

Attention was drawn to wader bird migration and ground nesting birds. Concerns regarding the length of time the campsite was open for and suggestions of limited opening times from April to August. Concerns were expressed if wild campers would move further along the beach if not using the campsite. A strategy for all crofters along the beach was suggested. A campsite is important and needed but with a cap on numbers along the full length of the different crofts owns if possible.

It was stated that visitor numbers to the area are increasing every year, both in Berneray and the Outer Hebrides. Last year, on one evening alone more than 25 campervans stayed overnight. *Some members of the public agreed* a toilet / facilities block would enhance the area along with controlled numbers / parking for overnight vehicles.

Points were raised regarding the comment of bad behaviour at the beach. It was explained the bad behaviour of leaving rubbish, dune damage and other behaviour previously listed, was not meant for locals but a minority of those visiting the island. Concerns were also expressed about the use of regulations to come. Rachel explained these regulations were not for islanders but those visiting and staying on the campsite, i.e. noise levels, parking. Those booking on to the campsite would follow a code of conduct while visiting the area.

Concerns were raised regarding the volume of traffic on the narrow roads through Berneray and also the larger vehicles / buses arriving. It was stated that when the campsite is at full capacity with 31 vehicles it would be overcrowded and over time this will destroy the East Beach. Multiple comments confirmed that visitor traffic has been going on for 40 years. Rachel explained that they wish to control numbers with booking forms and if full, visitors will be turned away and sent to other campsites nearby on Uist. Ruairidh Nicholson replied to the traffic comments stating he counted 15 campervans driving to the beach area one afternoon, this traffic is already here on the island for ferry / day traffic and would not dramatically increase with the proposed campsite.

Questions were asked if there would be staff on site 24 hours a day, the use of CCTV and lighting / noise levels at the campsite. Rachel explained the site would be manned and have suitable lighting which would not cause any lighting pollution issues in the surrounding area. Visitors would be bound to a code of conduct / contract when booking regarding noise levels and behaviour while staying on site.

Queries were raised regarding continued access to the beach once the campsite was operational. This was in relation to daily beach visitors, local walkers and also wheelchair access. Rachel explained access to the beach would always be available through a mixture of paths, gates and access routes.

Questions were asked regarding the planning application form. It was questioned why 'no' was selected instead of 'yes' for Schedule 3 Development. If yes had been selected, there would have been a requirement for the proposal to be advertised in the local newspaper with information of the proposed development shared, allowing the community to know more regarding the plans in place.

Concerns were expressed about lack of any consultation of the planning application and that no notice had been given to neighbours. Date and timelines of deadlines for objections and comments were asked. *Recommendation* of another meeting to discuss again, as other options must be available. Lindisfarne and Tiree were mentioned as named examples of different managed systems currently in place. Questions were raised about public consultations not happening before hand and asked Councillors for opinions regarding the campsite planning application. Uisdean Roberston replied stating that they cannot comment on a current planning application as it may come before council. Rachel explained they had completed a long pre planning consultation process in the weeks and months leading up to the planning application being fully submitted. Rachel expressed that the thoughts and ideas of the community were very important throughout to move forward.

Questions were asked by those living near or in sight of the proposed campsite and if neighbours to the development should have been informed of the planning application. It was explained that under new planning regulations, no neighbours are notified unless within a 25-metre buffer zone of the development itself. This did not apply to any neighbouring properties.

Concerns were made that due to the CNES cyber-attack, planning applications were not online anymore, it was stated that the planning application and associated drawings were readily available to view on the temporary CNES website.

It was stated the trouble with visitor numbers and erosion started when the causeway was built and not just in recent years from campers / beach visitors alone.

Questions were raised regarding the hostel and the overflow of campsite / hostel. Rachel replied that hostel overflow would be welcome at the campsite.

It was stated that not many people lived full time in the area of Beasdaire many years ago. This is changing as people have invested in Berneray by choosing to live here. There is a quiet spiritual side of island life and people wished to keep that.

Positive comments were made stating that tourism plays a big part, and the islands (both Berneray and the Hebrides) depend on visitors – 'to live on a vibrant island, we need tourism'. It was stated when the beach access was fenced off last year, local businesses did suffer with visitor numbers down.

It was mentioned that campers in motorhomes are always looking for facilities on Berneray such a shower, toilets, fresh water, overnight parking area and in particular electric hook up is needed. There is a demand for the campsite and associated infrastructure.

Donald MacLean (vice chair) stated that visitors have been coming to Berneray for over 40 years. From 1983 vehicles have visited the island with numbers increasing over the years with the start of the Loch Bhrusda car ferry in 1996 and continuing up to today.

Margaret MacLean (Chair) thanked everyone for attending the meeting and hoped all questions were answered. Margaret wished everyone a safe journey home.

This one agenda meeting provided an opportunity for the community of Berneray to hear in detail the plans of the proposed campsite currently submitted through planning at CNES for 8 Rushgarry, Berneray, Isle of North Uist, HS6 5BQ.

'Berneray Sands' investors led a presentation which was followed on by questions and observations from the public. Opinions of the campsite were brought forward throughout the meeting, resulting in a general divided opinion of both for and against the planning application. Information and deadlines for the planning approval process were provided to the public. A general agreement moving forward, for the applicants to engage with the island community.