



## THE BIG ISSUE



It may not be prophetic but the next three to four years is likely to be one of the most important periods for these two villages. It will be important for all those who hold this place dear, permanent residents, weekenders, part time holiday makers and visitors. Decisions taken by the people of Elie and Earlsferry within this period are likely to have a far reaching effect on the villages and future generations. Whilst that may sound grandiose it is the current incumbents who will shape that future.

### Proposed Developments

Elie Estates have moved forward with their proposals to develop two areas of ground, at the field to the North of Grange Road and the field to south of the surgery at Wadeslea. The proposals look likely to increase the population of both villages and the nature of that population increase may well be crucial to the viable future of the villages.

Over the last twenty five years or more the price of property here has risen out of the reach of most first time buyers. The previously council rented developments at Wadeslea and Woodside have been bought as owner/occupied and part time residences and holiday rentals. The consequence has been that during the non holiday periods both villages have been devoid of a resident population to help to sustain the local businesses. A survey recently undertaken by a member of the community council found that of some 832 available residential units in both villages only 264 were permanently lived in. (31%). There are now no shops in Earlsferry whilst in the 1950s there were probably around 10. It could be argued that the demise of the local shops in Earlsferry and Elie may have more to do with the mobility of the modern family and the convenience of supermarket shopping. More recently the trend has been towards



deliveries from supermarkets to houses being rented out as holiday homes. Another consequence has been a lack of community spirit and cohesiveness that should come with villages such as ours. The lack of use of the Town Hall in Earlsferry, for example, may have more to do with the lack of population than the inconvenience of the accommodation. The school role at Elie Primary School has been steadily falling from 36 in 2015 to 27 currently. If this trend continues it is more than likely that some form of consolidation might be mooted by the Education authority. Premises which were previously businesses, shops or restaurants have been consistently bought up and converted into residential homes. And yet each summer, Christmas, New Year and Easter the villages are thronged with people either visiting or staying and during these periods the local business that have survived have to make their profit.

### Questions

Should we ask whether this trend if it continues is desirable? Are we entitled to consider whether something should or could be done to try to reverse the trend, to stimulate demand more on a 24/7 basis rather than a total of three months per a year? Would the availability of cheaper housing assist in reversing this trend or conversely a reduction in the number of houses rented out or only occupied part time. If so should we be looking at possible remedies or is it the case that it is a modern trend which should be accepted or even adapted to the local environment?

### Other Holiday Destinations

It is not a phenomenon which is unique to this little corner of paradise. Similar anxieties are being expressed in Devon and Cornwall – especially St. Ives – in the Yorkshire Dales National Park and in some of our sister villages further round the East Neuk – not to mention our mighty capital over the water. The perception is that they do not relish going the way we are going or even have gone.

### Solutions ?

Can we reverse or slow down this trend assuming we wish to? How could we increase the permanent population or adjust the current percentages in favour of permanent residences; One such remedy has been suggested in St. Ives. Their percentages are actually much less than us (about 20% second or let out homes) but they held a plebiscite and the majority were in favour of the local planning authority imposing restrictions on new builds that they could only be used as owner/occupied homes. Whilst this may be superficially attractive to these communities it is not attractive to developers who see a significant percentage of their market immediately disappearing. It is highly likely that if any such restriction were imposed say on the developments by Elie Estates these developments would not be commercially viable. Especially if the percentages here were reflected in the potential market. Another possibility is to impose on land developers a minimum percentage of dwellings which require to be “affordable homes”. The local planning authority makes it a condition of planning permission that some of the houses to be built will be rented out for affordable rents. Currently the general rule of thumb seems to be 30% of the development must be affordable housing. Now there are drawbacks to that scheme. Firstly in order to attract quality tenants there requires to be a sufficient pool of local employment. In a place like the villages that is not so. There is another potential drawback that if the developer either decides to handle the rented properties himself or sets up a separate organisation to do so and these houses are not taken up by suitable tenants then they can be handed over to the local housing authority. It stands to reason that if these homes are “unrentable” to suitable



tenants there is a danger of renting to “unsuitable” tenants.

So to attract more people to live permanently in villages such as ours we need to find suitable employment and an infrastructure which enables those employed to reach their place of employment quickly. This means a transport infrastructure that is reliable by a proper modern road network or a railway which services the main conurbations. There is the further consideration that with a properly connected community the ability to work at home via the internet could foster more such home workers.

It might be argued that with a development of the nature of Elie Estates proposals there would be some increase in employment locally – e.g. care home staff, small business units etc. but would it be sufficient to sustain 22 affordable rented homes plus a number of owner/occupied houses ?

## Decisions

The villagers are going to have to decide whether the proposals which Elie Estates put forward are likely to be of in the best interests of the community. Will that mean more permanent residents ? Will more permanent residents encourage economic growth in the local community ? Without this development are we looking at further stagnation of the local economy and reduction in the small number of businesses which have so far survived ? Are we looking at a landscape that is fully populated for three months of the year and deserted thereafter ? Will the proposals by Elie Estates actually have an effect of increasing the resident percentage of population or will the proportion of unoccupied houses remain the same ? Can the infrastructure of the villages cater for an increased resident population and conversely will the lack of the permanent population increasingly diminish that infrastructure, schools, library town hall etc. ? Indeed are we taking a risk that if these developments go ahead all that will happen is that the permanent resident population will increase slightly but insufficient to sustain the local economy in the medium term? It is a conundrum but one which has to be faced. Elie Estates are holding two exhibitions and drop in sessions at Toll Green Hall on March and April.

## Public Meeting

The Community Council propose to hold an open public meeting to consider not only these proposals but also the wider implications raised by this article in **Earlsferry Town**

**Hall** on Monday 9<sup>th</sup> April at 7.15 and everyone is welcome.