

## Opinion Piece: Guilty as Charged

As the newly appointed Chair of the leading trade body representing the Scottish self-catering sector, I am growing increasingly alarmed at the claim being made by some of our national and local politicians that licensing of short-term lets will help to improve access to affordable homes, despite assurances from the Cabinet Secretary for Housing in October, when over provision was removed from the draft SSI, that the rationale behind the proposals is not in fact driven by housing concerns.

My first question in response to this claim is: how? Given the pronouncements made it is patently obvious that the claimants have not read the detail of the proposed regulations and paid scant attention to the deluge of evidence provided by the ASSC and the wider tourism sector.

To be blunt, STL licensing is an irrational, illogical, and anti-business policy which has no chance of improving access to affordable homes.

In a recent article in *The Oban Times*, the Convenor of the Holyrood Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee states that *"the high number of short-term lets in popular tourist spots is leaving people struggling to find somewhere to live."* In that same article a Green Party spokesperson states that *"it is time that short term lets are regulated to ensure that long-term housing is available and affordable for residents."* Other politicians representing areas from the Highlands and Edinburgh continue to make similar assertions, despite there being not a shred of evidence demonstrating a direct correlation between the concentrations of self-catering and bed and breakfast provision and the availability of affordable homes. Worse still, promulgation of the link between the two and the claim that licensing will solve the problem gives false hope to those individuals and businesses suffering the very real difficulties caused by the housing crisis. As such the politicians involved are stoking division and having a detrimental impact on community cohesion by persisting with their baseless attack on the livelihoods of thousands of micro-businesses across Scotland.

The Scottish Government's stated intention for STL licensing is that it will make sure short-term lets are safe, it will help with issues faced by neighbours from short-term lets, and it will help councils know and understand what is happening in their areas. It therefore seems that the micro and small businesses involved are being asked to pay for a data gathering exercise that may result in their being denied continuation of their livelihoods.

It seems unlikely that even the advocates of this legislation can believe that it will have any measurable impact on the availability of affordable housing. The reason being that, on their own admission, the Scottish Government has no evidence or data to suggest it will. It seems, therefore, that those who believe regulation can achieve that ambition are highly likely to be sorely disappointed. To state otherwise seems disingenuous at best.

The housing crisis is precisely that – a crisis. The conclusion that the licensing of legitimate micro self-catering businesses and bed and breakfasts can play even a minor role in solving the problems involved is no more than rhetorical hot air. The spike in house prices over the last two years has had nothing to do with short-term lets. According to local estate agents in the Highlands, the majority of property sales have been to people who want to move from the south to live permanently in local communities. The housing market is badly overheated with no shortage of purchasers who have no intention of letting their homes to tourists. Licensing will not make any difference to this economic reality in a post-Covid world. It's also relevant that there has been a significant increase in the numbers of bed & breakfasts and guest houses coming on to the market and there is evidence to indicate that the prospect of licensing has prompted their owner's decision to sell. As currently proposed licensing will have no impact on second homeowners who choose to leave their property empty for 40+ weeks of the year. To suggest otherwise is mere speculation.

Meanwhile, there are politicians representing Highland and Edinburgh who accuse the ASSC of being protectionist in our call for the replacement of draconian licensing arrangements with a more proportionate registration scheme.

If it is protectionist to point out that STL licensing will not produce any improvement in the availability of affordable homes, then – guilty as charged.

If it is protectionist to point out that 55% of our members earnestly believe that the uncertainties inherent in a licensing scheme will force them to close their business, then - guilty as charged.

If it is protectionist to point out that over 70% of self-catering and bed and breakfast operators and staff are women and licensing will have a disproportionate impact on their costs, workloads and subsequent livelihoods, then - guilty as charged.

If it is protectionist to point out that at a huge majority of self-catering and bed and breakfast operators are owner occupiers living in their local communities and they will be the most detrimentally affected by Licensing, then - guilty as charged.

If it is protectionist to point out that Local Authorities will need to recruit dozens of permanent new staff to set up and implement a Licensing scheme, following years of public service austerity and when Covid recovery has barely begun, then – guilty as charged.

Perhaps local Councillors need to consider how this fact is presented to their electorate prior to the Local Government elections next May. Presenting licensing as a justified response to the housing crisis may be a difficult case to make in these circumstances.

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**Chair, Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers**  
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