



**SHETLAND ISLANDS COUNCIL**

# HOUSING AND COLOUR

Guidance for Housing  
Development in Shetland



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# HOUSING & COLOUR

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**This Guidance is just one of a suite of documents prepared by the  
Development Plans Team to help guide development:**

## **Guidance Notes**

### **The Shetland House**

*Guidance for Housing Development in Shetland*

### **Housing & Colour**

*Guidance on using Colour in Shetland*

### **Towards Sustainable Construction**

*Guidance on Sustainable Design and Construction for  
Dwellinghouses and other Buildings*

### **Towards Better Design**

*Guidance on Design*

### **Renewable Energy Technologies**

*Guidance on Domestic Renewable Energy*

### **Reducing Carbon Emissions in New Development**

*Guidance for developers*

### **Masterplan Development Handbook**

*A Best Practice Guide for Developers and Communities*

### **Design Statements**

*A good practice guide*

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## **Interim Planning Policy**

### **Towards Sustainable Construction and Better Design in Shetland**

*Location, design and amenity guidance and policy for  
housing and other development in Shetland*

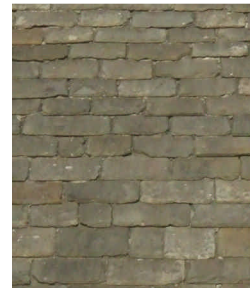
## Introduction

This Guidance has been produced to help you choose colours for your dwellinghouse. The aim is to encourage an approach that respects indigenous approaches to colour and therefore emphasises the distinctiveness of Shetland. We hope that the guidance will promote the exchange of ideas on the subject of colour with applicants, agents and developers. When building a house, colour should not be an afterthought; it should play an integral part in the design process.

Colour is, however, only one of the factors that help to determine how successfully a development relates to its surroundings. Others include scale, proportions and detailing and these are dealt with elsewhere in *The Shetland House*. As the Shetland landscape is very open, with buildings being seen over long distances, the colour of a building will influence to a large degree how it sits within the landscape. The successful use of colour can help to integrate a building into its surroundings, it can lessen its visual impact or it can be used to accentuate certain features of a building such as windows and doors. Colour is one aspect of local building tradition and the colours used in any particular area derive from the available range of materials and techniques.

Indigenous or traditional roofing materials in Shetland were:

- green turf
- straw thatch
- stone slate (a warm light grey or buff in colour, seen here at the Böd of Gremista, Lerwick)
- imported Welsh or Ballachulish slate



Later, felted and tarred roofs tended to replace turf or thatch. Usually these were black or grey, but as the example on the left shows, green was also used. Corrugated iron was also sometimes employed: colours varied, but black, green or a post-office red were among them.

Walls were almost always constructed of stone until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stone was often left in its natural state, and there are subtle variations in stone colour and texture between different parts of Shetland, depending on the local geology. However, there is also a strong tradition of lime harl (usually off-white, though the materials used influenced the result) and later there was much use in most communities of smooth cement render, often white but also in a quite wide range of pale pastel shades – blue (seen here in Burra Isle), yellow, pink and occasionally green. These colours were still used on some buildings even after stone had given way to brick, mass concrete or blockwork.



These indigenous uses of colour, combined of course with the other design elements common in Shetland - produced a distinctive local character and a recognisable Shetland landscape. In a world where local identity is becoming more and more valued, we should be proud of that indigenous tradition and cherish it, just as we value our music or our dialect.



## Recent Housing Development and Colour

Over recent years, the palette of colours used in Shetland housing has changed. From the 1970s, there was increasing use of dry-dash rendered blockwork, often in grey, buff or brown. More recently, much of our new housing has been timber-clad and it has often been



stained or painted in various shades of brown, though there are exceptions in some larger private and housing association developments in Scalloway, Tingwall and Lerwick. Roofs have more often than not been covered with tiles in various shades of brown, with some use of terracotta.

However, there is almost no indigenous basis for the use of brown or orange tiles (see box below). Windows are frequently also brown in colour, whereas a wider range of colours including white was used in the past.

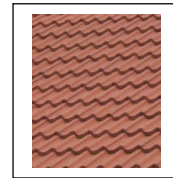


Does this matter? This tendency to abandon indigenous colours and design features is unusual. In most parts of Europe, it is common to see newer houses designed and finished very much along indigenous lines; the example on the left is from Spain. This does not, of course, mean that they are in any sense unsuited to modern requirements. There is simply

a pride in local custom and tradition which is applied to new buildings in the way that it has always been, despite the availability of a far wider range of materials and colours than was once the case.

In a world that is increasingly 'globalised' in an economic and social sense, this may seem surprising. In fact, however, people are recognising that local identity is one of the things that is crucially important in the modern world. In Shetland, we have begun to realise that the distinctiveness of our music, knitwear, archaeology, dialect, seafood, lamb and much else is in fact a great asset. They are things in which we need to take pride. But our landscape and our building traditions are just as much a part of our identity and our heritage. We should cherish them in the same way.

### Pantiles and their cousins



Orange (or terracotta) pantiles are found widely on the continent of Europe. They are Middle Eastern in origin and were later adopted by the Greeks and Romans. In Britain, they are particularly characteristic of the east coast of England and Scotland, where they were imported from the Low Countries during the medieval period. They're immediately obvious in the towns of the Lothians, Fife and Berwickshire. They were never used in Shetland and this is probably because, in their original form, they were not fixed down but instead were simply laid in overlapping courses. As such, they'd have been regarded as entirely unsuitable for Shetland's gales. With the exception of the use of a flat clay tile (not a pantile) on a few properties in the Reawick area, Shetland has no history of extensive use of various shades in the brown and orange spectrum or of pantiles. Their use will lead to a continuing erosion of Shetland's identity and a tendency for Shetland to look like somewhere else, or nowhere in particular.

## Recommendations: Roof Colour

As we've already noted, indigenous roof colours in Shetland range from green and straw to the buff or light grey of local stone 'slates' and the blue-grey of imported slate or the black of tar. There was occasional use of a true red, usually in the form of corrugated sheeting. In recent years, there has been some interest in reviving the tradition of turf roofs, as the example on the left shows. Their use on modern buildings does need to be the subject of careful design, but they provide good insulation.



There has also been some use of local stone slates on a number of restored buildings. Whilst it seems very unlikely that their commercial production will be revived, it is possible to find commercially-available tiles that come close to their light buff or pale greenish-grey. If the aim is to respect local tradition, they are a good choice.

The use of imported slate from Wales or Scotland produced roof colours ranging from charcoal-grey to a deep, purple-blue. Natural slate (right) is in fact the material of choice for a proportion of new houses in Shetland today and it is a proven finish that is known to last for hundreds of years. It is also much less prone to the discolouration and growth of micro-organisms that is so apparent on concrete tiles after relatively short periods. It is still possible to obtain Welsh slate new or second-hand; alternatively, some of the slate imported from Spain, China or India comes in colours very similar to Welsh or Ballachulish slate. Slate is a good solution, but if it is beyond the budget there are other materials, including concrete tiles, thin fibre-cement tiles and coated metal sheeting, which echo the traditional slate colour, if not always its texture.



An incidental benefit of a dark roof, in whatever colour or material, is that it absorbs heat more successfully than a light-coloured one. The heat can be recovered from the loft space by the use of a loft heat-pump.

## Recommendations: Wall Colour

Many Shetland buildings retain their original natural stone finish and we would not recommend painting a stone building that has never previously been painted. Local stone colours and textures vary from one part of Shetland to another and that is an aspect of local character. Apart from that, one advantage of natural stone is that, apart from very rare re-pointing, it needs no maintenance and it makes little sense to add a new maintenance burden. However, although it may be desirable to build in natural stone, its use in new buildings is rare simply because of problems of availability, time and cost.

For most people, the choice will be between a new house in blockwork, rendered in some way, or one clad in timber. The use of timber in Shetland does have precedents, but it was most often employed in sheds: the boat-sheds at Hay's Dock are larger-scale examples.

We recommend that, whether the material is render or timber, you consider using a finish that is part of the Shetland tradition. Render may be

- dry-dash, in which case the most obvious colour is white
- wet-dash, which is likely to be a somewhat untraditional bland, dull grey unless either white cement and light aggregate is used, or it is painted
- lime harl, which requires more specialist skill in application, but can be readily coloured, as seen for example at the Tolbooth in Lerwick

- smooth cement render, which can be painted in any colour

Timber boarding acts as a protective and decorative envelope for the structure of a building and it can be “painted” (in fact, coated with an opaque microporous finish). Contrary to the impression one might gain from looking at newer Shetland housing, a wide range of colours is available either off-the-shelf or by bespoke mixing.

In the remainder of this section, we provide some examples of the thoughtful use of colour on Shetland houses, beginning with some in white or cream.

## White or Cream

Three examples of rendered finishes and one painted timber example



## Blues

Here are two examples of the use of blue or greenish-blue shades and some colours to consider.





## Greens

The sheds at Hay's Dock in Lerwick are one example of the use of a strong green on walls and bold red on roofs. Here are two domestic examples of the use of green on houses, one quite strong and the other more muted. Most shades of green will harmonise well with the natural landscape. Here are examples:



Here are some suggested shades of green. Paler pastel shades would also be in keeping with local tradition:



## Reds

There are a few older Shetland buildings that import the west Norwegian deep, rich red. The best known original example is the sail loft at Voe, which helps to give a notably Scandinavian character to the old village; more recently, Albert Building on Lerwick's waterfront became another prominent example. Recently, the colour has begun to be used on houses. These buildings tend to look particularly smart with white detailing and a neutral grey or black roof, which allow the red to stand out.



Suggested colours:



## Other Colours

There are, of course many more possible shades and colours than we can illustrate in this guide. Among the lighter, pastel shades, yellow is worth considering. Pale yellows are certainly among the colours that were used traditionally in Shetland, though they seem rarer nowadays. Like most colours, they work best with a neutral roof, which is also the traditional style. Here is a successful example from Gulberwick:



## Recommendations: Detailing

The choice of colours for windows and doors and other details can make all the difference to the appearance of a house. The Shetland tradition varied from place to place, but it often involved quite strong contrast between the details and the main colour. Here are two examples of detailing on older houses:



More recent examples continue the tradition. The house on the left, above, has a grey roof and walls of a quite dark grey, but the bright white detailing of dormers, windows and doors transforms it.

On the right, there are bold contrasts between the red, white and grey details of the houses and the main colours. This photograph is also a good example of how a consistent, neutral (and traditional) roof colour allows the use of bold wall and detail colours without any danger of the development appearing confused or jumbled.



## A Final Note

### Environmentally Friendly Paints

A number of paint manufacturers still continue to use solvents in paint that, upon evaporation, release volatile organic compounds (VOCs) - these cause environmental degradation and contribute towards global warming. You should consider using environmentally friendly paints and finishes for your building. There are a number of companies that now use only natural products to produce solvent free paints and treatments. Paint tins are generally marked to indicate the level of VOCs. If you require further information please contact the Planning Service.

### Untreated and Unpainted?

Depending upon the type of paint that you choose, timber will have to be repainted/retreated every 2 to 5 years. If having to paint and treat your timber every few years doesn't appeal to you there are solutions available. Although more expensive at the outset cladding a building in timber such as iroko, and to an extent cedar and European larch, does not require protective coating and is coloured by the bleaching effects of the rain and sun, which creates a patina that enriches the architectural effect. For more information on iroko and cedar cladding refer to page 19 of The Shetland House.



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