

GLENNURQUHART RURAL COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

MONDAY 2nd SEPTEMBER 2019

OPEN MEETING

Present: Susan Clark (Chair), Carolyn Wilson (Secretary) and 17 others

A full list of attendees is attached as Appendix A

Apologies: Fraser Mackenzie, Margaret Crichton, Michael Thorpe, Nicola Vestey and Pam Bellew

1. Previous minutes and matters arising:

The previous minutes, which had been posted on the GURCA website, were approved.

There was an action on GURCA from the previous meeting, to make representation about the site of the former Scotmid, and land at Pitkerrald, in response to the Inner Moray Firth Local Plan consultation. Carolyn Wilson (CW) confirmed that this had been done.

2. Finance:

Nicola Vestey was unable to be at the meeting, but had forwarded a summary of the position. In the general GURCA account (which covers everything except the day-to-day running of the hall) we now have £9,606 in our unrestricted funds, and c.£22,500 in restricted funds, of which £16,500 is the balance in the hall restoration fund.

The hall day to day account, which is managed by the hall sub-committee, stands at just over £12,000.

Current estimated surplus for the general account is around £1,800.

Nicola has now completed the process to register GURCA for Gift Aid

3. Tourist Information centre update:

Gordon Findlay gave an update the TIC.

Since GURCA obtained the License to Occupy the TIC from Highland Council, 12 weeks ago, we have taken the opportunity to gather some initial thoughts and observations on the two areas of concern raised by Highland Council, when they provided feedback on our asset transfer request back in April.

Community Support

Highland Council raised this as an area of concern: *“although people had voted at a public meeting in favour of exploring ways to keep the TIC open was there any additional evidence of their commitment and support for this?”*

The license to occupy the TIC given by the council in June provided an opportunity to test support. There has been a fantastic response....

- Over the 12 weeks since the licence was granted (June 11th) the TIC has been open on 45 days, an average of 3.5 days per week.
- Twenty or so different volunteers (some crafts people, some not) have provided over 553 hours of their time to the TIC over that period. The majority of time given to providing visitor information, others ensuring a regular supply of leaflets, others giving time to painting and cleaning.
- Two community groups provided displays that were well received and provoked a good deal of visitor interest. The heritage group provided a John Cobb presentation and Grow Urquhart the planters made from plastic bottles stuffed with bags outside the TIC, with locally grown vegetables and herbs for the community and visitors to sample....and photograph!
- Visit Inverness Loch Ness also used 4 days to promote the Loch Ness 360

Gordon reiterated GURCA's thanks to all those who have donated their time and knowledge so generously.

Support also came from other quarters

- At least two businesses re-iterated their support for providing commission from ticket sales. This supports and validates some of the revenue assumptions in our business plan.
- We also had a very generous sale or return offer from Birlinn Publishing (an independent publisher based in Edinburgh) for books and maps. Again, this helps support the revenue assumptions in the plan for retail sales. Included was a visit from their MD Hugh Andrew who had heard of our plans for the TIC, and the project relating to the castle, and was very supportive of our community's aspirations

We obtained, and noted, some helpful visitor feedback over the summer.

A tally was kept of visitors through the door on days the centre was open: visits started at around 80 per day in June, rising to over 100 through July and August. Total visits recorded over the 45 days was 4,504, an average of around 100 visitors a day. The centre was open on average 6 hours per day, so around 17 visitors per hour. This is consistent with the total seasonal footfall tally reported by Visit Scotland.

Despite the argument put forward when Visit Scotland withdrew from the TIC service, that visitors no longer require a 'drop in' facility, and prefer to research and reserve online / digitally, our experience would suggest that tourists and visitors DO value a more personal information service. Our team were surprised by how many tourists came in holding a phone in their hand, only to ask how to get to the place they had up on the screen! It's also clear that even when visitors have a plan to go

somewhere, they often still seek confirmation from a local person that it is a good place, or as interesting/worthwhile as they have been told.

There was negative feedback - 2 or 3 comments per day - about the toilets, relating to the charges and the poor condition/cleanliness.

However, a far larger number of visitors came into the TIC to ask "Where do we pay for the parking?" It would seem that visitors would be happier to pay for parking than to use a toilet facility

There were also numerous queries about how to get to the castle from the TIC, and whether there was a bus shuttle service.

Community Benefit

This was another key area of concern raised by Highland Council in relation to the proposed social enterprise: *"difficult to quantify the amount of community benefit this would deliver, would there be a significant number of local beneficiaries?"*

Following on from the development of the Local Energy Plan and the workshop that Soirbheas held in July to consider options for local transport initiatives, we have started to discuss with them the potential for using the TIC as a Community Transport Hub, that would provide a range of community transport services. This would be in addition to providing the baggage transfer and visitor information services currently being proposed for the Social Enterprise.

There is more work to do to determine the scope of such services and how this would be introduced, but the study's conclusion is that a community transport hub has significant potential in terms of community benefit. It would also strengthen the case for the asset transfer and social enterprise with both Highland Council and potential funders.

Funding

Based on the business plan assumptions relating to the purchase of the TIC, start-up costs and the purchase of the baggage business we are looking at an overall funding requirement of around £260k for the project.

Since April, when our efforts to secure loan funding were unsuccessful, we have revisited the business plan and re-considered the options for funding.

Our Scottish Land Fund contact is positive about progress and remains committed to us making a grant application for the purchase of the TIC, if we are successful with our asset transfer request. The likely timescale for the application will be November or January (the Land Fund won't consider a grant application until the asset transfer decision has been made) with a decision from them on a grant by March. This should enable an offer to be made to Highland Council for the building within the 6 month period defined in their asset transfer process.

We have discussed with SSE the potential for grant funding (Sustainable Development Fund) for part of the set-up costs associated with the social enterprise, including purchase of the baggage business. After consideration, they have suggested a meeting in September, involving the person leading on the fund (Lindsay Dougan). This is an encouraging step. Decisions on any funding are likely to be made in April/May next year.

With the developments relating to Community Benefit and the potential for a Transport hub, Soirbheas remains a viable option for additional grant funding towards the set-up of the social enterprise.

In July, a group of GURCA trustees and members of the prospective board of the social enterprise met with Community Shares Scotland. They provided useful and practical information on the governance, set-up and operation of a community share scheme. We believe this is a viable option that could provide a smaller proportion of the overall project cost and close the gap between grant funding and the total required. A community share scheme has the benefits of reinforcing community support and provides confidence to other funders.

Finally, Social Investment Scotland have indicated they would be open to another approach, which is a positive development. This may provide a valuable option to use borrowing (at a lower level than previously being considered) to close the gap between grant funding or a lower than hoped take up, were we to offer a community share scheme.

Overall, we believe the current package is more considered and attractive to funders than it was in April.

For the record, Loch Ness Travel has enjoyed another very successful season. George knows that we are still working hard on this project and remains open to the potential purchase of the business.

Next Steps

The key events over the next couple of months will be the meeting with SSE, followed by working on our case to persuade Council officials to give a positive recommendation for our asset transfer request.

We intend to use all the information we have been gathering to support a more formal presentation to the council to address the concerns previously raised, ahead of our asset transfer request going before committee in November.

Susan Clark (SC) thanked Gordon for this update, and asked the meeting to consider the following issues for approval:

Transport Hub – this provides a real opportunity to expand the scope of our grant funding. However, to go forward, GURCA members should note that the Transport Hub scope will include the Strathglass area. Are members happy to go ahead on this basis?

Transport Hub – Soirbheas suggest that the application for funding to develop this plan should be made by GURCA, albeit assisted by Soirbheas in the documentation. Are members happy that this happens?

Do members agree we should continue to explore the option of a Community Share Offer to raise some of the funding for the TIC proposals?

Those present at the meeting voted unanimously in favour of all the above.

4. Urquhart Castle:

As previously agreed, the Asset Transfer proposal for the Visitor Centre and car park is proceeding slowly, because GURCA's efforts are focussed on the TIC. However, there have been Liaison meetings, and we are now waiting for HES to respond to us on our various proposed initiatives. It has been agreed there will be a joint meeting to discuss this, but we are waiting for HES to set a date with us.

The working group is aware that the next major step for us will be to produce a Business Plan, and initial work on this has begun.

HES is hosting a 'meet the producer' session in November, where local producers can showcase their goods, with a view to having them stocked by HES.

5. Loch Ness Homes land transfer:

Gordon Watson (GW) gave an update on progress with the lease. After meetings with the respective lawyers over the summer, a draft lease has been proposed and we have responded with our comments. We await LNH lawyer's response.

The footpaths have now been opened, and a path from the Care Centre through the Care Project housing to the scotmid has been provided. The planned footpath will still be installed but this will not happen until all the new housing is complete.

After a meeting with GURCA, Community Council and the landowner, it has been agreed that the path linking the Care Centre and the cemetery can be improved. Erik Trelfer advised the meeting that there had been a request for a handrail to be provided at a difficult part of the path. Erik will ascertain the exact location and this request can then be considered.

ACTION – Erik Trelfer

6. Hall:

Gordon Watson reported that hall day to day finances are healthy and have been boosted by some very successful fundraising over the summer. Gordon's 'Crawl for the Hall' speed walk around the Loch ness 360 route had raised over £1,000 and the bottle stall at the Games had raised over £1,200.

SC gave an update on the restoration project. Planning consent application has been resubmitted and approved, and the QS has updated all costs. We now intend to put out to get tendered costs for the work, as these will be required before we can apply

for funding. We also need to put together a Business Plan. Unfortunately, the volunteer who had originally intended to do this work has had to step down, so we are now looking for anyone who feels they can assist with this workstream to please come forward!

If you believe you could help develop the Business Plan, please contact Susan Clark or Carolyn Wilson.

7. Other items:

Proposed new Childcare Centre – Michael Thorpe was unable to be at the meeting but had sent a brief update. The working Group had been in discussion with, and received advice from, Just Enterprise. Their next action will be to put together a Business Plan, after which the intention will be to instruct a Feasibility Study. Once this has been completed, they will be in a position to seek grant funding to get a Project manager in place.

Grow Urquhart – the display at the TIC has created a lot of interest and visibility for Grow Urquhart. The group had proposed creating a community garden on part of the land between Kilmore and east Lewiston, and the drop in session held at the hall to promote this had received very positive feedback.

However, when the group polled local residents for their views, the votes were 15 in favour and 11 against. The group felt it would be irresponsible to take things forward at this time, given such a narrow margin in favour, and the level of opposition from some local people. The project will not go ahead at Kilmore just now, although it may be revisited at a later date (again, subject to consultation).

The group is now working with the school / childcare centre to create growing space and promote its intentions.

Phone boxes – there are two BT phone boxes which are available for purchase by the community, at minimal cost of £1 each. If the community does not take the opportunity to purchase these soon, they will be removed. Lynn Kropp explained that it had been thought this had been processed some years ago, but it seems this was not concluded.

The Milton box has a group of volunteers willing to maintain it as a local book swap / library space. Volunteers propose to spruce up and use the box in West Lewiston as a 'selfie stop' for visitors to take photos.

It was agreed unanimously by those present that GURCA should process the relevant application forms to take ownership of both boxes.

ACTION – SC

Community Action Plan – SC explained that, disappointingly, it had not been possible to find funding for the £2-3k still required, in order to allow the work on this to go ahead. It was still felt that such a Plan would be a key piece of work for the

community, and very helpful for funding applications by all local organisations. However, we had reached the stage of being at a loss as to how to move forward.

Pam Lucas suggested that a Highland Council initiative – ‘Planning for Places’ may be something that could deliver at least part of the CAP remit for us, and provide some resources. She agreed to research more details and pass these to the secretary.

ACTION – Pam Lucas

John Cameron’s field Pitkerrald – a meeting was held last week between GURCA, Community Council, Shinty Club and John Cameron to discuss the possibility of the field at Pitkerrald, where the community bonfire is currently held, being purchased to allow the Shinty Club to continue its development of sporting facilities within the community. All present had agreed that GURCA would be the most suitable body actually to own the land, should the sale proceed.

SC, for GURCA, had agreed that GURCA would discuss the purchase with the Scottish Land Fund, subject to any subsequent work on a funding application being done mainly by Shinty Club representatives. All costs associated with the subsequent development of the land would be borne by the Shinty Club.

On the basis of this, those present agreed unanimously that the discussion with Scottish land Fund should go ahead.

8. AOB:

Treasurer. - There has been no interest yet expressed by anyone in taking on the role of Treasurer. Nicola Vestey will be leaving the area before too long, and it really is imperative that a new Treasurer is identified. **There will be no organisation to deliver any of the community’s aspirations, if we do not have a Treasurer!**

All members are again asked to consider whether they, or anyone they know, would have the skills, and be willing, to take on this role. Anyone with experience of book keeping and/or accountancy would be an ideal candidate, but the role is not overly complex, so someone with an affinity with figures and eye for detail would soon pick it up. Nicola is very happy to go through everything with a prospective new Treasurer, and work together with them through the rest of the financial year and OSCR report.

Please contact Carolyn or Susan if you would like to consider this.

Pat and Angela Veitch - SC wished to record thanks to Pat and Angela for all their years of work at the TIC toilets. To mark their retirement, GURCA had arranged a small party at the TIC in August, which had been much enjoyed. Thanks to Dick Beach, Fraser Campbell and the Deli for supplying refreshments and a lovely cake!

9. Next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Monday 9th December 2019 at 8pm.

Appendix A – List of attendees

Susan Clark

Carolyn Wilson

Gordon Findlay

Gordon Watson

Ann Macdonald

Pam Fraser

George Cruikshank

Christine Hart

Helen MacLennan

Neil Barron

Erik Trelfer

Dick Beach

Miranda Service

Adrian Varwell

Peter Bellew

Tish Fearn

Graham Fraser

Lynn Kropp

Fiona Morrison