
Action to Transform Community Facilities

Alastair Balfour (*Convenor of SCDT's Community Property Action Group (CPAG)*).

What do YOU think our community most needs?

- Affordable housing for rent?
- A new library?
- Retirement housing for our older citizens wishing to downsize from family homes?
- An upgraded or brand-new primary school?
- An all-weather playing pitch at the King George V field?
- Purpose-built offices for local businesses?
- Better facilities for the growing number of walkers passing through?
- A large community hall for bigger entertainment and social events?

.....Truth is, while we all have our personal priorities for how we'd like to see these special villages developed, we need **all** of the above. That was first made clear back in 2011 when the first Community Action Plan was created after extensive consultation. And it remains true today.

SCDT is very aware that time is passing and little has happened to tackle this formidable wish-list.....although we have devoted time, energy and scarce funds to upgrading the valley's network of walking and cycling paths and trails, acquiring and developing the bothy in the graveyard and, led by the Community Council, successfully opposing the unwanted application from Gladman for 70+ houses on a site next to the new CALA development on Campsie Road.

So, you ask, what happens next? Since the beginning of this year a small team under the SCDT's auspices has been working to develop a vision and a concept of what might be possible by way of new facilities for Strathblane and Blanefield to cater for our needs and to make us a sustainable community. We've taken as our guide that Community Action Plan priorities.

We've reviewed the 2017 HubCo report from Stirling Council which confirmed that while they hoped to replace the deteriorating library in the 2020-2021 financial year, they had no plans to replace the school. Even the various options that this report recommended for upgrading and extending the school were not accepted by the council, which repeated that sufficient funding was not presently available.

Community empowerment throughout Scotland

We've also explored what other Scottish community development trusts have been doing. That's quite a lot: today over 200 community development trusts like SCDT are beavering away in seeking control over their own futures. Here's a quick summary of what's going on elsewhere:

- Abandoned churches are being converted into community centres
- Attractive, eco-friendly new affordable and retirement homes are being built
- Undeveloped council-owned land is being purchased by communities with the aid of Scottish Government grants for development to meet their property asset needs
- Hydro-electric and wind-power schemes are being built to meet local electricity needs and provide income for their communities to reinvest in other projects
- Jobs are being created for local people to work full- or part-time on developing and running community projects like walker campsites, gardens, allotments & play parks.

The common theme here is that government – whether it's national or local – no longer has the cash to provide and protect these projects and services. In particular it often no longer has the cash to rebuild or replace ageing buildings, so less essential services like libraries, swimming pools, public toilets and community centres are run down or closed altogether. And schools like ours age away, still maintained in good condition, still delivering an excellent service to our youngest children, but no longer capable of providing a modern education experience for the next generations. and com a modern education experience for the next generations.

The engine driving this wave of community activism is the Scottish Government's recent legislation that enables properly established bodies like SCDT to acquire run-down, closed or un-used public properties and land. Most of us will have heard of Community Right To Buy orders, by which community councils and development trusts.

The new player on this legislative block is the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act. With this measure Holyrood gave community organisations the right to request public bodies like local authorities and utility companies to transfer underused or threatened property assets so they can make better use of them. This was accompanied by the Scottish Land Fund which has £10m a year to enable such purchases to be made, often at less than market value.

The Strontian Case Study

This has enabled imaginative, bold projects like the one a community development trust like SCDT recently carried out in the Highland village of Strontian, on the shores of Loch Sunart in Ardnamurchan. Last month it opened a new primary school, an attractive complex of wood-pannelled buildings, built at a cost almost £1m to provide Strontian's 30 nursery and primary pupils with a quality education in a modern, technology-enabled space.

What's this got to do with Strathblane and Blanefield? Simply, the fact that this splendid new school was built and is owned by the local community, not the council. In a case study that has deep parallels with the present situation we face about our ageing Primary, Strontian faced the refusal of cash-strapped Highland Council to replace its 1970s-era school.

What the good people of Strontian did about their problem offers a really interesting insight into how our community could take control of our own destiny buildings fit for purpose, to live in as well as to educate our youngsters. They came up with their own design for a school, and a site, and a plan. That plan involved building the school they wanted and then renting it to the council, which in turn would maintain it and provide the teachers and equipment.

And after a lot of work by Strontian's community council and development trust over two years in raising the cash, from the combination of a bank loan, a Scottish Government grant and by securing £156,000 of investment in shares in the school by local people and others who supported the project – the excited pupils moved in on October 30.

A Vision for Our Community?

SCDT has worked at learning how this project was achieved. We've talked with the Scottish Land Fund to understand how we can access grants to buy Stirling Council property and land – including the school and library, for a redevelopment that meets our agreed needs. . We've met with our local MSP, Bruce Crawford, who was very supportive. Most importantly we've talked with the council about the concept of applying a Strontian-type solution to its funding problems as far as our community is concerned: in other words raising our own financial package to build a new school and library and rent them back to the council.

We're currently seeking funding to carry out a feasibility study into how we could follow the trailblazing path created by Strontian and other volunteer-run Trusts. SCDT doesn't yet have the resources that other longer-established community bodies can bring to bear on ambitious new projects. We don't have the cash or paid staff to put plans together, raise large-scale funding and tackle the multitude of challenges that big initiatives like a Strontian-style project demand.

But we have developed an exciting new vision for the future of Strathblane and Blanefield. This is based on acquiring the school and library site – and possibly other council-owned sites in the villages – and raising the finance to design and build not just a replacement school, but a community campus building that also houses facilities such as a new library, nursery provision, business space, leisure and recreation facilities including a large auditorium capable of housing bigger events than either the Edmonstone Hall or the Village Club, and a bistro-type café. We also envisage upgrading the King George V playing field with an all-weather pitch, plus modern changing facilities.

We believe our community both needs this resource and is large enough to justify the cost....which will be substantial, probably in excess of £6 million (though we have no definite figures yet).

CDT has adopted this new vision:

- *To achieve a quality, contemporary development that will provide the cultural and social heart of our community. Our aspiration is to deliver an attractive building complex that is entirely in tune with the beautiful landscape within which our villages lie, using traditional materials and green technologies to the maximum possible extent.*
- *The school element should embrace the latest educational philosophies and techniques to offer our young children an inspiring place to learn. The library should be a calming, thoughtful space. And the public areas should encourage social interaction, recreation and participation.*
- *To achieve a sensitive, phased development of surplus land within the community for housing that meets the village's clear requirements. It is likely that a housing association model would be deployed*

It's clear that this vision can only be realized if we are able to raise finance by selling surplus land to meet the community's expressed need for affordable and retirement-style housing. It's SCDT's preference to do as other communities have done and use a housing association model to develop housing for rent rather than purchase, although we also think it possible to sell some individual sites to local folk who want to build their own home. It may also be necessary to invite a housebuilder to buy sites from us to put up houses they can sell locally. However this development happened, it would have to be under the control of the community, through SCDT and the Community Council, and to be approved by the community before a brick was laid.

Obviously this is a major and ambitious project, even on the scale of those initiatives now being pursued by other Scottish communities. It would affect the lives of most people in our twin villages – we believe, for the better. So how can this grand plan actually come to fruition? And will the community support it?

To answer those big questions, we need to commission a detailed feasibility study that will give us all an idea of what can be built where, what it might look like, how much it will cost and where can we raise that finance? Once we have the outcome of this study – it will take 4-6 months to complete - we should have a concrete project and plan on which to consult everyone.

What's next? We need to secure funds of around £25,000 to pay for this feasibility study and a quick assessment of overall viability. We've applied, so far without success, to the Scottish Land Fund for a grant, and are pursuing several approaches including to Stirling Council. SCDT itself has very little spare cash.

We're optimistic that we will gain this funding to at least start down this ambitious road, though it's likely to be into the New Year before we succeed. We believe this is a vital project to secure a good long-term future for our community, and look forwards to bringing you more information as we advance down a path that, if we get the go-ahead, will take the next three to four years.

Community 'Ownership' of the Project is Central

The overarching premise is, of course, that the community will be in control of how our villages evolve. **This is a community project not an SCDT project.** As we show on the next page we have had nearly 10 years of community participation in this process and as we move to the next stage community consultation must be a central feature.



The Timeline

- 2008** **The Community Development Trust is established** with the overall objective of advancing community development to improve residents' quality of life in ways that are sustainable — socially, economically and environmentally. It has worked in a complementary way with the Community Council (SCC), first in creating our **Community Action Plan (CAP)**
- 2011** After nearly two years community consultation led by SCC the CAP was agreed. In it we identified seven main and interrelated priorities:
- Developing the Footpath & Cycleway network
 - Improving car parking esp. for local shops
 - **An overdue new 'community' primary school**
 - **Affordable and particular needs housing**
 - Facilities for young people
 - **Using public body assets for the community**
 - Enforcing the 30mph speed limit on the A81
- Some progress has been on each of these (especially on path development) but in every subsequent review exercise the three priorities highlighted above top the list.
- 2015** The **Community Summit** organised with the help of Stirling Council had, as participants, over 50 enthusiastic volunteers representing the full range of community organisations. The them the 'built environment' was by far the most important issue. The key theme to emerge from the Summit was the need to:
- "Work together to create a strategy to tackle the range of urgent 'built environment' requirements to meet community needs — School, Library, Village Hall, affordable housing & housing for older people. The real prospect of a new school building opens up the possibility of a co-ordinated solution to our multiple community needs – especially in the built environment. An imaginative coordinated project might combine the resources of Stirling Council with the expertise and experience available in our community in achieving that outcome."
- SCC and SCDT were asked 'open up a dialogue with Stirling Council to explore a partnership to develop the school and facilities that meet wider community needs;' and out of that came the **Hubco study**.
- 2017** Stirling Council, using the resources of Hubco (a joint partnership between public & private sector organisations aimed at developing and delivering better local services), and with the participation of SCC, SCDT, the Parent Council, School and library staff and community members representing the main community assets took part in an exercise which involved mapping what we have, listing what we might want and outlining how additional facilities might be achieved.
- The **Hubco Report** was summarised in the October 2017 Blane Valley Bulletin. A number of ways of meeting our needs were outlined, but Stirling Council made clear that their funding would be limited to a new Library and Early Years provision with some improvements in school condition.
- 2018** Since 2017 SCDT has embarked on the task of finding an alternative community-led route to achieving the facilities we need. The previous three pages describe the accelerated pace of work that has gone on so far this year.
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