

SFCT Annual General Meeting

Chair's Report – Gareth Jones

Wednesday 29th November

- It is astonishing that we are here once again to report on another 12 months in the life of the Trust.
- The year under review began with a new community event in the diary – the Highland Gathering that was attended by more 500 people. Held at Corriegarth a great venue to which it will return next year. Extraordinary effort by both staff and volunteers – extremely alarming when it looked at one point the tea tent and its contents of sandwiches, cakes, the soup to go ladies and Ernie were about to take off as high winds swept over the show ground
- But down to business – we have two written questions – which we hope to answer. They are as follows:
 - The Trust's strategy is to develop facilities in each community why is practically every event based at Wildside.
 - Why is the Trust focusing on strategic projects and none that make a difference to families living in the villages such as housing, community transport and afterschool clubs
- As explained at previous AGM's, the Trust strategy is based on four specific phases. The first was to stabilise the Trust which had been through a very difficult period. Second was to professionalise the service by recruit a team of specialists and develop a clear mandate for action, the community action plan. The first two are complete and professionalising the service was consolidated with several staff changes and additions during the review period. The year saw the addition of three posts – Jillian Barclay and Calum Martin looking after marketing and PR and the Community Action Plan Officer Robbie Burn. Nice see employing local people. We owe our thanks to the Scottish Government and the Development Trust Associate of Scotland for funding these posts. Whilst talking about external funding, congratulations to BCC for securing external funding for its community services coordinator, freeing up the community benefit funding to be spent elsewhere. Welcome Olivia Grant if you are here. During the review period Fiona Mustarde took up the vacant posts of finance officer and Mathew Rhodes picked up the reins of buildings and facilities officer. Susan Low stepped into the role of bookkeeper – And I would like to welcome them too. The professionalization included a recommendation from Tony to bring on board fund raisers. This is paying dividends, to date they have raised more than £250,000 working with both the Trust and volunteer organisations. On top there is external consulting and in kind help and support worth another £50k.

- The third leg of the strategy was to put in place the infrastructure – we had a choice – single anchor building or provide facilities on the doorstep of every community. As a Board we chose the latter and as you will hear we now pretty well at the end of that phase.
- We are now well into the fourth phase of the strategy – supporting a thousand small projects that will make a tangible difference to day-to-day life. This time last year we said that if the complex challenge of running multiple projects in parallel had not drawn results – we taken the wrong route. Relieved to say we now have the permissions for our major projects. Why is this critically important – funders only really entertain applications for funding when the proposal is ‘shovel ready.’ So, let’s take a quick trip around the Strath to give you an update on progress.
- Wildside has become a busy hub with Soup to Go, bowling, arts and crafts, youth club, baby and toddlers, work hub, exercise classes, Highland Dancing, socials, meetings and more. The Polycrub will be up and running in the New Year, work on the play park is due in March. A group of volunteers, supported by Trust directors, have secured planning permission for a the park and £20,000.00 has been raised towards its development. The Trust has also purchased a substantial parcel of land for £27,000.00 adjoining Wildside zoned for housing but also extending activities at the centre
- In answer to the first of the questions about the way the buildings are used, Wildside and BCC’s Hub have been kept busy partly because they were the two buildings that stayed open during the pandemic. With Stratherrick Public Hall re-opened – groups are starting to use that too. In the Spring, we will be launching a booking system that will be available to every public space in the area. Later I will talk about the more fundamental approach the Trust propose to ensure every building has a unique purpose and is fully utilised.
- It was with great relief that Stratherrick Public Hall, opened earlier this year following long and complicated repairs caused by leaks in the roof. £40,000 has been spent over the last three years on repairs and running costs – supplemented by many hours given by volunteers. Working with Hugh, the Trust instructed a quantity survey and architect to develop a long-term plan for the much-loved building. This has been completed and will include further repairs to the exterior of the building, decoration, and landscaping if the Board agrees to take it forward. Match funding is being sought from outside bodies.
- Errogie Church has also been given a new lease of life. It is now wind and watertight ensuring that it will be an asset for the community for the next one hundred years. Planning permission has also been received from The Highland Council to convert it into a centre for heritage, biodiversity, and Highland culture. It will also provide a meeting place for people living in the Northwest end of the community which includes Torness. We are now working with the steering group to on a business plan that will

underpin applications for funding. Meanwhile it is now available for basic use. The significance of the successful completion of this project is that it provides evidence to funders that the Trust can manage complex building projects. This will stand us in good stead for future funding applications. Fortunately, we managed to avoid killing any bats, otherwise tonight Tony would be joining us from Inverness prison.

- Slipping down the pass, Inverfarigaig is experiencing a remarkable transformation. We have supported the community to purchase pieces of land, discussions to transfer the forest school and adjoining garden are at an advanced stage with Forest and Land Scotland and we are close to securing two properties to provide affordable housing. The community also has a Polycrub and next fiscal year will see the development of a 'men's shed' – the meaning of men in this context is of a non-gender specific space open to everyone.
- Chris, please provide a bit of insight into what is being achieved in that corner of the patch
- When I listen to that, I hear evidence that the community hub strategy was the right one.
- Heading back towards Foyers a quick reference to the excellent job the Heritage Group is doing to repair the Mort House in Boleskine Cemetery. Funding came from the Stronelairg Windfarm Fund with help from Steven, our community liaison officer.
- Foyers Bay is next. A project that has seen the tumble weed blowing through it for the last few years. But no longer. Planning permission has been granted to put in a slipway which will provide a safe public place to launch boats onto Loch Ness. We have a suitable contractor to build the slipway in the Spring
- Meanwhile Malcolm is preparing the area to become a unique boating centre. Please explain what is happening
- Just a few metres away is the BCC Hub. After quite a difficult period, we are delighted to say that we are rapidly building a strong and productive relationship with Kit and new team there. Welcome to Jo, who recently took up the roll of community development officer. Kit and her team are now developing a plan that will once again restore BCC to its trailblazing role in improving the health and wellbeing. More anon.
- Final stop on the coastal tour is Riverside. This is proving a difficult project where lessons have been learnt. The great achievement during the review period was securing planning permission for the leisure amenities. A liaison committee has been established to steer a course between providing a much-needed resource for the community and producing a development that is acceptable to the people who live on the doorstep. Huge thanks to Councillor Chris Ballancewho is doing an invaluable job helping us walk that tightrope. As a first step the Trust's architects and designers have worked with the local community to put in place landscaping that will soften the impact of any new buildings.

- I said final – I didn't mean final final. With great relief the new toilets at Foyers opened their doors and by heavens are they smart. This project has taken 13 years to come to fruition – it was, dare I say just a little constipated. It was unlocked for two reasons – dogged fund raising by the brilliant fund raisers – and huge thanks to them – and an agreement by the chairs of the Trust and Community Council to join forces to make it happen. We pulled on expertise in both groups to clear all the planning and financial hurdles. Many thanks to Patrick the outgoing community council chair for his hugely collaborative approach. This ended a fractious relationship. Also, thanks to another member of the team, Peter Leyden who looks after the loos
- The Trust team is developing the capability to manage the property portfolio, ensuring they all meet the multiple standards such as energy efficiency, insurance, fire safety, licencing all buildings must now meet. Thanks are owed to Lyn and her fellow crafters for keeping the Trust on its toes. They can now thread the eye of a needle – and I do not say that in jest!
- I am fully aware that the investment we are making in infrastructure isn't universally supported by everyone. To reassure you, no one ever got poor investing in property. They are adding to the overall value of the assets owned by the community. If the ambition for these buildings doesn't work out – they will be converted into affordable housing or sold to add to the sovereign fund that is building nicely to provide services for our children when the windfarm money dries up. I'd like to say a huge thank you to the staff for the massively frustrating task of landing all the necessary permissions – and to our architects in Inverness and Edinburgh for their extremely professional support. If anyone gets a whiff that there is an aluminium smelting works coming onto the market – best not to tell me!
- As explained in my opening comments – this is the end of a chapter. Our focus since the start of this year has been to go small – support a multitude of small initiatives that immediately impact people's lives
- The core of this is the funding for grants and community projects. As you heard from Fiona this has gone up from £185,000 to £225,000. Money, thinking about that second question, that is spent on making an immediate difference to people's lives. Grants to 40 students to help them with their travel and study costs. One quote from the completion report: this grant really helped me to concentrate on my studies by taking away some of the financial stress of moving away from home.
- We will evolve the grant system to provide training and support to a wider category of people who need to master a new skill for work or business. It could evolve into a community training scheme to help more individuals realise their ambitions and contribute to a more prosperous place. Meanwhile we have kicked-started the apprentice programme and are in discussion with the Whitebridge Hotel on supporting a member of their catering staff.

- A new type of grant item has suddenly become a cornerstone for the community - the distribution of community benefit funds to individuals and families who are facing financial hardship. This began with the £80,000 Covid-19 support that ran through to 2021. In 2022 and now 2023 close to £20k a year has gone to individuals and families facing financial hardship. The Knockie Trust has just agreed this year's grants that will see hundreds of pounds going to 60 families.
- Catriona grateful if you could thank the team at Knockie Trust
- It is not just cash – as part easing the pressure of the Cost-of-Living crisis the Trust also supported an extraordinary gift from one of our long-established families. As most of you are aware Alex and Janet Sutherland donated 40 tonnes of logs that was chopped into firewood and collected and or delivered to numerous homes. Thanks again to staff and volunteers. Delighted to say that the Trust has found the funding to repeat the initiative this year. Malcolm has placed an order for 48 tonnes of timber
- This is a green shoot of bigger things to come
- There are other initiatives designed to help people cope with the dramatic increase in the cost of living. Volunteers are working together to provide a meal in a warm space every day of the week. Community benefit funds were used to subsidise the cost of Fish on Friday at the Whitebridge which has been extended by Bella and Lesley, the meal provided by Soup to Go is enjoyed by dozens of people and BCC is looking to provide a hot meal on a Thursday. In addition, at Wildside there have been larders, clothes swaps, bring and buy and food sales. This is a place that cares for each other
- There is a more fundamental approach to providing affordable food emerging. Two communities jumped at the chance of a having a polycrub – gale-proof, hard-polycarbonate clad version of the well-known poly tunnel. Again, thanks to the fund raisers who made this possible. This part of a community growing project that as Chris talked about earlier, will enable the community to collectively produce our own fruit and veg for the community
- This is a green shoot of bigger things to come
- The review year has seen big steps forward in implementing the recommendations of the Community Action Plan. To ensure power and control sat with the community, we devised a novel governance structure. Anyone with a passion to make change could pick up the batten, together with a pile of cash, and run with it. Labelled 'Action Groups,' we would follow the community's lead. They have been successful, but not in the way we expected.
- Many thanks to Graeme for leading a team devoted to improving the pathways in the area....a critical part of our external infrastructure! It has been by or own admission a painful experience. The support we promised, and he needed wasn't there. However, out of a lively discussion, this group has helped us

put in place the help they need to allow volunteers get on with what they enjoy most.... doing great work on the ground and not being bogged down by bureaucracy. So far the team has audited 27 paths in the area to check their general state and accessibility. To make improvements £20k has been secured from Highland Council, with the Trust contributing a further £20,000.00 The team is also working on the development of an app that will show where all the paths are but could also guide users to heritage sites and activities to improve biodiversity. An online directory of everything you want to know and learn about the area

- It is a similar story with the Housing Action Group. A rough ride but for varied reasons – and I am not talking about Peter whose expertise in this area is highly valued. A discussion about where to put housing was always going to be problematic. However, it has focused our minds. In part, driven by the conversations with the Action Group we have formulated a clear three-pronged strategy that is based on one, buying land, two, buying standalone properties and three, working with housing trusts to provide affordable houses on land owned by third parties. The strategy is bearing fruit...we have purchased a piece of land in Whitebridge at a highly advantageous price and discussions have started on what it is appropriate to build there. Meanwhile discussions are close to fruition to acquire two plots in Inverfarigaig. In both instances we are committed to close consultation with the people most affected by these potential developments.
- The Transport Action Group has also led to great outcome. Many thanks to Rob Mullen for the work he put into working out best options to make the acquisition of a community bus viable. It is a puzzle that has eluded this community for as long as the new toilets. Delighted to say that in the last few days we have received word that The Highland Council has awarded the Trust a three-year grant to subsidise the cost of providing a bus. A steering group will be set up in the New Year and an order placed as soon as possible. It's not just a bus that's heading our way – we have also purchased a van for use by the community. (And for those of us who care about these things – it will accommodate 8x4 sheets.) Neither will be free – everyone knows the cost of running vehicles these days – but they will be much better rates than you would pay in Inverness. Don't forget, this will run alongside the transport scheme run by BCC which is always on the lookout for volunteers
- The fourth Action Group that gained traction is devoted to supporting parents with solving the problem of childcare. A survey was conducted and 78% of respondents said lack of childcare had affected their employment. The picture is looking bright. A member of the team is working with The Care and Learning Alliance and Stratherrick to remove two or three quite complex hurdles. They are solvable with the target of getting the service in place by the start of the Autumn term. Lack of wraparound support is one of the reasons why parents are choosing to send their children outside the Strath. Meanwhile the

Scottish Childminding Association has agreed to provide a fully funded support and training package for someone who would like to establish a childminding business from home. So in answer to the second question, there is a lot of activity in this area to ease the pressures on mum's and dad's and make the Strath a more attractive place for young families to live. There are 12 youngsters at Stratherrick Primary and yet we give 100 presents out at Winter Wonderland.

- Kirsty, you could explain a little more about the work being done to improve the educational experience of our youngsters
- The final group I will make a quick reference to is very much a skunk works. As you will guess from the pun, the review year has seen the emergence of a group dedicated to improving the biodiversity of the area. The fund raisers are hoping to work their magic by securing funding to restore a small parcel of native trees and equipment for volunteers to remove Sitka spruce within areas identified by FLS and development of ponds and flower meadows. It is also hoping to land a grant for electric bicycles.
- This is a green shoot of bigger things to come
- The Action Groups, the appointment of Robbie will enable the Trust to support them better, are one part of a strategy to give power to the people. The Trust was in past criticised for being this shadowy, unaccountable organisation.... Oh yes, it is/oh no it isn't. Anyone can on their own, or with friends, pick up and run with one of the actions in the CAP. Cash and administrative support is available coordinated by our CAP officer. An innovation, driven out of the conversation with Graeme is that the people involved will have the opportunity to directly influence the Board. A representative – we need a name for this community role - will be invited to attend board meetings at those points when they have strategic stuff to discuss. This is just one way we are improving transparency and the opportunity to get involved. The Board has agreed to hold one meeting a year in public, every major project must have a steering group and we have started holding community clinics or gatherings to provide an opportunity to meet staff and directors face-to-face. During the review period the project managers have been very diligent in providing a weekly progress update on every major activity we are involved in. Each year we also hold a community pulse survey to get your direct judgement on the job we are doing. The results of this year's survey are on the Trust website. We have also agreed to move to six Board meetings a year in order to free up time for directors to work on projects they have a passion for. It will also make it a more attractive role.
- The review year has also seen the completion of a project that will revolutionise the opportunity for you to take much greater control of what happens in our community. Started last year and led by external consultant Nick Wright, many of you have contributed to the development of a Local Place Plan. This sets out, settlement by settlement, the changes you would like to see. The Highland Council recently

accepted the plan – the first of its kind the whole of the Highlands. We are now encouraging every settlement to develop and manage the input into these plans. They will be updated on a regular basis. Inverfarigaig has such a group, and one will be established for Errogie and Torness in the New Year. We are now exploring how we can set up a community forum where the big decisions that must be made can be discussed by all of us. Any thoughts on how we achieve this will be welcomed.

- You will be relieved to hear that we are heading towards the final part of the report. There are two themes – one financial and one fanciful. The financial one is that part of the role of the fundraisers is to track any power-generation scheme that might provide additional community benefit funds. On the same theme, in February Tony will sit down with SSE to discuss this community making an investment in a virtual turbine which will provide direct income from the profits of the windfarm. Meanwhile we hope to draw down windfarm funds to kick start the major development projects. The agreement with the electricity generators allows communities to spend money they would receive in 20 years' time today. Fiona, our new finance director is developing a 25-year financial model to inform how we make best use of this opportunity.
- I would stress that we will continue to protect the legacy fund which continues to grow despite a very difficult financial period.
- I like to ask Ken to give us an update
- Earlier this year the Board decided that it would make sense to bring all the plans we have in place together under a single driving vision. The outcome of the discussion was the community benefit funds – to have a truly transformative impact – must be used help the community become far more self-reliant. Highland communities like our own can no longer ignore the huge global shocks that have traditionally shaken the bigger towns and cities. We will be affected by global warming, food will be in short supply, local and central government will struggle to provide basic services. This is a viewpoint and conversation that quickly gets political which we will have elsewhere. However, we do not want our children to accuse this generation of squandering a once in a lifetime opportunity. The strategy to build our self-reliance, which we will develop with you, has eight pillars including growing the areas commercial prosperity, improving our health and wellbeing, transforming the quality of the education we provide to our youngsters and so on. There is a newsletter special providing the background which is available on the website.
- It is a goal that brings us full circle and to a question asked by one member – how the network of buildings will be used in the future. Here are some simple examples of what could happen:
 - BCC which is working with doctors at the Medical Centre to develop the concept of social prescribing. It will connect people suffering medical conditions with activities that improve their

health and wellbeing. Diabetes sufferers will take part in exercise classes at the Riverside Amenity Centre and attend cookery courses on healthy eating at Stratherrick Public Hall. Balance classes for the elderly, falls is a key contributor to early mortality, will be available at the Riverside gym followed by appropriate walks developed by Graeme and the paths team

- Self-builders will be able to access timber felled in the community forest, cut to size at the community sawmill and then use the tools at the Inverfarigaig Men's Shed to make the shelves.
- Children at Stratherrick primary visit the forest school to learn about biology, conducting experiments in the neighbouring forest, sports will be a combination of sailing lessons at the Foyers Bay boat club and a game of shinty at Riverside. There is an opportunity to transform the quality of the education for our kids reversing the drain to neighbouring schools
- Tourists will spend a couple of hours at the heritage and biodiversity centre in Errogie Church watching on web cams, the fledgling Eagles living in the Monadhliath Mountains, down to Foyers Bay for a canoeing expedition and then to the Whitebridge for an evening of Scottish Country dancing
- One more scenario, there is an abundance of food on the hills around us. Most of it goes to game dealers and south to England whilst we make the round trip to Inverness to do the shopping churning out carbon into the atmosphere. In this scenery, venison is slaughtered locally, stored in a commercial chill room at Errogie Church, prepared by a part-time butcher and cooked and served in the café. It is here that you can also buy the craft food produced by crofters like Jane and Adam and the growing group of artisans developing high quality organically sound food and drink
- Yep, as a London politician might describe it – sounds like magical thinking – but it is called the 'circular economy'. A very real concept that is being embraced by governments and companies and communities around the world. Recall my comments earlier, much the green shoots will, with energy & drive, funding and facilitation grow into something quite extraordinary.
- Why is it so critical we grasp the moment – It's because for the younger generation there is not the optimism of our own; we know it is going to be a lot tougher; life expectancy is slipping back in the UK 7/29, the golden age of Scottish education is behind us, the services from central and local government are shrinking, household income for 30 year olds is for the first time lower than the previous generation and global warming will change the way we live here.
- Community benefit income is a once in a lifetime opportunity. In thirty years' time, if we can find the will and work together, our children and grandchildren will comment on the foresight of the people in this room. Not only will they have the infrastructure but also the money to pay for it. Remember one of

the best decisions the Trust ever made was to set up the legacy fund – which will start to pay dividends if the windfarm money runs out. The Trust is just a facilitator – it is the community that will make this happen.

- We would like to say a special thanks to three members of staff who have left the Trust. That is Mark Henderson who set up the role of facilities manager, Marie who did a remarkable job looking after the finances during a very turbulent period and our administrator Laura who steps down from the role after 7 years. Her last task has been to help her replacement Kirsteen Campbell steer us through tonight's AGM.
- My final thanks from Catriona and I, is to Tony and his staff who have managed a vast volume of work showing extreme patience when, yet another mad scheme drops into their inboxes.
- And thanks to the growing army of volunteers that includes my fellow directors sitting around this table. Stratherrick and Foyers are on the move.