

Trustees' Report

We live in increasingly challenging times. Government and local authority budgets are inadequate to provide even some of what we would have considered in the past as basic services. For example, Mary and Maud volunteer for the South Wester Ross Community Car Scheme. A significant part of what they do is deliver prescriptions and take people to medical appointments in Dingwall and Inverness. Jonny and Kirsty are on the community hall committee, again we would not be sitting here in anticipation of our soup lunch if it weren't for volunteers giving up their time and applying for grants to provide facilities and activities. The NHS and Highland Council continue to find ways to do more for less. The result is that communities need to do more for themselves because no one else is going to do it. To this end, in my opinion, Community Groups are important.

It is worth reminding everyone that the COW Trust's Trustees and co-opted members are volunteers trying to do the best for their community. We welcome help, engagement, constructive comments. All we ask for is that it should be conducted respectfully. There were times last year when this was not the case. This caused upset and anxiety and should not be tolerated.

Your Trustees worked hard last year on two fronts...completing the toilets project and applying for grants to purchase the Kinlochewe Stores and Owners' House. Both projects required a lot of work. Many hours were given freely by the Trustees to progress both projects.

You will be pleased to hear that I am not going to give you chapter and verse on each aspect of each project. We tried to keep folks informed as far as we reasonably could throughout last year. We listened to what people said and tried to do better. The Trustees will be pleased to answer specific questions you may have at the end of the meeting.

Kinlochewe Public Toilets

With respect to the toilets, it is with regret that there was a delay to their opening. This was a result of a combination of issues. One of the principal delaying events was satisfying building control and obtaining a completion certificate. You will understand from a public liability point of view we must be careful to ensure that everything is in proper order and remains so. The bottom line is that we now have public toilets which are open 24/7. This contrasts with public toilets in other nearby communities including Achnasheen and Poolewe and further afield.

I want to tell you this. When people make donations online, they sometimes comment on why they have donated. Here are some comments.

“Because clean and safe toilets are important and so necessary in the highlands where facilities are a far distance from each other.”

“Women's toilets were very well maintained, the signs about it being maintained by the community made me want to contribute as a visitor of the area.”

“I am so grateful for this fabulous facility - it is very much appreciated and I hope it continues to be there for years to come. I encourage everyone who uses it to donate.”

“They are a fabulous community resource and a god send on long drives!”

There are many, many more similar comments.

This is a testament to the efforts of Carol who makes sure our toilets are kept sparkling clean, Andrew who never ceases to amaze me with his superlative technical skills, attention to detail and his impressive toolbox and of course where would be without Mary who does almost everything including sometimes getting her marigolds on to deploy plumbing rods to remove blockages. That's the toilet team and I applaud them for all their hard work.

Kinlochewe Stores and Owners' House

In summary, we submitted a funding application with all supporting documentation. It was a big effort. At the time of submission, it was made clear to us that it was a very competitive year with many applications. To compete, we had to reduce our funding application to 80% of the asset value. The lowest we were comfortable with. We had to take into consideration the increasingly difficult environment to get funding from elsewhere to make up the difference and allow for all the other costs involved in delivering the project.

At all stages we were encouraged by the feedback from SLF about the high quality and comprehensive nature of our application. Nevertheless, we were unsuccessful. Clearly, we were disappointed but at no time, as set out in our Position Paper issued to members last year, did we think that success was a certainty. There was a significant risk that we would be unsuccessful, especially in a year with less money available and fierce competition.

Further to discussions, the owners agreed to take a different path to sell the assets. They were grateful to the COW Trust for trying and thanked us for our efforts.

The principal objective was to secure the Post Office and Store for the Community and avoid another home becoming a “second home”. We understand that there is a high probability of the Post Office and Store continuing to serve the community. Therefore, to that extent the process may, in the final analysis, be notched up as a success.

The other less tangible outcome of the process was community engagement. It got folks talking supportively, and it generated positive energy. Rare commodities in some communities. Kinlochewe is known as place where stuff is happening. A place that can attract people to sustain our community. To my mind this is a good thing and we should build on it.