



Coigach community hall secures vital local services

A community hall has secured vital local services in one of Scotland's most remote areas.

For residents of the Coigach peninsula, north-west of Ullapool, the new hall in Achiltibuie is the culmination of over a decade of determination, planning, fund-raising, hard work, and lots of enthusiasm.

But the description "community hall" does little justice to a project that touches the lives of the 240 residents of the peninsula - and well beyond.

It's a doctor's surgery and a base for community nurses. It's home to a pre-school playgroup. It's a gym. It's a snooker hall, a badminton court, a five-a-side soccer venue. It's a youth club, a café, a library, a hairdresser's, an exhibition space. Its superb acoustics make it a great venue for visiting musicians.

'I thought: 'it'll absolutely never happen'. But I joined up anyway because I thought it was a good idea.'

Peter Drake, former hall committee chair

It's somewhere to hold your club meetings, or somewhere you can just drop by for a chat. It's been described as the best hall of its type in Scotland.

Yet one of its most ardent supporters joined the project thinking it would never see the light of day.

"It was around 1984 and the committee that ran the old hall began investigating the idea of a new one," says Peter Drake, who runs Polbain Stores, near Achiltibuie and who would later chair the hall committee.

"The original target was £16,000. I went to the first public meeting and, as the old hall had run at a loss for two years, I thought: 'it'll absolutely never happen'.

"But I joined up anyway because I thought it was a good idea."

Running local events raised £100 here, £100 there. The first Coigach Gathering raised £300. (It's been held ever since and now raises nearly 20 times that amount.)

Ten years later, the committee had a new target of £30,000, and exactly that in the bank. What they couldn't know then was that the hall that would open five years later would cost over £600,000.

But their very success at fund-raising was one of the keys that opened up new sources of funding. These would include Ross and Cromarty Enterprise, which approved a community action grant for £57,000 towards the new hall, The Highland Council, the Millennium Fund's 21st Century Village Halls fund and the Rural Challenge Fund.

The cleverly designed hall has rooms linked to a central hub, so it can cater for several activities at the same time, or for a single major event, such as a concert or wedding. Oil-powered under-floor heating costs little over £1,000 a year to run and modest income from the various groups and organisations that use the hall combines to cover running costs.

"If we didn't have the new hall, the doctor's surgery would probably have had to stop and the pre-school playgroup would have had to shut," adds Peter.

Community impact checklist

- ✓ Vital public services retained in rural area
- ✓ Top quality community centre built, and generating annual surplus
- ✓ Centre provides focus for community, tourism and the arts
- ✓ Project means more people are active in the community



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Old hall gets new life

When local people visited weekly doctor surgeries in the old community hall, the district nurses would have to turn up the radio to guard patient privacy.

The old hall was built in 1914 and served as a TA drill hall until a committee was formed to buy it in 1958.

But by the 1980s, the building was draughty and struggling to keep up with the demands being made, although people still felt an attachment to it.

"There used to be great craic in the old hall," says Cathy McNeil, who holds the electronic keys that enable local people to use the new hall.

"Some people were a bit stand-offish with the new hall at first. But I think what it has done is to get people out more. Lots of people come along because it's nice and clean and warm and bright and airy."

The old hall, meanwhile, has been renovated and is now home to Achiltibuie Piping School.

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The secret to success

The secret recipe for a successful community hall project includes meticulous planning, a good architect, enterprise network help when you most need it, and not setting your sights too low.

Of course, it helps to have some very capable people steering the project.

For example, former Coigach hall committee treasurer Harry Hassall was able to seek advice from at least one prominent national business figure who had a house in the area.

And his own experience included heading a university biochemistry department with a £4 million annual budget.

"We just sat down and decided what exactly we needed," says Harry. "Once you have your scheme, you might be hawking it around for funding for a couple of years and it's too late to change it then, so it's absolutely critical to get it right at the start."

No-one can accuse the Coigach committee of setting their sights too low. The eventual size of the hall would be 568 square metres.

"In a scheme like this you have four phases," adds Harry. "The first is fund-raising. The second is that you must be there to see it comes in on budget and to build

up a good relationship with the contractor.

"Then you have to show that it works at a surplus and is sustainable. We did, and we have a surplus of £8,000-£10,000 a year.

"Finally, you must show it continues to be sustainable when all those enthusiasts who fought for it are gone and those who replace them may not have the same excitement or emotional energy."

And it's precisely this community and voluntary effort that continues to underpin the project's success.

One contribution to the project proved crucial: a £57,000 grant from Ross and Cromarty Enterprise (RACE).

"They were the first to put money on the table," says Harry.

"We had a good relationship with them. We knew they were there; they didn't intrude or put restrictions on their help."

