



Cullen Community Centre

How a community saved and revitalised an important local asset
Cullen, Moray

Background

It seems fitting that a place known for its ability to warm stomachs with its famous soup, should have a heart-warming tale to go with it. A small coastal town on the Moray firth, Cullen is steeped in history – from serving as the final resting place of Robert the Bruce’s wife in 1327 to being the birthplace of the aforementioned fish soup, Cullen Skink.

Today, Cullen attracts tourists from around the world to its beautiful coastline. It’s also home to a thriving community that knows how to look after its resources and each other – something that was put to the test in 2017, when the local council dropped a bombshell. Cullen Community & Residential Centre was due to close its doors forever and was possibly slated for demolition.

“At the same time, to save money, Moray Council said they were not only closing the Community Centre but all the public toilets,” recalls director Stan Slater. “They

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Brenda Gifford

were also selling the Town Hall, which would mean the only thing left for Moray Council to look after, was the bins. So we thought we’re not having that!”

Consulting the community

Committee members from local charity, The Three Kings Cullen Association quickly arranged a public meeting to gauge opinion. Together they came up with a list of cross-generational requirements for the town. It was too late to save the Town Hall – that would soon be owned by the adjacent hotel – but the rest was still up for grabs.

“The meeting gave us a very clear picture of what the community wanted,” says Chair, Brenda Gifford. “There was a strong desire to hold on to what was going to be the only remaining public space available – the Community Centre, which also houses the public library and the local playschool.”

A former school dating back to 1876, the building stopped being a place of formal education in 1970 – but people still continue to learn there. Along with residential accommodation, the Community Centre was home to several activity groups and classes, all of which would lose their home.

The journey

The Association had other ideas, and initially sought a two-year lease of the building. This, they felt, would create enough time to apply for a Community Asset Transfer and take on full ownership. “The lease also gave Moray Council a chance to see if we could actually run the centre,” explains Stan. “And it gave us time to justify our business plan to them.”

“We had to qualify as an organisation,” explains Brenda. “Which we did by attending monthly meetings and keeping records of all our development work. Targets were set and we had to meet each one as evidence of our ability to run the Centre.”



All of which proved that not only could the Association take over the building – they could actually increase its productivity. Although valued at £150,000, Moray Council agreed to sell the property for £35,000, which

was covered along with legal costs by a grant from the Scottish Land Fund. Financial support and information was forthcoming from Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Development Trust Association Scotland, the Armed Forces Veterans Association (a high number of veterans live in Cullen) – as well as deficit funding from Moray Council itself.

“We were one of seven groups in Moray going through a transfer process at the same time,” says Brenda. “And we were all well supported by Dawn Brodie at Moray Council who was very knowledgeable and experienced. She’s part of a group in her own community that had recently gone through a successful asset transfer, so that was really useful.”

“We also visited five other centres all over Scotland. They were all at different stages in the asset transfer process and that was very enlightening for us. Some of them had made incredible progress and it was all due to the strength of their community support.”

The power of community action

Which is something Brenda and Stan have in common with the groups they visited. The local community in Cullen isn’t short of enthusiasm, putting the Centre to good use in all sorts of ways, from children’s football to art classes.

“They’re always full of ideas about groups they want to set up and run, such as yoga, a Men’s Shed, community cinema, dog training and Italian classes,” says Brenda. “One evening we came into the Centre to hold a meeting and there wasn’t a single empty room in the building.”



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“I don’t think we could have asked for more from our community. We’ve got a large group of volunteers who are very loyal and will tackle absolutely anything.”

That proved particularly helpful when the Association was faced with the challenge of an inherited deficit.

Due partly to a lack of marketing and development strategy, Moray Council had been running the building at a considerable annual loss, with the residential part of the centre operating at less than 10% capacity.

“We knew there was potential to build the business,” says Brenda. “And the residential side really helps to subsidise the community activities. So we just kept on growing and increasing the number of user groups paying room hire and residential bookings through publicity, information spread by word of mouth and our new website – it was amazing. We received some deficit funding, and along with the increased income we had a positive bank account of £5,000 by the end of the first year.”



Future plans



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With additional funding, the Association plans to increase the size of its hall, start a community café, and re-configure the residential space to allow smaller groups to use it.

“Shared decision making has been our strength,” says Brenda. “That, and being flexible. Nobody tries to dominate and we adapt to good and original ideas.”

“Plus you’ve got to listen to different age groups,” adds Stan, “because they have different needs, and you’ve got to cater for them all.”

What could have spelt disaster for this small town back in 2017 when the Council announced its plan to reduce services, has in fact given Cullen a shot in the arm. As for the public toilets – that worked out for the better, too. “We didn’t let them close,” says Stan. “We took them on and now donations provide enough money to keep those open as well!”

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www.cullencrc.org.uk

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