



# Johnstone Old Police Station

Active Communities transform a former police station into a community hub

Johnstone, Renfrewshire

## Background

There is a sign on the wall of Active Communities' headquarters in Johnstone that reads 'Daring greatly'. And ever since the organisation was founded in 2003, it's fair to say that's exactly what they've been doing.

Originally called 'Jogging Buddies', before becoming a registered charity and changing its name in 2010, the group plays a pivotal role in the health and wellbeing of Renfrewshire residents. Physical activity, mental health and wellbeing, volunteering, education and training are all part of its remit, running events that help bring people together and feel more connected to their community.

A former shop unit proved a good spot to gather in at first but when numbers began to swell, Active Communities knew they'd have to look for a bigger venue. Their search didn't take them far, when a former



***“At first, taking ownership of the building was “just a pipe dream”, but by continuing to dare greatly, that dream has since come true.”***

Susan McDonald

police station just across the road became available. Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Susan McDonald says at first, taking ownership of the building was “just a pipe dream”, but by continuing to dare greatly, that dream has since come true.

“Like a lot of organisations, we’re trying to be less reliant on grant funding,” explains Susan. “And that was one of the reasons for wanting to buy the police station, to give us an opportunity to bring more income in from our classes and groups, and by renting out space.”

Although Police Scotland had been using the premises right up until they relocated, the building was in need of substantial refurbishment. It was also primarily an administrative base divided up into small offices, so demolition was required to open up the space. A large building, with garages and porta cabins in the rear, the property offered huge potential for Active Communities to extend its existing activities and add some new ones. But first, they had to prove it was right for them.

## Finding the funding

---

“We got £10,000 from Renfrewshire Council’s Community Empowerment Fund to do a feasibility study, which was really helpful,” says Susan. “Because we had to show there weren’t any other buildings nearby that would be suitable, to prove that the police station was the best fit.



“That allowed us to do a lot of community consultation, which was crucial for us getting the building through asset transfer. It also helped us get other funding in place because we were able to show that we’d done a lot of work to scope out not just the building, but the need in the local area.”

Although the building was being sold by Police Scotland, signing a strategic partnership agreement with Renfrewshire Council early in the process also proved beneficial. “Anytime we had any issues, I was able to go to the Council and say ‘we’ve got this partnership agreement to develop the site and work with you,’” says Susan. “So that helped with funding, but politically it also gave us a bit of an ‘in’ as well.”

A grant from the Scottish Land Fund for £192,000 paid for the building – a 20% reduction on the valuation due to it being for community benefit. This was closely followed by a huge amount of fundraising to cover the re-fit cost of just over £2.3million. The Scottish Government’s Capital Regeneration Fund brought in £730,000, with additional sums forthcoming from the Town Centre Strategy Fund, Robertson Trust, Big Lottery and Garfield Weston among others.



***“That allowed us to do a lot of community consultation, which was crucial for us getting the building through asset transfer”***

Susan McDonald

## Challenges along the way

---

Hard-won funds that were almost put in jeopardy, when it transpired part of the land Police Scotland built on back in 1960 was in fact still owned by a debt company who had taken ownership of a long-since demolished house when the occupiers defaulted on their mortgage.

“Nobody had been able to chase them,” says Susan. “And because of lockdown, the Land Register was closed for a whole year. So we had to wait and see if anyone came forward to put a claim against the land. Thankfully it expired at the beginning of August 2021.”



Susan is upfront about the fact Active Communities had never carried out an asset transfer before, never managed a building and never overseen a capital project – and, as she says, “you don’t know what you don’t know.”

Learning visits organised by Development Trust Association Scotland to projects that were a year ahead in the asset transfer journey proved useful. As did attending training and a facility management group set up by DTAS, where Susan and her colleagues could speak to people working on similar projects. Taking on a dedicated project manager, again funded by Renfrewshire Council's Community Empowerment Fund, also proved invaluable.

"Originally we looked for somebody who would volunteer a bit of their time for us," says Susan. "But as the project progressed, we realised the amount of work that was involved, so we brought in a full-time project manager, and I don't know what we would have done without them."

## Future plans

Plans for the new premises include a community kitchen where they can run cookery classes, an events hall for fitness sessions, afternoon teas and a community cinema, offices with flexible working spaces, rooms for counselling or creative activities, a training suite, hubs for local businesses, a community garden, Men's Shed, bicycle maintenance and more – all of which will generate income.

They'll also open a 'Community Pantry', a more dignified response to food poverty than food banks, where items donated by local supermarkets can be bought at low cost, saving families £650 a year in food bills. This will then be tied in with their cookery classes.

"All of the projects inside the building are connected, so the idea is that anybody walking through the door will find a whole range of activities that they could get involved in," says Susan. "At times it's been a really hard slog, but speaking to the community reminds you why you're doing it – it will all be worth it in the end."



***"At times it's been a really hard slog, but speaking to the community reminds you why you're doing it – it will all be worth it in the end."***

Susan McDonald



## Johnstone Police Station

[www.activecommunities.co.uk](http://www.activecommunities.co.uk)

## Acknowledgements

*Photographs provided by Active Communities. Copywriting by Kelly Apter. With thanks to Susan McDonald and everyone at Active Communities for sharing their story.*