

Visitor Information Centre and 55 Main Street

There have been numerous ill-informed assertions made recently about the Visitor Information Centre, so it is time to set the record straight.

2019: First season

In 2019, Callander Community Development Trust (CCDT), in partnership with Callander Community Council (CCC) and the Sir Walter Scott Steamship Trust, set up a Visitor Information Centre in the National Park Office. The first season was hugely successful with 20,000 visitors coming to the VIC for advice and information from our amazing team of volunteers. This local help was much appreciated by this wide range of visitors, with half coming from overseas and the rest from the UK.

Practical problems

In spite of this encouraging first year, a number of organisational problems began to emerge. The office was a through route for the Landscape Partnership team and Rangers working upstairs. Security was an issue on locking the building and the retail space was limited. If LLTTNP decided to close their office, then the entire building was closed down. This problem has obviously become more acute in the Covid-19 climate. There were no possibilities for reopening the VIC in 2020, but it was increasingly necessary to start planning for a range of possibilities for 2021.

2020 to 2021: Options

LLTTNP offered a year's extension to the lease, but no further commitment beyond that. We had considered St Kessog's with a view to including the VIC in the Community space; however, there is no definite timescale for that project to complete. We also felt that, with all the numerous options being proposed to be included in the building, there would be insufficient space for the VIC to function properly there, especially as, for it to pay its way, we need a large amount of retail space.

Gordon Steele, the head landlord, has suggested we should have spoken to him; however, our lease was with LLTTNP and they were our landlord.

55 Main Street

When we looked at 55 Main Street, it had a number of significant advantages:

- Like the original premises, it is located on Main Street, near to the Square.
- The ground floor has 30% more space than the old VIC, with potential to expand further by removing the old bank safe room.
- There is no access path through the visitor space, as in the old VIC. This is extremely important for us to have expanded retail space in order for the VIC to cover its costs, as well as a more open area for volunteers and visitors alike.
- The fixtures and fittings in the old VIC were donated to us by Visit Scotland and LLTTNP have verbally agreed we can move these to the new building, provided we repair any damage to the old VIC when removing them, thus containing any initial set-up costs.

Additionally, we have the upstairs floor, which is even larger than downstairs, and also an attic room on the second floor. The plan for upstairs is to review its potential uses with the local businesses and the community. We are currently doing an options appraisal looking at the possibilities for community use, business use or turning it to residential as a long-term lease or a holiday let.

Property acquisition and development trusts

It has been a long-term ambition for CCDT to acquire property and **we** have considered various possibilities as these have come up. We did a business plan to acquire St Kessog's many years ago, but decided the risk was too great. We looked at the site of the Caledonian, but we were professionally advised not to proceed due to flooding risk. The Trossachs Store, which we were considering as a possible business hub, was unavailable to purchase as Ashley Bank only wanted to lease it. Finally, we looked at the old Eagle Hotel with a view to putting it back into good condition, possibly as a business centre and flats, but the building condition was too bad to proceed.

Development Trusts differ from Community Councils in many ways and they should complement each other, so they can work closely together. One major

difference is that Development Trusts can own property, which is a way for us to increase our assets and our ability to thus contribute to the community.

Callander Community Hydro Ltd. (CCHL)

Callander Community Hydro Limited is a wholly owned subsidiary of CCDT. This company has enjoyed several successful years generating and selling electricity to the National Grid. Originally, CCHL took out a bank loan for £1.65M to construct the hydro scheme. The loan was shared between Triodos, Social Investment Scotland and Scottish Investment Bank and we agreed with Triodos we could donate some profits annually to CCDT to be allocated to community projects. This depends upon the scheme making a profit and CCHL paying its loan commitments to the banks.

A number of good wet years have enabled us to make early repayment of some of our original loans to the extent that now we only have loans with Triodos. CCHL had planned to repay more of the loans; however, having recently rescheduled our loans with Triodos to reduce the interest rate, we realised early repayment did not offer much return.

55 Main Street: funding the purchase and business planning

CCDT approached CCHL for funds to assist with the purchase of 55 Main Street and £130K has been gifted to CCDT. This does not reduce the £60K funds that CCHL will allocate to CCDT this year for the Hydro Fund grants, weather permitting. We still have a substantial loan to repay to Triodos in an agreed schedule over the next few years.

CCDT is taking out a 10 year mortgage for £108K with BOS and this, together with the £130K provided by CCHL, will be sufficient funds for the purchase and refurbishment of the building. We are currently creating a business plan for the VIC, with the objective to at worst break even, hence the need for retail space. The upstairs facility will be expected to contribute to the running cost of the building and our aim will be to create a revenue stream to ultimately generate profits for CCDT.

2021 onwards: the positive points

- CCDT will acquire a real asset on the Main Street which has been empty for a couple of years.
- This is a no-risk purchase; the monthly cost to CCDT will be about the same cost as the peppercorn lease we were offered from LLTTNP for the old VIC.
- Our money is being invested for us to own a real asset and not simply fund a lease.
- More importantly, it will reduce the number of empty buildings on Main Street.
- An active VIC within this building will be a terrific asset for Callander, its visitors and its whole community.

Frank Park, Chair CCDT

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