

NOTES ON MEETING HELD AT STOER HALL
Monday 4th September 2017

Present:

Madeline Macphail (Chair) (MM), Linda Munro (Highland Councillor) (LM), Nigel Goldie, Mary Hinsley, Marianne Hutchison (MH), Phil Jones, Ray Mackay, Wilma Mackay, Caroline Macphail, William Macphail, Margaret MacLeod (MM), Carol A MacRae (CM), Grant D Nicoll, Dorell Pirie, Gordon Robertson (GR), Franny Schlicke, David Slator (DS), Andy Ventners.

Apologies:

Vanessa Ling, Tom Campbell, NC500, David Whiteford, NHI, Alan Jones, NHI, Douglas Gibson, NC500, Garry Cameron, HC, Don O'Driscoll, JMT, Sue Agnew, SNH, Louise and Shane Tunstall, Clachtoll Campsite, Russell Pursey, Elphin, Roy Kirk, HIE, Janet Turnbull, Scottish Motor Homes Wild Campers, Gavin Steel Scottish Water, Boyd Alexander, ACA/ACDT.

MM opened the meeting by briefly explaining the rationale behind the formation of the Assynt Development Community Trust as a rebranding of the Assynt Community Association. The ACA/ADCT reacted to the crisis when the Assynt Visitor Centre was suddenly closed by arranging to store the community owned exhibition materials at the Mission building and in moth-balled Stoer School. The Tourist Information centre has been housed in the Mission building for this season with a view to developing a community run visitor centre there in the future. ACA/ACDT is in the process of acquiring deer fencing around Culag Park (having already purchased a new mower for the Games field).

Because of complaints from local people and visitors, the ADCT has now taken on the challenge of forming a local group to create disposal facilities for motor homes and capable of handling all generated waste without harming the local environment. This has been identified as a priority given the increased influx of visitors exploring the NC500 route. The current infrastructure is inadequate in a number of ways and it is to be hoped the issue of campervan waste can be addressed in such a way that a balance is maintained between providing visitors with extra facilities and protecting our environment for local and visitor.

Motor home owners generally empty their waste about once a week if 'wild camping'. Grey waste (the dirty water from showers and wash basins) can normally be handled by normal mains drainage systems. But green waste (from campervan toilets) and blue waste (from chemical toilets) need to be treated in a holding tank before being released into the main sewage system or septic tank. There are currently no facilities allowing motor home owners to dispose of this waste in the approved manner when visiting Assynt.

MM has already been in contact with a number of agencies and individuals, all of whom recognise the need for action and most of whom have pledged practical or financial support to this project.

- a) Alan Jones (NC500 and North Highland Initiatives) who was involved in a similar scheme in Kinlochbervie has agreed to become involved once a potential site for the proposed facility has been identified.
- b) Tom Campbell (Chief Executive of NC500) has contacted David Whiteford (Chair - North Highland Initiatives) who in turn has agreed to pay for Alan Jones to carry out any necessary costing and planning exercise once a site is confirmed.
- c) Garry Cameron (Highland Council) has agreed for the probable asset transfer of land to the scheme operators if the proposed facility is to be sited on ground currently owned by the Highland Council.
- d) The John Muir Trust and Scottish Natural Heritage have both pledged support to the scheme.
- e) Janet Turnbull of the Scottish Campervan Association recognises the strain placed on local communities. This group has already contributed £500 to a similar community scheme set up in Arisaig and wish to help Assynt.
- f) Scottish Water and SEPA will assist where necessary once a decision is made on the proposed site. SEPA will be able to advise on the best way to handle the green and blue waste.
- g) Louise and Shane who run Clachtoll Beach camp site welcome the proposed facility as they do not have a chemical disposal point able to accommodate motorhomes who regularly call in asking to dump their waste.
- h) Russell and Bridie Pursey from Elphin have passed on their personal knowledge of existing facilities on the continent.
- i) A multi-agency group is already in place to look at waste facility provision on the NC500. The chair, Roy Kirk, (Caithness and Sutherland Area Manager of Highlands and Islands Enterprise), is keen to be kept in the loop as there are likely to be other communities looking to follow Assynt's lead and he will assist Assynt as much as he can

LM gave a brief outline on the challenges ahead, given that the Highland Council have failed to provide the level of support necessary to cope with the pressures and impact of the NC500 despite promises to the contrary.

There followed some discussion on the current problems caused by the general lack of litter bins for visitors to the area and the increase in indiscriminate fly-tipping as a result. Although LM suggested the local community put pressure on the Highland Council to increase the frequency of bin collections, given that many visitors dump their litter in private bins or in the metal bins situated outside various business premises, there was a danger local businesses would be expected to pay for the extra collection service. DS pointed out that current HC policy is not to provide litter bins as they encourage people to dump their waste next to overflowing bins. Highland Councillor Kirsteen Currie is already aware of the Assynt Community Council's opinion regarding this issue.

MM argued that litter is a separate issue from campervan waste and should perhaps be looked at again. The main aim of this meeting was to set up a working group representative of the local community specifically to look at a motorhome waste handling site in Assynt.

A number of potential sites were considered briefly.

- a) The Glac Industrial estate on the approaches into Lochinver. All agreed this was the best option due to ease of access and the provision of mains water and adequate drainage. But MH was concerned it would not provide the most pleasing attraction to visitors as they approach the village. Sympathetic landscaping would be necessary along with adequate and welcoming signage (multi-lingual), also advertising facilities available in the area, and explaining how the waste unit was community funded and operated (and thus adequate charges were necessary to maintain the facility). It was suggested that alternative sites might well also be necessary.
- b) The harbour could provide additional facilities for boat owners visiting the marina.
- c) The old salt dump next to the cattle grid on the approaches to Lochinver.
- d) The car park adjacent to Stoer Hall.

LM suggested the first step should be to set up a working group to enable funding application under the Highland LEADER regional scheme. The Highland Council welcomes the strategic approach as it might well set the template for other communities in Sutherland. The new SSE Regional Fund also becomes available from October and might benefit this scheme since it involves cross-community spending. It was agreed any application for financial support should be made through the ACA/ACDT since applications from constitutionalised groups are looked upon more favourably than those from private individuals.

Other practical suggestions included a fact-finding visit to Ardmair Bay Campsite where there are waste handling facilities and Kinlochbervie where a similar scheme is also in operation. Campervan hook-ups are not needed as the scheme is solely to provide waste disposal facility for motor homes wild camping and not staying in camp sites. This has become a large number with the advent of the NC500. But GR pointed out that having a local facility in place would provide an opportunity for local crofters to offer single-van overnight hard standing, given the number of motorhomes currently parking at random points on the roadside at night.

MM then asked for volunteers to form the working group, backed by DS who thanked her for her hard work and who pointed out the only way to achieve results in such instances is to take charge of the problem. The proposed Work Group will consist of the following:

David Slator (Assynt Community Council)
Gordon Robertson (Assynt Foundation)
Carol Anne MacRae (Assynt Crofters' Trust)
Sarah-Ann MacLeod (Achmelvich Camp Site, proposed by Margaret MacLeod)
Madeline Macphail

David Slator also suggested Linda Munro join the group as a Highland Council representative, and Alan Jones, financed by David Whiteford will work closely with the group.

LM agreed and immediately pledged £500 from the Ward Discretionary Budget to cover any administration costs.

The meeting closed at 20:40.