

Report Summary

After nine years, four feasibility studies and two community surveys we are now ready for the Community Council and VRG Board to make a decision on whether to proceed or not with the Community Hall (Meeting Room) The building comprises a hall capable of comfortably seating 40, a generous entrance lobby, two toilets, one accessible with baby change, a catering kitchen and storage for furniture and the water treatment plant.

The estimated cost of the building is £250,310 plus £34,890 in professional fees and expenses. A decision to proceed to planning, building warrant and tender is requested. There will be a further joint project review before any tender acceptance.

Background to the Project

For nine years we have been working towards the provision of a meeting space for our community. This has been variously called a community base, a community meeting room, woodland base and a community hub. From hereon we'll refer to it as a Community Hall - this satisfies the requirements of HMRC for VAT zero rating of community new build facilities.

In 2015 we worked with Stirling University to develop a plan for upgrading Howietoun Mill and converting it for shared use as a community space and university teaching facility. We were about to appoint consultants for the project when the University decided to sell the Howietoun fishery and the mill building. The private buyer was unwilling to sell on the mill building to us.

In 2016 we secured a Scottish Land Fund grant for a feasibility study for us to buy and manage a community woodland, and to site a community building on the land. We went on to purchase the woodland with a substantial grant from SLF. The community building with meeting space, cafe and workshop space was costed then at between £600,000 and £800,000. This was considered to be significantly more than we could afford at the time, and its delivery would have required borrowing against future wind farm income.

In 2019 we investigated the use of repurposed steel shipping containers as a cheap and easy way of providing a meeting space. The project was taken to detailed design and specification. The estimated cost was £150,000 plus VAT at 20%. After Covid the price and availability of containers and their conversion costs changed substantially making the project poor value for money.

In 2022, and based on the space requirements from the shipping container study, we began work on a traditional building with a main meeting room capable of seat-

ing 40, a separate equipped kitchen, toilets and entrance lobby. It is a much reduced version of the 2016 building proposal. This is the project for which we now seek approval to proceed.

The Working Group

We have a working group of eight community members contributing to the current project. We would look to further expand this group with users and managers if it is agreed the project should proceed.

Community Consultation

We have had two community wide surveys to gauge support for investment in a community hall. In 2017 as part of the SLF funded feasibility study a survey form was delivered to all households in the community. 62 households (about half the then population) responded with 74% of those (47 households) keen to support and use a community facility. 18% of respondents (11 households) were against the proposal with 8% (4) undecided.

In 2021 we again consulted the community on the repurposed shipping container scheme as a community facility. Survey forms were sent to all households in the community with responses by post and email. 31% of households responded to the survey with 81% of those in favour of proceeding with the project, 19% against. Those responding were evenly divided between FK6 and FK7 postcodes.

The conclusion drawn by the independent consultants managing the surveys for us was that there was a clear majority of community households in favour of proceeding with each project and for the provision of a community hall.

Current proposal

The building will be located at the Community Woodland in the Carron Valley facing south with views across the pond and native woodland. The design provides a hall/meeting room of 40m² - enough space for 40 people to sit comfortably. Opening off the hall is a furniture store for tables and chairs.

There is a large entrance lobby with benches and coat hooks also giving entry to an accessible toilet with baby changing space, and a separate unisex toilet. In operation, we can designate these female and male if we prefer. The kitchen was the subject of much discussion during the community consultation. It is now a separate room of 10m² with an external door, a store and access from the hall. The kitchen and its equipment are stainless steel and to catering standard.

The current scheme is based on a well insulated timber frame with a pitched roof, double glazed windows with steel roller shutters and steel faced doors. External

cladding for the walls is coloured profile metal sheet with a profile metal sheet roof. This construction will provide us with a quick build, much can be prefabricated off-site. With a well insulated building we can consider an air source heat pump for space heating with over-sink hot water heaters. A small water treatment plant provides potable water from an existing raw water supply from the reservoir. External lighting and CCTV security are included. Externally, there are 16 car parking spaces and two accessible spaces, with a surfaced footpath from the car park to the main entrance.

Design Team

We have worked with a design team comprising the architect (Bruach Architects) and building cost consultant (DNG Consultants Ltd) for the feasibility study. If the project proceeds, we will add a civil & structural engineer and a services consultant to the team. We have fee quotations from all four consultants for a full professional service through to building hand-over and end of defects. 20% VAT is charged on professional fees and expenses, and this is not recoverable.

Delivery and Timescale

From the date of an approval to proceed, a planning application would be submitted in 4 weeks with 8 weeks for determination. In parallel the Building Warrant drawings would be prepared with 12 weeks for approval during which time the tender information is prepared and issued to selected contractors. Work on site could start in early autumn this year for completion early in the NewYear.

Probable Cost

An outline specification has been prepared by the Architect with contributions from our group. This has been used by the cost consultant to prepare the probable cost. We have tried to remove any uncertainties from our requirements. The probable cost will become a firm cost when the project is tendered to contractors. The probable costs at February 2024 are:

Building and fit out	£250,310
Professional fees and expenses including VAT (14%)	£34,890
Total project cost	£285,200

The project build cost is zero rated for VAT. VAT is not recoverable on professional fees and expenses. It is also recommended we identify a contingency of 10% (£25,000) for any unforeseen expenditure. If this is a joint planning application by the Community Council and VRG, the planning fee is waived. Once planning ap-

proval is secured, the VRG Board would be responsible for progressing the project to tender, with a further joint meeting to review the tenders, agree the tender amount and to approve the appointment of a preferred contractor.

Financing the Project

It is recommended we apply the savings in the Investment Fund to finance the project (£285,200). The fund is currently valued at £478,000 (19/02/24). The Investment Fund was set up with two purposes in mind. Firstly, to invest and grow the Restricted funds for which we had no immediate use, and secondly, to provide an income for the community when the wind farm income comes to an end. We now know that the wind farms are likely to be 'rewinded' and the index linked community benefit will continue. We also have potential community benefit income from three further wind farms which are in process of approval. Also, the community hall project capital cost is one to which the Restricted funds can be directly applied.

Annual Running Costs

The annual running costs for the Community Hall include insurances, heating and lighting, water treatment, building maintenance, cleaning, repairs and administrative support for bookings and letting. These are currently estimated at about £10,000/year and could be partly offset by letting income. There is some uncertainty on energy consumption, which will depend on the use of the building. The running costs can be readily met from Restricted Fund income, currently £58,000/year and index linked.

Use and Management

Until the building is finished and available it is difficult to determine the precise range of uses and users. We do know it could be used for the monthly meetings of the Community Council, the VRG Board, the Woodland Group, for wood fuel and woodland volunteer days, as a base for the Tom Robb run event, and community events like the Open Day/picnic and Pomona Day. Forest school and parent and child groups have also expressed an interest. There is also the potential for private lets for children's and family parties. Keep fit, pilates and yoga classes are all possibilities once we have the facility up and running.

The decision to proceed or not

After nine years we are now at the point where we as a community need to make a decision on this project. To proceed with the community hall or to abandon the project is one of the biggest decisions we will have had to make.

We each may have our personal opinion on the project and what use we, individually, might make of the Community Hall. In voting, each of us needs to consider

whether this is a facility and an investment that can benefit the wider community now and for the generations to come.

RF for VRG - Meeting Room Subgroup
02/24