

CONTEXT FOR THE SLAINS COMMUNITY ENTERPRISE PROJECT BUSINESS PLAN

Why can't we just read the plan?

And so you should! It is on the website. However nothing is simple about the Collieston Community Centre and so a bit of explanation is required about the Business Plan.

Striking a balance.

Consensus around the subject of change in the village is simply not possible. Too many people care too deeply about its future and have opposite views on what is "best" for everyone. All these views are worthy of respect but, we will never progress if we are not prepared to be tolerant, pragmatic and work towards compromises. The business plan is a compromise between what the village wants and what the Big Lottery will pay for. The letter that went out with the ballot paper was a good summary of what the Big Lottery will fund. It did not identify clearly how the Business Plan meets the village needs.

What do we, the villagers of Collieston, want?

Sticking with the theme of compromise, over a period of years, many meetings and a number of ballots, the majority have indicated they want a new hall of some sort. (Hall or Community Centre, it matters not, there is no formal definition of either.) Ideally we would like a hall which cost us nothing and had little or no impact on the village.

What will the Big Lottery Fund?

The Big Lottery will not fund village halls. It will fund "sustainable community enterprises", which have to demonstrate very specific community needs and benefits. The plan is therefore very detailed, subject to constant revision by the Big lottery and, even at this late stage, is still being refined.

Why bother with the Big Lottery?

As part of the business plan an Options Study had to be written. Without repeating the entire Options Study, it is worth noting the following. The funders of improved facilities require the facility to be sustainable. This is particularly the case for Local Authorities and grant awarding bodies. Making an improved facility sustainable requires it to be capable of earning money. The ability to do this must be built into the design. The best opportunities to balance making money with community use come from providing a facility which can be used for more than one function at a time. Once you begin to pursue funding, to develop such an improved facility, you discover that the funders big enough to support such a facility attach numerous strings to their funding. None of the big funders will fund projects under Public Service management. Nearly all the grant awarding bodies require matched funding. This often comes from smaller grant awarding bodies who rely on the big funders to scrutinise bids.

What does all that mean?

If you can get through the strict scrutiny the big funders apply to bids, (and the Big Lottery is the biggest and strictest), other smaller funders are likely to support your project. Only one of the options in the study could provide the size of space requested by villagers, sufficient space to ensure enough income to sustain the project and a potential business plan which the Big Lottery would support. All other options failed in one of these areas.

We don't want an "enterprise" in the village!

The Big Lottery bid will have to demonstrate that any new project in the village will benefit a lot of people, raise lots of money and grow in size. The majority of villagers do not want a new hall which attracts more and more people into the village.

How do we square the circle?

The letter that went out with the ballot did not do the business plan justice. The path to the completed business plan has been a rocky one as everyone knows, with many painful trips and mistakes made on the way. The plan, and the hall design have benefited from this process however, and have evolved, particularly over the last year. From the destruction of the existing hall, proposals to build huge boxes and an ambitious business plan which would shame Tesco, we now have a flexible building which better fits its surroundings, we retain the existing hall and we have a business plan based on the "worst case scenario" for income generation, the minimum usage to sustain the building and checks and balances to ensure the impact of income generating proposals on village residents, is taken into account.

Income Generation

A key part of the business plan is the provision of respite care. This will take time to develop properly and will rely on developing a Service Level Agreement with a care provider. To allow time for this process to happen, the business plan allows initially, for simple holiday or commercial lets, and demonstrates sustainability on that basis. What makes the project attractive to the Big Lottery is basing income generation on a facility which benefits people from the wider community of Aberdeenshire. By restricting this to those requiring respite care, it also meets the village requirement of limiting impact. The other key parts of the plan are the hiring of meeting rooms twice a month, and the hiring of the hall for arts events, clubs and functions, many of which would involve villagers. The plan has been based on the same letting charges the Local Authority uses with reductions for residents. **Because the village would own the new facility, we control who uses it and how often. This would not be the case if we did not own it.**

Management

Initially the plan relies on four part time members of staff to manage the facility supported by a voluntary management committee, which in turn would work with the Community Council. There would be opportunities for volunteers to help with the running of clubs and functions, as happens now.

Guiding Principles

The business plan is based on the following operating principles:

- Although our social enterprise must generate sufficient income to cover the operating costs of the community centre, it is not driven by the need to make a profit and will invest any surplus funds accumulated in the community.
- Positive ideas to generate income will be balanced against any negative social impact they may have on the community.
- Positive ideas to generate income will be judged against their potential to: increase community self-reliance, reduce reliance on public services and their ability to enrich the wider community.

Growth

The plan has to demonstrate potential for growth for the Big Lottery to support it, and the potential ability to benefit many people. **The plan demonstrates sustainability without growth.** The guiding principles would ensure there is a check on the impact of any growth. The growth can offer benefits to villagers. There is the potential to grow the play group, to run a voluntary transport scheme (bit like dial-a-bus based on volunteer transport to help those without cars), to attract “outreach” services from the council or health service, to develop a café and/or retail facility, to provide an exhibition facility for the many artists who come to the village. To be ruthless, it offers the opportunity for the village to benefit financially from the many people who already visit the village without making any contribution at the moment.

Key Bits of the plan

Section 5 is “the meat” of the business plan. It demonstrates how the project would initially receive income from the Big Lottery until it was operational, three years after the building was completed. This is the “break even” point, reached through minimum hall usage and basic holiday or commercial lets for only part of the year. Income estimates are deliberately modest. You should read this bit of the plan.

Big Risk - The Summary

Love it or hate it, this is the only plan the village has for a new facility. It's a big project, it has big risks. If the Big Lottery does not believe this plan is sustainable it will not fund it. The project risks are identified in the business plan, they are all believed to be manageable, there is evidence supplied to support this. If the evidence is not strong enough to support the sustainability of the bid, it will fail. All risks associated with the project should be considered but should also be kept in context. Are the risks any more or less than owning a pier with public access? There are also risks associated with not supporting the project.

This is the last chance of Big Lottery funding before the Olympics. The current financial climate around the world means the likelihood of any other form of bid for a project is unlikely for at least another 10 years. Funding of Local Authority projects will be linked to housing development. This business plan for a new community centre is a pragmatic balance between the requirements of the Big Lottery and meeting villagers needs without too much of an impact. There is no Plan B!