

Community Land Week

Local Community Ownership of Assets - A Long Story Short

'Keeping Sunart a great place to live work and visit'



What's Community Land Week?

Community Land Week aims to celebrate the achievements of community landowners and their achievements. It is a festival of events run by communities that own land or buildings all over Scotland, organised by Community Land Scotland and runs from 10th to 18th August.

- In **October 2018** the pupils of **Strontian Primary School** moved into a brand-new school which was built by and is owned by, the local community. Unusually it is leased to the local authority – Scotlands' first ever '*Community Finance Initiative*' funded school.
- In **March 2019 'Oakwood'** – a new community-run Visitor Information and Craft Retail Centre opened in the village, which not only helps local businesses to thrive, but is generating funds for charity.

Sròn an t-Sithein (Strontian) is a small village of approximately 300 residents at the head of Loch Sunart, which separates the Ardnamurchan and Morvern peninsulas, roughly 20 miles west of Fort William. With a primary and secondary school, village hall, respite care centre, handful of shops, hotels and restaurants, petrol station, post office and pub, the village is the designated 'strategic settlement' for this remote area of Lochaber – we just think it's great and want to keep it that way!

The Scottish Land Fund¹ helped provide finances to purchase these properties and in each case, all resulting net profits are ploughed back into local good causes. Successfully accessing support from the Scottish Land Fund to purchase two properties in the village allows us to celebrate a long tradition 'doing it for ourselves'! We would like to tell you our story.

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Strontian Rocks!

Did you also know that 2019 has also been designated the Year of the Periodic Table? One hundred and fifty years ago Russian scientist Dimitri Mendeleev listed all the earths known elements into a table, including Strontium! A new element had been discovered in the old lead mines above the village at the turn of the 18th century and was later isolated and named "Strontium" by Sir Humphrey Davy in 1808, named after the village. So, we're proud to be the only Gaelic village named in the Periodic Table. These important mines in fact led to the next piece of our community empowerment jigsaw.

A Floating Church?

There's a history of mining in our area going back 300 years and the village was created in 1724 to provide housing for local mine workers following the discovery of the mineral Galena in the hills above Strontian by Sir Alexander Murray in 1722. Like anywhere in Scotland with a concentration of hundreds of residents in the 19th century, religious views varied. The 1843 'Disruption' of the Church of Scotland led to the 'breakaway' Free Church of Scotland being formed. When the Free Church congregation around Loch Sunart appealed to local laird Sir James Riddell for land on which to build their own church he refused. Members of the congregation developed a plan to worship on a boat sheltered in Loch Sunart. They raised the extraordinary sum of £1,400 to have a specially designed boat built by Port Glasgow based shipbuilder John Reid & Company. This had two floors, was 78ft long, 23ft wide and 17ft high and was designed to accommodate up to 400 people! It was floated into place in 1847 and served the population for many years until the landowner eventually relented and a new church was built in Longrigg in the 1870's, overlooking the bay in which the worlds' first floating church was built¹.

140 years later, residents would again raise money locally to help the community they were part of!

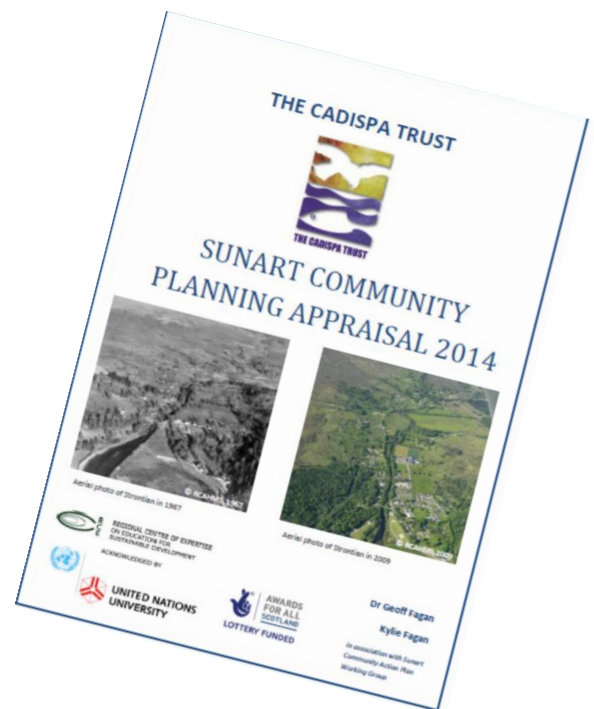
Getting ourselves organised

Jump forward to 2007 when a charitable community company was established in response to (the then) Scottish Executive, selling off local assets in and around Sunart. These included several plots of amenity land including valuable green space in the centre of the village, a core footpath and the angling rights to the Strontian River. These were acquired by the community and have been managed and maintained by the Sunart Community Company ever since. In partnership with the Strontian Angling Club, the sale of fishing permits helps

raise funds which are ploughed back into supporting local project.

Having a Plan Helps.....

Since 2012 the company has stepped up efforts to develop long term plans for the community's sustainability and notably it helped coordinate a widespread local consultation which resulted in 10-yr Community Action Plan, listing the priorities which residents identified as important to them. This piece of work then led to further strategic planning including a housing needs analysis in 2015 and, in conjunction with the Community Council and the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust, a 'Masterplan' for the village.



The latter document identified development priorities for different pieces of land locally and much was subsequently adopted by the Highland Council in its statutory regional plan, thereby enabling local peoples voices to be heard at a strategic level. A 'fit for purpose' primary school was highlighted in all these consultations and helped support the case for investment in the new primary school (see above.)

Power to the People

In 2011, several residents identified the potential for a community owned hydro-electric scheme for the village, and with the backing of the majority of residents the SCC spent two years developing feasibility plans for a 100kw scheme. In October 2014 our new *community benefit company* - Sunart Community Renewables² launched its share offer which eventually attracted £753,000 of investment. The scheme received the support of the local crofting community (across whose grazings the feedstock

¹ see more at <http://www.strontianfloatingchurch.co.uk/>

² <http://www.sunartcommunityrenewables.org.uk/index.html>

would run) and a local crofter, who sold the land for the turbine house. A modest bank loan completed the funding package worth over £800,000 and the after an eventful construction phase the scheme was commissioned in November 2015. Selling electricity into the national grid, profits are used to pay shareholders 4% interest and thereafter all profits not used for share buy-back are donated to the Sunart Community Benefit Fund. £110,000 has been donated to local projects (including £24,000 to the Strontian Community School Building towards development costs, and £5,000 towards Oakwood for set up and refurbishment.)



In 2014 the building that housed the village primary school was assessed to be inadequate by Highland Council but their proposed solution to the issue – building temporary modular units – did not meet the

aspirations of our local parents, who wanted a high-quality, permanent solution for their children – a primary school fit for the 21st century!

The temporary accommodation was proposed by Highland Council because of the potential to eventually accommodate Primary Pupils in the Ardnamurchan High School building, after 2027 when the contract on the privately financed (PPP) High School would come to an end. Any primary school improvement works could therefore be time-limited.

Stalemate ensued – until, working with the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust, the community came up with a new proposal: to build a new school themselves.

The concept was that the community should build the school, and lease it to Highland Council (HC), in much the same way that Private Finance Initiative schools have been built. In this case however, the community would finance and own the building; future profits (if any) would be reinvested in the community rather than going to external interests: a Community Finance Initiative, CFI rather than PFI. To their credit, HC agreed to this and have supported the project since.

The other unique feature of this innovative proposal, as well as providing a modern schoolbuilding, so important for the long term sustainability of the community, was that it could also address the need for more affordable housing in the longer term. The design of the building was based on the footprint of 4 houses which would allow for the efficient and economical conversion to

community owned housing (or other identified community use) if the building was no longer required by the Highland Council as a primary school.

Importantly therefore, the directors were proposing to build a long term asset for the community – which just happened to be have a local authority as a tenant for the the first ten years or so!

How do you build a school?

The community was already familiar with the model of using ‘community shares’ to raise capital through the hydro project, so following local consultation, a group of parents established a Community Benefit Society in early 2016 to take forward the proposals to build a new primary school in Strontian.

The volunteer Board of SCSB quickly realised that professional support would be required and thankfully the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust agreed to project manage the build, whose help proved to be indispensable.

Following the agreement of Highland Council that the concept was acceptable, fundraising and project planning got underway. With the help of Community Shares Scotland³, a business plan and prospectus was developed and a community share offer launched in December 2016 – eventually raising over £155,000.



Importantly, the Board adapted the model ‘rules’ for a Community Benefit Society (the constitution), to ensure that locally resident shareholders always held the majority of seats on the board of Directors, and were also in a majority overall. This meant that SCSB was eligible to apply for a grant to the Scottish Land Fund for assistance with buying the land on which the school would sit. Happily for everyone involved, the the project received a huge boost when it was awarded £51,000 from them in 2017.

³ <https://communitysharesscotland.org.uk/>

The Board continued to fundraise as well as work closely with Highland Council officials to finalise the details of the building and the lease arrangements. This sort of thing had never been done before and looking back everyone agreed it was a lot more complicated than it looked on paper. Importantly a very open minded approach from Triodos Bank, enabled the Board to secure a £446,000 loan to make the project a reality and allow work to begin on site in October 2017.

This followed a Design & Build tender exercise won by local contractors S & K MacDonald Homes, with a stunning design (from architects Kearney Donald Partnership).

Timescales by this time were very tight, but through heroic efforts from S&K MacDonald Homes, and other

project partners, work was completed in August 2018 and the new building opened to pupils in October 2018.

Broadly, the £950,000 costs have been met as follows :

Triodos Bank Loan	£446,000
Highland Council – tenants works	£196,000
Community Shares	£156,000
Scottish Land Fund	£ 51,000
SCSB funds	£ 37,000
Foundation Scotland (Coram Trust)	£ 30,000
Sunart Community Benefit Fund	£ 24,000
Local donations	£ 10,000

Full details of the project can be found at [Strontian Community School Building Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/strontiancommunityschool) and also at <http://www.strontiancommunityschool.org.uk/>



Finding ways to support local business, possibly by developing commercial space for let, was an area for action identified in the Sunart Community Action Plan. Accordingly when Visit Scotland decided to close the village Visitor Information Centre in August 2017 with the loss of a seasonal job, the Sunart Community Council proposed a 'community buyout'.

The Sunart Community Company immediately registered an interest in the property with Visit Scotland and entered into negotiations. Meanwhile over the winter, expressions of interest were sought from local craft businesses to see if there was sufficient interest in running a co-operative retail operation. We soon had a waiting list of 12 businesses waiting to take part.

The local tourism group SMMAATA (Sunart, Morvern, Moidart, Ardgour, Ardnamurchan Tourist Association) was also very concerned at the loss of the information point at a key 'gateway' to the peninsula and offered to enter into a partnership.

The local development officers of the SCC developed an outline business plan based on creating a vibrant retail and information centre, selling local craft produce. SMMAATA agreed to provide and maintain a range of visitor information as part of its contribution, with SCC employing a part time coordinator and volunteers drawn from the community staffing the till and answering visitor enquiries.

In August 2018 we were awarded £41,000 from the Scottish Land Fund and the Visit Scotland Board accepted the community's proposal so the property was purchased in November. In February and March 2019 the shop was re-decorated, a new door fitted, CCTV and improved lighting installed, and the entranceway re-designed to make the shop more welcoming. Oakwood Tourism and Crafts opened its doors for business at the end of March 2019 in time for Easter. To summarise, it is community-owned business that helps 17 local craft business with commission-based sales, directly retails products from 7 other local businesses and which simultaneously raises funds to support the Sunart Community Company.



Still in its first year of trading, turnover is reassuring, new product lines are being introduced regularly and by 2020 it should be capable of supporting a part time employee.

The funding package is as follows:

Scottish Land Fund	£41,000
Sunart Community Benefit Fund	£ 5,000
Sunart Community Council	£ 1,000
Sunart Community Company	£ 1,000
SMMAATA (In Kind)	£ 3,000