

Minutes & Discussion Notes, Assynt Development Trust Ltd Open Meeting , Thursday 16th May 2019

Present: around 32 local residents.

Present, representing ADT: Willie Jack, Sarah Ann Macleod, Nigel Goldie, Marianne Hutchison (directors), Ewen McLachlan, Adam Pellant (staff).

Apologies: 2 local residents.

Meeting began: 7.30pm.

Willie Jack introduced, giving purpose of the meeting and background on ADT and recent projects and activities. This included:

e-bikes project – Willie stated that this project is now aimed to be for residents' use of the e-bikes only, not tourist hire.

Culag Park – Willie mentioned the burden preventing commercial activities placed on Culag Park at the time of the acquisition of the Park from the Vestey's, as relates to the recent discussion about removal of An Cala's picnic benches from the edge of the park.

Willie then welcomed comments and main issues of interest from everyone present in turn.

JM: Asked how the carpark was made on the grass area of Culag Park at the time of the Mission redevelopment, given the burden preventing commercial activity.

AM: Wonders why picnic benches being on the edge of Culag Park has been treated as an issue needing addressing.

CM: Asked whether it is an open meeting, given that an invitation to it implied it was a meeting for ADT members only.

WM: Mentioned the history of an earlier forerunner to the current ADT before Assynt Community Association, Assynt Amenities.

LM: Said she thought the meeting could have been advertised better.

GM: Agreed regarding better advertising, and added that he hoped the meeting could move ahead in a constructive spirit rather than conflict.

SH: Asked if there was no discussion with the Vestey's or legal advisors over the Park burden issue before asking An Cala to remove the picnic benches. It was answered that there hadn't been.

MM: Expressed concern about the recently stated ADT position of favouring facebook over Assynt News as a means of communication in future. He suggested that public announcements should go into Assynt News, given that many people don't use facebook, which anyway can be very divisive.

DM: Suggested the documenting, consulting and prioritising of activities and projects are very important for ADT, and suggested that the long list of projects being undertaken by ADT could prove too much for too few staff to manage.

AD: Said that posters for this meeting and previous ADT activity (site development ideas workshops) were inadequate. Asked that posters be emailed for others such as him to put up. Adam responded saying he will do this in future.

AD also stated that he would like to see certain areas in Lochinver tidied up, eg. repainting of tired-looking buildings. In response to this, MM said that it shouldn't be forgotten that the harbour is first and foremost a working industrial area.

AD: Raised the issue of the original Mission redevelopment competing with other local businesses. Said that although the current set-up at the mission is now very good, lessons from the past need not to be forgotten. Spoke about the detail of how the e-bikes project was progressed, saying that Ben Macleod of Baddi-Bikes had contacted ADT in the first instance, not the other way round, and that ADT should actively support local business not compete. RM, and SM: both completely agreed with AD's comments about the e-bikes project.

MB: Although stating that his comments weren't aimed just at ADT, he expressed concern about organisations chasing grants which become available, then seeking community support for the projects, rather than setting out priorities, with community involvement, and then seeking the funding for those. He also said communication is difficult in the age of social media etc, and that ADT need to devote time to it, not just getting content right, but also tone, including for replying to comments and queries.

TB: Agreed about communication. She said newspapers such as Assynt News are entitled to have editorials with editors commenting and giving their opinions.

JT: Said that the letter recently placed in Assynt News about ADT and the e-bikes project, had been a letter received, not in any way an editorial. Said Willie had been told this before he submitted a recent ADT statement to Assynt News, and as such the ADT statement placed later in the Assynt News saying it had been an editorial had been hurtful.

MM: Regarding tone, he said he would like to see a greater willingness to enter into debate with people not necessarily singing from same the hymn-sheet, as at present he felt some reasonable and pressing questions are dealt with quite abruptly. He added that ADT aren't de facto community leaders, and a democratic mandate is important.

FS: Said she thought communications and consultation are important, and that too many projects may make quality suffer.

KA: Agreed with SH's comments regarding discussion on possible change to the burden on the use of Culag Park.

PJ: Agreed that the e-bikes project may have been a case of putting the cart before the horse in terms of seeking grant then seeking community support and justification.

MM: Said that community organisations in Assynt have been similarly chasing grants available for years, including staff such as Adam Pellant spending significant time chasing grants to fund their own posts.

PJ: Said that ADT hadn't made it clear whose decision it was to remove the picnic benches from Culag Park and how the burden had been part of the reason for this.

JM: Agreed with SH and others about the Park and the burden on it. She restated the offer she previously made of helping with legal discussions with the Vestey's about potentially removing or changing the burden. She also agreed with comments made about grant seeking often occurring in advance of relevant consultation. She stated she didn't think the e-bikes project would succeed, for logistical reasons.

JD: Said she appreciated ADT directors' and staff's efforts and willingness to engage, and said it was good to have such a good turnout at this meeting.

GM: Said people should acknowledge the positives of ADT as well as raising negatives.

Willie Jack: Stated ADT are here to learn, and welcome and encourage people to join ADT and engage in meetings. He gave more detail about the ambulance issue. He and JM had met with Robert Farquhar of the ambulance service last week. The padlock on the far gate remains unlocked to allow ambulance access. Signs will be put up soon asking people not to block access to the park for emergency vehicles. ADT and the park users group are considering plastic grid laid into the grass at at least one access point to prevent the grass being churned up and ambulances getting stuck on the park.

JM: Stated that ADT don't mind ambulances on the park at all, and if the surface is damaged by ambulances for recreational park users, that's not an issue when compared with the importance of ambulance activities.

JT: Asked if ADT are seriously considering abandoning use of facebook, as well as of the Assynt News, and just having meetings as a means of community communication and engagement.

Willie Jack: responded saying we may well reconsider that.

SM: Said she thought ADT should keep actual discussions off facebook as much as possible, but continue to use facebook and Assynt News for publicising news and events.

AD: Agreed Assynt News is important for that.

MM: Said he thought rolling arguments on facebook should be discouraged.

PK: Suggested setting agendas and agreeing action points are vital for meetings, and asked that action points be stated as a direct result of this meeting.

DM: Asked if the Cludgie Project planned at the Leisure Centre could or should be abandoned given that the Clachtoll campsite has now opened up its motorhome waste disposal facilities to the general public. BC mentioned the possibility of a similar facility happening at Nedd in future. Various people responded, suggesting that the quantity of motorhomes coming to Assynt and the distance of single track road to Clachtoll are reasons to think a facility at Lochinver will still be greatly beneficial and necessary to meet demand.

Willie Jack: Mentioned other benefits for Assynt Leisure of having the Cludgie Project sited there.

PJ: Stated that Facebook serves a purpose for people who don't/can't attend meetings.

Willie Jack: Said that ADT need to respond quicker to facebook queries.

WM: Expressed concern over the sport/recreation area of Culag Park shrinking if not careful and cautious.

Willie Jack: Said that ADT may well take up JM's offer of legal negotiation assistance, in part at least, but that the burden itself may actually be a good thing for the community use of Culag Park.

JM: Asked why the burden issue cropped up at the time it did, seemingly coincidentally. Willie responded saying that lease-related documents were looked into at the time of re-doing the lease with An Cala.

AD: Asked when change of use of the marine room was first considered. Willie answered that it was around /January, at the time of the valuation survey of the mission.

AD: Suggested that outdoor tables could have been allowed to stay put until the marine room had been converted into expanded café space. Willie agreed that in hindsight this would have been the most sensible thing to have done.

IM: Regarding the air ambulance, he asked why people can't be stretchered from the edge of the park to the helicopter. BC mentioned some issues that might prevent this, mentioning his own experiences. Willie said it depended on details of the patient, the weather, etc.

JT: said she didn't see the issue of park damage as important compared to saving lives. Willie said all agreed with that but it was important ambulances don't get stuck on the park.

GM: Asked if any resolutions on anything were to be made at this meeting.

Willie responded that he hopes people will join ADT in some way, whether as members, directors or on working groups. Adam added that after the meeting the ADT board will consider issues raised and resulting decisions made will be publicised.

KM: Raised the problem of deer in Lochinver and risks including Lyme's Disease. Various people responded, mentioning that Elaine of Woodland Trust Scotland and Coigach Assynt Living Landscapes Partnership, and the West Sutherland Deer Management Group, are working on the issue. There is a plan to solve the issue by creating grant-funded deer-fenced woodland areas around Lochinver to prevent deer entering Lochinver.

MH, as chair of Assynt Community council, mentioned that there is a presentation by WSDMG at the next Community Council Meeting in Drumbeg at the end of May. Willie suggested people concerned with this issue approach the Community Council.

TB: Asked about Discover Assynt advertising. Willie responded that ADT are asking for donations rather than set subscriptions.

MM: Asked if that means general donations are being sought to promote tourism businesses directly.

Willie responded that visitors and local residents are in his opinion the primary beneficiaries, and that donations are mainly from tourism businesses themselves.

FS asked how local tourism operators know the procedure in order to get advertised through Discover Assynt and how they know how much to donate. Willie said that the advertising has been carried forward from the previous Discover Assynt set-up, website and membership list. He had emailed tourism providers about the new procedure.

PJ: Suggested that ADT minutes could go on facebook.

MS: asked about the Digital Archive. Willie replied that it was still present in the ADT office and open to public access, but that the archive may soon be redeveloped in partnership with another local organisation.

GM: Mentioned the Tourist Information facilities recently being relocated to Assynt Leisure Centre from the Mission foyer, and asked that local tourism businesses please pass on any leaflets etc. there.

WM asked for applause to thank Willie as chair, which then followed.

Meeting closed around 9.00pm.