

Milngavie Hub Steering Group

Report, August 2017

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1 About the group

1.1 Formation by Milngavie Civic Trust in March 2015

Milngavie was to follow Bearsden in the development of a hub as part of EDC's transformation programme. In 2014, Milngavie Councillor Eric Gotts suggested to Milngavie Community Council (MCC) that the community should itself consider where its hub would best be located. Milngavie Civic Trust (MCT) responded by organizing a community meeting to explore this in March 2015. The Trust aimed to increase public awareness of the transformation programme, and by learning from Bearsden's experience, prepare the ground for quality community engagement.

Thomas Glen, now Depute Chief Executive - Place, Neighbourhood and Corporate Assets, had repeatedly given assurances that the community would be consulted from the outset. He also stated that potential venues for a hub would be: The Town Hall/ Lillie Art Gallery, the Library/Community Education Centre, the Fraser Centre and the Youth Centre. MCT therefore searched exhaustively for contact details of all groups that use these venues, and invited their members to the community meeting.

The presentation at the meeting provided information on the other planned hubs in East Dunbartonshire, with illustrations of the one already in use: a Council desk fitted into the William Patrick Library.

Following this meeting, the "Milngavie Hub Steering Group" was formed to further explore the issues, with representatives from the following community groups and users of specific venues, with chair Douglas Cameron of MCT.

Groups: MCT, MCC, East Dunbartonshire Arts Council, Milngavie in Bloom, Making the Most of Milngavie (MMM - the MCC sub-group that later became Milngavie Community Development Trust), Milngavie Heritage Centre and Clober Residents Association. Baldernock Community Council is now also represented.

Venues: Town Hall, Community Education Centre, Fraser Centre, and Youth Centre.

To obtain comprehensive information on the current use of these venues, a questionnaire was sent to user groups and information requested from EDC's lettings department. Douglas Cameron also wrote to Thomas Glen regarding the community's interest in being involved from the outset in the location and provision of a Hub. Thomas replied suggesting "that we arrange a meeting after the summer recess once a manager is in place and in a position to take the project forward. In the meantime please be assured that the Council is committed to involve community group representatives of Milngavie early on in this process."

Progress on a Hub for Milngavie then stalled. Reports for Council meetings simply stated that the Milngavie project would begin in late 2018 and be completed in 2020, with a budget of just over 4 million pounds, and that a project manager was still to be appointed (which eventually happened by July 2017, see below).

1.2 Adoption of the group by Milngavie Community Council in May 2016

Milngavie Civic Trust (MCT) was established in 1971 to further the interests of the town. By 2016 membership of the Trust had dwindled and it was wound down at an EGM in April of that year.

The statutory bodies *“To make public bodies aware of the opinions and needs of the communities they represent”* are Community Councils. In May 2016, MCC agreed to adopt the Hub Steering Group as a sub-committee, with Douglas Cameron remaining as chair.

1.3 Council’s proposed Champions Group

At the June 2016 meeting of East Dunbartonshire Council, a motion by Councillor Eric Gotts was carried:

The Council instructs the Chief Executive to:

- (a) set up, after the summer recess, a Champions’ Group consisting of local councillors and representatives from community and user groups to work with council officers to discuss options for the location of the proposed Milngavie Hub and also for the range of services and facilities provided within the Hub.

1.4 Imminent engagement

On requesting an update from Thomas Glen in mid-July 2017, Douglas Cameron received an email from EDC officer Ellen Beattie, stating that “a Project Lead has been appointed and that internal consultation has commenced. The Council is also engaging with various community planning partners to establish whether there is an opportunity to share in development and service delivery. These discussions are at an early stage and there is as yet no outcome to report. The council will also engage with community regarding the Milngavie Hub and details of how and when this engagement will take place will be advertised on our website, on social media and the local press.”

2.0 Observations from members of the group 2015 - 2017

2.1 Retention of facilities in Milngavie.

Milngavie and Bearsden are separate and distinct towns, requiring their own facilities. It will be vital for quality of life in our community, and especially of its disadvantaged members, that facilities providing access to learning, cultural and recreational resources all remain centrally located within Milngavie. **The community would vigorously oppose the relocation of any to the extended Kilmardinny House as suggested in the Report for the Council meeting in September 2013.** This would severely disadvantage those who do not drive, such as the young, the old, those with medical or visual problems or limited means, and would be contrary to the Council's principles of social inclusion.

2.2 Existing facilities.

The group considered the existing facilities at the Fraser Centre, the Community Education Centre/ Library and the Town Hall/ Lillie Art Gallery. (The Milngavie Youth Centre has a 50-year lease on their building, so this site is not available for a hub). Each of these three buildings serves an important and distinct purpose in the active community life of Milngavie, and none should be disposed of. Each has served its specific function well for at least 40 years, and it is clear from the spreadsheets of Community Education Centre and Town Hall lets supplied by the Council, and from communications with groups that all are very well used.

For this reason, it is suggested that the Council should consider any changes only with extreme caution, after careful evaluation of feedback from other communities where hubs have already been established. Any changes should have a positive rather than negative effect on community life.

Earlier this year, Councillor Eric Gotts suggested that the best way forward might be to refurbish the existing buildings, rather than make any drastic changes. A hub desk could be fitted into or added to any of the buildings, though ensuring its privacy would be important. There may be opportunities to include other Council facilities and also to consider the aspirations of the community for certain additional facilities.

The Fraser Centre

This was formerly the Senior Citizens Centre, a Club House erected in the 1950s by Milngavie Burgh on the site of an existing Old Man's Shelter in the Memorial Gardens. It was very well used and in 1983 was replaced by a new building, largely paid for by a grant from Sir Hugh Fraser for the Old People's Welfare Committee, who administer the centre. They use it themselves every morning, but in the evenings it is let to a wide range of other organisations. Milngavie in Bloom maintain an attractive setting with their plantings in front of the building.

The Old People's Welfare Committee now feel threatened because when their lease was renewed recently, it was on condition that the building is not needed for another purpose. But this valued facility should continue where it is, without even temporary disruption, especially given the high number of elderly people living in Milngavie. (The East Dunbartonshire Area Profile shows that Milngavie has a higher proportion of people over 75 and over 85 than any other ward in the Authority – figures based on the 2011 Census).

The western part of the building, currently leased for a nail bar, would be ideal for a central hub desk, with waiting room, and would provide privacy for customers. If required it might be possible to extend this part of the building without disturbing the Fraser Centre, but the footprint should not encroach significantly on the open space of the precinct. This safe open space is a special feature of Milngavie Town Centre, greatly valued by the community and envied by other Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

In the recent Town Centre Strategy Report there is a comment that the library should be relocated to a more central position. But for this or any other large facility to be moved into the precinct, the take-over of a large existing building would be required. After the Iceland store did not renew its lease at the end of 2016, Cllr Gotts suggested the premises could perhaps be used for this purpose.

The Community Education Centre and Library building.

This complex has been a true hub for the community for 40+ years. It was opened in 1976 on the old paper mill site, now part of Allander Park which was designated a Centenary Field in 2014. This makes the area a recreational space in perpetuity. The location, beside the mill pond and Allander Water, is surrounded by wildlife and industrial heritage. Its peaceful ambience makes it ideal for the library.

The website <http://www.architectureglasgow.co.uk> refers to the “stunning setting and the sympathetic way the building works with its immediate landscape and lakeside setting”.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION CENTRE: The spreadsheet of the lets shows that this facility is very well used for such activities as classes, meetings, crafts, and music. Physical activities in the gym include badminton, children’s gymnastics, keep-fit and boot camp fitness classes, karate, martial arts and youth activities. The Centre is also used extensively by the Time Out Club - parent-run care before and after school and in school holidays - for games, music, arts, crafts and also computer & board games. The venue has provision for a café.

The facilities at the Centre are appreciated by residents from a much wider area than Milngavie itself. For example, it provides for craft activities, such as by the West of Scotland Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers, who need a room with water provision.

LIBRARY: Milngavie library is an integral part of the very busy community centre. It benefits from people using the centre on a daily or weekly basis. It would be a matter for extreme regret if the symbiotic relationship between the library and the Centre’s rooms-to-let - for example by toddlers, after-school, camera, art and sports clubs, were to be sacrificed.

The library has a large children and young people's section, with a family reading area, and a quiet area with tables for work and study, where Douglas Academy students often work. There is a separate computer room that can be hired by groups learning IT. The local history corner is also much appreciated - this could usefully be enlarged to compensate for the loss of Brookwood’s extensive, separate, Bearsden and Milngavie Local History section, now mostly removed to archives without direct public access. Such material cannot be purchased, and is not available online. The “Milngavie Evidence and Health Check Report” shows that, with regard to SIMD ranking, “there is a high degree of disparity within Milngavie”. The library should continue to cater for ALL, including highly educated residents, and not be dumbed down to a smaller, general-purpose social space.

Although not within the pedestrian precinct, the current location is very central in relation to the distribution of population and is very easily accessed. It is on the West Highland Way, less than 5 minutes walk from its start in the precinct (although remarkably this route is not signposted for the library), and is accessible from all parts of Milngavie on core paths, including from west Milngavie via footbridges. By road it is some 150m north of Milngavie Youth Centre. For those who need to drive there is a car park, with disabled parking at the door.

Milngavie Library is no further from the central point of the designated Milngavie Town Centre than is the William Patrick Library from the central point of Kirkintilloch Town Centre. In Kirkintilloch, community facilities are distributed all over the town.

Addressing the perception of this venue as 'dislocated' could be more fruitful than moving the library. Milngavie in Bloom, with the Ramblers and Scouts, have already much enhanced this section of the Way (formerly the railway track to the paper mill), while Milngavie BID is planning major visual improvements at the beginning. The Council could consider allocating part of the funds available for the hub to paving the WHW as far as this important facility. The on-road route also needs better signposting.

The existing building could accommodate a hub desk, within the building or in a small extension to the front. For larger additional facilities, it could probably be extended upwards or northwards. However, the number of car parking spaces is barely adequate for the existing users, so an additional use requiring substantial parking (such as for elderly people) might be more difficult to accommodate.

The Town Hall and Lillie Art Gallery Complex

Following the destruction by fire of the original Milngavie Town Hall, built in the 1870s, Milngavie Town Council set about planning a new hall with additional facilities for the expanding population. Further land was acquired to accommodate the extended facilities, including an art gallery using the bequest from Robert Lillie, and a car park. The design of the new building, opened in 1962, had won a UK-wide architecture competition.

Milngavie Town Hall is highly valued. The Main Hall, which seats 450, is the largest in East Dunbartonshire and is the only hall large enough for certain events, such as the Schools' Chess Competition. It is often full to capacity for such activities as dinner dances, ceilidhs, jazz concerts, craft fairs and horticultural shows, and also when the subject of a meeting or public hearing is controversial. Thus it is a vital and unique facility for a variety of large-scale events. Since it is adjacent to the railway station and bus terminus, it is used by organisations from a wide area, such as the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. Therefore it would be a great loss not only to Milngavie, but also to East Dunbartonshire as a whole if its floor-space were to be diminished.

Ancillary facilities essential for many of these activities include rooms for performers, a Lesser Hall which can be made open-plan to the Main Hall, a kitchen with hatch to the Lesser Hall, a bar and a cloakroom. The Lesser Hall is also extensively used in its own right, or with the kitchen, e.g. by the Friendship Circle to provide lunch and companionship for housebound elderly people.

In a separate wing, the Court Room, no longer needed for its original purpose, also provides a valuable space. Milngavie Heritage Centre uses it to display artifacts and twice a year to host a week-long exhibition.

A hub desk could probably be accommodated within the existing complex, and a further small additional facility within an extension. However a larger facility, such as a library, would require substantial remodeling and extension which could risk compromising the current good functioning of the existing facilities.

Parking: the small car park off Buchanan street, intended to serve the Town Hall, is invariably full without turnover during working hours. It should be subject to a charge regime similar to that applied to some other Milngavie car parks, but with 3 hours free. However, after 6pm the nearby station car park is largely free and is therefore available to service large evening events.

3. The hub as an opportunity to gain new facilities

Over the past 2 – 3 years the Council has carried out consultations with the community in a number of areas. From these, and from a survey initiated by MMM (later MCDT), aspirations for several new facilities in Milngavie have emerged. It is likely that community engagement regarding the future hub will result in further additions to this list.

1. MCC, in its response to the Milngavie Town Centre Strategy consultation, highlighted the need for a **Welcome Centre** with full information for both long and short distance walks, maps and some supplies of outdoor goods. It should have facilities such as showers and toilets. It could also provide information on the natural and historic heritage of the area. Milngavie is lamentably lacking in such facilities compared with other towns at the start and end of Scotland's major walks.

The Council's recently published report on this consultation indicates that MCC was not alone in recognizing this need:

<https://www.eastdunbarton.gov.uk/residents/planning-and-building-standards/planning-policy/town-centre-strategies>

2. Both Milngavie Heritage Centre (in its response to the draft Culture Leisure and Sport strategy - CLS) and MCDT (in its Community Action Plan - CAP) highlight an aspiration for a **Heritage Centre/Museum** for Milngavie (which could also serve Bearsden). Whilst Kirkintilloch extensively celebrates its industrial heritage, that of Milngavie, together with its social history, equally deserves continuous public presentation.

http://www.milngavieheritage.org/CLS_response.pdf
<http://www.milngavie.org/documents/CAP.pdf>

Furthermore, as explained above, Milngavie library's local history corner could be extended to restore direct public access to the material until recently available in the Bearsden and Milngavie local history section at Brookwood library.

4. Next step

Members of Milngavie Hub Steering Group have been considering issues surrounding the provision of a hub in Milngavie for two and a half years, and have also observed the development of hubs in neighbouring areas. It is suggested that changes to facilities that currently are working well should be made only with extreme caution, after careful evaluation of feedback from communities where hubs have already been established.

The group sees dialogue between Council and Community BEFORE major decisions are made as essential to achieve the best outcome for the whole community, and to ensure that overall the provision of a hub has a positive, rather than negative, impact on the well-being of the town. **Nothing less would accord with the Council's often stated vision: "working together to achieve the best with the people of East Dunbartonshire."** The group would therefore welcome an opportunity to meet the appointed project manager soon to open channels of communication.