

BLAIR ATHOLL and STRUAN COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Annual General Meeting

Thursday 29th September 2022 at 11am

MINUTES

Present: Councillor John Duff (Chair – part), Viv Cree (Chair – part – and minutes), Tony Dowson, Fiona Gordon

1. Apologies for Absence

Cllrs Xander McDade and Mike Williamson, Louise Fisher, Lynda Mutch

CC members also acknowledged the death of Donald Isles (longstanding Chair), with thanks for his contribution and leadership over many years.

2. Previous Minutes

Minutes of last year's AGM were approved.

3. Matters Arising

None

4. Treasurer's Report

VC presented the treasurer's report, delivered by email from LF, as follows:

The only transactions this year have been £500 of resilience money paid in by Blair Castle Estate and out to The Atholl Glens. Also £50 external examiners fee to our accountant for last year's accounts which he donated to the Blair Atholl Baby & Toddler Group.

Accounts will be submitted to PKC once they have been examined and signed.

LF intimated that she is standing down after this year, but she will give a full briefing to the new treasurer when they are elected in November.

JD asked if the CC had paid for use of the village hall this year. If not, he recommended that in future, this should be paid and can come out of our £700 administration grant from the council. We cannot, however, claim retrospectively for any costs this year. It was agreed that we should pay for use of the hall if possible. Matter to be taken forward by the new CC.

5. Chairman's Report

VC introduced her report for the year to September 2022, covering issues which have affected the community this year. Full report is attached to these minutes, alongside a copy of the CC response to the consultation on the proposed closure of Blair Atholl Surgery.

6. **Officer Appointments (until the EGM on 8th November 2022):**

The meeting was chaired by Cllr John Duff to agree the following officer appointments:

Chair – Viv Cree – proposed by FG, seconded by TD

Secretary – Viv Cree – proposed by TD, seconded by FG

Treasurer – Louise Fisher – proposed by VC, seconded by TD

Minutes Secretary – Viv Cree – Proposed by TD seconded by FG

Data Controller – Louise Fisher – proposed by VC, seconded by TD.

All appointments were unanimously agreed, and VC took over the chairmanship of the AGM.

On behalf of the council and the ward councillors, JD thanked all the CC members for their work over the last year.

7. **AOCB**

- a. **Venue for further meetings:** VC has asked whether it might be possible to have future CC meetings at the School, which has wifi, and the school is keen to extend its links in the community. She is waiting to hear back.
- b. **WiFi for the Village Hall:** FG has been doing some research to find out what needs to be done to take this forward and will get in touch with Neil Mackintosh for the village hall committee to discuss. VC (whilst welcoming this proposal) advised caution – the Village Hall is a registered charity and although the CC can support the Village Hall committee, the issue of wifi is theirs to decide. TD said that he had done work on this three years ago, without success in taking it forward, in spite of the fact that ongoing costs could possibly be met by the CC as part of its administration budget. FG to report back to our next Ordinary meeting.
- c. **Planning applications:** JD reported that PKC is reconsidering its procedures re planning applications. If agreed, in future, if either a CC or the elected members object to a planning application, this will have to go to the Planning & Placement Committee for review.
- d. **Resilience:** TD will continue as co-ordinator of the Resilience Group in the meantime, and report back to the Chair of the CC if anything is of interest to the CC. The COVID group has been mothballed, and the group itself is still active regarding defibrillators just now. VC asked why Resilience money had gone through the CC and not BAASI, since this is well within the constitution of BAASI. TD said he was not averse to a shift. VC will raise this at a subsequent BAASI meeting.

8. **Date of Next Meeting**

7th November 2023

Blair Atholl and Struan Community Council

Acting Chair's report for AGM, 29 September 2022

1. Membership

Viv Cree was co-opted in December 2021 and took on the role of Secretary, then held by Donald Isles as well as being Chair. Viv managed the emails from then on, while Lynda continued to operate as Minute Secretary.

Donald Isles had a stroke in early May this year and was unable to attend further community council meetings. Tony chaired the May meeting, and Viv chaired the following meetings, with Viv taking on an Acting Chair role as well as being Secretary. Donald subsequently died on 17th September. His passing is a great loss to the community of Blair Atholl & Struan. Donald not only chaired the CC, but also led and participated in almost all the other local and regional community organisations. We are deeply sorry to have lost his experience and wisdom.

Two additional CC members have already intimated that they would not stand for CC again next year. These are Tony Dowson and Lynda Mutch, Minute Secretary. The CC is hugely grateful for their contribution and service to the community.

2. Planned closure of the Blair Atholl Surgery

The major issue that preoccupied the CC over the last year was the Atholl Medical Centre's proposal to close the branch surgery in Blair Atholl permanently. This was first intimated via notices in Pitlochry Life and Breadalbane & Atholl Quair in November 2021, and from then on, CC members campaigned, firstly, to draw this proposal to residents' attention and, secondly, to urge that the Medical Centre rethink their plans. One of the first steps was to organise a petition placed in the two local shops for four weeks between late November and early December 2021. The petition secured 119 signatures over the period, and this was followed by a series of communications and meetings with local councillors, MSPs and MPs, aided by Heartland FM. When it became clear that the Medical Centre was not minded to change its plans, we urged that a full consultation be carried out with members of the community. This was eventually carried out through postal letters to patients and

comments' boxes in the shops in August 2022 and the final outcome is still awaited. The CC's response to the consultation is attached for information.

3. Other business during the year

The CC was busy with other more routine matters, which included: arguing for a 30mph speed limit at Trinafour; complaining about the train service; reports from the Resilience Group (this was mothballed in January but can be recreated again if needed) and The Atholl Glens group (including planning for a celebration for the Queen's jubilee); winter pavement gritting (now done by two residents, including one CC member); concerns about the condition of the lade and the River Tilt Bridge; also planning issues, including plans to build 20 houses at Old Blair and the ongoing renovation of the Bridge of Tilt hotel.

4. Looking to the year ahead

At its last meeting held on 13th September, CC members agreed to support a Blair Atholl Community Action plan, to be conducted in 2023. This will allow us to identify what the important issues are for the community moving forward; the last plan was conducted in 2014, and many of the items raised at this time remain matters for attention now, including health and transport provision.

5. Thanks

I would like to thank Tony, Louise, Lynda and Fiona for their work on the CC over the last year and more personally, for their support to me in enabling me to hold the CC together over the last few months in Donald's absence. I would also like to acknowledge the help and support that we all receive from our local councillors, who take forward issues on our behalf and fight our corner when needed.

Dr Vivienne Cree

29 September 2022

Addendum

The Old Smiddy
Blair Atholl PH18 5SG
1st September 2022

Lavinia Peebles & Partners
Atholl Medical Centre
Ferry Road
Pitlochry PH16 5FG

Dear Lavinia,

Proposed Closure of Blair Atholl Surgery: Blair Atholl & Struan Community Council's response

This letter is a record of the views of the Blair Atholl & Struan Community Council in relation to the proposed permanent closure of the Blair Atholl Surgery. I will also write to you independently as a patient of the Atholl Medical Centre.

Before turning to an examination of the issues relating to the proposed closure of the Blair Atholl Surgery, we would like to acknowledge the context within which this consultation exercise is taking place. As you are fully aware, it is now two-and-a-half years since the Blair Atholl surgery closed its doors for what has been described as 'health and safety reasons' at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that Blair Atholl residents have had first-hand experience of what it feels like to have a no health service provision in the village. But just as importantly, it also means that many have given up hope of ever seeing any health provision in the village again. What began as a temporary arrangement has become, to many, a *fait accomplis*, and this will inevitably have an impact on the consultation exercise, and on the feedback you receive. As a Community Council, we would like to set aside any pessimism we may individually feel and share with you the views that we have expressed from the beginning, ever since the proposal to close the surgery was first mooted almost a year ago in *Pitlochry Life* and the *Atholl Quair* in November 2021.

Firstly, we would like to state that Community Council members understand the difficulties the Medical Centre has faced in trying to recruit GPs to the local area. The GP shortage is, we know, a national issue, and the lack of suitable and affordable housing in the neighbourhood is a pressing matter which national and local governments must address urgently. We also understand that there have, in the past, been ongoing concerns about the nature and fabric

of the existing surgery premises. We are pleased that GPs from Pitlochry have continued to offer a home visiting service when required over the last two years, and that prescriptions can be delivered to patients at home if necessary. Furthermore, we are glad that this consultation is now taking place. As you know, we have consistently expressed the view that a decision should not be taken without the people of the village (and the surrounding area) having an opportunity to respond; we argued that the letter in the *Atholl Quair* and *Pitlochry Life* should not be considered adequate consultation. This was why we instigated a petition located in the two local shops for four weeks between late November and early December 2021. The petition asked the Medical Centre “to revisit the proposal to close the branch surgery in Blair Atholl on the grounds that it is a much needed local service for those who do not have access to transport, including older people, young families and people with disabilities.” It secured 119 signatures over the four-week period (the number was 107 at the point when Community Council members met Medical Centre staff on 1st December). This is also why we have given practical support to the current consultation, placing collection boxes in the local shops and ferrying responses to the Health Centre on a weekly basis.

With this background information now in place, it is essential that we reiterate the reasons for our objections to the proposed closure, as first shared in an email on 11th November and then discussed at the meeting with members of the Medical Centre team on 1st December 2021. It is these issues that we have raised repeatedly with local councillors, MSPs, MPs and with Deputy First Minister John Swinney himself on 21st February 2022. The issues have also been regularly debated at Community Council meetings and aired on local radio, thanks to the efforts of Heartland FM to help us to keep this matter in the public eye.

Reasons for BAASCC objections to the proposed permanent closure of the Blair Atholl Surgery

Our concerns were, and are, six-fold:

1. The need for proper consultation: As outlined above, we were concerned from the outset that it seemed as if the decision about permanent closure had been taken by the Medical Centre team before a consultation had taken place.
2. Transport issues: It is difficult for residents to access the surgery by public transport, given the restricted bus service and the almost non-existent (and expensive) train service. Many of those who need medical care do not own or drive cars; the Blair Atholl & Struan catchment area has an unusually high percentage of older people (and especially, very elderly people and people living with infirmity). It is also extremely difficult for parents with young children to manage appointments in Pitlochry. Residents have advised us that while it is OK to ask for help from a neighbour occasionally, this

cannot become a regular occurrence when repeat visits to see a doctor or nurse are needed.

3. Medical issues: Without a local branch surgery, two outcomes seem likely, both of which will place significant pressure on the NHS. Firstly, more people will ask for home visits, and at the same time, more people may put off asking for help until their conditions are so advanced that they have become more serious (as we know happened during the COVID-19 pandemic).
4. Environmental issues: All residents agree that it would be much better for the environment if routine vaccinations (for example, for the 'flu or pneumonia) could be conducted in the village, instead of potentially hundreds of patients making separate journeys into Pitlochry.
5. Public health issues: It is widely accepted that those who are able to access care close to home are likely to make a speedier and better recovery from illness or a traumatic event. With this in mind, keeping provision as local as possible is always to be encouraged (and in line with Scottish Government policy).
6. Financial/IT/practical issues: Blair Atholl and its hinterland has a high percentage of residents living in old, draughty houses that they can ill-afford to heat adequately. They need to be able to access help locally because they cannot afford to do anything else. The community also has a lot of people who have no access to smart phones, tablets and computers. This means that online support is simply beyond the means and experience of many. It is vital that the NHS finds helpful ways of caring for people in isolated, rural areas such as this one.

Looking ahead, Community Council members have offered a number of what, we hope, may be seen as positive, practical, alternative suggestions to the permanent closure of the branch surgery. These are listed next.

Alternative suggestions to the permanent closure of the branch surgery

1. We are aware that it would be extremely unlikely that a permanent closure would be reversed in the future if, for example, GP staffing levels were to improve. For this reason, we strongly recommend that there should be a temporary suspension of the branch surgery, not a permanent closure, with an agreed review in, for example, 12 or 18 months.
2. We would like to see the retention of some health care in the village, for example, vaccinations for 'flu and pneumonia. There may also be other services that could also be provided locally, perhaps by a district nurse, physiotherapist or nurse practitioner rather than a GP. This would fit with the Scottish Government's priority of

decentralising services and making the NHS work better at the local level. Medical Centre staff are best placed to advise on how this might be best achieved.

3. The Medical Centre's letter to patients makes much of the poor condition of the existing surgery. We would like to point out that this is not (now) wholly accurate. An inspection by Community Council members this week revealed that there is both phone reception and internet in the building, and Atholl Estates has carried out an extensive programme of upgrade to the fabric of the building over the last year or so; this work only stopped when it seemed as if the surgery might not reopen. The Community Council has it on record that Atholl Estates is committed to supporting the provision of health care in the village and is willing to do what is necessary to make this happen. Furthermore, there are other premises in the village that may offer alternative accommodation, including the refurbished rooms in the Village Hall. None of these options has been fully investigated (yet).
4. Whilst the Community Council accepts the Medical Centre's concerns about lone working, we believe that our suggestion to consider the use of resilience volunteers as 'receptionists' merits further consideration, and, again, would be in line with the Scottish Government's commitment to empowering communities.

Finally, Blair Atholl & Struan Community Council would like to offer its full support to the Atholl Medical Centre team going forward. Whatever the outcome of the consultation exercise, we hope that by working together on this important matter, we may be encouraged to work more closely together in the future, for the benefit of all.

With kind regards,



Dr Vivienne E. Cree

Secretary, Blair Atholl & Struan Community Council