

Elphin Community Hall

Business Plan



November 2024

1. Background

In 2010 the community of Elphin held a meeting to discuss the future of Former Assynt Primary School which had closed in 2001. There was a lot of support for community management of the property as a place for a community resource. A steering committee was formed, and as a result Elphin, Ledmore & Knockan Community Association Limited (ELKCAL) was formed which has been leasing and operating the hall ever since. The 25-year lease with Highland Council ends in 2035.

Since the building's conversion into the Community Hall, it has been used for many activities that have benefitted the surrounding community. From its conversion into a Community Hall, it has regularly been used for Toddler group, Craft Circle, a meeting space for various groups including the 2 crofting associations in the township, the Assynt Community Council, for council meetings and by the Highland Council as a voting location for elections. It is also used for birthday parties, wakes and wedding receptions. During its use as a Community Hall, it has been used for Friday Night Games nights which served the children and teenagers in the township, First Aid courses and Yoga classes. It is regularly used for information dissemination and display space for local and outside groups and activities such as the North West Geo Park, Coigach Arts group and the Grampian Speleological Group. It has also been used for numerous workshops involving everything from dry stone walling to fabric dyeing with natural dyes.

Gathering for music has always been a strong attraction in the community and the hall has been used for musicians to get together regularly to practise and to perform for ceilidhs held at the hall. There have even been several large music festivals, bringing in people and bands from farther afield. At present, one of the residents of the township is giving music tuition to both the children and adults of the community, using a room at the hall as his teaching studio and a group of local musicians perform at ceilidh events held at the hall. The hall is also used for a weekly Craft and Food Market during the summer season which draws in both local people and tourists travelling along the A835. This is an ideal venue for many local artisans to sell their creations and enables them to continue their crafts and so continue to live in the area. Besides these numerous activities held at the hall ELKCAL regularly organises community events and dinners to bring the people who live here together for much need social interaction. These events such as Chicken Day, the Midsummer Fete and Christmas dinner strengthen the bonds of the community.

The community is very actively involved in hall management and activities so that decisions about future directions and activities are directed by the community for the benefit of the community. At present regular community events at the hall serve to reduce the isolation of the elderly, through Craft Circle, and mothers and young children, through Toddler Group but the community has identified the need for more social interaction, especially in winter for families and older children, and so at present the ELKCAL Board is planning family based activities such as music evenings, games nights and soup suppers over the darker winter nights.

This region has one of the most rapidly growing populations in Assynt, with more and more families moving into the area, increasing the number of children and young families. Many of these new people are bringing new crafts and skills to the area and leading to an enthusiastic, innovative outlook for the future. A community owned hall will be the perfect place for these ideas to flourish and develop. Hopefully, with the support of the Highland Council, the Community Asset Transfer will go ahead and this will enable Elphin and the surrounding area continue to grow and develop.

2. Improvements since 2010

When the community, through ELKCAL, took over the management of the hall it was in a very poor condition. It had a leaky roof, was extremely drafty, poorly heated and had only a basic kitchen area. ELKCAL has worked hard to make a lot of improvements to the building to bring it up to a modern, acceptable standard. ELKCAL has made major changes to the out-buildings and playground area, erecting fencing to prevent stock entry, installing two external toilets, converting sheds into storage areas and enlarging the car parking space available as well as creating disabled parking spaces close to the hall entrance. They have also created ramps to allow disabled access to the building and installed a disabled toilet at ground floor level to improve accessibility for all. Two extra toilets have also been installed upstairs which means that there is now a total of 6 toilets available for use by people using the hall during the bigger events that are held.

ELKCAL has also improved other areas inside the building. The former head teacher's office has been converted into a modern kitchen which meets current hygiene standards. This has been fitted out with cupboard units, worktops and splashbacks and is equipped with a cooker, double oven, dishwasher, microwave, fridge and double sink which enables food to be safely prepared and served. The flooring in the kitchen was also removed and replaced to improve hygiene standards.

ELKCAL has also regularly repainted and repaired the external woodwork to maintain the integrity of the building as well as repainting the interior walls. A defibrillator unit has been installed for use, if needed, by the surrounding community and the cost of maintaining this is paid for by ELKCAL.

In 2020 ELKCAL commissioned major work repairing the roof and repointing the stonework to prevent further deterioration of the building structure due to water ingress. It has also removed and re-laid the flooring in the main hall area with an industrial grade laminate floor which is suitable for heavy traffic and is able to be cleaned more efficiently and hygienically than the old carpet flooring.

Recently ELKCAL has upgraded all the external lighting system to make access to the building in the dark safer and to increase the energy efficiency of the building. Creating a smaller energy footprint is one thing that ELKCAL wants to improve about the way the hall is operated. Installing an effective and energy efficient heating system is the next goal of the community.

All of these improvements have been paid for by ELKCAL, so as you can see, the community, through the management Board, have invested a lot of time and money into successfully maintaining and improving the hall which shows how it will be competent in doing so in the future.

3. ELKCAL

ELKCAL is a Charitable Company limited by Guarantee registered at Companies House (Company No. SC381507) and OSCR (Charity No SC042007). The Board currently comprises 9 directors, while the company has approximately 100 members drawn from the local community.

ELKCAL, with the support of the community, has proven it is an efficient manager and if the building is community owned, has the financial ability to continue operating the hall in an effective manner. The Board of Directors is very stable, with members who have served for 12 years being joined by more recent members so that skills and experience are passed on, ensuring sound management practice. In the past 14 years ELKCAL has proved its financial viability by not only paying for all the improvements listed above but also by paying all the expenses for the continual maintenance required by such an old building and by paying for all the necessary services like electricity, insurance and fire safety inspections, as well as buying equipment such as tables, chairs, marquees and other things necessary for the various activities held at the hall. The Board has introduced and enforces a range of policies including financial management/ decision making and appropriate use of the Hall including Child Protection and Equalities.

The latest accounts (31 Dec 2023) show that ELKCAL income in 2023 was £6,984 which generated a surplus of £837, of which £468 was used as match funding for the exterior light upgrade, and the remainder was added to reserves. ELKCAL has built up its monetary reserves from zero in 2010 to a healthy amount of around £17,000 in 2024 which demonstrates that it is able to cater for not only unexpected expenses but to also continue maintaining the building while still planning to make further improvements to the building. The income source is from fund raising activities such as Chicken Day and the Mid-Summer Fete which have a well-established attendance base, as well as from hall hire to outside organisations for regular activities such as the weekly summer Craft and Food Market.

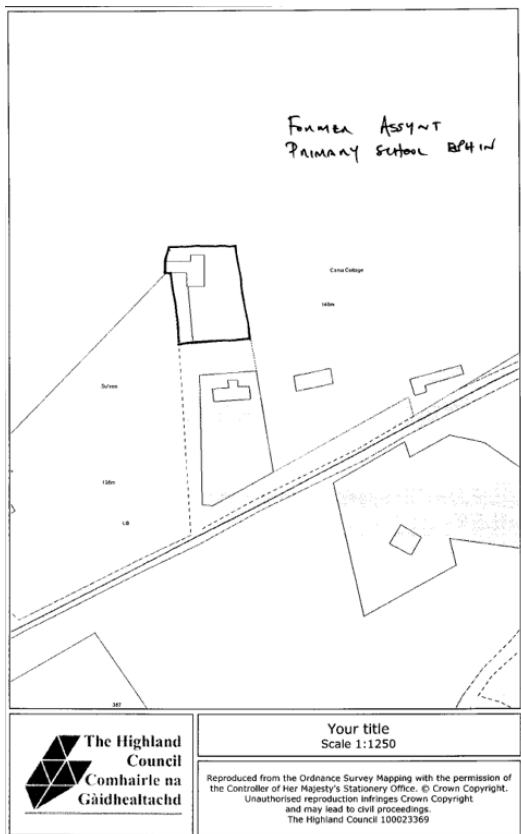


4 Elphin Community Hall

Elphin Community Hall sits on a site of 1 acre (0.4ha) currently owned by Highland Council which inherited it as a school and surrounding land. It was originally owned by the School Board of the Parish of Assynt which acquired the site in September 1879. There is no title plan attached to the title deed, but the Inland Revenue Field Book includes the plan shown below. The exact boundary on the ground will be determined during the purchase process.



The area leased by ELKCAL from Highland Council extends to approx. 0.13 ha. And only includes the building, playground and parking. See plan below:



5 Proposal

The proposal is to purchase the buildings and area subject to the current lease and the remainder of the 1 acre plot from Highland Council for £1 under Community Asset Transfer.

ELKCAL have been the tenants of this property since 2010 and the property has been used successfully as a community hall for the surrounding communities of Elphin, Ledmore, Knockan, Ben More, Aultnacealgach, Lyne, Stronchrubie, and Inchnadamph.

Having ownership of the building and land will allow ELKCAL to make changes that will benefit these communities because we will be able to embark on bigger projects rather than be limited by the conditions of our lease. It also means that we will have access to a wider range of funding to make these improvements.

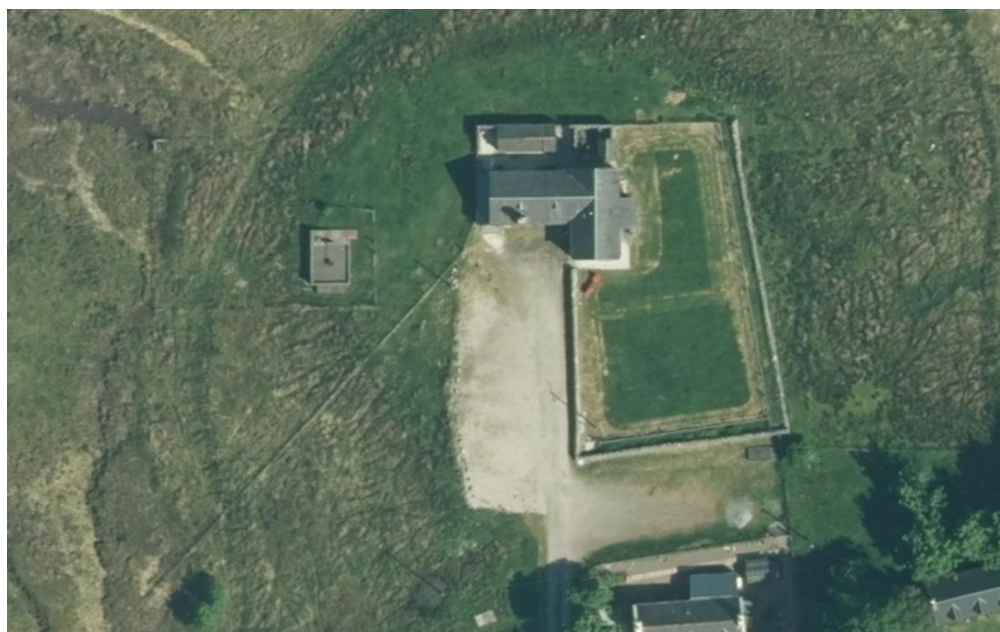
We want to develop the facilities at the community hall to make it more suitable for a wider variety of community groups to use. Some of the developments we are looking into are to improve the heating in the building so that it can be used in winter, upgrading the toilets to cater better for mothers with children, increasing the energy efficiency of the building so that we can keep running costs to a level which makes it affordable for all community members to use. One of the main goals of ELKCAL, directed by community wishes, is to develop a “greener” operating method. This has led to a plan to install photovoltaic panels to generate electricity to reduce the running costs of the hall and to enable an efficient heating system to be installed.



6 Plans for the Future

The aerial photo below shows five distinct parts of the hall and its surrounds:

- Main Buildings
- Walled Playground
- Car park
- Septic tank
- Rough ground at the south west part of the plot



6.1 Building

Infrared Panel Heating Project

The immediate priority for the building is to upgrade the heating system. We have selected Infrared heating is the most efficient method of heating the building as heating by heat pumps etc only heats the air which then escapes from the building. The infrared heating will also heat the stone walls of the building which will reduce the damp and radiate back into the hall.

Budget

Item	Cost
3 x Herschel XLS-DIY1100 60 x 155 Infra -red panels	£1,800
Installation	£900
Total	£2,700

This project will be completed within a year of completion of transfer.

Funding sources include:

- Energy Trust Scotland via Business Energy Scotland have indicated that the installation of PV cells and heating upgrade projects are eligible for 75% funding.
- Highland Council Community Regeneration Fund – approx. £700K pa available for projects in Sutherland.

- ELKCAL own funds

Further projects

The following projects have been identified, but to date specifications and costings have not been completed:

- Improved hall insulation
- Toilet upgrade, including baby changing

6.2 Playground

The school playground is the only community green space in the community and is the main area used to hold outdoor community events such as community barbeques, fundraisers and fetes. It is where we place seating and tables and erect marquees and stalls for these events. There are no plans to change or develop this area.



6.3 Parking

Elphin Hall is located on the NC500 which offers an opportunity to provide a stopping point for the huge number of visitors and campervans who pass through the area. If ELKCAL owned the property it would enable us to develop plans for caravan/motorhome parking and vehicle charging points as well as interpretive/information signage at the hall. This will entail enlarging the current carpark so that motorhomes and larger vehicles can turn around more easily. In terms of facilities, we will also consider the inclusion of waste disposal facilities (see below).

Similar facilities are offered in other communities along the NC500, for example Kinlochbervie and Lochinver, and have been demonstrated to generate a revenue stream for the communities while requiring minimal management. There are no similar facilities in the vicinity of Elphin. The plans for Elphin need further definition/ specification so feasibility and likely costs and income can be explored, as well as gaining an understanding of any planning and licensing requirements.

6.4 Septic Tank

The septic tank is located on land that outwith the boundary of the leased area but is included within the 1 acre which is the subject of the Community Asset Transfer request. This will guarantee full access and clear ownership of the septic tank, allowing ELKCAL to make any improvements as required.

There is an aspiration to include a waste disposal for the campervan stopover, however this will depend on whether that is compatible with the septic tank and whether there is sufficient capacity. The feasibility work for the campervan stop over will include gaining an understanding of the waste disposal facility specification/technical requirements, whether any improvements are required to the septic tank and to understand any planning, licensing, Scottish Water, SEPA etc. requirements.

6.5 Rough ground

One of the main goals of ELKCAL, directed by community wishes, is to develop a “greener” operating method. This has led to a plan to install photovoltaic panels to generate electricity to reduce the running costs of the hall and to enable an efficient heating system to be installed. Installing photovoltaic panels is a very expensive undertaking and not one that ELKCAL wishes to undertake in a leased building.

ELKCAL has obtained a quote and specification for a 12-panel ground array of 365Wp panel totalling generation of 4.4kWp, a battery storage system and control system. The panels will be installed on the rough ground. The quote obtained requires to be updated, but it is estimated that the costs will now be in the order of £20,000.

This project is planned for completion once the heating system has been installed and would be expected to be complete within a year of the transfer taking place. Funding sources identified for this project include:

- Energy Trust Scotland via Business Energy Scotland have indicated that the installation of PV cells and heating upgrade projects are eligible for 75% funding.
- Highland Council Community Regeneration Fund – approx. £700K pa available for projects in Sutherland.
- ELKCAL own funds

Otherwise there are no plans to develop the rough ground which is wet/ boggy and unlikely to be suitable for any development.

