

The Kings Arms Community Consultation

To buy or not to buy - that was the question!

In recent years, hundreds of successful community enterprises have sprung up all over the UK. For example, in 2019 Gartmore, in Stirlingshire, became the first Scottish village to have both its shop and pub in community ownership, when it purchased and developed the Black Bull Hub and Pub. Buying and redeveloping the Kings Arms, will allow Ballantrae to join the 600 or so other Scottish ventures that own and manage major assets for the benefit of their local community. If we achieve our goal, we will have restored a well-loved building to its traditional place at the heart of our community, where among other things, locals and visitors can meet to socialise, enjoy food and drink in comfortable surroundings.

The Kings Arms, a historic building at the heart of the village, dates back to the 18th Century, and until quite recently was one of three hotels in Ballantrae, the others being the Ardstinchar and the Royal Hotel. Along with the loss of the dozen or so shops that provided everything from shoes to groceries and hardware, and most recently, of the RBS branch, the disappearance of these centres of community life is a great loss. The idea that the Kings, which has been so important for so many of us, might not survive, is a worry that gradually crept up on us all.

The Kings Arms has been on sale for some time, but has attracted little interest from prospective purchasers. This, along with awareness of the significant role it has played in village life, and worries about what might happen if a buyer could not be found, gave rise to the idea that maybe the Ballantrae Trust should try to buy the building and develop it as a community hub. There followed many hours of discussion, in the Trust Board and with people in and around the village, about how the Trust might bring the Kings back into the centre of village life. As well as talking about it, we looked round at what folk in other places had done in similar situations, and thought carefully about the different ways the building could be used, to exploit its full potential.

We concluded that as well as providing food and drink; occasional live music events, and a place for families and larger groups to celebrate and relax, the new Kings Arms hub could also meet some other current needs. Among these were the idea that it might provide much needed office space for the Ballantrae Trust, which is successfully working to support other developments in the community, such as the Play Park; installing new cinema equipment in the village hall, and a programme of cinema and live theatre/ music. We also hoped the Kings Arms could house a small display telling the story of our village, including our farming and fishing heritage,

As the Trust's enthusiasm for the idea of purchasing and developing the pub for the community grew, we came to the conclusion that if we really thought it was such a worthwhile idea, we should ask Ballantrae folk whether they agreed with us. That is where the idea of a community consultation came from. After all, there would be no point in buying and redeveloping the Kings Arms, if those who live here had no interest in doing so.

In a way the rest is history, because everyone in the village and surrounding area has now had the opportunity to say what they think - through the invitation to attend a consultation day on 10 November, and through questionnaires, which were available in prominent village locations and via social media, as well as being delivered to every door in the Ballantrae Trust area. In addition, many people had a member of the Trust call on them personally. Gathering people's views about such a complex initiative as buying a hotel and developing it to address their needs, as well as attracting visitors into the village, was important if we are to make the project a success. We were overwhelmed by the extent of the support and interest shown and are grateful for the contribution to our thinking, of all of those who took the time to write down their thoughts.



The community consultation: - what did we find out?

Enthusiasm for the idea of buying the Kings Arms building for the village was strong, with 90% of those who completed our questionnaire supporting the proposal. Only a few people (3%) were against the idea, but some (7%) were unsure, or felt they needed more information before deciding. Overall, what emerged was a picture a community that cares about what their village is like now and will be like in the future. There is lots of talk about 'bringing the village together', with many people thinking that purchasing the Kings Arms will help do this. One person summed things up, saying 'The Kings could be a great place for the community to come together'.

Many of the 312 folk who completed the questionnaire, talked about the part the Kings Arms has played in their lives and the life of the village in the past, and expressed disappointment that it no longer does so. For some, the sense of loss seems to verge on grief. One said, 'This pub holds a lot of memories for me', while another told how 'it used to bring the people of Ballantrae together.' At the consultation event people shared stories about times when 'everyone' went to the pub 'young and old alike' after events in the village, and the party would 'continue in the Kings with everyone mucking in together.' The tales told were clearly important, because they were fresh and alive as they poured from their tellers' lips.

What did the consultation tell us about the reasons for people's views?

Many folk who completed the questionnaire shared the reasons for their views about the proposed purchase of the Kings Arms. Though diverse, they cluster together in groups of comments that overlap with one another.

The 'heart' of the village

The first group clustered round the hope that the project could help to restore the 'heart' of the village, and focused both on the part the Kings Arms has played in the past, and on the part they'd like it to play in the future. One person lamented that 'It's a shame the village has no "heart" anymore' while another wrote that the Kings 'used to be the heart of the community, unfortunately this isn't the case anymore.'



Looking for a solution to the problem, someone wrote that they would 'like the village to have a pub with an atmosphere that brings the village together', while another went further, pointing out that 'The Kings Arms could be the heart of the village, somewhere to eat, to meet and socialise, somewhere anyone at all could enjoy.' Some people justified their hopes for the future, by

remembering how things used to be when the Kings Arms was central to village life. One reported that the Kings 'used to bring the people of Ballantrae together', and suggested that 'It needs to be changed so that it can be that place again for everyone in the community.' Another predicted that 'If the Trust took over it would bring the heart of the village back for families to come together.'

Availability of food, drink and accommodation

The second group of reasons focused on Ballantrae's need for a setting that provides good food, drink, and accommodation, at affordable prices. Several folk referred to the importance of the Kings Arms as a place to go for a meal or drink, including one who wrote that 'The village needs somewhere to eat and drink other than the garden centre or shop for a take-away', and another who pointed out that there is 'no place to eat in the village for locals or tourists after 5pm if the pub closes.' The scarcity of places to go out for a meal without having to drive, was pointed out again and again. For example, one person said 'We need somewhere nice to have Sunday lunch or a take-away - a place that is affordable' while another, focusing on the problem faced by villagers whose families live elsewhere, wrote 'There is nowhere to take visiting relatives locally for a nice meal or just a social get together without driving.' One frequent visitor to Ballantrae lamented the fact that 'The village lacks a good pub and hotel, as visitors we always go outwith the village, which is a pity.'

Business benefits

In justifying their support for the Kings Arms project several people talked about the implications it might have for businesses. Among these, some referred to the business opportunities that will be open to the revamped Kings Arms village hub, including one who wrote 'It would be good for tourism, which would benefit the community indirectly, but it would also benefit the community directly through jobs, opportunities to promote local crafts etc. It would really enhance the village.'

Some comments focused specifically on the ways in which the project could impact on the social and economic sustainability of the village, including one from someone who believed that 'Retaining the Kings Arms will improve the social and economic viability of Ballantrae' and another who wrote that 'It would be extremely beneficial to the economic and social development of the village.'

As folk who live in the village know, the flow of ferry traffic to and from Cairnryan is huge, with around 4000 vehicles a day. Conscious of this, several people drew attention to the business opportunity each of these vehicles creates, because the Kings is an 'ideal place for tourists and passers-by to stop'. This was echoed by another contributor who welcomed the Kings Arms development, as a 'Fantastic facility for the village with good traffic flow and car park to attract passing trade.' In order to capitalise on its proximity to the A77, perhaps we simply need to follow the advice of another contributor, that 'We need to "capture" the Irish Ferry traffic.'



Just as important as comments about the business opportunities the new village hub could generate, were contributions that pointed out that B & Bs and self-catering holiday homes depend upon the availability of decent food and drink, to keep their customers happy. For example, one person wrote of the Kings Arms that 'it supports a lot of local businesses - supplying meals for B&B guests/holiday cottages etc', which finds support in a comment by the owner of such a business, who said 'We have a self-catering cottage...many visitors wish there was a good pub/restaurant as they are mostly disappointed in what Ballantrae has to offer at the moment.'

Finally, hinting at the style and standard of both residential and catering facilities they would like to see us providing in future, and also at the ways in which attention to such details could be helpful, one person wrote that 'Conversion to a boutique hotel/gastro pub highlighting local produce, would provide a valuable facility for local people and attract visitors to the village.'

Which services, activities and opportunities should the community hub offer?

In addition to asking people whether they agreed with the proposal to buy the Kings Arms for the village and to share the reasons for their answer, we invited them to consider a list of things that are happening in other community projects, and to say which they would like to see at the Kings Arms. This list included, for example, the possibility that the Kings Arms village hub might run 'Gourmet Nights' and put on 'Live Music' events; showcase Ballantrae's history and heritage; display and sell work by local craftspeople, and offer the Kings Arms as a venue for meetings and training events which, marketed well, could be a significant source of income. Almost all of the 20 items that appeared on this list received support from more than half of those who completed the questionnaire. As we move forward with the project, this information will be extremely helpful as we decide on both economic and social grounds, what facilities, services and activities we should provide.

Listening to the views of those who are against buying the Kings Arms

As lots of folk will recall, we were very keen to hear the views of those who are unsure about or against buying and developing the Kings Arms, because we need to reflect on their reasons for feeling or believing what they do. Some folk are clearly unsure whether it would be wise to take on the gigantic responsibility of an old building and a business that has undoubtedly seen better days. We can assure them that we are doing so carefully, taking advice from others with relevant experience and expertise, who know more than we do, at this point.

A few people have expressed concerns about whether a redeveloped Kings Arms building could ever be financially viable as a community enterprise. This is related to the idea some seem to have developed, that because it is a community venture, the Kings Arms hub will be run by volunteers who know nothing about the hospitality industry. These concerns are unfounded, because as a Trust, we are taking very seriously the need to consider whether the project can be established as a sustainable business that through time can make, not only a huge social contribution, but also a financial contribution to our community. That is why we have commissioned Community Enterprise, who have huge experience of helping community groups undertake development projects, to assess the financial viability of our proposal and help us to write a 5 year business plan. And since the only way this project can be viable is if it is run on a sound business footing and run by people who demonstrably have the experience necessary to do so, finding the right manager and helping her/him to find a suitable team will be our highest priority, after ensuring that the building is fit for purpose.

Two more concerns need to be addressed. First, a small number of people seem to believe that the reason the Kings Arms is for sale, is that it is 'only fit for demolition' (some talked about its 'crumbling structures' and its being 'held together by paint'). The Architectural Report we commissioned about the state of the building, allows us to confirm that these fears are unfounded. Finally, some folk seem worried that if we buy the Kings Arms for the community, everyone in the village will be asked for money to help pay for it. Everyone should rest assured that no one will be asked for any money. However, since we are aware that some people are interested in supporting the project financially, we are exploring with Community Shares Scotland, the possibility of giving folk who wish to do so, the opportunity to invest small amounts of money in it.

What Next?

Our application to The Scottish Land Fund for a grant (not a loan) to help us purchase the Kings Arms, has successfully made it through the first stage, so that we are now able to apply for up to 95% of the purchase price, based on the commercial valuation we have commissioned. The Land Fund, which is administered by the Scottish Government, supports communities in becoming more resilient and sustainable by owning buildings and land from which they can benefit. At the same time, we are looking into other ways of raising the funds we will need to renovate and equip the new Kings Arms village hub.

In the coming months, members of the Trust Board will be paying visits to a number of places where locals have already taken ownership of buildings, including pubs/hotels, to use as community hubs, because we are keen to learn from their experiences. We expect these visits to be enjoyable and worthwhile in helping us to develop our own project and would like very much for some Trust members who are not on the Board to be involved. If you are interested in this possibility, please let us know, using the contact details below.

During the time that we have been talking with people about our proposal to buy and develop the Kings Arms as a village hub, people have raised lots of questions. Hopefully, many of these have been answered above. However, you might also like to look at a list of some of the questions we've been asked and the best answers we have been able to give, which you can find at <https://www.ballantrae.org.uk/village-organisations/the-ballantrae-trust/projects/>

We will be giving regular updates about what is happening with the project in the Ballantrae News and the Stinchar Valley Magazine, as well as posting them on the Ballantrae Trust's web pages, and including them in the quarterly updates to Ballantrae Trust members. If you are not already a member of the Trust, but are supportive of the Kings Arms Project, why not join us? Membership is free so, if you want to join, drop us an email to receive a membership form, or if you don't use email, give us a call.

Finally, to everyone who took part in the Kings Arms Community Consultation THANK YOU. As you can see, we listened to what you had to say, and you have given us lots of food for thought!

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