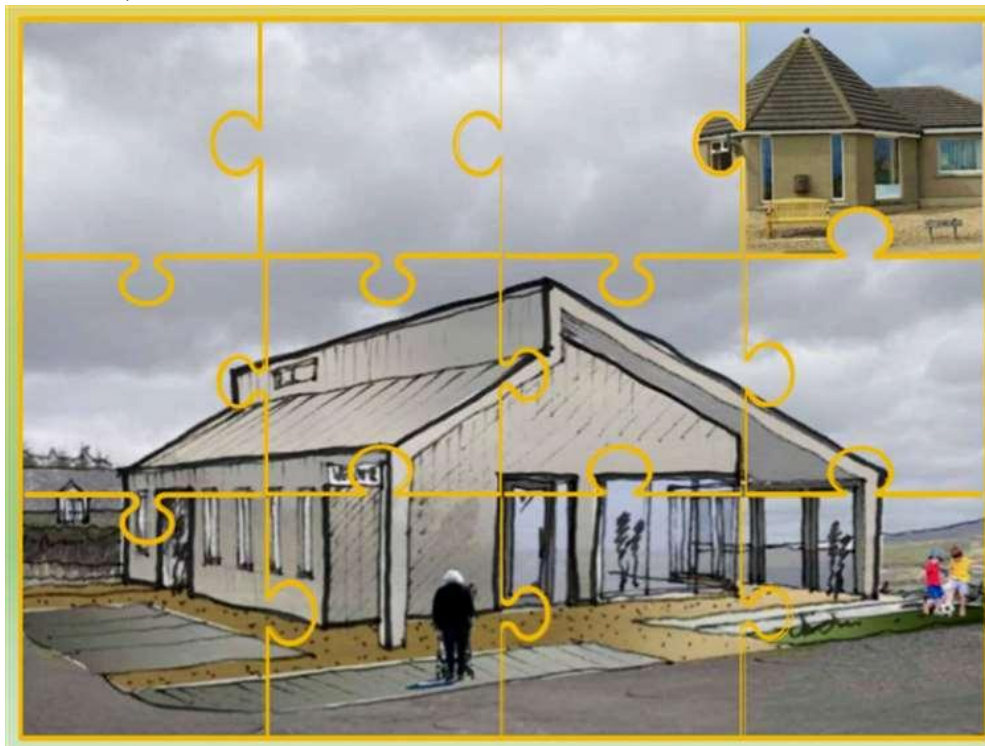


£2.1 million ‘legacy project’ is the aim for Dunbeath and District Centre

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Jigsaw Project: An artist's impression of the proposed health and wellbeing centre on a site close to the existing building in Dunbeath.

Dunbeath and District Centre provides a vital and much-valued service from its present base in the village – but the aim is to move into a new building in an ambitious £2.1 million project. The long-term goal is “a modern, accessible community centre designed to meet the growing and changing needs of our communities”, next to the existing one but three times bigger.

It goes by the name of the Jigsaw Project, reflecting the concept of many pieces fitting together to form a bigger picture – in this case, one that provides a wide-ranging community health and wellbeing role far into the future.

“The project is shovel-ready,” the centre’s operational growth manager Daniel Macleod pointed out. “The funding strategy is what we’re working through at the moment.

“The overall build cost plus operational cost for a year is about £2.1 million, and we’ve got a pledge of £50,000 from SSE Renewables. It’s a fairly small pledge, but all the same it’s good.”

The present building in Neil Gunn Road, just off the A9, dates back to 1992. It’s a warm and welcoming space but larger premises would be a natural progression.

The centre has two full-time staff and five part-time, supported by a team of 35 volunteers.

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Daniel said: “There are loads of little pieces to come together to make the overall vision of what we want for a modern, 21st-century social care prevention building – trying to reduce that

financial burden on the statutory services, trying to keep those individuals at home longer, living the best of their life for as long as possible without relying on early intervention by professionals.

“We call it a legacy project because it’s going to be here for generations after me and my kids.” Once the Jigsaw Project has achieved what it set out to do, a name will have to be found for the centre itself.

“We will be looking for ideas for what we should call the building, so that will come in time. We’ll be open to suggestions,” Daniel said.

“It’s a building three times larger than the current facilities and we aim to provide more services for our area. At the moment we have about 300 service users so we hope to expand on that, depending on the needs and demands.



Christmas carols with pupils from Dunbeath Primary School and visiting musicians.
Picture: Dunbeath and District Centre

“We were only the Dunbeath and district area but we’re now east Caithness, so we have expanded our catchment area.

“We get users from Helmsdale, we are getting users now from Thurso, Halkirk, we get users coming from Wick, the whole way along the east coast... We say ‘east Caithness’, but we know that we’re catching users from further afield than that.”

In the meantime, efforts are continuing to source funding.

“I’m giving myself another three years to see if I can capture everything,” Daniel explained. “The funding environment is really difficult nowadays, and unfortunately we don’t get any benefit from wind farms – there’s no community benefit from the turbines in Dunbeath.

“It’s a challenge, I must admit, because there are other areas that have got plenty of wind-farm gain. But Dunbeath is completely out of area for any wind-farm gain so we have challenges because of that.

“I’ve got another one year’s funded post left, but hopefully I will secure funding to remain as the operational growth manager to oversee the current operations but also push the new project into fruition.”

The centre aims to “to help people in Dunbeath and the wider area live well, stay connected and feel valued”.

Daniel explained: “Our services are designed around the holistic needs of each person. Physical health, mental wellbeing and social connection are deeply intertwined and our programmes reflect that.

“We provide nutritious meals both in-house and through our outreach meal delivery service, ensuring those who may struggle to cook for themselves receive balanced, healthy food. Gentle exercise sessions and wellbeing walks promote mobility and confidence.

“Regular social contact, creative activities and one-to-one support help alleviate loneliness and improve mood. For many, the centre is the one place they can come to feel seen, heard and valued.

“Our groups, outings and shared meals nurture community bonds. People tell us they come for the food but stay for the friendship.”



Daniel Macleod, operational growth manager at Dunbeath and District Centre.

The centre’s partnership with Caithness Rural Transport also helps to make sure people stay connected. “We do have a rural transport branch on our doorstep that can support our service users to come to the centre – but not just to the centre,” Daniel pointed out. “They can go to the doctors, and they can go to the post office, or they can use it for going into the town as well.”

Daniel was speaking amid a buzz of conversation as another busy lunch service drew to a close. Some of the users were preparing to settle down in the cosy lounge for a talk by a bank representative on fraud and scam prevention, to be followed by a lip-reading session.

The previous night, the centre’s emergency status had been activated after a road accident that closed the nearby A9 for almost three hours. Many of them had been heading south from Orkney.

“We had 28 through the door for comfort stops, use of wi-fi, hot drinks, soup and a meal,” Daniel said.

“Obviously with the crash on the A9, just south of the snow gates, they were unable to move on in their journey. So we activated our emergency centre status and notified all statutory services to say that we were open and anybody that was stuck within the traffic could use our facilities.

“They had a cup of tea, they had vegetable soup, they had macaroni cheese, they had home bakes.”

One of the stranded travellers later left a comment on social media saying: “The staff were amazing... What a spread they put on.”



A Christmas gathering at Dunbeath and District Centre with visiting musician Addie Harper on the accordion. Picture: Dunbeath and District Centre

For those wishing to find out more about Dunbeath and District Centre, it has [a website](#) and a frequently updated [Facebook page](#).

“Social media is a big thing nowadays for getting the word across,” Daniel said. “We do rely heavily on that, and it’s word of mouth – people speaking about it, people cascading the information around.

“We do local leaflet drops, but social media is the largest platform for us to get our information out.

“We’ve got a small criteria that they’ve got to meet, and that’s generally a vulnerable resident in the community that needs a bit of support.”