

TSI: Helensburgh and Lomond Area Plan

Introduction

Helensburgh and Lomond's third sector is integral to the wellbeing of our local communities, delivering services that support capacity building, funding advice, training and networking opportunities. However, insights from community groups in the area highlight a range of pressing challenges that hinder their ability to meet growing demand, this coupled with an ever shrinking pot of funding means that many third-sector organizations are struggling to sustain their services, expand their reach, and effectively support those in need.

A particular focus in H&L has been CWB and how this approach could effectively strengthen the third sector locally. This resulted in a number of key local groups forming a working collaborative (reporting to CPP) which has been heavily supported by the TSSA.

In addition, it is worth noting that the ABOIP consultation process identified the top three priorities for H&L as:

1. Transport
2. Community Wellbeing
3. Climate Change

Overall A&B top three priorities were identified as:

1. Transport
2. Community Wellbeing
3. Housing

The top seven categories included: Climate change, community wellbeing, digital inclusion, diverse economy & skilled workforce, financial inclusion, housing and transport infrastructure.

This Area Plan highlights key issues and priorities identified by the H&L TSSA through firsthand experience, discussions, and observations, while also outlining some light touch practical steps to address these concerns.

Key Issues and Priorities:

1. Funding Pressures

The availability and security of funding remain a major concern for community groups in Helensburgh and Lomond.

Challenges:

- Increasing competition for limited funding streams.
- Short-term funding cycles create uncertainty and make long-term planning difficult.
- Time-consuming and complex grant application processes.

Impact:

- Local groups will have to divert already limited capacity away from service delivery to focus on securing funding.
- A range of pivotal local services risk reduction or closure without sustainable funding opportunities. This is a pattern that is already emerging across the region.
- A reduced capacity to respond proactively to emerging community needs.

Action:

1. Encourage partnership working and joint funding applications to increase chances of securing financial support.
2. Provide targeted support to help groups develop long-term funding strategies and sustainable project plans.
3. Expand training on AI and digital tools to streamline funding applications and administrative processes.
4. Investigate the development of a central resource hub (TSI website) with funding guidance, best practices, and grant-writing support.
5. Formalise the CWB collaborative approach. Continue to pursue the current focus on establishing a community charity shop.

2. Volunteer Shortages

Many groups report a shortage of volunteers, affecting their ability to deliver services effectively. Again as funding shrinks and essential services delivered by anchor organisations reduce, greater pressure is placed on volunteers to breach the service delivery gap.

Challenges:

- Difficulty attracting new volunteers, especially younger individuals or those with specific skills.
- The ageing volunteer base creates additional challenges in sustaining services.
- Limited resources for recruitment campaigns and effective volunteer management.

Impact:

- Groups are struggling to maintain a effective breadth of service provision.
- Increased pressure on existing volunteers to take on more responsibilities.
- Competition within the sector to secure and retain volunteers.

Action:

1. Promote collaboration - share volunteers and reduce competition for limited resources.
2. Advocate for funding to support structured volunteer recruitment and management efforts – consider the scope for collaboration around a volunteer/fund writer position.
3. Leverage digital platforms and social media to enhance volunteer engagement and outreach.
4. Work with key local groups to promote local volunteering opportunities. Consider a more formal/structured approach.

3. Succession Planning

The medium and long term sustainability of many organisations is under threat due to insufficient planning for leadership succession. The level of responsibility placed upon trustees can be significant.

In addition, the increased regulatory powers granted to OSCR place an even greater emphasis on accountability and compliance expectations on trustees. This requires them to navigate even more rigorous reporting and governance standards.

Challenges:

- A lack of new committee members and trustees coming forward to replace outgoing leaders.
- Few opportunities for mentoring or leadership training for potential successors.
- Many groups struggle to identify or attract individuals with the necessary skills and commitment.
- Significant time commitment and increasing level of responsibility.

Impact:

- Governance risks and service continuity as long-serving members leave without replacements.
- Uncertainty about the future of some groups, especially smaller/grassroots organisations.
- Struggle to form an adequate quorum for essential decisions/AGM.

Action:

1. Explore the viability of 'speed-dating' AGMs to 'share' members for voting.
2. Look to online platforms of Trustees willing to work with H&L groups. This could be an effective way of bringing in key skill sets.
3. Standardise TSI trustee training for H&L – mix of online training and in person. This offers greater flexibility to potential trustees to learn and develop at their own pace.

4. Partnerships and Collaboration

Establishing strong partnerships and new relationships with other related interest groups is essential. A joint approach is a key component to successfully weathering the challenges of the third sector, not least in Helensburgh and Lomond. New and diverse partnerships need to be formed to breach the funding gap, overcome the lack of trustees/volunteers and enable groups to present new and dynamic collaborations to enhance appeal to funders.

In addition, collaboration offers not only increased flexibility, but potentially a means of securing larger funding pots thus increasing overall sustainability and security.

Challenges:

- Reduced funding forces organisations to compete rather than collaborate.
- Succession planning issues create instability in leadership and strategic direction hindering effective collaboration with other organisations.
- Organisations often focus solely on sustaining their own services, limiting resource sharing.
- Hesitancy to engage in open collaboration due to concerns over funding and autonomy.

Impact:

- Missed opportunities for creating innovative approaches to delivering services and the potential associated appeal to funders to invest in an area that is 'thinking out of the box'.
- Increased pressure on individual organisations to meet demand with fewer resources.
- Funders increasingly favour collaborative funding bids, as this affords them greater 'reach' for their investment.

Action:

- Establish a Helensburgh and Lomond 'Collaborative'. Following the model in Oban. TSI to support a core group of key organisations work under a banner of a 'single' partnership. Added to the core group would be other active organisations participating with specific identified funding opportunities in mind.
- Use the above model to foster a culture of open collaboration across the wider area.
- Develop joint funding applications to align with funders' priorities and secure more resources.
- Investigate shared resource models (e.g. staff, volunteers, funding bid writers etc.)

5. Digital Divide**Challenges:**

- Many small organisations lack the skills or confidence to use digital tools effectively. Therefore, there is greater effort in undertaking everyday tasks, including marketing and promotional activities (website, SM etc). This can lead to groups being 'overlooked' by potential funders.
- Emerging technologies, particularly AI, feel overwhelming, inaccessible and frightening.
- Given the wider financial pressures on the sector, investing in funding to support new AI platforms and digital training is uncertain.
- Rural areas, and potentially a sector dominated by more person centric skills can mean the perceived importance of new and emerging technologies is reduced. Thus increasing the digital divide.

Impact:

- Missed funding opportunities due to difficulty navigating online applications and digital processes. This is more significant in this time of unprecedented rapid technological change.
- Increased administrative burden as manual processes take more time and effort. The authenticity of a funding bid may well be favoured over an AI generated one but for how long? How long with it be before funders use AI tools to not only assess applications but to select and build relationships with applicants?
- Widening gap between well-resourced organisations and smaller, grassroots groups. A very real concern is that the 'voice' smaller organisations will get lost in the myriad of increasingly sophisticated AI generated funding bids.

Action:

- Continue to provide accessible digital skills training tailored to third-sector needs such as AI training on appropriate and ethical use of AI platforms to securing funding bids.
- Develop training currently offered to include best practice around inhouse AI backend/administrative tasks. For example, how to use AI to draft risk assessments, take minutes etc.
- Encourage funders to offer financial support type funds specifically for essential IT tools and digital transformation across rural communities.
- Promote peer mentoring and collaboration to share digital expertise.
- Work with Plinth AI (or other funding platforms) to support the sector.

- Provide IT support to carry out a digital audit and, where capacity allows, assist with drafting project specifications for website rebuilds and other digital improvements.

Conclusion

The third sector across H&L is facing significant challenges that threaten its ability to meet community needs. Addressing these issues - funding, volunteer recruitment, and succession planning- requires a joined-up approach involving effective partnership working and effective collaboration, as well as proactively addressing the digital divide at all levels.

By focusing on practical actions and strengthening stakeholder relationships, we can work to ensure as resilient and sustainable a future for our local community groups as possible.