

Portobello Central – only a few weeks left to raise funds to ‘Open the Doors’

A charity has taken over the former Town Hall on the High Street in Portobello on a long term lease from the council at a peppercorn rent and hopes to open the doors to the public this summer.

Portobello Central is now running a crowd funder to help them open the doors of the building with a new member of staff – a Launch Manager – in place. The idea is to employ someone who knows the history of the building, and can explain it to anyone who walks in, as well as being in charge of the day to day running of the hall including bookings.

So far the crowd funder has reached its halfway point both in terms of time and money raised. The charity have noticed that more donations are made at weekends, but a spokesperson said: “Several very generous donations have been received, and many welcome donations from all sorts of people.”

The organisation has been in existence for about 18 months with Chair Jennifer Elliot heading up a board of ten elected last September at an AGM.



Jennifer Elliot Chair of Portobello Central a charity which is leasing the Portobello Town Hall from the council on a 25 year lease to bring it back into community use and management PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

Jennifer explained that this charity is taking Portobello Town Hall back into community management, but the building now needs to be opened up. She said: “I hope we are close to the end of the beginning. We have, for the last couple of years, been working without being able to get into the Town Hall. It’s been closed and the gates locked with scaffolding up. Now we are working towards taking on the 25 year lease from the council.

“We want to open it as a community space, much like it was – but maybe run more easily for people to get in. There was a little bit of feedback that it had been tricky to book in the past. The building had fallen down the council’s priorities, whereas for Portobello Central it is the only business we have. It is the only thing we do and we want it to run as a community space night and day.

“We see it being used for music and weddings, and a bit more of an events and weekends business, but there is a great space for things like bike classes – maybe the kind of exercise classes that are noisier or attract bigger numbers.”

Jennifer explained the building had fallen into disuse mainly as a result of council budgets. Curiously the building fell into the schools budget so she agreed that “rightly” it had fallen down to the bottom of the council’s priorities when the council also had a job to do making schools safe and secure.

She continued: “It was a little bit underinvested over the many years. And it was booked through the Library so there was a lot of disconnect and labyrinthine processes. We want to make it simple to rent the building.”

In between the crowdfunder is designed to raise what Jennifer called “lift off cash”. She said: “I have absolutely no doubt that there will be rental income, that this building will wash its face financially. We will run it sensibly, not charging extortionate rates but we will charge a going rate. But there are a few things that before we can open we need to raise the cash for.

“We have some grant applications in, and this crowdfunder will be the icing on the cake to open the doors. We need a member of staff. That is the main thing as at the moment we the volunteers are answering booking enquiries late at night, slowly but not efficiently or effectively.

“The target for the crowdfunder is £25,000 – we hope the total will be at least that and maybe a little more. We have current grant applications in the same region, but we are still waiting for some answers on these.

“Then we expect the income quite quickly to cover the costs. Right from the beginning we did a budget and it stacked up.

“We hope to sign the lease at the beginning of April – the

start of the financial year for the council – and I would like to think there will be events in the summer. Certainly it will be open in the autumn.”

She continued: “We need to get in and do dull but important things like Legionella testing, checking that the fire systems are working and that there is adequate toilet provision. The drains still need to be looked at which is also important. Really we just have to make sure the building works. It was working, and we are confident it will, but we will have to look after the day to day matters, not the council. So we have to take out insurance and think about the health and safety aspects. This is the bit of the building which will make it fun.”

As to the state of repair the building is being handed over in, it is good. Jennifer continued: “It should be wind and watertight for the next 30 years, and we know there will be boiler upgrades and heating upgrades needed – that is part of why the hall closed. There is a big boiler in there which is probably only going to last a few years. We are working on ways of heating the building while also decarbonising. Technology will change in the next few years, and we want to get into the building and use it while seeing what we can do to make it more energy efficient. That is a big bill that is coming up, and we know there are a lot of things like that.”

THE HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

Their mission to Save Porty Town Hall began exactly as that, against the backdrop of rumours of Weatherspoons or their like moving in to convert the building owned by the council to a pub.

Secretary Geoff Pearson gave us the potted history of how Portobello Central came into being and is now the tenant in a newly renovated building.



Geoff Pearson Secretary of Portobello Central a charity which is leasing the Portobello Town Hall from the council on a 25 year lease to bring it back into community use and management

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He said: "It used to be the venue for the Highland Fling nursery until they moved out and later we discovered that the outgoings on the building were almost twice the income. The rates alone were £51,000 a year, and since we are a charity we won't pay rates.

"In November 2019 the community gathered in the City Chambers with Maureen Child and Mary Campbell who were both councillors at the time, people from heritage societies in Portobello, and a senior council officer. We discussed a lot, but not much happened in the months after that.

"We were taken rather unaware in early 2020 when the council put up a to let sign. There were two people interested – one man who wanted to run a food market which we felt would take business away from the wonderful shops we have in the High Street, and the second one was the owner of St Stephen's Church, Peter Schaufuss. He did not pursue it except to produce a document about how wonderful the place was, which turned out to be the same document as he used when buying St Stephen's.

"We then put in a 36-page business plan backed by a community consultation run by the community council plus another 36 pages called Delivering New Life a bit later. In November 2021 the possibility of us taking over the building was discussed at a Finance & Resources Committee. The council supported us by suggesting offering the building to us on a 25-year lease on a peppercorn rent, as it was not really worth entering into a community asset transfer."

The council then applied for and got the £350,000 needed to put the building into good repair from the Scottish Government's Place-based Investment Fund.

The work carried out on the building has just been completed and has been first class according to Pearson. The outside

render has been stripped off completely in places and replaced rather than being patched and the building they are moving into is now in very good condition. The council made the hall wind and watertight, and the whole building has been painted inside and out.

That is not to say that they do not have plans to change things around in due course by moving the toilets to the back of the building (they are at the front at the moment) and opening the space to the front of the Town Hall up as shops and studios. But it is a good place to start from.

What now?

Now the charity needs some funding to help them employ someone and open the doors. At present the fundraising has reached just over 50 per cent of the target at £13,000+.

The 1914 building is to be brought back to life with dancing, sports, markets, sales, parties and weddings. It can be used for virtually any kind of pop up event as there is a large hall with a stage, and a meeting room upstairs.

Enquiries are invited to book the hall as this is the way it will become sustainable. The group behind the project hope that it will become a community hub used by everyone.

Access is easy – there is a bus stop outside the door.

Donate through Crowdfunder [here](#).



Jennifer Elliot Chair and Geoff Pearson Secretary of Portobello Central a charity which is leasing the Portobello Town Hall from the council on a 25 year lease to bring it back into community use and management PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter