

Representations received CAT Request – Raddery, Former School & Woodland

Representation 1

To whom it may concern,

We are writing to object to the CAT proposals for the former Black Isle Education Centre, including Raddery Woodland.

The proposals of Raddery House Ltd are interesting and it is, as the Directors have stated, an ambitious project and they should be applauded for this and some of their vision. Unfortunately, when looking into the detail of their proposals they are poorly considered on four critical points, those being:

- Finance.
- Company Structure and powers
- Community consultation.
- Raddery Woodland Proposals

Finance -

The proposals are centred around the raising of over £2.2million of grant funding between 2025 and 2029. There is no evidence as to the realism of the grants which are stated with merely a list of potentially appropriate sources listed.

The above figure does not include an additional initial amount of £415,000 from the Scottish Land Fund to provide to cover the costs of the site to the Council. Given the scope of the proposals and the limited employment opportunities it will provide, there is an overall sense that there is not significant evidence overall of a project that will “empower communities”, a fundamental aim of the Scottish Land Fund. Indeed it is stated within the Business Plan that:

“RHL has been in conversations with the Scottish Land Fund since the beginning of the CAT application process. SLF expressed concerns, based on the initial plans outlined, that the proposals benefited a community of interest (families and children with life-limiting illnesses) rather than the community of the Black Isle. ”

Given that the Outline Business Plan was written in 2022, with the group being aware of the site since May of that year, this should have allowed plenty of scope to provide an update on this situation from the SLF. In fact it is stated that such an application/discussion will not be entered into until after the successful conclusion of the CAT. Given initial discussion with the SLF, this provides absolutely no guarantee or reassurance that this will indeed be successful. Additionally it is stated within the business plan that SLF require 5% of the funding for purchasing the asset to be provided by local sources yet this figure is not then taken through or included within Appendix 8 – Income and Expenditure Progressions.

Generally, we feel that financial forecast for the project underestimates greatly the cost for infrastructural improvements – the costs for renovating the existing school building are listed as only £1.2million for example. These are listed as being based on builders estimates but the estimates are then not provided within the appendices of the CAT request. This would have a huge impact on grant funding etc.

Considerable income is estimated from a charity shop and café both entirely staffed and run by volunteers; which in our opinion is an unrealistic business model. In fact roles for only three salaried positions are allowed for within the finance projections – yet it is mentioned that the project will create local job opportunities particularly for young people. Additionally it is assumed that the “pop-up” sop space, offered rent-free in Fortrose is in fact located within the Business Premises of one the Directors (a podiatrist).

Company Structure and Powers -

Our major concern is that at present Raddery House Ltd are, at present a private company limited by guarantee and that it is written within their articles of association that the company could sell on assets as they feel fit, as per Schedule 1 Powers Available to the Company and shown below.

	Property
3.1	To register an interest in land and to exercise the right to buy land under Part 2 or Part 3A of the Land Reform Act 2003 or Part 5 of the Land Reform Act 2016.
3.2	To purchase, take on lease, hire, or otherwise acquire any property suitable for the Company.
3.3	To construct, convert, improve, develop, conserve, maintain, alter and demolish any buildings or erections whether of a permanent or temporary nature, and manage and operate or arrange for the professional or other appropriate management and operation of the Company's property.
3.4	To sell, let, hire, license, give in exchange and otherwise dispose of all or any part of the property of the Company.
3.5	To establish and administer a building fund or funds or guarantee fund or funds or endowment fund or funds.

There is some indication that Raddery House Ltd will become a charity, a process which we acknowledge takes time, but again no update on the progress of this or in fact any guarantee that this will be the case is included in the proposals.

To us, we feel that this does not constitute a sound basis for a CAT project and hints at possible underlying motives for part or all of the property purchase.

Community Consultation –

It is stated that the major consultation carried out was via a “door knock” survey with local Raddery residents, with the overall response being overwhelmingly positive. There are no details included as to what exactly the local residents consulted on. It is our understanding that in fact only two questions were asked – one via support for the campus project, with the intention being a children’s hospice and for the woodland as a memorial space for the hospice. It is our understanding that there has been no further consultation with members of the local Raddery community with many not in fact being aware that the proposals had been published.

A limited wider consultation is then stated to have been carried out, consulting with 300 residents of the black Isle over the proposals – if this was the case, it would represent approximately 3% of the some 10,590 people who live on the Black Isle. There is no evidence included within the proposals to demonstrate the findings of this consultation in any detail.

No other wider consultation in any form has been carried out, with no details of the project publicly being available until the publication of the CAT proposals by the Council. Twice the group have cancelled presentation at Community Council meetings (most recently February 2023) because of admission of ‘lack of details’ on the project, yet at this point the proposals will have been submitted to the Council as they are now seen.

The business plan does discuss various stakeholders, both local and Scotland wide who “support” the project. The evidence of this included within the Appendices indicates generic support for the ideas rather than specific support for the proposals (as is the case for the woodland proposals). Additionally there is no evidence of support from the local stakeholders’ groups, the list of which rather conveniently aligns with the Board members interests.

The justification for the consultation method is explained as so as not to exclude the age 65+ demographic, with no thought to the resulting exclusion of consultation with the wider black isle community or indeed the under 65 age demographics.

There is a reference, with some pride, to the fact that one of the board members has set up a website for the project. A website that has no information and requires login details for people to access?

There is some discussion around the wide range of

It is with some irony that we note these issues with community consultation given that two members of the committee widely criticised our initial announcement of our plans to pull a CAT proposal together on the grounds that we had not consulted with the local Raddery residents – despite the fact that in the end we received over 200 positive responses to our original proposals including many from local residents. Their response to us on Facebook, unfortunately not preserved, was ultimately bullying and intimidation.

We are also deeply concerned that this bullying behaviour has not been limited to us with several local Black Isle residents speaking to us confidentially about their fear of speaking openly against the proposals.

Raddery Woodland Proposals -

The following offers detailed comment on the brief proposal for the Raddery Woods aspect of the project. It is this element of the proposals that we are most interested in.

Generally our principal concerns are centred around the fact that the woods are emphasised throughout the proposals as being peripheral to overall site plans, and that ‘preservation’ is considered the most important aspect of the future management of the woods to the detriment of community. We are also extremely concerned over the language with regards to freedom of access to the woods which appears to be reserved for only “respectful” users of the campus facilities. There also appears little to no knowledge base supporting any of the proposals.

Much of the commentary surrounding the proposals for the woodlands and indeed the Appendices included seem to have been included in direct response to our initial commercial proposals for the woodland which would have underpinned any CAT proposals which we submitted. It is to our great sadness that members of the board of directors for Raddery House seem to have taken against any proposals which we may have made without fully understanding them or the implications to the woodlands or indeed discussing their concerns directly with us. It was offered to Raddery House Ltd that they could work with us to support each of our CAT requests, an offer which was declined by them. It is with sadness that we read that many of their general ideas for the woods and the wider scheme align with our proposals for the woods and the two schemes could have in fact been hugely complementary to each other.

The devotion of the RHL proposals to the woods can be summarised within the proposals Appended 'Notes on 3a': "If however the Council are minded to separate them (Raddery House from Woods) then the required elements can be drawn from the business plan and we would be obliged if we are given the opportunity to take our bid forward on that basis."

To allow for our detailed comment of the proposals we have extracted the relevant section, section 9.0, from the Outline Business Plan – quoted below in black with our comments/thoughts highlighted in brackets and highlighted in yellow.

9.0 Raddery Woods

Raddery Woods is an area of Ancient Woodland appearing on the register and in the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map in the 1860's. It is believed that it may be the most Northerly Beech Woodland in the UK. The woodland forms part of the original gift by the Salvesen family to Ross and Cromarty. The Highland Council's forestry officer, Nick Richards, has commented that it is clearly an important site (Not disputed). The lack of intervention in the woods for many years and respectful use by the local community has allowed the development of a plethora of diverse wildlife, encouraged biodiversity and is home to several protected species. (This has not stopped invasive species, nor as referenced within the proposals damage to the woodlands caused by the ingress of neighbouring sheep. It is widely recognised that appropriate management of woodlands will in fact further enhance habitats for wildlife more so than management through neglect). It is a natural cathedral of trees, a special place. (Absolutely acknowledged – it is a hugely special woodland that deserves to be celebrated and shared with the wider Black Isle community).

9.1 Preliminary survey

(It should be noted that very little within this paragraph actually relates to a preliminary survey or a description of the woods).

RHL noted the strong desire expressed by local people during the community consultation that the woods be preserved for future generations. (Is preservation itself of most benefit to the wider community? Ensuring its long-term survival absolutely very important. Also note in the context of our comments r.) The directors engaged an ecologist to conduct a preliminary survey of the woodland and he continues to advise the Board. He has been invaluable in sharing his knowledge and experience. (There is no evidence that the Directors actually engaged an ecologist – merely a quotation included in the Appendix 7.5 covering the costs of procuring an ecology report. There is a Paul Johnson, not in our understanding a qualified ecologist, mentioned as a non-active member of the Steering Committee but the quotation comes from a separate ecologist, Rebeca Boyd. Additionally we would argue that relying on the report of an Ecologist in what is a complex woodland is dangerously one dimensional). There are a range of documents appended to the report in relation to the woodland habitat, (These are generally spurious generalised text, largely not even specific to the Raddery woodland, which confirm nothing other than the woodland is an important habitat, which would be anticipated in a woodland of such age and diversity. Does the Highland Council forester cited actually support the proposals as indicated including limiting access – see below?) but the following summary points are worth noting in the body of this report: The woods are a natural wildlife haven, a peaceful, tranquil place. Its appeal is nature getting on with things, managing its own environment without interference. With some modest help, this could be enhanced, and its long-term future secured. (Refer to our comments above re woodland management techniques.) There are very few young trees, and virtually no understorey, even in the areas where the canopy is open. (There are in fact pockets where the understorey actually offers great potential with some lots of natural regeneration – although these are limited within the beech undoubtedly.) The beechwood is dying, albeit very slowly, without younger trees coming through, and if a beech specific disease arrives in the UK, such as Beech Leaf Disease, then the impact on the wood could be catastrophic. (Absolutely, however implementing a 'no-intervention' approach would exacerbate the effects.) Climate change is already resulting in more violent and more frequent storms, and a raise in temperature and extended periods of drought will add

to the uncertainties. Conserving the woods requires that their custodians give thought to this situation. It also requires that the developments planned for the Raddery House Campus do not impinge on the woodland and damage the balance of its eco-system. (Agreed - It has been proven that the beech tree will be hugely impacted by climate change with many beech forests in the South of England simply dying out. Careful, active, and knowledgeable management of these woodlands will be required in order for them to survive. None of the information included within these proposals suggest that Raddey House have the ability to implement this). RHL's ecologist advises that a small tree nursery is set up, either in the wood or nearby on the Campus. (Again – refer to notes re ecologist above. There is merit in this idea as part of a coherent management approach, further consideration would need to be given to seed provenance from other zones as appropriate.) (It should also be highlighted at this point that there is significant beech within Raddery woods but there is also a significant composition of notable oaks and other native and indeed non-native species including notable specimens of dougals fir.

Trees would be grown from the mast collected from the wood to maintain the current gene pool and used to replace windblown or dead trees. Other species could also be grown to add to the diversity where appropriate. He has also made recommendations in relation to supporting the microclimate of the woods, attracting birds, bats, and pollinating insects. These recommendations lend themselves to a range of non-invasive educational activities for young people, including siting bird and bat boxes and constructing insect hotels. Nature-based mental health and wellbeing, forest bathing and nature walks, fungi/foraging courses and could all be part of visitors learning about and enjoying the woods with very little disturbance. RHL has based its plans for Raddery Woods on the advice of their ecologist who has agreed to advise on an ongoing basis. (We would highlight our concerns again in relation to the basis of plans on entirely on one professional discipline is not enough in progressive woodland management. A qualified ecologist has an ecologists' viewpoint and would normally be included within woodland management decision making together any number of professionals but notably including a forester. Sustainability is achieved through the balancing of Environment, Economic and Social needs, especially in the context of a Community Asset Transfer. We would also query in what format these recommendations have been made, and ask why they haven't been included as an appendice to the proposals, unless there are recommendations that RHL do not wish to disclose?)

These are detailed in the next sections.

9.2 Woodland management

RHL will conserve the special habitat of the woodland, recognising the importance of nature based solutions to climate change. They will undertake full survey over the first year with view to establishing a management plan to keep the woods healthy for coming generations, preserving its biodiversity and gene pool including the range of wildlife already identified, including badgers, bats and red kites, red squirrels, pine martens and a barn owl. Plans will be made to eradicate invasive species identified including rhododendrons. Areas of boundary fence which need repairing – there is evidence of damage to woodland caused by straying sheep and deer - and an ongoing programme of boundary fence renewal undertaken over the next ten years alongside the planting and establishing of native hedgerows. (This section is very sparse with no reference to ongoing Highland Council policy regarding woodland management or the multi-faceted modern approach to woodland management that includes community access and impact. Or indeed placing much priority on the main document underpinning the management of any woodland – the Woodland Management Plan. It should be noted that this is required for any ongoing management of the woodland including any minimal felling which would be required to enhance biodiversity).

9.3 Maintaining community access and improving access for disabled visitors

The woods have been open to anyone who wishes to use them respectfully, and this would continue but with improved access for those who are mobility impaired and wheelchair users. (I find the use of the phrase "respectful" hugely concerning. Who will police this and decide the rules as to who is allowed to access the woods or not? – and with regard to Scottish Access Legislation). Parking for those arriving by car will be on the campus nearby alongside disabled WC facilities. (This can be a busy single-track road with timber lorries accessing the nearby Raddery Sawmill. Any such access plans would require a pavement to accommodate wheelchair users and traffic together.)

There will be no tree felling to create car parking and no permanent structures erected in the woods which might encourage anti-social behaviour. A temporary canvas shelter can be erected as need be for outside activity in rainy weather. (At present there is a temporary shelter structure within the woods, which has been present for many years – with absolutely no evidence that it is used for anti-social behaviour).

9.4 Creating a classroom space on the campus

Linking woodland activities to a workshop or classroom base on the campus ensures that activities related to the woodland benefit from facilities and space and avoids any adverse impact of development on the woods themselves. (We would argue that there is scope within the woodland for coherent long-term plans to incorporate limited, well-designed sensitive structures which will not adversely impact on the woods. Having such a structure on site allows for greater connection with people and place, vital for fostering future and ongoing community involvement which such a space on the campus will not. Again a safe link between the campus and the woods would need to be established.)

It enables considerable possibilities for educational and interest projects, conservation, biodiversity etc. for groups pre-school to adult groups as well as wellbeing activities and foraging groups etc. Linking forest cams to the workshop would allow study of the animal life without disturbance. (We should be encouraging responsible access/managing access during breeding/nesting seasons e.g. within the woods for people to respectfully get the opportunity to view wildlife. Again enhances connection between people and place. There are many examples of projects where groups study nature in nature without any disturbance to the local animal populations.) Guests, campus users and community groups would be welcomed. (What about the general wider community? And the local community who already use the woods as a vital resource. There is no mention of individuals/families from the wider community within the entire proposals for the woodlands.)

9.5 The Sapling Project

RHL intends to use the space offered by the campus to carry out a larger sapling growing project. Groups and individuals will be able to plant and grow saplings from seed collected in the forest which will then be used to regenerate the woods and establish new areas of woodland. One local landowner has already indicated their willingness to participate by allowing the establishment of an important linking habitat on their land. (This is a good idea and ties in with current Highland Council policy. It should also be highlighted that a local landowner also comprises a member of the board so this should be relatively easy to achieve.)

The project will enable RHL to maintain the gene pool from this unique wood and increase its biodiversity, in addition to the benefits for carbon capture from new plantations. It will also enable the replanting of Raddery Drive. Hedging plants native

to the area will also be grown in a similar way and used to establish new and repair old stretches of hedges, a habitat for wildlife. (Good idea, however it is not relevant to the actual purchase of the woods and we would suggest should be achieved in any case? It also offers limited wider community benefit unlike the planting of recent community hedgerows in Rosemarkie and Fortrose. It should also be noted that no specific area or ground, although relatively minimal in nature, seems to have been set aside within the campus plans for this or indeed the grow project.)

9.6 Wellbeing activities

Guests at Raddery House and local visitors to the campus will benefit from the use of the woods for wellbeing and health-enhancing activities. (Again this seems to suggest that only through association with the Campus will people be able to take part in wellbeing activities. This is not inclusive to the wider or indeed local community.)

The benefit of outdoor activities to health and wellbeing is well-established. The woods offer quiet and peace for those wishing it, and contemplation spots and memory walks will be established. Individuals can enjoy the green cathedral on their own or join volunteer-led groups undertaking mindfulness or forest bathing. RHL envisage a range of small groups - foraging and nature groups, art, reading and morning coffee groups - enjoying the woods. There will be scope too for woodland craft projects. RHL will actively seek to engage with individuals who would like to volunteer with tasks and activities in the woods. (All good ideas but seem in complete disagreement to previous suggestions that access to the woods will be kept limited and respectful to minimise any impact to wildlife. Small income generating groups will be allowed access to the woods but not educational groups?)

9.7 Revenue and costs

RHL believe that there are opportunities to defray the costs of managing the woodland through the sale of saplings (the Woodland Trust sell these at £10.95 each) and adopt a tree/sponsor a bird box schemes. Other organisations have used similar strategies successfully, with charges typically around £10-100 per tree. The sale of bare root natural hedging plants raised on site is also planned. (Good ideas – however there appears to be no local market research supporting the need locally for such a business. Would these be sold in the “shop” to support the annual income of £12 – £20k a year? That’s a lot of trees!). Benches and memorial plaques will also be available for purchase with the monies supporting the preservation of the woodland in perpetuity. (It should be noted that memorial benches and plaques detract hugely from the natural feel of woodland and need to be managed carefully. To paraphrase FLS policy: **“We are fortunate enough to manage many special places and wild landscapes that mean a great deal to many people. However, one of the main reasons these places are treasured, is precisely because they feel wild and natural. We therefore ask people not to leave memorials in the forest – to respect the qualities that others have enjoyed and continue to enjoy.”** Their inclusion per se within the Business Plan demonstrates a fundamental lack of appreciation of woodland management and undermines the entire basis of the woodland proposals.)

Volunteer-led nature walks, and forest-based wellbeing and foraging sessions are also being considered as fundraisers to support the conservation of the woodland. Grants will be sought from funders supportive of environmental projects and commercial sponsorship linked to net zero sought from local businesses involved in the timber industry. Costs incurred will include fencing, stakes, protective tubing, tools and, on occasion, expert advice. (Improving access for disabled and mobility impaired seen as an important part of woodland access, despite being a major cost, there are only £9k of

projected costs included to cover this and the professional fees for managing the woodland – woefully underestimating the cost of such works.)

Reuse and recycling will be central to RHL's approach with plant pots coming via a recycling initiative.

In conclusions despite the many positive aspects to the proposals when looked at in some details they are poorly considered and in our opinion score very poorly in relation to the CAT assessment framework criteria.

Representation 2

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to you to object to the proposed CAT request from Raddery House Ltd for the former Black Isle Education Centre including Raddery Woodlands.

I think that the proposals for the school campus are a lovely idea - if a little implausible and ambitious.

My objections centre around the proposals for the woods.

I am a local resident and access and use the woods with my children - we hold informal community events there such as an easter egg hunt last year.

The ideas around the woods deeply concern me as I am worried that they will try and restrict access to them for local families.

There is language used throughout the proposals limiting access to "anyone who wishes to use them respectfully" and "Guests, campus users and community groups would be welcomed."

I'm also worried about the proposals for siting memorial benches and plaques in the woods - and again this would limit my and my families access as we would prefer to give these areas a respectful distance - and that actually I would prefer that the woods didn't become a sad place to be.

I played in the woods as a kid, my children currently play in the woods and I can imagine their future kids playing in the woods - it would make me incredibly sad to think that this might not be possible in the future.

I would be worried about the increase of large vehicles that would be needed to undergo the work, we already have a lot of that with the farms and the sawmill and the road is not fit for more.

I'm also worried about the lack of community consultation around the proposals.

As a local Raddery resident I wasn't aware of the full extent of the plans until they were highlighted to me on Facebook. There is only a small sign locally that indicates that the Council consultation is ongoing.

I was asked about my opinion at some point last year - but that was for a hospice (which I indicatively supported) and for a memorial woodland (which I objected to).

Representation 3

I'm writing to you as a group to express our concern at the current CAT request for the above property by Raddery House LTD.

We are a local Parent and Toddler group who have been running in Rosemarkie for many generations. Like many local groups we temporarily closed during the pandemic due to COVID restrictions, however we were one of the first groups on the Black Isle to start up again - meeting exclusively outside. We still meet as a traditional toddler group but run sessions outside wherever possible.

It was therefore with some excitement that we reviewed the proposals by Raddery House LTD for the site as in our opinion both the education centre and woodlands have some much scope for use as a positive community resource for all the residents of the Black Isle young and old.

You can imagine our dismay therefore upon reading the proposals to learn that the plans firmly ignore the young people of the Black Isle. Our families mainly bring children under 5 to the group but many have older siblings and we are well aware of the lack of facilities for young people on the Black Isle.

Yes, they will provide respite facilities for young people and their families and this is laudable.... but it does not bring any immediate community benefit to Black Isle residents. Yes they will "kindly" rent the sports facilities out to local groups at a charge. Yes, they will run Dementia support and Grow projects but again with no reference to involving young people in neither. Yes they will run a cafe and a shop but neither will actually employ and upskill local young people as they will be entirely staffed by volunteers.

There is provision in place for supporting young carers and this is very welcomed. But again doesn't actually seem to really offer much to the young people other than a venue for activities.

We became even more concerned upon reading the plans for the adjoining woodland. The language used throughout seems to be around restricting access to "respectful" user's only, by many people's definition preventing enjoyment of the area by younger people.

We know the woods are currently used by several local families, and have been for generations and the idea that their access may be restricted; alongside access for anyone young or old is simply not acceptable.

A classroom for learning about nature will be set-up but at a "safe" distance from any actual nature. Yet, study after study find that children learning about nature in nature and being in the outdoors is profoundly fundamental to their well-being. The Nature nurtures children report by the Wildlife Trust is one such report but there are many more. How do we expect our children to grow up with a knowledge and respect for how important wildlife is, how to preserve it and respect it, without actually allowing them into a woodland to view it?

The idea for a community hub for this area has so much promise, and it is absolutely heartbreaking to see it being implemented with so little consideration for the younger generation of Black Isle residents. It also betrays the very pledge of helping the young people of the Black Isle that the site was originally passed to public ownership for.

Regards,

Rosemarkie Parents and Toddler Group

Representation 4

I'm afraid I don't have enough time to write a detailed response about my concerns for the transfer of Black Isle Education Centre and Raddery Woods, but I do have a couple that need to be aired.

Before I do so, I would like to say that the respite centre is a lovely idea.

1. This appears to be a private company, rather than a community led venture. I'm failing to see the community side of it.
2. My main area of expertise is on the ecological side of the transfer, and I am unable to find evidence that the woodland will be managed effectively.
3. My impression is that the main emphasis of the group will be the use of the education centre. With that in mind, I can't see any guarantees that the assets (eg the woodland), or parts of the assets, aren't going to be sold off to other parties in the future.
4. Some of the funding sources listed will not cover the woodland initiative side of the venture. The board have not looked at the funding sources properly.
5. I'm just not sure what the wider community benefit will be, especially with regards to the woodland.