

Photo credit Gemma Smith

December 2025
**Business Plan for
former Altnaharra Primary
School**



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Executive Summary

Altnaharra Community Trust (ACT) was established in 2015 to represent the interests and aspirations of the local community in one of Scotland's most remote rural areas. The Trust manages the annual community benefit fund from the locally developed Creag Rhibach wind farm, and now that this funding stream is live, ACT is positioned to deliver meaningful, community-led regeneration. The Trust is governed by five volunteer directors who are all members of the local community, committed to reversing long-term decline and securing a sustainable future for Altnaharra.

Over recent decades, Altnaharra and the wider Northwest Sutherland area have experienced significant and ongoing depopulation. The mothballing of Altnaharra Primary School in 2017 due to a dwindling school roll - marked a turning point and a visible reduction in the viability of the village. As families are lost, local services and opportunities disappear, perpetuating a cycle of decline. Community leadership and intervention are now essential if Altnaharra is to stabilise, grow and thrive once again.

The village has historically been anchored by three key community assets: the primary school, the church and the hotel. All three have been diminished:

- **The primary school** sits unused and deteriorating, a visible reminder of population loss
- **The church** has fallen into severe disrepair and is no longer safe for community use
- **The hotel** operates only on a seasonal basis, reducing hospitality and employment opportunities

These closures limit social interaction, weaken community cohesion, and narrow the area's economic prospects.

Employment in Altnaharra is mainly linked to farming and the sporting estates, such as gamekeeping and estate maintenance, supplemented by seasonal roles within the hotel sector. Limited, low-density job availability results in young people moving away, leaving an increasingly ageing population and reducing demand for essential services. While this is a longstanding challenge, it is not irreversible.

ACT has already made significant progress in enabling future opportunities. Through engagement with BT, ACT successfully brought fibre-to-the-premises superfast broadband to Altnaharra and surrounding townships, an essential piece of infrastructure which now supports remote working, digital enterprise and inward migration opportunities that were previously impossible.

Photo of the former primary school and surrounding land (google earth photo)



The property is currently unused and has been left empty since it was mothballed in 2017. ACT engaged in talks with The Highland Council during the process of the school closure and agreed with councillors that the community would gain ownership of the building and surrounding land to benefit the wider community. The CAT transfer will make this possible.

Map of Altnaharra:



https://earth.google.com/web/search/altnaharra/@58.32267128,-4.45166768,0a,177832.35975111d,35y,0.13306671h,1.65479343t,0r/data=CiwiJgokCR4oOM8RJKIAEWPMbYtBIKlAGb5AdC0xtxHAITwRz2zZ1hHAQgIIAKICCABKDQj_____8BEAA

2. About Altnaharra Community Trust

Altnaharra Community Trust was incorporated in 2015.

ACT is a registered Scottish Charity: SC046400

Contact details: Altnaharra Community Trust,

Since 2015, ACT has been able to build up significant funding to plan for the following:

- ACT would like to restore the village with additional funding where required to provide residents and tourists with suitable facilities for visiting.
- ACT has already begun restoration plans for the church building after having taken over the building from Church of Scotland and plan to restore the church but also ensure its use can be multi-functional.
- ACT are in the process of applying for the CAT of the school to use the site for some affordable homes and one or two workshop/business premises/opportunities which ultimately will provide the village with a centre.
- In general ACT are looking at making improvements to the village as many parts of it are derelict, run down and neglected.

ACT's current objectives listed below from the Articles of Association:

Purposes

4. The organisation's purposes are:
 - (a) the advancement of education for residents within the area of benefit;
 - (b) the advancement of community development for residents within the area of benefit;
 - (c) the advancement of environmental protection or improvement within the area of benefit;
 - (d) the distribution of any surplus funds held by the organisation for any of the preceding purposes within the area of benefit and Scotland generally.

3. Board of directors

Altnaharra Community Trust is governed by five local volunteers who were invited to the board as trustees to ensure a wide representation and who bring a diverse range of skills to our wide range of projects.

The following table details the names, skills and experience of the current board of directors and members of staff:

Name	Job Title	Background
Pieter Bakker	Director – Chair	Manager of Altnaharra Sporting Estate, living and working in the area for over 30 years. Pieter has expert knowledge of what is missing in the community and how best to take steps towards regeneration.
Ann Mackay	Director – vice chair	Now retired, Ann has lived in the village for over 50 years and was employed as the Head Teacher of Altnaharra primary school.
Colin Campbell	Director - Treasurer	Colin's family moved to the area 45 years ago and he was educated at Altnaharra primary school. Colin also managed Altnaharra hotel for a period and now employed by Altnaharra Estate as a gamekeeper. He has extensive experience in life/work in the area.
Rebecca Stickland	Director - Secretary	Rebecca lives and works just outside the village in Farming. She also managed the Altnaharra hotel for a period.
Mandy Smith	Director	Mandy lives and works in the village. She has owned and run a B&B for over 20 years.

4. Membership

Members of Altnaharra Community Trust are key to our organisation. Active members help shape our Trust's objectives, agendas and projects, allowing them to participate in the development of their community.

MEMBERS

11 Qualifications for membership

Voting membership shall be open to:-

- (a) Individual Members Individuals over the age of sixteen years who reside within the area of benefit (for nine months or more in any year commencing 1st January and ending 31st December) and who support the purposes and have complied with the procedure for application for membership declaring that at all times there must be a minimum of 20 voting members.

Non-voting membership shall be open to:-

- (b) Associate Members (a) Any corporate body which supports the purposes and has complied with the procedure for application for membership; (b) Any individual who has been nominated for membership by an unincorporated body which supports the purposes and has complied with the procedure for application for membership; (c) Individuals over the

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age of sixteen years who reside outwith the area of benefit and who support the purposes and have complied with the procedure for application for membership and; (d) one individual under the age of sixteen years who resides within the area of benefit (for nine months or more in any year commencing 1st January and ending 31st December) and who supports the purposes and has complied with the procedure for application for membership.

12. Employees of the organisation are not eligible for membership.

Application for membership

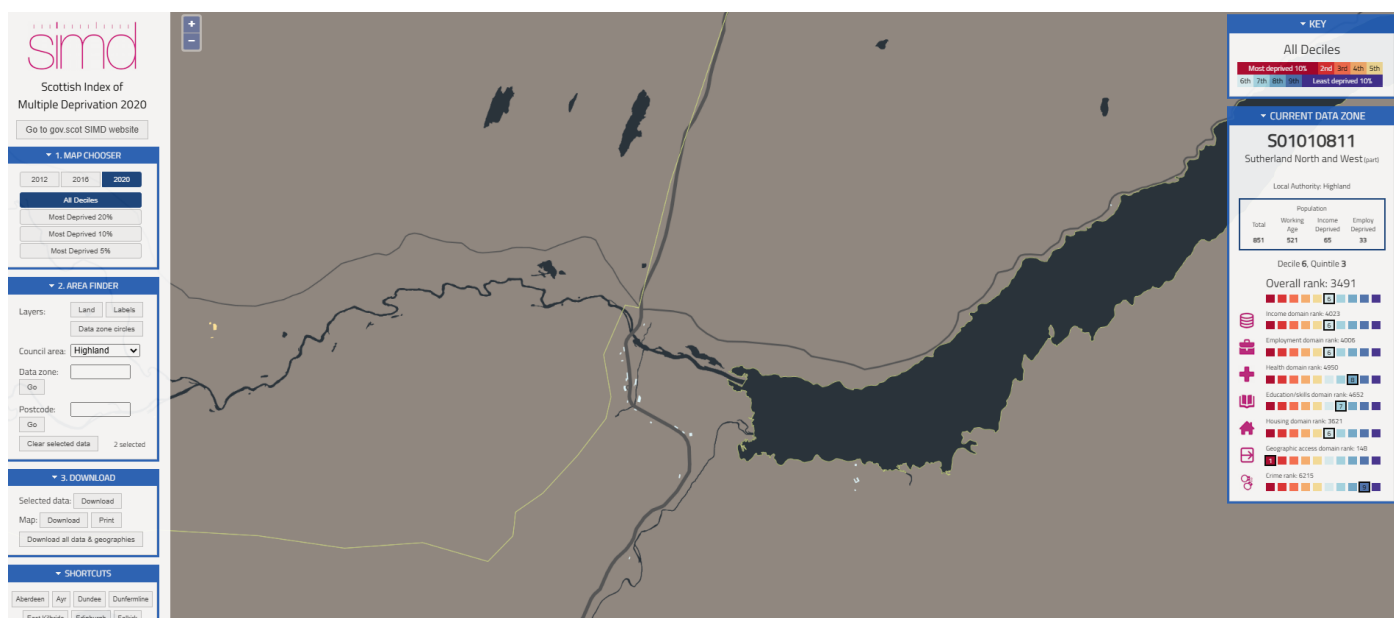
13. Any person or body who/which wishes to become a member must sign a written application for membership (in the case of a corporate body, the application must be signed by an appropriate officer of that body and in the case of an application for membership by an individual nominated by an unincorporated body under clause 11(b), the application must also be signed by an appropriate office bearer of the unincorporated body which is nominating him/her for membership) along with a remittance to meet any annual membership subscription.
14. The application will be considered by the board at the next board meeting.

5. About Altnaharra

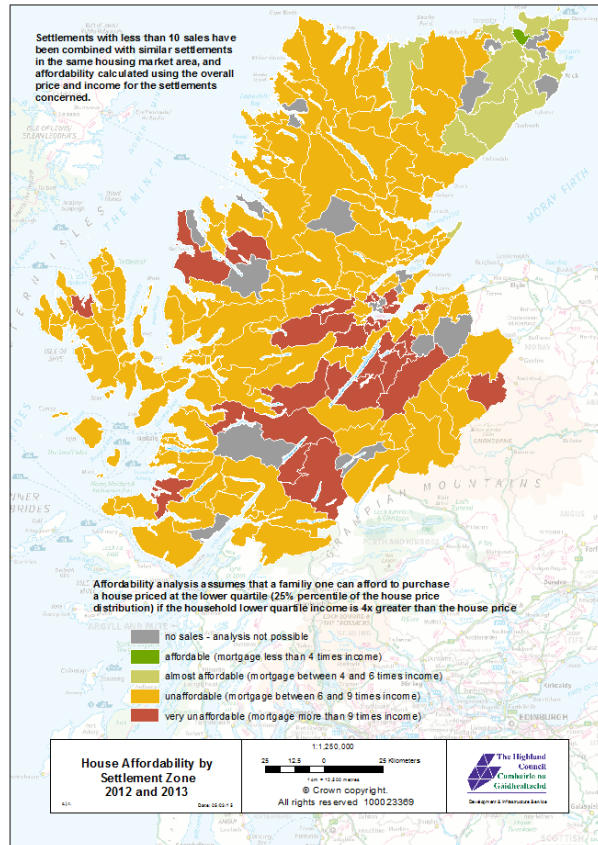
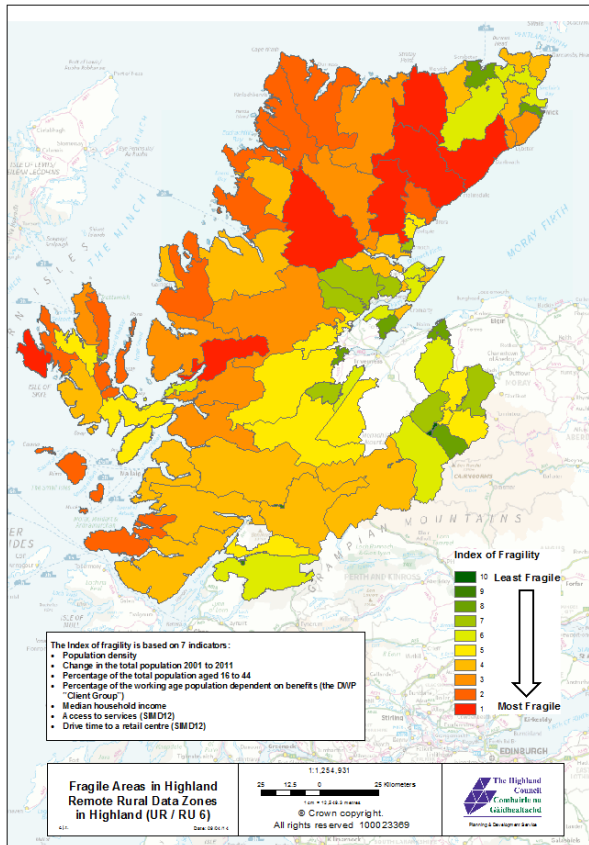
Altnaharra is a small, remote settlement situated roughly halfway between Lairg and Tongue, positioned along the main route connecting the two. Just north of the hamlet, a crossroads offers further access: a B-road travels north-east towards Bettyhill, while a narrow minor road winds below the slopes of Ben Hope and continues to the north coast near Loch Eriboll. All routes in and around the area are single-track, reflecting the rural nature of this Highland location.

Nestled near the western edge of Loch Naver, Altnaharra is connected to the north coast by the scenic road to Bettyhill, which follows the loch's shoreline before meandering through Strathnaver.

While there is evidence of ancient settlement in the wider landscape, Altnaharra's more recent identity is tied to its name. It is thought to derive from the nearby burn crossed by the main road - the Allt-na-h-Aire — meaning "Stream of Watching," hinting at both its Gaelic roots and the long-standing human presence in this dramatic environment.



The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020 screenshot alongside includes Sutherland North and West. However, notably the geographic indexes (1) is the most deprived in this area. The data for Altnaharra alone is not available, although we expect that the housing index would be lower than the indicated (6) for Altnaharra specifically. simd.scot



The Highland Council's Housing Needs and Demands assessment shows that while Altnaharra is classed as 3 on the fragility index – it borders with the most fragile of areas. The report also highlights that housing is unaffordable with buyers requiring a mortgage of 6-9 times their income to purchase property in or around Altnaharra and the community council area.

Highland Councils Housing Needs and Demands Assessment:

https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/13404/housing_need_and_demand_assessment_2_015

These factors combine to make a strong argument for ACT to support the community by undertaking community-led initiatives including possible housing to go some way to address these significant issues, which are having a detrimental effect on the community.

6. Other projects

As well as the demolition of the former primary school for future regeneration, ACT has been actively developing a project on behalf of the community:

- o Full planning and building warrant has been granted to renovate the former Altnaharra Church Building into a community hub building.

7. Evidence of need & support

Community Engagement:

Altnaharra is a very small, close-knit community – therefore any engagement is held on a regular basis with many locals able to voice their wishes to the board of directors. The closing of the primary school deeply affected those living within the village and their wishes are for community ownership and development. Regular board meetings are held to discuss plans to move forward.

The community engaged in a HNDA for the larger NW Sutherland community on behalf of the Farr North Community Development Trust. Altnaharra residents could participate and the return rate was substantial for the area.

The community are supportive of our ambitions to build and own more property as this will give further stability to our organisation and the village to address depopulation issues.

8. Development Strategy

Vision: create an exemplar partnership working project that provides long lasting social and economic benefits to the community to reach our target of providing good quality local community owned buildings in perpetuity

Standards for housing

We shall build buildings that provide good quality affordable homes and/or business units in an attractive setting.

We will set and meet standards that produce quality, energy efficient homes that are sustainable in the long-term.

Key Stakeholders and Partnerships

We shall build on and enhance our relationships with the Communities Housing Trust and Highland Council.

We shall engage with key local stakeholders, local government and media as required.

We will carry out community engagement activities for all projects and seek feedback.

Where we will develop

We will build in Altnaharra. We shall create a long-term strategy for the village and maximise compatible funding streams.

What we will develop

Our top priority will be to provide affordable community owned buildings in Altnaharra. We will “future proof” the design of buildings where possible, to incorporate features for a range of users.

Procurement and Community Benefits

We will adopt procurement methods that produce optimum value for money and facilitate the delivery of community benefits.

Financial Capacity

We will always ensure that the provision of any homes is financially viable and fundable, will meet our business plan and funders requirements, and will not impact adversely on our future interests.

Governance and Delivery of the Development

We will ensure that ACT provides leadership and scrutiny for our development activities. We shall work closely with CHT and HC in this regard.

Risk Management

We will be proactive in assessing and managing the risks associated with our development role within this project.

10. Management Strategy

If housing is an option for progression - ACT may appoint a management agent to undertake housing management on our behalf. We will have a Management Agreement in place with a housing management service provider.

Management strategy: To create safe, secure properties which are maintained to the standards agreed for the benefit of the residents, local community and ACT.

Maintenance

As Registered Private Landlords we shall adhere to the current repairing standards as outlined in the Scottish Government's model Private Residential Tenancy Agreements.

Sinking Fund

Our business plan identifies an amount to be set aside for major repairs for each property on a monthly basis. We will agree any major repairs with ACT board and the service provider.

Long-term repairs

We shall agree a planned preventative maintenance policy with our service provider. Inspections will be carried out annually to monitor the condition of the buildings.

Housing Management

The service provider will arrange for repairs and day to day maintenance of the properties. They will allocate properties, arrange for new tenancies to be issued, welcome tenants, collect rents, manage arrears and complaints.

Allocations Policy

We have agreed an allocations policy with CHT which is widely used in other rural areas and highlights household priority factors and community priority factors. This policy will be implemented by the service provider on our behalf. A new Local Lettings Initiative has been created for Altnaharra to help address local priorities in new allocations.

Voids

We shall try to minimise void periods by working closely with the local community, housing partners and the service provider to advertise properties prior to the end of a tenancy. Should a void arise, we have financially prepared for this by retaining a proportion of monthly rents.

Tenancies

We shall use the Scottish Government's model Private Residential Tenancy Agreements. These provide greater security for residents and clearly set out the expectations of the tenants and the landlords.

Review

The management strategy will be reviewed as necessary by board. The service provider will alert to any regulatory or legal implications. The service agreement will be reviewed annually.

11. Project Process

A Minute of Agreement shall be established to identify each organisations roles and responsibilities in the project. A broad outline of the process from this point is below:

CHT:

- CAT application to HC for ACT
- Feasibility work on behalf of ACT
- Secure Rural & Islands Housing Funding and other grants/private finance with ACT
- Project management and facilitation on behalf of ACT

Joint responsibilities between ACT and CHT:

- Community Engagement throughout entire project
- Undertake tendering process to identify costs
- Decision making on behalf of the community
- Oversee the demolition process
- Ensure continual viability throughout project

12. Proposed Project Plan & Timetable

Date	ACT	CHT
December 2025	Apply for CAT	Support from CHT
March 2026	CAT Result and transfer	
April 2026	Updated tender quotes for demolition	Support from CHT
May 2026	Community engagement	Support from CHT
June 2026	Feasibility works	Undertake work to look at feasible options in moving forward for the community
September 2026 onwards	Demolition and site clearance	
2027	Redevelopment	

13. Risk Management

Careful consideration of the potential risks should be given prior to embarking on a community-owned project, as with any development project. While this list is not exhaustive, we have outlined the main risks which communities should be aware of.

Pre-development exit strategies

Area of concern	Identified risk	Mitigation/Action required
Community support	Unsupportive of development	Strong community engagement in early stages. Further consultation on sites and uses. Explanation on need, tenures & benefits to long-term sustainability.
Planning/Building Warrant	Not considered suitable	Check suitability in advance of submitting applications.
Feasibility studies	Viability of new buildings – business units or housing	Carry out appropriate surveys to determine possibilities
Development funding	Explore options to secure funding at the outset.	Prepare detailed financial plans at the outset and make funding applications and/or agree loans or grants in advance.
Budget	Where possible agree fixed costs using professionals	Re-evaluate costs and make savings. Secure additional funding if required.

		Delays or worst-case scenario the project put on hold or stopped completely.
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Development exit strategies

Area of concern	Identified risk	Mitigation/Action required
Unforeseen costs	Budget increases from original estimates.	Obtain fixed cost quote where possible in advance. Retain a contingency in the budget for unforeseen costs. Negotiate with contractors regarding increases. If necessary, source additional funding.
Contractor goes out of business	Establish staged payments	By paying for work on its completion this offers the contractor security over cash flow. It also means that any work done will have been paid for and another contractor could be engaged if necessary.
Defects/maintenance issues	1 year defects liability period in contract	Ensure that there is a suitable clause to allow for all defects to be made right by the contractor. This should include latent defects after the 1 st year.
Heating/ventilation/water/sewage	Ensure systems installed are suitable for property and for users	At the design stage consider most suitable systems, including user and maintenance. Provide user instructions and training to occupants. Set up maintenance contracts where required.
Difficulties in obtaining completion certificates	Engage with contractor and local authority	The contractor is responsible for ensure that the building meets the planning and building warrant requirements and

		obtains the completion certificate.
Delays in grant funding/loan payments	Financial planning	Prior to development begins establish a cash-flow which includes all funding streams and payments. Include an element of contingency.
Delays	Agree build schedule	Delays can impact on many aspects. Some contracts have penalties for delays but this can add costs to the contract sum.

14. Budget and Costings

Acquisition Costs		
Community Asset Transfer	1.00	
Legal Fees and Costs	3,000*	
CHT fees	2,256.00	
Total	5,257.00	
ACT Funding		
Creag Riabhach wind farm April '24	141,646.94	
January '24	165,465.57	
November '24 (due)	(178,000.00)*	
Total in bank	478,000.00	**150,000.00 of this amount in savings**

Initial Project Costs	
Demolition of current buildings	60,000.00*
Feasibility Work	30,000.00
Total	90,000.00

*Approx. figures are subject to change

