

Hillswick Shop Public Meeting Notes

Wednesday 25th February 2026 7.30pm

Hillswick Hall

Start time: 19.30

NCDC Directors present: Robert McGeady, Kelly Robertson, David Brown, Alistair Williamson, Bill Manson,

Shop Directors present: Leanne Hamilton, Graham Mullan

Apologies: Craig Johnson, Margaret Robert, John Alex Cromarty, James Titcomb, Aileen Robertson

Present: Charlotte Anderson (NCDC staff)

53 members of the public attended

1. Welcome

Robert McGeady (RM) welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced himself as the chair of the NCDC board of directors. He added that himself and Margaret Roberts (MR) had been co-opted onto the Hillswick Shop board. RM said that he would give some facts and context about the shop in regard to how it operates and is run.

2. Background & context

RM said that all the directors of the shop and NCDC boards are volunteers who live locally and have to make difficult decisions as part of running the companies. He added that if anyone wanted to contribute to moving NCDC or the shop forward, to let NCDC know. The shop was set up as a trading subsidiary to NCDC. The directors of NCDC have different duties and obligations to abide by since NCDC is a charity and must adhere to charitable law and act in the best interests of the charity.

RM reminded those present that the shop had been set up as a trading subsidiary of NCDC rather than as a community cooperative at the request of the community in 2009.

3. Current situation

From 2009 – 2022 the shop paid back to NCDC around £65k which is how trading subsidiaries work, passing back their profits to the parent charity which means the trading subsidiary does not have to pay corporation tax. NCDC has invested around £138k back into the shop, this includes up until the end of March 2026.

NCDC took the decision to put money back into the shop especially over the last 3 years to give it time to turn it around. That unfortunately hasn't happened.

4. Letters and comments submitted ahead of the meeting

RM stated that copies of the letters and comments submitted ahead of the meeting were available at the front if anyone wanted to look through them. He added NCDC haven't said they won't fund the shop at all past the 31st March 2026, but that it was part of the process to call the meeting and ask the local community for comments and ideas that doesn't involve NCDC continuing to put in the same level of funding in the long term. RM addressed some of the comments that had been submitted ahead of the meeting:

Keep the shop open regardless: Although directors understood this, NCDC has to abide by the rules and regulations set out by OSCR. NCDC had gotten advice about community benefit in 2025 around a different matter and although this can be used up to a point, it is a balancing act.

Roll the shop into NCDC: A charity is not allowed to trade.

Use NCDC reserves to fund the shop: RM agreed that NCDC's reserves are currently in a good position currently but cautioned that it can't just be drained. RM highlighted that Polycrub has been an incredibly successful business but NCDC don't know from year to year how much profit will be passed back and NCDC need to look for new income generating options which need capital to get them started. He also added that NCDC are still pursuing affordable housing at the Old Urafirth School site which is a long term project adding that there will hopefully be a public exhibition in coming months. He added that NCDC are not just sitting on reserves but do have plans for projects to benefit the community.

5. Community Feedback and Ideas

RM said that the purpose of the meeting was for NCDC to listen to any ideas the community has to ensure the shop can move forward as a business. He reiterated that NCDC will support as far as it can. All views from this evening will be taken and discussed at the next board meeting. RM opened the meeting to comments and questions from the community.

1. Why had the shop been losing money since 2022.

Ans: anecdotally the opening of the Brae co-op, customers passing away and not being replaced, cost of doing business i.e. salaries, water, electricity, rates and margins getting squeezed have all had an impact.

2. Why has the Ollaberry Shop not had the same problem.

Ans: Speculate that the transfer of the Post Office to the Ollaberry Shop has helped.

There was agreement that although the Post Office doesn't pay that much, the increased footfall is a big help.

The Ollaberry Shop was set up with shares and this maybe gives it a stronger community feeling and this might be a model that could be replicated in Hillswick.

It was added that NCDC has never been approached by the community to make the Hillswick Shop a cooperative.

3. The status quo is not sustainable but people don't want to see it shut so it needs to reduce costs or people need to spend more. Why do people use the shop, personally only visit when using another amenity in the area i.e. the doctors surgery. Need to look at ways to get people in, self service coffee machine or something else could be beneficial.

4. Unclear at what rate the shop is losing money but could staff costs and increased social media marketing especially in the summer be looked at. Also offering 24hr fuel.

5. Looking at the wider picture, if the shop were to close it would effect a large number of local small producers and more marketing about quality local products could help. Local artists can't afford to open a craft shop themselves but could the Hillswick Shop expand its offering.

It was added that Growing Local also needs an outlet for produce.

6. The public are not getting enough information about what NCDC are doing. Minutes were available on the website and then disappeared.

Ans: The minutes up until October should be available on the website and there is also a newsletter that goes out to every member as well as social media.

7. NCDC are being defensive and what are the reserves

Ans: around £800k currently.

The price of fuel is currently 9p more expensive than Brae, the shop has very little stock and what is there is expensive. It is the NCDC board vs the community and the meeting is not going to change anyone's mind.

8. Really vexed to be having the meeting and a lot of folk in the community worked really hard to get the shop opened. It has taken 3 years to come to the community about the financial losses. It is really important to get a dialogue going between the shop and the community again and work together.

9. I buy most of my groceries from the shop and enjoy getting fresh local produce. We are all directors (members) of NCDC and need to get involved. The shop is really important for people who can't get to Brae or Ollaberry. Could offering options to bulk buy certain products so there is a guaranteed income be an option. NCDC need to find ways to make it work.

10. In the last 14 months since moving to the area I have used the shop 3 times. A private business would be closed. Although social gain is important, how many people rely on the shop? From past experience of a similar scenario, losing a local shop can force people who were living independently into residential care. Nobody is using the shop

enough to support the overheads that continue to go up and up. And the behaviour patterns of community would need to change too. A cooperative model could move the shop forward, but the question needed to be asked is what is needed for it to become successful.

11. 59 people regularly use the shop. Why are we stuck on it being a successful shop when it is really a community service. It should be taken back to basics. If people want certain things, that can be ordered for them. Reduce the stock, reduce the staff, reduce the overheads and reduce the opening times. Remove the shop board and have NCDC run it.

Ans: It is not about it being a successful business, NCDC would be happy for it to break even. There are legal requirements why it can't be run by NCDC directly.

12. Can the shop be sold as a community buy out

Ans: Yes

13. Could there be more clarification on rates. For the size of business the Hillswick Shop is, there shouldn't be rates paid.

Ans: Shop has to pay water rates.

14. The shop needs to be simplified. Get the manager on the shop floor more to be community facing.

15. From personal experience, it is difficult to bounce between doing admin and complex account work and working on a shop floor.

16. What are the main losses for the shop, is it staff or wastage etc. Is it possible to get a break down.

Ans: profit and loss accounts are available on companies house, full accounts are available at the shop. The biggest cost is staff wages.

17. The shop board has struggled to recruit board members for many years. The losses of the shop is the folk in this rooms problem not NCDC's. The more directors on the board, the less time everyone has to spend. It always ends up being the same folk on every board.

Ans: That is why RM and MR have been co-opted on the shop board to make the board quorate but anyone is welcome to join the shop board. This is not a unique problem, with boards and committees across all areas struggling.

18. Customers have changed drastically. 5-10 years ago all my clients used the Hillswick Shop regularly. Now some don't use it at all. There isn't the same interest.

Ans: The small local shops are very popular during periods when boats are unable to get to Shetland but need to be used all the time.

19. Worked most of my life in the shop. It used to be a struggle to find space for new products, now the shop looks bare, and I don't go because there is nothing to buy. Produce is poor quality.

20. There needs to be better provision of household basics i.e. lightbulbs and j-cloths. There seems to be lots of some things like tinned fruit but not enough of others.

21. Fruit and veg needs to be balanced, having selection vs wastage. I feel there is good quality veg available.

Ans: Growing Local produce was really popular last year.

22. There needs to be a good shopping experience with basics available but that is not happening just now.

23. Basics have been bumped up in price and now I go to Brae for milk etc. The school also cancelled their contract when the milk was hiked up. How can milk be cheaper in Unst than Hillswick.

24. We need board members, especially younger people but they feel ostracised/ bullied. Committees need to let people join and let people speak and share ideas.

Ans: NCDC are offering a "try before you buy" idea where anyone interested in joining the board can come along to a few meetings and have another director mentor them before they commit to joining.

25. A decision on how to keep the shop open can't be decided tonight.

Ans: No but any ideas will be discussed at the next board meeting and community will be kept informed as things progress.

26. Keep it open less hours, reduce staff – manager can do books when it is closed.

27. Nothing is done to promote the shop on social media. New people to the area are not encouraged to shop there.

28. Having different opening hours in the winter vs summer

29. Reduce opening hours but have an honesty box for veg etc for when it is closed. Offer 24 hour fuel, reduce staff and increase exposure.

30. There is some confusion between the shop community and NCDC. Maybe have a shop AGM as a way to get the community involved and get more people to join the committee.

31. Could NCDC commit to resource the shop for a further 12 months while the community develop a new model whether that is a co-op or offering bulk buy options etc.

32. If the shop is open less hours, that also means less people will go and people could be confused about when it is open.

6. Next Steps & Closing Remarks

RM thanked everyone for attending tonight's meeting. He stated that the NCDC board will be meeting shortly to discuss going forward.

Graham Mullay added that he has sat on the shop board since it opened in 2009 and in recent years every meeting there is a discussion about who could be asked to join the shop board. It has been a real struggle to find people, and it has felt like a lack of support from the community.

RM said that there needs to be more community participation because we all want a thriving community.

Meeting end 20.37