



## Gigha prospers after community takes the lead

When the islanders of Gigha agreed to a community buy-out, they were saying yes to a daunting challenge and a sizeable debt which would need to be repaid.

They faced reversing decades of decline. They'd have to learn about property, contract and employment laws, planning rules and Crown Estate licensing.

They'd have to find out how to tackle housing in serious disrepair but at the same time attract new families and business ventures.

And they'd have to raise and pay back over £1 million - equal to more than £10,000 for every adult and child on the island. They'd have to make a £150,000 deferred payment within a year, then pay back £1 million a year after that, including £200,000 which had to be raised on the island itself.

'We were ignorant - but then you don't buy an island every day. You know what you want to do, but you don't know how to do it. That's where HIE played a very important role and were able to give us sound advice.'

**Willie McSporrán, chair,  
Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust**

Agreeing to such a massive undertaking took not just community resolve, but also - crucially - learning from the experience of others.

Feelings among the steering committee set up to consider the buy-out proposals in 2001 were, unsurprisingly, very mixed at first.

"The deciding factor was a visit to Eigg," says Willie McSporrán, who chairs the Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust. "We

thought: if they can do it, then so can we."

The islanders provided willingness and determination. The Highlands and Islands Enterprise Network provided support, expertise and contacts.

"They gave us a lot of assistance in sending people here and there," says Willie. "Without their help and support I think the buy-out would have been utterly impossible. I think in all honesty it would never have happened."

The islanders worked initially with HIE's community land unit. It commissioned feasibility studies in areas such as housing, agriculture and business planning, and provided solid evidence that a buy-out could work.

They also worked with Argyll and the Islands Enterprise (AIE) to learn the skills, knowledge and confidence they would need to embark on their journey and maximise the likelihood of success.

"We were able to take the community through how to set up a company, the roles and responsibilities of directors, the pitfalls they might come across, so that they'd be able to take the project forward confidently," says Rhona Sutherland, of AIE.

Behind-the-scenes work by the enterprise agencies - in staff time, advice and access to expertise and funding - has been invaluable.

It has ranged from helping put up a new petrol pump to helping the islanders embark on a renewable energy scheme using wind power. And it has helped islanders become experts in approaching and securing help from a huge array of groups and funds.

**Continued overleaf**

## Community impact checklist

- ✓ Island community growing after decades of decline
- ✓ Sea change in islanders' skills, spirit of self-help and self-confidence
- ✓ Islanders' experience inspiring other groups
- ✓ Huge improvements to local housing and economy
- ✓ Firm foundations in place for continued growth



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These have included the Scottish Land Fund, the National Lottery's New Opportunities Fund, the Sustainable Communities Project Fund, the Scottish Community and Householder Renewable Initiative and Social Investment Scotland.

Fyne Homes Housing Association has been building new homes, while the Trust has been working with Argyll and Bute Council to develop pathways.

Decision-making remains firmly rooted on the island. Every islander aged 18 and over can become a member of the trust, provided they're on the electoral register and pay a £1 fee. They elect eight directors who meet weekly. The Trust members have the final say. There's one major difference between the island tenants of 2001 and the thriving community today, adds trust director, Lorne MacLeod. "Taking on the island wasn't the easy option. In many ways it was the hardest. What's been achieved is so impressive, and it does come down to community confidence."

And, just as the islanders of Gigha were inspired by their visit to Eigg, so Gigha has become an inspiration to many others who visit the island and take away some of the experience and confidence they need to embark on their own ventures.

## Decline is reversed

Today, Gigha is thriving. Back in 2001, however, the island was in serious decline.

The population had fallen below 100. Critically, the school roll was down from 34 to just six. After the buyout, the islanders learned that, of the 41 houses the Isle of Gigha Trust took over, all but one were below tolerable standard. A quarter were in serious disrepair. Since the buyout, the population has risen by more than 20 per cent and the school roll has doubled. The first small businesses to

open in a decade are up and running, with more set to follow and a refurbishment programme is tackling decades of under-investment in housing. The islanders' small, community-owned wind farm won the inaugural Ernst & Young/Euromoney renewable energy award for best community-based project. Financed with help from HIE and Social Investment Scotland it will provide over two-thirds of the island's electricity needs and generate a financial return to enable the islanders to continue making improvements.

## Gigha timeline

### August 2001

Gigha, bought in 1992 for £2.3m, goes on the market for £4.15m.

### October 2001

With Scottish Land Fund backing, Islanders' bid accepted against three private bidders.

### March 2002

Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust receives Gigha's title deeds.

### January 2003

Plans drawn up for Gigha's first new homes in 25 years.

Gigha's three dairy farms double in size under a restructuring programme; another farm developed subsequently.

### March 2003

Islanders make a £150,000 deferred payment, on time. Two of three new business units built and spoken for; interest high in a third; more likely to follow.

### June 2003

Upmarket confectionery firm Hebridean Toffee to expand to Gigha.

### October 2003

House - the 'Big House' - sold for £640,000 to businessman; more jobs follow.

### March 2004

Islanders pay back £1 million, on time and fulfilling agreement with Scottish Land Fund and HIE.

### June 2004

Trust chairman Willie McSparran awarded an MBE. Trust sets up Gigha Renewable Energy to run Scotland's first community-owned wind farm.

## Project funding summary

● The Scottish Land Fund provided £2.5 million; the community provided £1.15m.

● HIE provided a further £500,000 grant.

● The Scottish Land Fund provided £90,000 to fund the creation of a development manager and to establish an office, with HIE contributing a further £30,000.

● The Scottish Community and Household Renewables Initiative provided an £82,000 grant for a community-owned wind farm; HIE bought £80,000 worth of shares in the project, to be bought back by the island's Trust with income from the wind farm.

*The Scottish Land Fund is funded by the National Lottery and administered by HIE.*

*The Scottish Community and Household Renewables Initiative is funded by the Scottish Executive and administered by HIE.*

