



## 'House' gives new heart to Uists

When a local arts centre offered screen-printing and wood-turning workshops for the over 60s, they had to turn people away.

When the same centre asked community groups to become involved in a museum project, the volunteers included teenagers.

But Taigh Chearsabhagh is more than a museum or an arts centre.

Last year Taigh Chearsabhagh, in Lochmaddy, North Uist, had 30,000 visitors, nearly five times the entire population of the Uists. That's the equivalent of half the population of Scotland descending on a single venue in Edinburgh.

It's a social hub, where local people regularly meet. It's a visitor attraction, with regular exhibitions, events, workshops and guest artists.

It's a learning centre. It runs arts programmes for schools and a summer school. It offers formal art courses to HNC and diploma level. There are even plans to enable people to study to degree level through UHI Millennium Institute.

*'In the initial phase in 1993, when we started to try to get the project off the ground, WIE's involvement was crucial.'*

**Helen McDonald, Taigh Chearsabhagh Trust**

It's a café, and a post office.

And people don't just visit the centre. Taigh Chearsabhagh runs workshops and heritage events throughout the Uists, in venues as varied as schools and homes for the elderly.

Yet little over a decade ago it didn't exist. Up to the early 1990s, the Uists had their own art association but no focus for arts activities. At the same time, the North Uist Historical Society had amassed an impressive photographic archive, but had nowhere to house and display it.

The two groups came together to form what was to become the Taigh Chearsabhagh Trust, which identified a derelict building, a former inn dating back to 1741 near Lochmaddy ferry terminal, as a suitable site for a museum and arts centre.

The trust supplied the determination to enable the centre to happen. Western Isles Enterprise supplied the focus and acumen that turned the aspiration into reality.

"We had been involved from a very early stage," says Isabel MacDonald, senior manager at WIE's Benbecula office.

"The Trust received funding through the EU LEADER programme to renovate the old inn and build an extension to it. That ran for a year or two, but was too small, so there was phase two: that involved HIE Attraction funding. We were also involved with Community Fund assistance."

The first phase of Taigh Chearsabhagh opened in 1995 with an upper gallery for the art association, a lower one for the historical society, a room for visiting artists and a small café. The impact on the community was immediate.

Chair of the Taigh Chearsabhagh Trust, Laura Donkers, says the joint involvement of the historical society and the arts community broadened the new centre's appeal.

**Continued overleaf**

### Community impact checklist

- ✓ *New social, arts and skills focus for local people and groups*
- ✓ *Protection given to area's heritage*
- ✓ *Project creating new jobs and widening local skills*
- ✓ *New opportunities bringing people back to islands*
- ✓ *More people taking part in local activities*



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"That link has meant that there's a much wider range of people who have an involvement in and are coming to Taigh Chearsabhagh," she says.

Within two years, annual visitor numbers stood at 23,000, while the range of activities also grew, requiring more space.

The second phase more than doubled the size of the centre, which now has three gallery areas, an archive room, a studio, café and a gift shop. The centre also has print-making and dark room facilities.

## New skills bring new confidence

In bald economic terms, Taigh Chearsabhagh has created seven full-time and seven part-time jobs and has an annual turnover of around a quarter of a million pounds.

It has enabled highly qualified young people to return home to practise their skills in jobs that otherwise would probably not have existed.

But its impact on local people has been much deeper and wider, providing stability and self-confidence in an area all too accustomed to emigration and loss of skills.

"Before the centre there was a feeling that Lochmaddy was beginning to lose a little bit of community spirit. The building has created a focus for people," says museum outreach officer Caitriona MacCuish.

A native of Solas, North Uist, Caitriona returned to the island after completing a Celtic studies degree at Glasgow University.

"Anyone can come in and look through the archive, and both visitors

and local people do - it gives them a sense of who they are and makes history more relevant to them."

However much of her work involves working out of the centre, on projects that blend past and present and strengthen people's sense of identity.

Projects range from exhibitions researched and staged by local groups involving people of all ages and backgrounds, to putting on arts, crafts and heritage activities for elderly people in long-term residential and hospital care.

The centre has forged many links with schools throughout the Uists. Arts officer, Andy MacKinnon, describes this as an indispensable investment in the future of the islands.

"It means there are now people growing up, aware of the possibilities of working in the creative sector - and of working here," says Andy, who moved to the Uists from his native Glasgow after taking a degree in film and photography.

**Taigh = house  
or dwelling;  
pronounced  
like 'tie'  
Chearsabhagh  
= an early  
name for  
Lochmaddy;  
sounds like  
'haar-sa-va'**

## Project funding summary

- Initial project cost: £270,000
- Funded through:
  - the EU's LEADER programme (set up to encourage new ways to develop rural areas)
  - Western Isles Enterprise
  - The Foundation for Sports and the Arts
  - Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
  - Local fund-raising
- Phase 2 cost: £550,000
- Funded through:
  - Scottish Arts Council National Lottery Fund (75% of funding)
  - Western Isles Enterprise

