

An open letter from the Bays of Harris Steering Group to the community of the Bays of Harris Estate

Following a series of community meetings in 2012 the Bays of Harris Steering Group was established on behalf of the community to investigate the feasibility of pursuing a community buyout of the Bays of Harris Estate. A Feasibility Study Report prepared by consultants, Duncan MacPherson from Harris and Faye MacLeod from Skye, was published online by the Steering Group in July 2022. It shows that community ownership of the Estate - which had an annual income of £84,243 in 2021 - is both financially sustainable and can help deliver the affordable homes, employment opportunities, support for crofting, and community projects needed to reverse decades of population decline and ensure that the community throughout the entire Estate prospers. A Business Plan for the Estate under community ownership was also prepared as part of the study.

The Surrey-based Hitchcock family who currently own the Bays of Harris Estate have indicated that they will consider sale of the Estate to the community if a 'decisive' majority within the community supports a buyout.

From this week, residents within the Bays of Harris Estate who are on the Comhairle's Register of Electors, and individuals registered on the Crofting Commission's Register of Crofts as being crofting stakeholders (including tenants ordinarily resident within 20 miles of their crofts within the Estate; and owner occupiers ordinarily resident within 20 miles of their crofts within the Estate) will be able to vote in a postal ballot organised and managed by Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar on behalf of the Bays of Harris Steering Group. The purpose of the ballot is to establish whether the community favours a community buyout of the Bays of Harris Estate through a negotiated sale with the current owners. The result of the ballot will be announced by Comhairle Nan Eilan Siar on September 14th 2022.

If the ballot result does not provide a mandate from the community to enter negotiations with the current owners to secure an amicable buyout of the Estate, such negotiations will not be pursued. If it does provide a mandate, a legally constituted Bays of Harris Community Trust will be created to:

- Conduct negotiations and secure agreement with the current owners to purchase the Estate;
- Apply for funding from the Scottish Land Fund and other sources as appropriate to purchase the Estate;
- Complete the purchase of the Estate and own and manage it on behalf of the community.

The Bays of Harris Community Trust would be governed by an elected Board of Directors representing the different geographical areas and crofting interests of the Estate. The Board would be accountable to the community in its governance of the Community Trust's management of the Estate in the interests of the community as a whole.

This is an important moment in determining the future sustainability of the Bays of Harris Estate and of the community that lives within it. We therefore encourage all eligible voters to participate in the ballot to ensure that your voices are heard in shaping that future.

Best wishes,

Bays of Harris Steering Group

John Maher (Flodabay); Katie Ann Mackinnon (Stockinish); Andrew Rodger (Berneray); John Macleod (Grosebay); Christopher Ross (Finsbay); Grant Fulton (Drinishader); Paul Finnegan (Meavag); Donald Macleod (Scadabay).