

Community land supergroup gathers in Outer Hebrides

Press release: 27 March 2023

It could be seen as the land reform equivalent of a musical supergroup with performers from different bands coming together to cut a disc or album. But those gathering in the Outer Isles today, will not be bringing guitar riffs or vocal harmonies to a studio. Rather it will be the stories of how they acquired and now manage their local land and assets, they are rehearsing with island counterparts.

In the first such get together on this scale, community landowners from the Northern Isles to Dumfries and Galloway, will spend this week in Lewis and Harris, along with some who are trying to follow in their footsteps.

Established headline acts of the community land movement, such as the island of Gigha (2002), will be there. So too will be the relative newcomers at Langholm (2020/22), at 10,500 acres the biggest buyout in the south of Scotland, and the island of Ulva (2018). North Lanarkshire will also be represented by the group that completed the purchase of 171 acres (2020) adjacent to the M8, the biggest buyout to date of urban land in Scotland.

The Outer Hebrides is already 'community land central' with just over 50% of the archipelago community owned (the bulk croft land).. The local MSP Alasdair Allan welcomes the visiting community bodies, but is calling for "more legal muscle" in the forthcoming land reform bill to ensure one island community, Great Bernera, can buy their island from its Germany-based absentee landowner, after a decade of trying.

The object of this week across the Minch, is for community trusts to learn from each other, and finetune their management approaches. Because although there have been more land and estates coming under community control in recent years, they are spread thought Scotland. Unlike neighbouring crofters and farmers, few can look over the fence to see how their neighbours are going about things. You don't get much of a view of Gigha's four wind turbines from Langholm's Tarras Valley Nature Reserve.

Topics of common interest will be discussed among the 10 different groups – from green income ideas to tourism; sustainable finance models to community engagement; woodland management to housing; nature -based enterprises to peatland carbon markets, and many more.

One who is very keen to attend to head to Lewis and Harris for the events (organised by Community Land Scotland - CLS - and Community Land Outer Hebrides -CLOH) is Stuart Williams. Indeed he will have to make six ferry crossings to get there and back to his home on the Orkney island of Rousay. He has only been in his job as manager of the Rousay, Egilsay & Wyre Development Trust (REWDT) for a little over a month.

"I was in West Wales until six weeks ago, managing a heritage railway. It is not the obvious background for addressing the social and economic development of three small islands with only 270 people between them. I went to Lewis and Harris last year on holiday. It was one of the reasons behind my strange move. I got the bug.



“I am looking forward to going back, but this time to learn. I don’t have a background in land management. This trip is a great opportunity to go and see how other people do it.”

The REWDT bought the 1710 acre Trumland Estate on Rousay in 2020, with support from the Scottish Land Fund, he said.

“Although we own it, there are a lot of grazing rights on it. Consequently, it can be quite difficult to work out what we can and can’t do. Talking to like-minded people will help. There is a lot of bog and wildlife, grouse, hen harriers, short-eared owls. There is also the wind turbine on Rousay owned by a sister company ‘Rewired Ltd’, which gifted the trust £180,000 last year.

“We have tourists coming. Many are interested in our bird life. But we want to be able to offer them more, to increase the local benefit. At the moment we don’t have places for them to spend their money and contribute to our economy. It would be great to provide community facilities that would also appeal to visitors, promoting sustainable methods of transport. So they can leave their car on the mainland. I am looking to steal some good ideas from Lewis and Harris. Plagiarism may be the way forward.”

Another looking forward to the trip is Mark Perry, Lead Ranger of the Viewpark Conservation Group in North Lanarkshire. “For me this study trip to the Outer Hebrides is a wonderful opportunity to learn about other organisations; to hear their stories, experience new methods of working and most importantly, to build relationships for my site for the future.”

In 2020, after a 16 year campaign, the Viewpark group purchased 171 acres of the Historic Douglas Support Estate, which dated back to the 17th century. Known locally as “our Glen”, the landmark buyout secured the historic piece of green space for future generations. Plans to expand the nearby Strathclyde Business Park in 2004 had led to the formation of the group, which continued to try to ensure this green space was protected from further development.

Mark said that when he first arrived in 2021 he was “floored by the potential”:

“Here was a property, steeped in history that had since been reclaimed by nature to become an oasis of rich woodland and wild meadow at the centre of a concrete jungle. For many locals the discovery of 'the glen' had occurred during the pandemic years; a countryside escape on their doorstep. We are not a manicured municipal park, we are muddy walks in wellies and the opportunity to see wildlife in its natural habitat.”

He and his wellies should not feel too out of place in the Hebrides.

Neither should Jenny Barlow, the Estate Manager of the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve. After all there is a lot of heather across the 10,500 acres of Tarras Valley and Langholm Moor which the Community Development Trust, Langholm Initiative bought from Buccleuch between 2021 – 2022. This followed 2 historic community land buy-outs which raised £6m to become one of the largest projects of its kind in the South of Scotland.

She said : “A nature reserve has been at the heart of community plans to help tackle climate change, restore nature at a landscape scale and support wider community regeneration efforts in Langholm. There are emerging plans to develop glamping, a bunkhouse and a potential field study centre, aimed at



boosting eco-tourism in Langholm and supporting local businesses. But projects that will not undermine our ecological efforts to ensure the nature reserve is sustainable. We are in the very early days of our community land ownership journey so we were delighted to be invited to visit the Outer Isles to learn from more established initiatives and embed some of this learning back into our developing plans.”

She and the other trust representatives will be travelling to meet the community landowners of the 56,000-acre Galson Estate in the north of Lewis. The area boasts sea cliffs, sandy bays, pasture and moorland. Its near 2,000 residents live in 800 households across 22 crofting townships.

Owners Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn (UOG), the Galson Estate Trust won praise for the way they protected vulnerable residents during the Covid pandemic and accompanying lockdowns. They stepped up again when the cost of living crisis hit in past months. Some £80,000 was spent supporting residents. Children’s activities and sports were subsidised, as were lunches for the elderly provided with other local groups. There were additional initiatives. Everyone over 80 or medically challenged, got a warm blanket. Some would see this as a metaphor for Galson’s community ownership.

The money comes from three 900kW wind turbines owned by a UOG subsidiary. They earn around £500,000 a year net, money which is invested entirely in the local community.

But for all UOG’s considerable achievements, chair Agnes Rennie, a Community Land Scotland board member, is looking to learn from others this week:

“We are very excited by this visit. One of the really interesting things for us will be to see what we have done through the eyes of the visiting communities. It will give us a chance to learn from communities that are so very different, from the Borders to urban settlements to Orkney. We all exist to make the land or assets work for our local communities, not just for today, but for the future. Development opportunities don’t stand still. We have got to keep refreshing our thinking.”

They will also visit the North Harris Trust (NHT), which manages 64,000 acres of croft land, common grazings, and open hill ground including An Cliseam, the highest peak in the Western Isles. It has four natural heritage designations which have to be protected. The trust maintains/renews a challenging network of pathways.

There are wind turbines, but they do not generate the revenue enjoyed by other community owners. NHT’s main income is commercial leases on the land for the likes of telephone masts and fishfarm shore bases. The deer herd provides the next most important income stream, with leases for shooting. Tourism is increasing in importance to the trust.

NHT director and Community Land Scotland board member David Cameron said: “Knowledge exchange between community landowners was one of the founding reasons for the establishment of Community Land Scotland In 2010. That is as important today as it was 13 years ago.”

Mr Allan, the long serving MSP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar said he was concerned that the residents of the island of Great Bernera have been trying for a decade to mount their own community buyout to help stem depopulation, but have been frustrated. Those acting for the Germany-based absentee owner, so far have managed to resist Scotland’s land reform provisions designed to allow a crofting community buyout without the owner’s agreement.



It is the more frustrating that the islanders can look across a narrow stretch of water to the 11,500 acre Carloway Estate, which has been in community ownership since 2015.

Mr Allan said: “More needs to be done. The Scottish Government is committed to a Land Reform Bill during this Parliament. As well as hopefully enabling a wider and more equitable distribution of land, it needs to make it easier for groups to face-off against hostile landowners. It’s simply not right that, in 2023, the ambitions of a community like Bernera have been indefinitely vetoed by an absentee landlord. If we want the right to buy to be a proper right for crofting communities, it does now need more legal muscle behind it.”

But he is proud of what has been achieved by local communities: “The Western Isles has gone from an area where land ownership has historically been concentrated in the hands of a few to the centre of community land ownership in Scotland. While most of Scotland rural land is in private hands, more than 75% of people in the Western Isles today live on community-owned land.

“This has empowered many communities to take control of their own futures and ensure that the land and resources that sustain them are managed in a way that benefits the community as a whole.”

This Hebridean gathering is being funded through the Scottish Community Alliance’s Community Learning Exchange and through Community Land Scotland funding from the Scottish Government.

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Photographs attached:

- 1) A photo of the North Harris Trust estate. Photo credit: Saskia Coulson and Colin Tennant
- 2) A photo of Galson Estate Trust / Urras Oighreachd Ghahbsainn’s new office building

Photographs of the study visit itself will be available from Wednesday 29th March. For copies, email: linsay.chalmers@communitylandscotland.org.uk

