

Harris crofters celebrate after taking over three estates

PLAN TO BUILD AFFORDABLE HOMES IN BID TO REVERSE POPULATION DECLINE

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Crofters on the scenic coast of south-west Harris took over three crofting estates from the Scottish Government yesterday.

The historic occasion was marked in the presence of Environment Minister Roseanna Cunningham, who made a speech at Seilebost School and officially transferred areas in excess of 16,000 acres into ownership of the local population.

The West Harris Crofting Trust is the first group to buy land owned by the Scottish Government under proposals first introduced a decade ago. The land is made up of three estates covering the townships of Scaristavore, Borve and Luskentyre.

The trust has a development plan and intends to build affordable houses and create new crofts on the land to encourage more young people to settle there.

The trust also hopes projects to create jobs and develop small scale renewable projects will reverse the trend of depopulation.

There have been fears for the area and its long-term prospects unless new people are attracted into the community of West Harris, which currently has a population of 123, with only one child under school age.

About 60 people attended last night's celebrations.

Among them was director of Strengthening Communities at Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) John Watt who said: "HIE has worked closely with the trust for some time and we believe that community ownership is the key to growing the population and enhancing the area.

"HIE is very supportive of this aspiring social enterprise and we look forward to the benefits that community ownership and a dynamic development plan can deliver."

To acquire the land and to enable the trust's project plans to get under way, the Community Land Unit at HIE has provided £23,600.

In addition, the Western Isles Council has approved £15,000 towards the plans and the crofting trust has also secured a loan of £20,000 from Tighean Innse Gall. The BIG Lottery Fund supported the trust by giving them £10,000 from their Investing in Ideas fund to carry out initial feasibility studies and consultation with the community.

Western Isles Council convener Alex MacDonald said: "I very much welcome the news that the West Harris Estate will now be in the hands of the community and this is another historic milestone for the Western Isles.

"After three years of efforts, the buyout will hopefully secure the future of the area and reverse the decline in population as well as improving economic activity.

"The board of directors are to be praised for their hard work."

Murdo Mackay, chairman of the West Harris Crofting Trust, has a tenancy of a croft at Luskentyre with a small number of Highland cattle and runs self-catering accommodation with his wife Isobel.