



Steering group secretary Neil Campbell says demographic trends are worrying

## Community weigh up buy-out plan for west side of Harris

The west side of Harris, perhaps the most photographed and immediately recognisable parts of the Western Isles, could be about to join the vast tracts of Hebridean land now held in community hands.

A steering group is currently investigating the prospect of launching a community buy-out of the 6,000 hectares between Scaristavore and Luskentyre — a purchase that, if approved, would represent the first transfer of government-owned crofting estates to the local population.

Should the plans receive the go-ahead it would leave the southern and eastern districts as the only parts of the island not in community ownership following the historic £4.5 million purchase of the 55,000-acre north Harris estate in 2003.

The island's west side — made up of three SEERAD estates covering the townships of

Sacaristavore, Shelibost, Borve and Luskentyre — remains entirely under crofting tenure. But the district's demographics have shown worrying trends in recent years, according to Neil Campbell, secretary of the steering group currently examining the community bid.

Around 37 per cent of the local population is now over 65, he says, and over 30 of the 86 houses in the area are either holiday homes or self-catering cottages. There is just one child, Mr Campbell's youngest son, who is under five years of age. And while the 13-pupil school at Shelibost is currently safe from closure, there are fears for its long-term prospects unless younger blood is attracted into the community.

Mr Campbell, who runs an award-winning self-catering business in Scarista, feels the buy-out could stimulate development in ways the current system of land

ownership does not. "We have a good landlord in that generally they will consent to any croft transfers etc, but they have never been proactive in helping to develop communities," he said. "Other communities have made buy-outs a success and we feel the same could happen here."

A meeting held by the 10-strong steering group last week attracted some 30 residents, and a community consultation — carried out by Agnes Rennie, who helped lead a successful buy-out of the Galson Estate in Lewis — is now underway.

Supporters of the bid have said a buy-out would encourage affordable housing development and help obtain benefits from the area's renewable energy resources. Initial aspirations include the creation or transfer of six new crofts, 10 house sites and the construction of a hydro-electric scheme.

Local crofter Morag MacLennan said she believed the community

had a chance to exploit the full potential of the land and keep all the proceeds from any future housing or renewable energy plans within the area.

"At the moment 50 per cent goes to the townships and 50 per cent to the landlord," she said. "But if it was community-owned all the proceeds would stay locally."

The feasibility study into the buy-out proposal is due to be completed by the end of July, with any ballot of crofters and local residents likely to follow in August.

Scottish Environment minister Mike Russell has already indicated the Scottish Government would be a willing seller, and as the area is entirely under crofting tenure the price of the purchase is unlikely to be as high as in other similar ventures. For the plans to proceed, however, at least 50 per cent of all crofters, and 50 per cent of all residents would need to first give their approval.

## EU probe "fraud" claims against Norwegian salmon farmers

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high and Norwegian dumping was under control.

The locally-owned Scottish and Irish salmon farming industries — through the European Union Salmon Producers Group — are now calling for the Commission to take account of this more recent evidence, as demonstrated by their own ongoing investigations, before accepting the recommendation of the Anti-Dumping Committee to do away with the Minimum Import Price. Inquiries to the Commission about the OLAF investigation this week met with the response that it is continuing and therefore sub judice.

Last week, the Free Press revealed that the EU is on the verge of removing the MIP and thereby placing in jeopardy thousands of jobs within the Scottish and Irish industries. While the Scottish industry is around 90 per cent Norwegian-owned, the impact on prices would have exactly the same effect on the viability of these salmon farming businesses and therefore on jobs. Indeed, some local managers of Norwegian-owned companies have expressed deep anxiety about the implications.

The current anti-dumping measures were put in place only in 2006 and, like their predecessors since 1998, have proved generally

effective in controlling Norwegian dumping and allowing the Scottish and Irish industries to recover. Last year, however, sustained Norwegian political pressure — abetted by their Scandinavian neighbours who, unlike Norway, are EU members — resulted in a review of the measure being instigated.

The final decision on the Minimum Import Price will be taken by the Council of Ministers in late July as an outcome has to be reached within 18 months of the review commencing.

The EUSPG wants the MIP to be extended pending further investigations which, they believe, would undoubtedly confirm that the Norwegians are ready and waiting to recommence dumping on a vast scale, having built up stocks in anticipation of an outcome favourable to them.

In another recent development, the Norwegian Government agreed that salmon farm licences could be used as collateral against loans — a form of state subsidy that is specifically outlawed under World Trade Organisation rules. This has led to large sums of money being released, effectively by the Norwegian government, to subsidise production. The European Commission is now being asked to explain why it is prepared to turn a

blind eye to such abuses in a non-member state when they would not be tolerated in a member state.

The Scottish Government is being pressed from what remains of the Scottish-owned industry to support an anti-subsidy case — as distinct from the anti-dumping measures — which would have to be investigated by the European Commission. The case was initiated by the previous Holyrood administration but there has so far been no confirmation of whether the current Scottish Government intends to carry it through.

However, this is very much a fall-back position for the industry as it

might take years to achieve an outcome. Retention of the MIP is easily the first priority.

MEANWHILE, another front opened up this week when it emerged that the Anti-Dumping Committee also intends to remove the Minimum Import Price on farmed trout, in order to maintain parity with its recommendations on farmed salmon. The major producers of farmed trout are Denmark, Finland and France — none of which have supported retention of the MIP for salmon, but who might take a different view of a threat to their own interests.

## Mitch to the rescue of Kyleakin phone box

Kyleakin will not now be losing its red phone box thanks to the intervention of BT press officer Mitch Reid.

The village kiosk had been included in BT's ongoing programme of removing loss-making payphones when Mr Reid, who is from Kyleakin, spotted the error.

"We gave a pledge that we would not remove any payphones from the Scottish islands," he said. "Bridge or no bridge, Skye is an island."

Locals were concerned because the kiosk is by the pontoons and is well-used by the yachting fraternity and often forms the centre-piece of tourist photographs.

## HIE staff redundancy package cost twice as much as thought

A Highlands and Islands MSP has revealed that HIE spent £4.2 million on its voluntary redundancy packages to reduce staffing levels, over twice as much as previously understood.

Following a series of questions by Labour regional MSP Peter Peacock, HIE Chief Executive Sandy Cumming has confirmed that in addition to direct redundancy payments of £1.8 million, HIE had also paid a further £2.2 million into pension schemes to fund 26 people who had retired early — some with enhancements to their pensions as part of the deal to get them to leave HIE.

"At a total bill of over £4 million this has been a very expensive exercise for the taxpayer. Those members of staff who are leaving were highly experienced and performing a valuable job contributing to the economic development of the Highlands and Islands.

"This is a triple hit for the Highlands and Islands — we have lost the people with the specialised skills who helped bring prosperity to the Highlands and Islands; we have funded the high cost of redundancy; and we have lost over £4 million of spending on economic development projects to fund redundancy instead."

## Trump circus set to roll into Stornoway

The Donald Trump circus will hit Stornoway on Monday morning as the American property developer and casino owner belatedly discovers the maternal roots that he has ignored for so long.

Mr Trump's first-ever visit to the island of his mother's birth is part of his public relations campaign to win support for a highly-controversial golf and housing development on Menie Estate in Aberdeenshire. Part of the scheme is planned for highly-designated conservation sites and has attracted opposition from environmentalists.

In a recent interview with 'Vanity Fair' magazine, Mr Trump boasted that nobody else would get planning permission for such a development

in this location — but that he would because he is who he is and his mother came from Lewis!

Mr Trump, who is aged 60, has hitherto ignored all requests and approaches from Lewis to recognise the connection in some tangible form, even if he had no interest in visiting the place. However, it is now confidently expected that he will spray some dollars around as part of his "homecoming".

Coincidentally, the wife of Mr Trump's front-man for the Menie Estate development, George Sorial, is a native of Lewis. So there should be no difficulty in ensuring that The Donald lands on the right island. He is scheduled to hold a press conference, kiss the ground and then head for the Menie Estate public inquiry.

## Skye road disruption claims dismissed

Scottish Water this week moved to dismiss local fears that works planned for the south of Portree would create further disruption on a stretch of road currently under repair and partially closed to traffic.

A spokesman from the utility this week said the ongoing

installation of a new water main, running from Viewfield Road to Braes, affected a different stretch from that currently under repair.

Local suggestions that Scottish Water would have to dig up recently-repaired parts of the road in order to lay the pipeline were "not true", added the spokesman.

## CRIMOMAGAN

**Contin** There will be a Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh Ward Forum meeting in the hall on the evening of Monday 16th June at 7.30pm. While this meeting is quite soon after the previous forum in Lochcarron, ward manager Robbie Bain said: "We felt it would be good to have a session to discuss the Government's consultation on community councils, which closes on 1st August." [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/04/30093619/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/04/30093619/0)

**Broadford** A child's silver Ridgeback mountain bike was stolen from the primary school some time between Friday 30th May and the morning of Monday 2nd June. Anyone with any information, please contact either Broadford police station on 01471 822 222, Kyle police station on 01599 534 222 or Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

**Plockton** Students from the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music are going on tour this month. Performances will be held on Wednesday 18th June in Inverurie, Thursday 19th June in Braemar and Friday 20th June in Kingussie, before the musicians return to Plockton on Saturday 21st. All events begin at 7.30pm and tickets are sold on

the door priced £5/£3. For any further information, e-mail [anita.hurding@highland.gov.uk](mailto:anita.hurding@highland.gov.uk) or call 01599 544706.

**Portree** The next Highland Council Eilean a' Cheo Ward Forum will be on Monday 9th June at Tigh na Sgìre. The meeting is open to the public and commences at 2pm.

**Sleat** South Skye Episcopal Church are holding a family eucharist on Sunday 8th June at 6pm in the conference room at Sabhal Mor Ostaig old building.

**Portree** The Way Forward Group will be holding a car boot sale on Saturday 7th June from 1.30-4.30pm in Howden's car park. Contact 01478 611 132 to book.

**Harris** The plantation of 25,000 trees at Kyles Scalpay, which will be used to explore the viability of growing willow as a biomass fuel crop, has recently been completed by the North Harris Trust.

**Skye** There will be a sponsored walk in aid of the Skye and Lochalsh Young Carers Project on Saturday 21st June. The walk will be six miles along the Moll Road. If you would like to sponsor or join in the walk please contact Joey 01478 611897 or Pat 01471 822284.