



WEST HARRIS
TRUST

West Harris Trust Strategic Plan

2022-26

West Harris Trust, Talla na Mara, Pairc Niseaboist, Isle of Harris, HS3 3AE
web www.westharristrust.org **email** admin@westharristrust.org **tel** 01859 503 900
A Company Limited by Guarantee SC347176 Registered as a Charity in Scotland SC041920 VAT Registration No.188248760

1. Introduction

The West Harris Trust (WHT) adopted its last business plan in 2018. It initially covered the period 2018-20 but was extended to 2021 due to the uncertainties created by the Coronavirus pandemic. During this period, the Trust progressed each of its main aims successfully, achieving a measure of financial sustainability although still benefiting from additional project grant funding for specific delivery areas.

This document is the result of both recent work by the WHT and wider community engagement throughout the period 2018-21, to set out the Trust's ambition, direction, and priorities for the coming 5 years. Our ambition for the next 5 years is for continued and sustainable growth despite the mounting economic and social challenges that our communities face including: the effects of Brexit on our agriculture and crofting sector which have yet to be fully realised; the longer-term economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our tourist economy; and the on-going lack of access to quality, affordable long term rental and owner-occupied housing which is a greater challenge than ever, as is access to childcare.

We have put in place a flexible strategic plan that will continue to identify needs and solutions, and to deliver community support where it is needed. Achieving sustainable development is an ambitious and long-term challenge. It requires ongoing consultation within the community to understand the opportunities and any problems and constraints. It requires balancing ambition and resources. Above all it requires us to take a long-term view to ensure our sustainability, and that of our community.

Despite the challenges, we are confident that our West Harris community is robust, forward-looking and flexible and that many of the opportunities ahead can be realised.

2. Background

The West Harris Trust was formed to purchase 3 crofting estates belonging to the Scottish Government on the west side of south Harris incorporating the townships of Luskentyre, Seilebost, Horgabost, Borve and Scaristavore. Following extensive consultation, the local community of approximately 119 voted decisively in favour of purchasing the land in October 2008 to regenerate the local community which had been in long term decline. The purchase finally took place in January 2010.

The Trust, a company limited by guarantee and a registered Scottish Charity, is governed by a Board of 5 elected and 4 nominated local volunteer Directors, representing the different townships of West Harris. The Board is supported by a small core staff, responsible for day-to-day Trust activities and taking forward projects and initiatives to meet the aims and objectives of the Trust. The Trust currently operates 2 subsidiary companies, West Harris Renewables (WHRL) and Pairc Niseaboist Power (PNP), established to facilitate renewable energy developments, and generate income for the charity.

Since its establishment in 2010, WHT's activities have grown considerably in range and scale, delivering a series of projects that have brought significant financial and social benefits to the local community. At the time of the buyout in 2010, the Trust had a guaranteed annual income of only £1,654. Ten years on this has risen to £315,234 in 2020, and the Trust now manages assets of £2.1 million, up from £59,000 in 2010.

Significant developments and achievements have included:

- an increase in the local population from 119 to 170
- the creation of 10 affordable homes through partnership working with the local housing association
- the delivery of Talla na Mara, a 500m² multi-purpose community building, providing business opportunities and job creation
- the refurbishment of the former Seilebost School to provide high quality business space
- increased tourism facilities and visitor management activities

From the outset, the Trust aspired to create environmentally sustainable energy for the community via small hydro and micro-wind projects via WHRL, a wholly owned subsidiary. Several projects have been delivered, but each has been challenging and with a number of problems, leading to the sale of shares in the Gleann Dubhlinn hydro scheme in 2021 and all being well, the sale of WHRL later in 2022 to support the repayment of outstanding finance, and as the best outcome for WHT and the community.

3. Vision for West Harris

The WHT seeks to develop its own business and the wider community in parallel.

“West Harris is a thriving and vibrant community with an increasing and demographically balanced resident population, a unique natural environment, and a growing and sustainable economy providing a range of economic and community opportunities.”

4. West Harris Trust Goals 2022-26

Mission Statement

“The West Harris Trust aims to increase the population of West Harris to 250 by 2026, working with partners to create a range of housing and economic opportunities to attract and sustain a growing and balanced population. The Trust will ensure it fully represents and engages the community of West Harris, and promotes the unique environment, heritage and culture of the area in a sustainable manner.”

The following goals set out the WHT’s ambition for the community over the next 5 years:

- An increasing and more age balanced population – up to 250
- A further 10 houses of mixed tenure available for permanent residents
- An exploration and feasibility study of the Trust buying housing which comes onto the market, and then converting this for affordable rental
- Lobby for a “housing control area” through the Scottish Government’s Short Term Let legislation
- An exploration of the provision by others of childcare services for under 3s
- More active engagement in the crofting estate – looking at different means of sustainable crofting such as forestry; and the renovation of existing crofts which have fallen into dis-repair
- An investigation of the provision of new business premises
- An investigation of the option to take the operation of the restaurant in-house within the Trust or Trading company subsidiary at the end of the current lease, supporting the ambition for

Talla na Mara to be the hub of the community, and providing a more flexible staff resource for the Trust in terms of facilities management and servicing

- The establishment of a Community Fund which allows residents access to funding for projects that would enhance their local community or provide opportunity for young people
- A much stronger link across to local and national outcomes which WHT could contribute to in terms of quality of life, local culture and Gaelic – with continued and stronger partnership working enabled
- To promote the unique archaeology and heritage of West Harris
- To improve access to the estate
- The opportunity to encourage inward investment to the area
- Work with partners to mitigate and monitor the effects of climate change, including to local infrastructure
- More proactive visitor management, possibly through the provision of visitor wardens through the summer season

Internally over the next 5 years the WHT will seek to achieve:

- A refreshed Board in terms of new members – both younger members and more of a gender balance
- A more resilient Trust staffing structure, with the resource required to take forward the ambitions of the Board and the community, offering terms of employment reflective of industry good practice.

5. Business as Usual

Alongside the development goals set out above, the WHT will continue to undertake the core activities of the Trust, and the management of the Estate, which draw on a significant proportion of available resources.

- Negotiation and management of commercial leases
- Management of business premises at Talla na Mara, The Cliff Shed and Seilebost School
- Management and operation of subsidiaries, WHRL and PNP
- Collaboration with community organisations
- Support for and delivery of community events and activities
- Management of tourism and community facilities
- Board meetings and membership communications
- In-house crofting administration
- In-house facilities management
- Finances and administration

6. Development Priorities

The ambition and development goals set out for the Trust over the next 5 years is aspirational and so in order to focus resource, the following 3 development priorities have been identified for the period 2022-24.

1. The Development of Housing Solutions

Key to the Trusts vision is that *“West Harris is a thriving and vibrant community with an increasing and demographically balanced population.”* Between 2010 and 2021 WHT played a vital role in facilitating *the development of 10 new homes, 4 shared equity and 6 for affordable rent, as well as the sale of several affordable plots of land for self-build, helping to increase the population from 119 to 170.* Whilst positive, this still masks the increasingly aging demographic and a housing and land market which is unattainable to most, other than non-resident second homeowners who currently own approximately 39% of the housing stock. The development of housing solutions is therefore seen as critical to population growth and retention.

We will work with the local authority, Hebridean Housing Partnership and local community to realise this goal, investigating housing development, either directly or indirectly, and opportunities to bring back in to use empty homes.

The Trust recognises the importance of both the provision of childcare for under 3's, of which there is a chronic lack of provision, creating barriers to full time employment, and also the availability of quality employment and business opportunities as a contributing factor to those considering moving to or staying in the area, and so will investigate the provision of both in parallel to housing development.

2. Restaurant at Talla na Mara

Since opening in 2017, the restaurant at Talla na Mara has been let to private operators, with the current lease due to expire in February 2025. The Trust will explore ways of maximising restaurant provision in West Harris to meet the increase in demand, including an investigation of the option to take the operation of the restaurant in-house, within the Trust or trading company subsidiary, at the end of the current lease, supporting the ambition for Talla na Mara to be the hub of the community, and providing a more flexible staff resource for the Trust in terms of facilities management and servicing, which could free up the core Trust staff to focus on the Trust development priorities.

3. Energy Efficiency of Talla na Mara

Talla na Mara benefits from low-cost energy produced by the 100kW Xant wind turbine located above the centre, with an average of 50% of energy consumed drawn from the turbine when operational. Over recent years, the turbine has experienced repeated and prolonged breakdowns, during which time all electricity consumed is drawn from the grid. With the increasing cost of electricity, the Trust wishes to investigate alternative options for heating the building to ensure it remains economical to run.

In addition to the priorities identified, unforeseen opportunities may arise either from new challenges created by outside influences or government policy changes. We shall continue to monitor any significant and unforeseen changes impacting on West Harris and our community, and when appropriate will allocate resources to respond.

7. Financial Projections

Over recent years the Trust has achieved a measure of financial sustainability, with core costs being met by Trust activities. There remains a dependence however on project grant funding to allow further development.

A financial plan has been prepared, which aims to steer the organisation towards being fully self-financing by 2026. This will require careful decision making on the allocation of resources, principally personnel and between the various development priorities.

A sub-committee of Directors will regularly review the financial status and delivery against the plan to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the Trust, with a focus on streamlining our financial and operational management so that efficiencies can deliver greater capacity and effectiveness, and more positive outcomes for the community

8. Monitoring Progress

Progress on this strategy document shall be appraised annually by the WHT Board of Directors. Working groups will be established for each development priority, with each group meeting bi-monthly, or more frequently as required, to progress the priority, reporting back to the full Board.

Members of the community will be given the opportunity for formal feedback through annual consultation, and informal feedback and input will be encouraged throughout the year.