

Na hEileanaich Ealanta - Creative Islanders Culture and Creativity in the Hebrides

A research study

I was approached by HI~Arts¹ early in the summer of 2002 with an idea I just couldn't say 'no' to. The prospect of spending July and August in the Hebrides discussing local culture and ways to support it with islanders from the Butt of Lewis to Islay was something I had often dreamed of. Of course there really wasn't enough time to do the subject justice and even less time to write this report; yet for all my misgivings, the experience has been inspiring, instructive and in many ways humbling.

While I recognise that HIE² and HI~Arts have a variety of goals to meet in terms of the arts and economic development, I hope both agencies will pay careful attention to what the contributors to this study themselves have to say, particularly their unequivocal concern about any development that fails to recognise the Gàidhlig language as an essential part of their Hebridean identity.

The people of the Hebrides are keepers of an ancient way of life that has safeguarded the Gàidhlig language through appalling times of discrimination, stretching right back to 1560. As they struggle to be heard in an ever-changing political environment, planners and policy makers would do well to listen with open ears and minds, recognising that the Gàidheals have a strong will to self-determine, a will which has served them well for a very long time. Any initiative that respects the language and way of life and that values the people themselves can look forward to the future with optimism. I hope the findings of this study will contribute to building a vibrant, creative initiative for all the Hebridean islands that places the people, their language and their culture at its core.

Déirdre MacMahon
Edinburgh
October 2002

Déirdre Ní Mhathúna
Dùn Éideann
Dàmhar 2002

¹ HI~Arts is contracted by HIE (see footnote 2) to promote the arts in the Highlands and Islands

² HIE: Highlands and Islands Enterprise

The Hebrides - what's in a name?

'When you look at the map, the Hebrides are not remote, either from each other or from the rest of Europe' Alex MacDonald, Lewis

The name Hebrides or *Aeboudai* was already in use when Ptolemy, a Greek geographer writing in 2nd century A.D., charted the islands to the north-west of Albion and Ierne, or Britain and Ireland. Ptolemy brought the Celtic-speaking people of these islands to the attention of the classical world. We know that his information was, in turn, at least two centuries old. He places the *Aeboudai* under the head of Ireland and mentions what are now understood to be Islay, Rathlin, Arran, Mull, Eigg and Skye. North and South Uist, called *Aebuda*, were placed above Ireland – which is not difficult to understand if your knowledge comes mostly from sea routes. In terms of language, it is clear that the oldest form of the Celtic languages, Goidelic, or Q-Celtic was the commonly spoken language of the islands even then.³

So we can say quite a few things with confidence already – The Hebrides were well-known to sea travellers at least 2000 years ago; the name Hebrides is very old and probably pre-Celtic; the earliest known form of the Celtic languages survives to this day in the Hebrides.

But what does The Hebrides mean today?

This was the big question that formed the basis of this research study. What, if anything, does it mean to you to be called 'Hebridean'? Does it connect you to a great and noble history that stretches back at least two millennia? Or have the divisions of local authority boundaries and area tourist boards, not to mention air and sea transport routes, overtaken any sense of cohesion there may once have been between the islands of the Hebrides?

'It has enormous value but it is deeply and very seriously undervalued - to its own detriment - even by islanders themselves. I don't know which is more painful, being ignored by a remote and indifferent government or undervaluing what we ourselves have.' Kevin MacNeil, Skye

The original premise - a season of arts events in the Hebrides

The spur for this research study came from discussions between Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and HI~Arts Director, Robert Livingston. The first suggestion from HIE was a Hebrides-wide festival. HI~Arts considered that a looser plan, such as the annual autumn season of events in Dumfries and Galloway, would be far more acceptable. However this research does not support a proposal of this nature.

³ 'The Celtic Realms' by Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, first published 1967 and 'Celtic Placenames of Scotland' by W.J.Watson, first published 1926

Instead my findings point to an urgent need for an arts and cultural infrastructure that recognises the Gàidhlig language as an essential component of arts development in the Hebrides. Once an infrastructure is in place, it should be possible to revisit big creative plans for all the islands. At this point, however, it would be very difficult to engender support or enthusiasm for anything on a large scale. Furthermore, it could only be achieved from outside local arts communities, leading to a serious question of ownership. We must learn from the struggles of previous attempts at something like that, most notably the Highland Festival - a concept that was planted onto the islands with no real thought for its cultural resonances or suitability. It is important that any future arts initiatives have strong local support in the Hebrides. In spite of these reservations, the suggestion of a diary of arts and cultural events for the Hebrides was broadly welcomed as a concept and could well be the first step towards greater cultural co-operation throughout the islands.

I and many of the respondents in this study welcome the opportunity it has given us to discuss arts and cultural issues in some depth. The experience has been valuable and will, I hope, form a solid foundation from which a consensus will develop – a consensus of committed arts and cultural activists whose views are passionate, positive and above all consistent. Their message is clear – we are the keepers of one of the greatest jewels in the crown of Scotland; Scotland needs us and the Gàidhlig language even more than we need Scotland.

‘The greatest cultural resource of these islands is the people’ Donald Morrison, Benbecula

The research method

The research method was quite simple, if unusual in an arts context. A selection of artists, cultural activists, administrators and voluntary workers were identified in all the main islands of the Hebrides; I then set off with a tape recorder and notepad, pretty much in the manner of a folklorist gathering precious material. The brief from HI~Arts was to hold a series of ‘open-ended conversations’ covering five main questions about cultural identity in the Hebridean islands, from Islay to the Butt of Lewis. In consultation with colleagues, I settled on one-to-one meetings as the best method of gathering this information. Its benefits were clear and sometimes unexpected. Where members of small communities held opposing views it allowed for those differences; where distance was often an obstacle, being interviewed on one’s home territory was much appreciated. By meeting individuals, it was possible to gather heartfelt opinions about issues that are fundamental to one’s sense of self and by extension, to one’s creative life. Remarkably, differences in these opinions were minor and tell us more about support and infrastructure than they do about the Hebridean people themselves.

‘I thought it was really important being interviewed in my own home here in the Ross of Mull; that I didn’t have to go to Oban, that I didn’t have to speak on the telephone, I didn’t have to fill in a piece of paper. I was able to think much more clearly about all the local connections that there are here – the people and what happens in this area’ Anne Baxter, Mull

THE RESEARCH

Background

It took 27 working days, 3,524 miles and 16 ferry journeys to visit the largest islands in the Hebrides during the summer of 2002. Only the Outer Hebrides (Western Isles) has an arts officer purely for those islands; in other local authority areas island arts activities are supported by officers whose remits are predominantly mainland oriented. While the outer isles could not be held up as an example of perfect arts provision at this point in time, there is a noticeable sense of cohesion between local enterprise, local authority and tourist providers there, which at its best forms the beginnings of a strong infrastructure that will support cultural development in the long term.

One thing is certain – things work best where local people feel in control and are respected for the arts work they facilitate. With unstinting support from the local arts association, Taigh Chearsabhair on North Uist has developed into one of the most exciting arts centres in the Highlands and Islands in ten short years; SEALL⁴ on Skye has been the catalyst for a programme of year-round arts projects and events that many towns would envy and Islay Arts Association achieves similar results, yet the latter are the first to admit that their Gàidhlig programming has room to grow. Elsewhere the arts scene is much more fragile and small islands frequently lose out – a difficult scenario to avoid when provision of resources is allocated on a per capita basis.

On Tiree, there has been no community hall for the past three years, thanks to some professional advice that spectacularly backfired. On Barra, there are just 10 hours' sessional youth work time for the island and no arts worker of any kind. Residents in the Ross of Mull have no local promoter and usually find that touring events are programmed for Iona, where ferries don't run in the evening. Argyll's island people feel they really have fallen off the edge of the Highlands and Islands network, whereas Strathclyde Regional Council, now defunct, served them well. There are high hopes for the new Gàidhlig centre, Ionad Chalum Chille Ìle⁵, but until now the Gàidhlig identity of Islay has been perilously close to disappearing.

All these issues point to the need for a long-term, holistic strategy for the arts and culture of the Hebrides that values the people and Gàidhlig culture as its greatest asset and takes local views fully into account. The coherence of opinion shown in this study suggests that it may not be such a daunting prospect, after all.

Notes on contributors

Fifty four people who live, work and create in the Hebridean islands have contributed to this study. They gave generously of their time and, by and large, found the

⁴ SEALL: Sleat Entertainment for All

⁵ Ionad Chalum Chille Ìle: Columba Centre, Islay opened August 2002. Gàidhlig centre and part of University of Highlands and Islands

questions that framed the study stimulating and helpful. The vast majority of respondents continue to be enthusiastic about arts activities in their communities but all show a weariness that comes from years of voluntary commitment, with few support structures to back them up.

All contributors were invited to give their personal opinions as artists, activists and islanders when answering the questions. Where they speak in their professional or corporate capacity, I have noted this in relation to the quote or comment in the body of the text.

In some cases acronyms are used – these are always the Gàidhlig versions which are translated in footnotes the first time they appear.

- **What does the concept *Hebrides* mean? What value does it have in the present social/political/cultural context?**

‘Hebridean’ to me means a Celtic web – no matter where you touch it, it connects you to all of it’ Francis Thompson, Lewis

This quote is arguably the most positive response the opening question engendered. Attitudes varied considerably to the value of ‘the Hebrides’ as a concept. Beginning the study in Lewis during the Hebridean Celtic Festival certainly enhanced the sense of value people there attached to their Hebridean identity. For festival organisers its importance is clear – ‘The Hebrides’ has a meaning that is recognised all over the world, it is a key to a fascinating culture and language that has international appeal. *‘Hebrides’ as a word is evocative, there’s a certain romanticism associated with it. It suggests a sense of distance and excitement, a place you want to see’* said Murdo MacLennan, Hebridean Celtic Festival, Lewis.

For many islanders farther south, it is difficult to acknowledge these associations. Although the very heart of Hebridean culture once had its seat of power at Finlaggan on Islay, many Argyll islanders felt it held little value in the context of their everyday experience. The name Hebrides is most likely pre-Celtic, which may run counter to a sense of ownership among a people for whom the Gàidhlig language is the most important badge of identity.

- **What cultural links exist between the islands that make up the Inner and Outer Hebrides? How might these be developed or strengthened?**

The Gàidhlig language, traditional music, the songs, the sea, a shared history and the islands’ way of life were widely recognised as important links connecting the islands. While occupations like crofting and fishing still have importance among many island communities, they are not seen in themselves as links. Everyone I interviewed has multiple occupations, some voluntary and some paid – island life is a creative way of life. At least 80% also mentioned links with Ireland, which are considered to be enormously important in terms of culture, tourism and shared history by most Hebrideans. Another significant point to note is that the majority of artists and arts organisers interviewed in this study have lived on more than one Hebridean island; this strongly suggests that creative people value their island identity almost as highly as their artistic identity. Camille Dressler of Eigg put it perfectly when she said *‘It’s a hugely creative way of life. All your life you’re an artisan’*. The only links everyone in this study identified between the islands are, in fact, cultural and stretch back to the golden age of Dalriada and later to The Lordship of the Isles. *‘The Hebrides is often understood to mean the outer isles...Islay, however, is ‘The Queen of the Hebrides’* Robin Currie, Islay

There are several initiatives under way which are beginning to support links between island communities. The Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES)⁶ Department of

⁶ Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES): Western Isles Council

Sustainable Communities encompasses community education, arts, museums and archaeology, sports, planning, environment and economic development; a clear benefit of working in this holistic way is that it puts the people and their survival at the heart of the council's policy and planning strategy. The Scottish Islands Network, which has been set up by Argyll and Bute Council in partnership with Habitat Scotland (based on Skye), has already impressed Robin Currie, Councillor for North Islay, Jura and Colonsay and many other people on Islay who previously felt isolated from the other Hebridean islands. Robin would like to see an annual gathering where islanders could meet and work together to solve common problems. *'An annual islands forum could make a big difference. Iomairt aig an Oir'⁷ has been taking a long time, but it is helping. The Colonsay folk agree they were on the edge'* he said.

'The things that often bring people together here are the adversities. We don't have a problem with conversation ... You start with the weather, then you start with the loss of the Gàidhlig language, depopulation, children leaving the islands, things that in your heart are really troubling you. Those then become the common bond' Munro Gold, Lewis

On a lighter note, inter-island games have been identified by CNES as a popular way of building links. It makes no sense to draw a heavy line between the arts and other social activities. Support and development for traditional games like shinty will in turn encourage cultural links. For every island community the biggest issue of all is sustainability; any cultural initiative must take account of local sensibilities. It should empower local arts activists rather than burden them with unreasonable demands on their already stretched voluntary time. Most activists bemoaned the lack of visiting arts events to the islands and strongly supported the suggestion that Scottish Arts Council funding for national tours should insist on islands bookings as part of any tour. *'We haven't had a play on Jura for three years... – it'd be great (for funders) to be pro-active, to insist on visiting islands on Scottish tours. HI~Arts used to give funding for ferry costs of performers - what happened to that?'* Sharon Hoverty, Jura

A responsive, culturally aware tourist strategy is also urgently needed throughout the Hebrides. While the Western Isles Tourist Board has achieved much in recent years, using the Hebrides name to great effect, it has failed to convince local arts activists that it is indeed serving their best interests. *'Tourist boards have a lot to answer for here. They have failed to recognise that the greatest cultural resource of these islands is the people'* said Donald Morrison, Benbecula. Yet the Western Isles Tourist Board is selling the islands as a holiday destination – something island communities in Argyll can't even dream of. Many guest houses and Bed and Breakfasts (B+B's) in Argyll and on Skye refuse to register with their local tourist boards because the service they feel they're getting is so unhelpful. The most frequently voiced criticisms of tourist boards centred around their system of awarding stars, which is judged by standards that most island B+B owners find ridiculous. The Scottish Tourist Board preference for matching curtains, wallpaper and downie covers may cause little trouble in return for that extra star when a local homemakers' superstore is a short drive away; but on an island with barely a supermarket, most hosts find these standards exasperating. They bear no relation to the true appeal of the islands and serve only to undermine the very people tourists would hope to meet on their holiday.

⁷ Iomairt aig an Oir: Initiative at the Edge, a development programme with support from the Scottish Executive targeting 'some of Scotland's most distant and fragile communities'.

Underpinning everything that islanders value about their way of life is the Gàidhlig language. People from all over the world visit the Hebrides to listen and learn about Gàidhlig. To all Hebridean people it represents a key to their shared roots, regardless of their personal fluency or literacy; it also is the one thing that people feel a deep sense of pride in. Cultural tourism offers a viable way forward for the Hebrides; it is high time that tourist promoters at local and national level took this on board.

'Maybe we could mention the tourist boards here – are they good for the islands or are they in fact an obstacle to development? A lot of us feel that they misrepresent Scotland, that we're not a nation of matching curtains and downie covers and that the way they present Scottish culture is shameful, really – shallow and tacky. Most people who are at all culturally aware have moved on from the tartan and haggis presentation of Scotland and Visit Scotland are still in there' Gordon MacLean, Mull

'We have to respect and learn from what's gone before and move on. It's the way to go, but how it's done is most important. It must have a fun element, while also keeping some rules. If the spirit dies within you, it'll become like deadwood – a 'lesson' in the worst sense of the word.' Mairi MacInnes, Arran

'We should be using our diaspora, it doesn't have to lead us into Balmorality...' Donnie Munro, Skye

- **What are the obstacles to closer links between the islands? How might these be overcome?**

The overwhelming obstacle everyone identified is transport. As occupational links such as fishing and sailing have declined throughout the islands, dependence on public transport has become all-encompassing. For most of the communities I visited over the summer of 2002, their biggest political concern was negotiating the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry timetables for the coming year. It is hard to overestimate the impact of any changes; whole communities have been cut off from each other because of one simple change to the Oban/Coll/Tiree run, for instance, which stopped at Tobermory on Mull in the past. On-island transport is an equally big issue, affecting arts and cultural activities in particular – even the best public transport in the Hebrides comes virtually to a standstill after 7pm. The cost of ferry and air transport has a profound effect on islanders; many contributors pointed out that holiday makers can get far better travel deals on ferries than local people making one return journey. Mary MacLeod on Lewis said *'it costs me more to get to the south of England now than it did when I lived in Stockholm'*. Artists who often live and create on meagre budgets are especially vulnerable to the vagaries of transport policies, because the arts are all about communication and indeed most artists must travel in order to work.

If these practical obstacles are to be overcome, it will take concerted political will. Some useful starting points would be more frequent ferry schedules throughout the winter despite lower passenger numbers and subsidised fares for island residents, but most of all cultural and social policies that recognise the importance of links in the

first place. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES) has made an enormous leap in 2002 by establishing the final transport link between Eriskay and Barra; it is now possible to travel by car from Barra to Lewis in one day – an unimaginable feat until now. Eoin MacNeil recommends that *‘every island should set up a transportation committee; it lends co-ordination to its transportation needs’*. The Barra community played an active role in the planning for the CNES Eriskay ferry service, negotiating fares down to £10 per car. Achievements like this are hugely empowering but are utterly dependent on local authority and executive support.

‘There are major obstacles because of a sense of the power base being elsewhere. You can encounter enormous resistance to development. Frailty of infrastructure is one aspect of this, also the fragility of our economic base.’ Donnie Munro, Skye

‘We need political, we need cultural, we need artistic change. Only then will we stop being ignored or pushed to the so-called periphery.’ Kevin MacNeil, Skye

- **What are the cultural resources or events which express the distinctive identity of a particular island? What are the cultural resources or events which demonstrate linkages across islands (e.g. Gaelic, Norse or Neolithic heritage, crofting/fishing practises, etc)?**

‘(The cultural resources are) fragmented, like the islands themselves’ Malcolm MacLean, Lewis

The common cultural resources identified by this study are without doubt the Gàidhlig language and traditional music and song. Agreement of their importance crossed all barriers – social, geographic and cultural. Festivals, fèisean, summer schools, local Mòd events and agricultural shows are important cultural and social events that bring islanders and visitors together. Local historical societies/Comainn Eachdraidh play a vital role in introducing visitors to local culture and often build strong links across the islands, exploring archaeology, agriculture, genealogy and much more besides. Since the 1980’s the Fèis network⁸ and the emergence of arts centres on different islands has begun to create an arts infrastructure that must be nurtured at all costs. Arts centres offer the opportunity to run exhibitions and events throughout the year, which is essential if we are to retain and support a Hebridean arts community. The visual arts have been building a strong following all over the Hebrides. Norman MacLeod of Taigh Chearsabhagh on North Uist believes that a sculpture trail the length and breadth of the islands is a real possibility with huge appeal. *‘Harris is perfectly suited to outdoor sculpture’* he said. On Tiree, annual exhibitions are selling 59% of the work, impressive by any standards. Brian Milne told me *‘Tiree Arts Enterprises has been a springboard for many local people. Irish links are part of that too... they’re a source of inspiration.’* Fèisean keep young people engaged with their language and music and can also pave the way for educational and cultural tourism.

Yet all these resources are incredibly fragile and heavily dependent on voluntary commitment. Twenty years ago this was less of an issue – today young people cannot

⁸ Fèisean nan Ghàidheal: national organisation supporting local language and music learning ‘fèis’ events (mostly for young people) that usually run for a week during school holidays

commit voluntary time, when they must spend much of their year away either at school or college and will have student loans to contend with for years to come. This will impact on cultural development in a big way for the foreseeable future, making the need for meaningful policies that support Gàidhlig and cultural development in the Hebrides ever more urgent.

'The reason that the arts are so immensely important is that they are informed by the tradition and nurture contemporary development.' Donnie Munro, Skye

When you think a little about this wonderful statement, it is clear that the arts and the islands are such natural partners - the island pace of life, the way of living, working and communicating all involve using your hands to make things, your eyes to see them and your ears to listen. It is a world where you can still hear yourself think, where poetry, song and story continue to underpin everyday life. The great gift that the arts bring is a way to express oneself and to develop one's opinions and understanding of the wider world, by describing and illuminating one's own experience - using those same island skills of seeing, listening and making. As more and more islanders appreciate these values, the role of the arts in strengthening communities is growing steadily. Most arts practitioners in the Hebrides are as passionate about Gàidhlig as they are about arts development – and this is the meeting point where the arts can really contribute to the long-term future of the islands. Religious tensions in some parts of the Hebrides can hinder an appreciation of arts and entertainment, but on the whole local people place such a high value on their culture that there is a clear case for supporting arts and cultural development at every level of island life.

The University of the Highlands and Islands can play a big part in keeping young people engaged in their culture; until that becomes an immediate possibility bright young students will continue to go away to learn new things, but be faced with the reality of leaving their language behind. Four years spent, for example, in an art college discovering the arts of printmaking, sculpting, tapestry and many more skills *through English only* can be enough to disconnect anyone from their first language. When you consider that only a small number of these young people will be confidently literate in Gàidhlig, it's not difficult to understand just how urgently creative, multi-disciplinary investment in Gàidhlig is needed throughout Scotland if we are to keep even a small part of this irreplaceable resource. *'Every language that works is dynamic. If the cultural aspects of Gàidhlig don't move forward it will die. We need new words to describe new activities; academics are pushing written aspects of the language but the real issue is to develop modern everyday usage'* Munro Gold, Lewis

Several contributors spoke of the enormous unexplored resources *'languishing'* in the National Library and the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh – songs and folktales that are the rightful inheritance of the Gàidheal. While fèis tutors work with the same twenty-odd songs year after year, we know there are thousands more waiting to be recovered from the archives. The fate of this treasure is deeply connected to the long-term development of Gàidhlig, yet a more open policy of access and education would be heartily welcomed by the ordinary people who struggle to keep their culture moving forward.

Cultural tourism has moved ahead in leaps and bounds in recent years. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on Skye has built up an impressive programme of short courses, all based around the Gàidhlig language, that attract students internationally. The college is also planning some exciting visual arts projects which will attract a broader community to its campus in coming years. There is huge potential for the arts and tourism to develop. Island life offers a different pace and set of values that many modern people, particularly artists, are searching for. *'...As religion has faded, it's very healthy that art and music and literature should become the places where people conduct their spiritual quest'* Gordon MacLean, Mull

Fèisean and summer schools are popping up all over the islands – most recently a fiddler's week on Taransay, Harris, which was a great success and will hopefully continue in future years. By far the most successful summer school is Ceòlas in South Uist. Ceòlas is an excellent example of how Hebridean people can welcome visitors from all over the world into the heart of their community life and language, while actually strengthening their own sense of identity in the process. Rather than putting visitors off, Ceòlas welcomes capacity numbers of students every summer to speak, sing, dance and ceilidh in Gàidhlig. However confidence in the future of Gàidhlig is hard to come by, even among its most passionate advocates.

'The Gàidhlig language is very precious but very fragile. People here are very aware of this fragility and are living in hope that something radical is about to happen, otherwise the language will disappear altogether – that's a big concern. In the area I work in I find that very unsettling.' Murdo MacLennan, Lewis

The Hebridean Celtic Festival has inspired many islanders by presenting local culture to a worldwide audience in a way that has lots of appeal for local people, both young and old. Its entertainment programme is undoubtedly the highlight of the summer calendar in the Outer Hebrides. There are festivals dotted throughout the islands, operating on a smaller scale but no less important. The Skye Storytelling Festival and Fèis an Eilean on Skye, Mull Music Festival, Mendelssohn on Mull, the Islay Jazz Festival and Fèis Ìle on Islay, the Jura Music Festival and the Arran Folk Festival all attract plenty of visitors to their islands – in fact most festival organisers admit they have stopped promoting these events because they have reached capacity. That is not to say that their events could not develop, but that they have already exceeded their venue, accommodation, restaurant and ferry capacity. This is a real issue, even for the Hebridean Celtic Festival which is currently assessing the viability of extending the festival to two weeks or possibly two weekends. Here is where the question of isolation really begins to kick in. Without developing an all-island infrastructure that acknowledges cultural tourism and its value to local people, it is virtually impossible to see how cultural events can be developed. It will require a co-ordinated approach from all service providers – something that has been noticeable by its absence to date.

It is time to stop thinking of the islands as poor relatives and acknowledge that their isolation is neither necessary nor healthy for Scotland. By cutting off the Hebrides from the rest of the country we are separating families and communities, weakening a fragile language and ultimately diminishing our own cultural resources.

The Hebridean people know they have something unique to share; consistent support and sensitive policy and planning are the least that they deserve. There is a huge

opportunity for growth and change in the Hebrides, without losing the most precious aspects of an ancient way of life. The arts can offer a sustainable way forward for all islanders, both young and old, because they depend on creative thinking. Creativity in turn demands respect for the individual as the cornerstone of any community. A population of confident, creative individuals will solve complex problems, but only if they are trusted to do so.

'(The obstacles are a) lack of passion, being dictated to by non-Gàidheals. Don't translate an existing blueprint into Gàidhlig. Islanders come from a different background. TRUST US! Be careful with web resources – this is an oral culture'

Christine Primrose, Skye

- **Would the sector or organisation in which you are involved benefit from a programme of greater coordination and integrated promotion? Would your island? Would the Hebrides as a whole?**

'Event organisation happens on a very local basis (in the islands), then folk tend to check out - just locally – what else is going on. There's no umbrella organisation co-ordinating this. For economic growth, tourism and cultural development it's just not enough' said one organiser who has experienced the pitfalls of poor co-ordination first-hand. Among the contributors to this study, I found general approval for a co-ordinating initiative as long as it respects the differences, as well as the similarities, between islands. It is interesting to note that the most consistent supporters of this proposal were members of the fèis movement. This suggests that the network support Fèisean nan Gàidheal provides has inspired activists to think about the bigger picture, although they are sometimes less positive about the practical value membership of such a large organisation can bring.

A diary that promotes events from Islay to the Butt of Lewis would serve several functions. As well as its obvious cultural tourism appeal, it would be an excellent first step towards better communication between islanders themselves - but it must be bilingual. When we remember that the vast majority of tourists are attracted to the Hebrides because of the Gàidhlig culture, there is no reason why this shouldn't work. However the long-term objective of the diary should be clearly articulated from the outset – namely, that its purpose is to contribute to a sustainable cultural infrastructure. Approached in this way, the diary can be a powerful development tool. Putting the Gàidhlig language to the forefront of this initiative will be a positive way of ensuring a local sense of ownership. Without that strong identity, islanders will find little incentive to work together, break through their island-ness and make a success of the diary. *'Eigg never made progress until it broke its own isolation. Isolation tendency is inherent in island life. Subsidising islanders to visit or support other island communities would be wonderful'* Camille Dressler, Eigg

- **If so, what should be the over-arching theme or flavour of such coordination and promotion? What outcomes should it seek to achieve?**

'Our shared cultural heritage – the Gàidhlig language, music, arts, archaeology – all these show we were once a semi-autonomous kingdom' Michelle MacLeod, Islay

The Gàidhlig language, the songs, the landscape and way of life are the way to sell the concept in most people's view. Or, as one more 'tuned-in' contributor put it, *'the chill factor, and the fact that life IS better here'*. Without exception, respondents want an initiative that recognises the people and their way of life as attractive selling points. They recognise the shortcomings of the hospitality sector, but overall are convinced they have lots to offer. That's why it is a source of enormous distress to so many arts activists that none of the economic initiatives so far have addressed the issue of young people who are left with no choice but to leave the islands *'like lambs'*, as one person on Lewis told me. This project could be a way to begin addressing this problem. It is no longer acceptable to ignore the devastating effect of depopulation.

'I think someone's got to sit down and think 'culturally, how are we going to keep young people on the islands – and it's not just here, it's an issue for all the islands' Anne Baxter, Mull.

'Incomers often can't learn about localities; it's part of our failing that people can't learn how to fit in. (Self-confidence and self-esteem get buried)...A new co-ordinating initiative can help to articulate the issues, but bear in mind that any problems will take time to resolve... this one-to-one type research can be helpful in addressing those issues.' Mairi MacInnes, Arran

- **Can such an initiative be developed by building on an existing agency, or will it need a new body? If the latter, where should that body be based?**

'Instead of thinking about what agency, look on ... this diary as a chance to be creative – make it unique, give it a wonderful design, think very creatively about how it would come together, what it would take. Design and create locally, use the talent we have' Kevin MacNeil, Skye

Kevin's response was by far the most imaginative to this question. Most other people felt weary at the mere thought of setting up yet another new project. Robin Currie spoke for many when he exclaimed *'there are plenty (agencies) surely already!'* as did Morag MacLennan on Harris: *'Don't create a monster! ... If only there was just one body...'*

A significant number of people interviewed asked what exactly HI~Arts is there to do and considered that its presence in the Hebrides was, to date, extremely limited. If HI~Arts, given its close association with Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), was prepared to contribute in the long-term to the island cultural scene, then it could well be best-placed to nurture a new cultural initiative into existence. It would be important to consult with organisations already working in the geographical area and to involve Gàidhlig agencies also; indeed the co-ordination could take many shapes and forms. Malcolm MacLean of Pròiseact nan Ealan⁹ suggests *'A pilot project - a Round Table - that will bring people together to discuss ideas and potential developments. Fragmented institutions are unlikely to come up with holistic ideas but such a forum could build new links between artists and island communities and involve agencies such as LECs, Local Authorities and Tourist Boards.'* There are real concerns about yet another initiative with only short-term prospects that may be foisted on islanders and have no long-term value; equally worrying to some is the

⁹ Pròiseact nan Ealan: National Gaelic Arts Agency

possibility of watering down scarce resources. All these concerns point to a need for creative thinking and sensitive consultation.

'Basing something on an island doesn't necessarily meet the issues head-on...it can be a political statement though' Stuart Todd, Islay

'Where is not important, providing the 'raison d'être' isn't driven by limited interests. The most overriding issue is ownership' Donnie Munro, Skye

For Munro Gold, Director of Sustainable Communities at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar the concerns were more global in nature: *'No way (should this be presented as) a two year project. Don't waste our time. You'll get completely the wrong sort of staff, completely the wrong attitude. We don't want to see a business plan that says it'll be self-sustaining in so many years. The bottom line is that it will need investment from outside (current island budgets).'* He could support the idea of HIE/HI~Arts taking a 'mothering' role in whatever initiative emerges from this consultation process, because of its all-island remit.

- **How should The Hebrides relate to the Highlands and Islands as a whole, or indeed to the rest of Scotland?**

'In a word – differently!' Malcolm MacLean, Lewis

This question took on different levels of importance on different islands. To the north, the connections with Inverness and the central belt were relatively clear and easy to articulate; from South Uist to Mull, connections with Oban and Glasgow were usually the most significant, although their sense of being Highlanders was still palpable. On Islay, the connections with Ireland were just as important to everyone interviewed as their Scottish connections – a heritage far older and obviously more attractive than their modern-day links to any Scottish seat of power. On a practical level, Glasgow in particular is hugely important for many islanders because it's the most likely place their children will go for further education. If we are to address the need to engage young people in their Hebridean culture, we must not ignore the university cities of Scotland, where so many of the opinion-formers spend their young adult lives and many artists must live in order to survive.

'I still find it amazing that other people value our culture more than Scottish or British people do and I think that's something that HI~Arts could help to combat.' Kevin MacNeil, Skye

'It's a huge area, but a small arts community. There's got to be better ways to support work that artists are involved in.' Alex MacDonald, An Lanntair, Lewis

'The Scottish Parliament is entirely run by Westminster. This leaves Hebridean people in limbo. The Gàidhlig language is not acknowledged. There is still direct discrimination against Gàidhlig' George MacPherson, Skye

'The Highlands + Islands being seen as some kind of spiritual reservoir for Scotland is really important' Gordon MacLean, Mull

'Keeping island communities strong is a HUGE task. The Scottish Parliament hasn't grasped this yet at all - Bòrd na Gàidhlig is a case in point. It's a shame to have

more great jobs in Inverness again. There's not enough island input into the LEC/economic development system; this has real ramifications (for the islands)'
Dòmhnall Angaidh MacIllinnein, Iomairt Cholm Cille¹⁰, Skye

¹⁰ Iomairt Cholm Cille: Columba Initiative connecting Gàidhlig Scotland, Northern Ireland and Irish Republic Gaeltacht communities

SUMMARY

For many, the questions posed in this Hebridean research study offered a fresh take on an old story – where do we fit in, and on whose terms? As I travelled from north to south and east to west, it became easier to see and understand the connections that bind Hebridean people to each other and to Ireland. The Gàidhlig language pre-dates any written history of Scotland and has been separate from Gaeilge/Irish for only 300 years, which is nothing in linguistic terms. The way of life, which is so creative, shares common threads with the entire western seaboard of Europe. The Atlantic sea connected the Hebrides to a vast trading route that brought people, food, wine, silks and stories from the Mediterranean to the Baltic for well over a thousand years – before the heavy hand of British government insisted that roads were the only way to transport goods, as recently as the 18th century. This fascinating, worldly inheritance means that in the Hebridean people we have far more than a cultural resource – we have a repository, in the ordinary people of the islands, of much that has shaped European civilisation since the birth of Christ. It is time to welcome this great treasure back from the edge and place it at the heart of the arts and cultural scene in Scotland.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **That HIE supports the long-term development of a co-ordinated and bi-lingual promotional diary for arts and culture in the Hebrides**
- **That HIE and HI~Arts develop a strong arts and cultural policy, with Gàidhlig at its core, for the Hebridean islands**
- **That HIE and HI~Arts actively promotes the development of an infrastructure that can support cultural tourism in the Hebrides**
- **That HIE, through HI~Arts maintains contact with the respondents in this research study, inviting them to be sounding-boards for future development of its Hebridean initiatives**
- **That any cultural development in the Hebrides learns from previous initiatives, which failed to engender a local sense of ownership**

List of contributors

Outer Hebrides

Lewis + Harris:

Fiona Porteous, Director, Hebridean Celtic Festival
 Murdo MacLennan, Director, Hebridean Celtic Festival;
 Chair, Western Isles Enterprise; Director, Tarlas Media Company
 Alex MacDonald, An Lanntair
 Brian Ó hEadhra, Taigh Dhonnchaidh, Ness
 Francis Thompson, author
 Malcolm MacLean, Director / Calum MacGillEain, Stiùiriche, Pròiseact nan Ealan
 Munro Gold, Director, Dept for Sustainable Communities, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
 Morag MacLennan, Fèis na Hearaidh, Harris
 Dr Mary MacLeod, Islands Archaeologist, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

North + South Uist + Benbecula:

Donald (Ryno) Morrison, Arts Officer, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
 Gordon Wells, Colaisde Bheinn na Faoghla
 Norman MacLeod, Director, Taigh Chearsabhaigh
 Dorothy Boa, arts activist
 Tommy MacDonald, Fèis Tìr a Mhurain
 Mairi V MacInnes, Ceòlas + Gleus
 Isobel MacDonald, Western Isles Enterprise
 Dana MacPhee, Museum Officer, Museum nan Eilean
 Iain MacDonald, Musician in Residence, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Skye

Barra:

John Joe MacNeil, Fèis Bharraigh
 Eoin MacNeil, Pathways Project
 Donnie MacNeil, B.E.D.S. (Barra Events Development Support)
 Jessie MacNeil, Voluntary Action Barra and Vatarsay
 Katie Denelly, youth worker
 Clare MacLeod, B.E.D.S. (Barra Events Development Support)

Skye:

Kevin MacNeil, writer / Caoimhin MacNèill, sgrìobhaiche
 George MacPherson, Skye Storytelling Festival
 Christine Primrose, Gaelic singer
 Dòmhnall Angaidh MacIllinnein, Iomairt Cholm Cille
 Duncan MacInnes, PAN, SEALL
 Arthur Cormack, Fèisean nan Ghàidheal
 Donnie Munro, Development Director, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig
 Norah Campbell, Director, An Tuireann
 MacLeod of MacLeod

Tiree:

Susan and Colin Woodcock, Blue Beyond Gallery
 Joyce Gillespie, Fèis Thioraidh
 Dr John Holliday, An Iodhlann
 Brian Milne, Tiree Arts Enterprises
 Jessie Gray, Fèis Thioraidh

Jane Rose, artist
Catriona MacLennan, Tiree Business Centre

Mull:

Gordon MacLean, An Tobar
Alasdair McCrone, Mull Theatre
Anne Baxter, Fèis Mhuile, Community Councillor, potter

Eigg:

Camille Dressler, Ealan nan Eilean
Ali MacDonald, Arts Development Officer (job-share), Lochaber Leisure

Islay:

Dr. Michelle MacLeod/ Dr. Michelle NicLeòid, Ionad Chalum Chille Ìle
Jane Cameron, Fèis Òigridh Ìle
Mairi Carmichael, Islay Gàidhlig Partnership, An Comunn Gàidhlig
Diane Brown, Fèis Ìle - Islay Festival of Music and Malt
Cllr. Robin Currie, Chair, Ionad Chalum Chille Ìle
Stuart Todd, Islay Arts Association

Jura:

Sharon Hoverty, Jura Music Festival

Arran:

Mairi MacInnes, Fèis Àrainn , Gaelic singer/songwriter

Bute:

Eileen Rae, Arts Development Officer, Argyll and Bute Council