

Inverasdale Community Centre – Wester Loch Ewe Trust (WLET)

Inverasdale is a very remote and fragile rural community in one of the 1% most rurally excluded parts of Scotland, with severe challenges but great assets.

When Inverasdale Primary School was moth-balled by the Highland Council in 2012, our community along the western shore of Loch Ewe (*the hamlets of Naast, Inverasdale and Cove*), formed a committee to organise a weekend of celebration of the school in June 2013. This led quickly to a desire to take the facility into community ownership as a catalyst to consolidate and strengthen our community and address obvious needs. Many of those who formed the committee are still volunteering for the project today and throughout the years local people have been consulted about their wishes regarding the acquisition and use of Inverasdale School and how to fulfil these wishes.

Where we are now

WLET received a Scottish Land Fund Stage 2 Award in May 2017 and completed the legal process for title transfer of the School building and grounds into community ownership in late November 2018. We have secured funding support from the Prince's Countryside Fund and the National Lottery in support of our project to build a kitchen to help us become fully self-sustainable as well as to provide much-needed services to the local community. More funding is required to allow the project to move ahead.

Community consultation to determine local peoples' needs is at the heart of what WLET is endeavouring to do. We began in November 2013 by administering a questionnaire to all households in the WLET area. It elicited a 61% response rate with suggestions regarding use of Inverasdale School premises and support for the proposals in the questionnaire. This was followed in November 2014 by an Open Evening at Inverasdale School where plans were outlined for bringing Inverasdale School into community ownership – these were unanimously supported. Various other community consultation events have taken place in the school including a 3-day community consultation by Architects in March 2016, the outcome of which was costed plans for renovation and extension of Inverasdale School. (*Funded by Awards for All.*) In November 2016 Community Enterprise held a Consultation Meeting in Inverasdale School and conducted a Local Survey (*Funded by Scottish Land Fund Stage 1 award.*) to assist WLET towards the SLF2 award. A community celebration was held on 27th May 2017 in the school to celebrate getting the SLF Stage 2 award. Several other community consultations have taken place, eg consultations throughout the winter of 2017-2018 to elicit the community's wishes for project progression – a kitchen was identified as the highest priority.

WLET is a well-organised body that knows its community. Many of the Board have been born, brought up, and have lived in the community all or most of their lives. Others are newer residents but all have a common purpose and determination – regeneration of the local area. Through regular consultations with the community WLET knows of local aspirations, listens to the community and endeavours to respond to community needs, e.g. the establishment of the 'drop in' afternoon in November 2015 to help combat social isolation which is still well-attended today.

Current Activity

We haven't waited to own the asset. We secured permission from the Council at an early stage to undertake various activities on an entirely voluntary basis to serve the community and test what would work in a renovated centre. WLET provides tourist services from the beginning of May until the end of October entirely staffed and provisioned by volunteers.

Tearoom: We operate a tearoom 2 afternoons a week throughout the season. The numbers coming vary throughout the season but we are regularly having over 30 visitors an afternoon.

Exhibitions: We manage and offer exhibitions. Currently, one centring on the history of Inverasdale School since 1877, the other on Wester Loch Ewe in the past.

Local Crafts and Produce: In addition to this, we have gathered a showcase of local talents – the art and craftwork of local residents and are beginning to sell Loch Ewe Salt and Seaweed, made just over a mile from the school. We also provide a small outlet for produce from Good for Ewe a local growing co-operative sited just half a mile away. We wish to extend and build upon this retail aspect of our project for the future, turning a volunteer-led project into one which provides local employment and thus helps stimulate the local economy.

Information Point: WLET also provides a small-scale information point for local venues and provides an outlet for sale of booklets on each distinct part of the wider local area.

Drop-in Service: Since November 2015, we have run a ‘drop in’ afternoon to help combat isolation and loneliness. This has proved a very successful service and is still going today by popular local demand.

The need in our community

WLET operates in a very remote, rural area stretching out on 9 miles of the west coast of Loch Ewe. There are no public buildings other than Inverasdale School. The local economy is very fragile due to a combination of low-income employment which is often seasonal, and decreasing population numbers. The area was not attracting new families or managing to get young people to stay due to lack of appropriate employment and services.

There is no shop, Post Office, church, etc. The nearest such services being at Poolewe – 9 miles from Cove. The population is ageing (23% of population is over 65 and a significant number are over 80) and losing families. There is no public transport service which means that people are dependent on driving or being able to use the Gairloch Community Car Scheme which involves booking in advance.

The communications infrastructure is very poor – approximately one-third of population cannot get broadband, the others suffer slow speeds, ‘drop outs’, etc. This compounds difficulties for the local economy as a significant proportion of people work from home and those who might settle due to being able to work at home depend on good communications infrastructure for daily contact with clients, head office, etc.

WLET plans to tackle the problems in our local area by the following means:

- providing employment through running tearoom, shop, provision of heritage exhibitions showcasing the local area, selling local arts, crafts, etc.
- addressing isolation – we already provide a successful drop-in and plan to build on this by introduction of men’s club evenings, local gatherings throughout the winter on at least a monthly basis for film shows, storytelling, etc.
- providing space for services and working with partners to provide suitable services *for locals and visitors* that can bring new investment into the area.