

DTA Scotland

GRASS-ROUTES

COMMUNITY PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABILITY

Case studies:

1. Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust
2. Garmony Hydro, Mull & Iona Community Trust
3. Greener Kirkcaldy
4. Newlands Community Development Trust

ISLE OF EIGG HERITAGE TRUST



ISLE OF EIGG HERITAGE TRUST



Lying 10 miles off the Scottish west coast, covering only 12 square miles, and with a population of 109, the Isle of Eigg is the second-largest of the Small Isles.

Motivated by a series of neglectful landlords and poor stewardship of the island's homes, infrastructure and natural environment, local residents mobilised to purchase their island. A community trust was formed, comprising local residents and organisations including the Scottish Wildlife Trust, that raised £1.5 million and completed the buyout in 1997. The island is now 'governed' by its residents through the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust (IEHT). The buyout has had a profound legacy beyond the island itself, including the establishment of the Community Land Unit within Highlands and Islands Enterprise to support future buyouts.

Since the buyout, the community and the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust have worked to improve the built and natural environment of the island. Given residents' physical and personal proximity to the natural environment, and their proprietary stake in its stewardship, conservation and sustainability are central to the community's activities and ethos. Environmental activities include renewable energy generation, conservation and maintenance, and eco-tourism, earning it the moniker of 'Britain's most eco-friendly island.'¹

¹ (The Guardian, 2017)

RENEWABLE ENERGY

Owing to the island's distance from the mainland, the national grid does not extend to Eigg. Instead, through a combination of hydroelectric, wind and solar power, the island is almost entirely powered by renewable energy, and has won various awards for its sustainable credentials. These include the Ashden award for cutting the island's emissions by a third,² Nesta's Big Green Challenge prize,³ and, last year, the European Solar Prize.⁴ With a combined generating capacity of 184 kilowatts, the various sources of renewable energy generate 95% of the island's energy use.⁵

Eigg's community trust established the island's own grid and renewable energy generation to reduce residents' reliance on polluting diesel-powered generators. To minimise the grid's impact on the natural environment and the visual landscape, all cables are buried below ground. Former arrangements, whereby individual households had used expensive, inefficient and polluting diesel-powered generators, had left some residents with unreliable electricity supply and in certain cases, none at all.⁶ Plans are currently being developed to complete this transition towards carbon neutrality by ending islanders' reliance on gas for heating and cooking, to find climate-friendly alternatives to current maritime and road transport, and exploring options for alternative fuels such as hydrogen and/or biomass.

² (The Guardian, 2010)

³ (The Guardian, 2010)

⁴ (Energy Voice, 2020)

CONSERVATION

In addition to their energy generation, the trust also works in active conservation and landscape renewal. After previous owners received subsidies for growing non-native and environmentally damaging spruces, the island has increasingly worked to grow native species from seed, and to manage and use these resources sensibly and sustainably. The trust has successfully planted over 290,000 trees in recent years and is intending to expand these activities over the next year to meet both environmental needs and heating requirements, while continuing to transition away from more pollutant gas and coal. In addition to this, they also undertake work to restore and maintain bogs, natural carbon sinks that can draw down CO₂ from the atmosphere.

ECO-TOURISM

Owing to its diverse scenery and wildlife, one of Eigg's primary sectors is tourism. Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust and the community have made great efforts to promote and sustain this industry, while minimising its environmental impact.

Because of their size, locations and populations, small islands like Eigg may have fewer potential industries to explore. However, as a small and remote island,

⁵ (Isle of Eigg, 2020)

⁶ <http://isleofeigg.org/eigg-electric/>

Eigg is also economically and environmentally vulnerable, so sustainability – in environmental, economic and socio-cultural terms – is therefore a key concern. There is a notable risk that tourism can detrimentally impact the natural environment and unique, fragile ecosystems like Eigg's. Given that the primary attraction of Eigg is its scenery and natural environment, such degradation would also imperil long-term economic viability. As such, the island highlights and refutes the false dichotomy between the environment and the economy.

Tourism is one of Scotland's largest industries,⁷ and sustainable tourism is regarded by the Scottish Government as one of the country's prime growth sectors.⁸ Eco-tourism refers to "the practice of travelling to less exploited natural destinations to appreciate the natural settings [...] while conserving the environments of the destination."⁹ This can help to support local economic development,¹⁰ though can also prompt environmental degradation and social disharmony.¹¹ An effective and truly sustainable approach to tourism therefore supports the natural environment as well as the local economy, culture and livelihoods.

Eigg is a prime example of putting this ethos into practice: the development of the tourism industry in Eigg is seen to have fostered positive environmental outcomes – including the appointment of a coordinator to oversee conservation and volunteers, a greater focus on preserving the island's wildlife, and growing awareness of sustainable practices among residents.¹² Active conservation work includes tree-

cutting and path-building to sustain tourism and the natural environment at once. Adventure sports have also been a prominent focus of the Small Isles Development Plan, with bike hires and active transport made available to visitors.¹³ Tourists are not, in fact, allowed to bring their cars to the island to limit pollution.

However, a doubling of tourist numbers has also had negative impacts in terms of pollution, water shortages, and waste disposal. The trust is now working with a consortium of other nearby islands to find ways to reduce packaging in shops, minimise waste and improve recycling services, among others, to reduce these harmful elements.

LOCAL IMPACT

Much of Eigg's environmental work has had significant impacts on local residents: the installation of an electric grid has connected new households to electricity supply, and improved the ease, affordability and security of supply compared to diesel generators. Factors like this, along with investment in good-quality homes has seen the island's population rise steadily: after dwindling over decades, the island's population has almost doubled from 65 at the time of the buyout to 109. In conjunction with the development of new industries and employment opportunities, this has helped to shore up the island's economy, future viability and prosperity.

⁷ (Visit Scotland, 2020)

⁸ (Scottish Government, 2021)

⁹ (Khanra, Dhir, Kaur, & Mäntymäki, 2021)

¹⁰ (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012)

¹¹ (Kousis, 2000)

¹² (Creaney & Niewiadomski, 2016)

¹³ Ibid

CONCLUSION

Sustainability and environmentalism are, for many of the islanders, not so much a policy agenda as a way of life. Residents' proximity – physically and personally – to the natural environment has imbued community ownership with a sense of stewardship, duty and care, echoing the findings of a recent report from Community Land Scotland.¹⁴ Residents reserve a 50% share of the vote within Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, with the remainder held by groups including the Scottish Wildlife Trust. There is therefore a strong conservationist bent to the trusts' decision-making.¹⁵

IEHT takes a cross-cutting and holistic approach to its work, including working with the natural environment – through renewable energy, sustainable forestry and eco-tourism – to secure long-term prosperity for local residents. As a small island community, the trust is uniquely well-placed to understand the island's needs and assets, and to find mutually-beneficial ways to dovetail these with their environmental work. This approach defies silo-working which can often overlook important factors or might implicitly encourage a 'bare minimum' approach. For governments and policymakers, this is not realistic given their sheer distance from the communities, areas and individuals concerned, pointing to the need for a stronger role for communities in delivering and implementing services.

Scotland has particular (historical) problems of absentee landlordism and poor land management, for which community ownership appears to be an effective tonic. The proprietary stake that this grants

residents in addition to their personal one, helps to ensure shared and effective stewardship of the environment, while democratised decision-making helps to ensure equitable and effective use of resources to serve local need.



¹⁴ (Macaulay & Dalgligh, 2021)

¹⁵ (Creaney & Niewiadomski, 2016)