



HARRIS | FORUM

*Progress / Partner / Protect  
Adhartas / Cairdeas / Dion*

*Pursuing development through community connection*

## Housing Subgroup

# Joint Strategic Housing Plan

2023

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## Vision

to **progress** plans and projects for housing aspirations throughout the Isle of Harris by working with **partners** to share ideas, resources and strategies to sustain the environment and heritage of Harris but create the opportunity of making Harris home for a growing community.



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## Partners

The members of the Harris Forum Housing Subgroup include the following:

- North Harris Trust
- West Harris Trust
- South Harris Community Council
- Harris Development Ltd

The following organisations have been co-opted onto the subgroup:

- Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
- Tighean Innse Gall
- Hebridean Housing Partnership
- Highlands and Islands Enterprise



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## Background on Isle of Harris

The Isle of Harris forms the southern part of Lewis and Harris, the largest island in the Outer Hebrides, situated 25 miles north-west of the Isle of Skye and 40 miles west of mainland Scotland. Harris divides naturally into northern and southern parts which are separated by West and East Loch Tarbert. These halves are joined by a narrow isthmus at the main settlement of Tarbert. A large part of the land is in community ownership, with North and West Harris community estates responsible for 33,125 hectares of some of the most rugged and scenic landscapes in Europe.

According to the *National Records of Scotland Mid-Year Estimates 2021* the population of Harris is 1795 which is a 6.3% drop from 2011. If the trend of population decline cannot be reversed, then the *Island's Growth Deal* estimates the population of the Outer Hebrides to fall by 16% over the next twenty years. Furthermore, a report by HIE entitled *Review of Fragile Areas and Employment Action Areas (2014)* places the Harris communities amongst the most vulnerable, not only in the Highlands and Islands, but also in the Western Isles.

The Isle of Harris has suffered continual economic decline for decades and the GDP of Harris is only two-thirds of the UK average.

The need to reverse population decline, strengthen communities and stimulate economic growth is critical for the Isle of Harris and the failure to act now could lead to key services, and the local economy, no longer being sustainable. Although there has been an increase in successful projects to stimulate economic development, the labour pool to ensure delivery is exhausted. Housing develop is a key element to stimulate economy and reverse population decline.



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## **Land Constraints**

A major factor that considerably frustrates housing development in Harris is the lack of suitable land or constraints associated with available land.

For many years local land trusts have flagged potential development land to key stakeholders such as CnES and HHP however, for a variety of reasons, such as unsuitable ground conditions or crofting related issues, these have not been advanced.

It is often the case that potential development sites have ground conditions that either make them too tough, due to rock, or too soft, due to peat.

Furthermore, the fact that most land is in crofting tenure means that land sales require approval from the relevant common grazing committee. Due to crofting legislation any sale of common grazing also necessitates compensation to be paid to the common grazing committee which makes sale of land more complicated and more expensive.

The development cost for housing in Harris per unit is also considerably higher than that of Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis due to most building contractors being based there.

There is a need then to create a detailed action plan for community groups, and other relevant bodies, on the steps required to identify relevant land and a need to create a list of potential developmental sites in Harris that could be further investigated.

## Assessing Housing Need & Demand

### North Harris Trust

In 2019 the North Harris Trust carried out a Housing Needs Survey that was aiming to reach the communities of North Harris and Scalpay. In total, 450 surveys were physically posted and the social media post directing people to the online version of the survey was seen 7766 times. **Despite these efforts, at the end of the survey period only 63 completed surveys were returned both physically and online.**

The results showed a need for housing ranging from one-bedroom properties to four- and five-bedroom accommodation. **Interestingly, over one third of respondents were looking for accommodation despite not being on the waiting list for social housing which is currently the only means of assessing need for affordable housing.** Also, over 10% of respondents were looking for their first home and without housing being provided for them they may relocate and only exacerbate the labour shortage and compound the depopulation issues.

### West Harris Trust

In December 2018, the West Harris Trust commissioned Tighean Inne Gall to carry out a Housing and Community Needs Survey of residents living on the estate. In total 96 surveys were posted, one to each household (78) and one to each business (18). **There was a 32% return rate from the surveys sent out to households and a 44% return rate from the surveys sent to the businesses.**

**Consistent with the North Harris Trust responses, only 4% of those who are considering moving home are on the Hebridean Housing Partnership waiting list.** The results also showed that 77% of respondents noted that their home would not meet their household needs within five years' time. The most striking statistic is that 100% of the respondents to the Business Survey stated that their business would grow more effectively with the increased provision of affordable housing in the area.



## Assessing Housing Need & Demand (2)

### **Harris Development Limited**

In November 2019, Harris Development Limited commissioned Threesixty Architecture to undertake a feasibility study of their keyworker accommodation project proposed for Tarbert. The project looks to create short-term accommodation units that could be rented to public and private sector organisations for their keyworkers to overcome the current accommodation crisis. The feasibility study was designed to look at the business accommodation needs in Harris but also offers an interesting insight from the responses to the community consultation survey.

Of the businesses that responded, it was noted that if the accommodation offering did not change for the following financial year that they would be looking to hire between seven and thirteen new staff for the following year. However, if the accommodation offering improved, they would be hiring between sixteen and twenty-eight new staff which is more than twice as many. Furthermore, the survey asked whether their current accommodation impacted on their decision to remain in Harris after their work contract ended to which 92% of staff said that they would stay if they had better accommodation.



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## Assessing Housing Need & Demand (3)

### Hebridean Housing Partnership

In 2021 Hebridean Housing Partnership commissioned Tighean Innse Gall to carry out a Housing Need Survey to establish the need and demand for housing and social housing in the Outer Hebrides at a community level. During early July 2021, a household survey was distributed by post to every household in the Outer Hebrides. There was also an option to complete an online version of the survey.

**The response rate was 15% from the combined paper and online surveys.**

The survey uncovered that there were 314 aspiring movers within the Outer Hebrides. **Of that number over 10% were based in Harris (which gave the highest percentage per area per number of households) and of that percentage almost two thirds were not on the social housing waiting list or current social housing tenants.** In total, the survey showed that there are 34 households in Harris who have identified themselves as being in housing need. The report also established that the only area in the Outer Hebrides where there is strong, compelling, consistent evidence from all sources that local people are being priced out of the open market is South Harris.

Finally, the report also dovetailed with the other housing need assessments by showing that the lack of housing was having a direct impact on the success of local businesses.



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## Assessing Housing Need & Demand (4)

### Comhairle nan Eilean Siar – Outer Hebrides Housing Need and Demand Assessment – 2023–2028

The above referenced document encompasses the whole of the Outer Hebrides in a similar way to the Hebridean Housing Partnership document. The aim of the document is to assist CnES with policy decisions on new supply, the use of existing stock, and the provision of housing related services. The document is not a representation of need, as such, but more a technical assessment.

**A General Housing Needs Survey was carried out which yielded 144 responses from private individuals.** The area that the greatest number of respondents wanted to live was identified as Harris. It also noted that 83% of respondents wanted to live rurally, as opposed to Stornoway, and 32% of respondents noted that their housing need was immediate.

**There was also a Housing Needs Survey carried out for organisations that yielded 37 results.** It again showed that the greatest needs were identified in Harris.

The document also references the waiting list for social housing and states that Harris was second highest in terms of demand with, at the time of writing, 45 waiting for a home and 12 awaiting a transfer.

## **Community Council Perspective**

### **South Harris Community Council**

As recent as February 2023, South Harris Community Council noted that they had development land in Leverburgh to build 12 houses which would meet the current need, at that specific time, of nineteen applicants on the social housing waiting list. Initially the decision was taken to only build six units in a first phase and a further six in another phase. However, following continual consultation with South Harris Community Council and a public meeting being held in Leverburgh with stakeholders, it was decided in August 2023 to build all twelve units in one phase. The news was welcomed by the Community Council who believe that even more housing will be required soon due to economic developments in the area.

### **North Harris Community Council**

North Harris Community Council are a member of the Harris Forum and a keen supporter of the need for housing developments. Although not currently a member of the housing subgroup, and without a current housing related project ongoing, the Community Council for North Harris is keen to be kept informed of any developments and will support member organisations in any way which it can.

### **Scalpay Community Council**

The Community Council that represents the Island of Scalpay is also a member of the Harris Forum and is a supporter of current developments ongoing on the island. The Community Council is supportive of the current Harris Development Ltd project to purchase the former Scalpay School to develop housing units. The Community Council for Scalpay is also keen to be kept informed of any other developments and will support member organisations in any way which it can.

## Key Documents

### Comhairle nan Eilean Siar – Outer Hebrides Local Housing Strategy 2017-2022

The purpose of this document is to set of the ambitions of CnES, and their partner agencies, for the delivery of housing and related services across all tenures. These ambitions are designed to facilitate and support the objectives of reversing population decline and enhancing public services.

The Local Housing Strategy has four key Strategic Outcomes, which remain relevant until 2024, which are listed below:

1. **Housing Quality** - Communities are sustained and re-vitalised through improvements to housing quality, condition, and energy efficiency.
2. **Housing Supply** - Housing supply is sufficient to support people's needs and aspirations and assist wider corporate aims.
3. **Homelessness** - Homeless clients can access a range of advice, support, and appropriate accommodation to suit their needs.
4. **Independent Living** - People can access services and accommodation which promotes and extends independent living.

Within the document a Housing Supply Target was set following extensive research and using market tools. The HST for the Outer Hebrides was set as follows:

- Social Rented: 35 Units per annum
- Below Market Ren/Equity: 15 units per annum
- Private Rented Sector: 12 units per annum
- Buyers: 30 units per annum

Although the Strategic Housing Investment Plan that covered the above period set out a requirement of 347 new affordable housing units over the period, a review report in April 2023 noted that 287 properties were added.

The LHS relies on community consultation at the initial draft stage, and it is imperative that the community in Harris is represented accurately.

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### **Comhairle nan Eilean Siar – Strategic Housing Investment Plan – October 2022**

The main purpose of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) is to set out the Comhairle’s affordable housing investment priorities in relation to the aims and objectives of its Local Housing Strategy and covers the five-year period between 2023-28.

The SHIP highlights that Harris is a leader in significant accommodation demand coming from economic sectors. It specifically highlights that finding ways to develop staff accommodation solutions will be a focus over the next period.

The intention of the plan is to develop 36 new housing units in Harris over the next 5 years. Although this is greatly welcomed by the Harris community, the fear is that the number of new units proposed is not enough and will only scratch the surface of current need and demand.

However, the SHIP is a live document that is annually updated which highlights the need for up-to-date and relevant data to be acquired from the pan-Harris perspective to underline the need that is perceived on the ground regarding housing.



## Hebridean Housing Partnership – Business Plan 2023

HHP are now moving into the final year of their business plan which is updated annually. The Business Plan agrees with the SHIP that one of the biggest challenges is the declining population with changing demographic. The aim of HHP is to work with partners to assist population retention and the regeneration of rural areas by increasing their housing supply.

The Business Plan also notes that housing demand is on the increase due to employers experiencing increasing difficulties with on-island recruitment. HHP have been approached by private sector employers seeking to lease properties to sub-lease to their employees because there are not sufficient accommodation units to meet labour demands.

The position of HHP is that the housing demand at present is broadly stable and they are increasing the supply of housing significantly through to 2026. Development beyond 2026 will be dependent on there being demonstrable need and demand.

### Current HHP Waiting List Figures for Harris:

04.10.2023	Waiting List - General Needs					Total
Parent Area	1	2	3	4	5	
5A TARBERT BUNAVONEADER CLIASMOL	19	14	4	1	0	38
5B SCALPAY BAYS	0	4	0	0	0	4
5C NORTHTON LEVERBURGH HORGABOST	5	12	1	1	0	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>61</b>



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## **Recent Harris Housing Developments**

### **James Place, Tarbert**

A development by Hebridean Housing Partnership comprising eight flats was handed over in January 2022.

### **Creag Aonaich, Scalpay**

The former Scalpay Care Unit was renovated into two new semi-detached properties. The development was progressed by North Harris Trust and was completed in early 2018.

### **Pairc Niseabost**

A project delivering six houses, 3 with 2 bedrooms and 3 with 3 bedrooms, was completed in December 2016. The homes were a joint project through HHP, CnES and the West Harris Trust.

A further four houses were developed by HHP via the shared equity scheme in 2020.

### **Ceann an Ora**

HHP worked in partnership with TIG and the North Harris Trust to develop 8 family homes which were completed mid-way through 2011.

The above examples show that there are many routes into housing development and ownership. Also, in the fifteen years prior to 2007 there were 32 housing units developed or refurbished by the North Harris Housing Association (a housing association in Harris that transferred assets to HHP before disbanding) with support from Tighean Innse Gall.



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## **Objectives**

The following are the objectives of the subgroup:

- to be the designated subgroup that all community organisations in Harris bring their housing projects to for support, advice, and consultation.
- to carry out a Housing Needs Survey for the whole of Harris which is representative of the community to understand the current situation.
- to work closely with all member organisations, and other relevant groups, to create a housing action plan document comprising of their housing projects aspirations over coming years which is guided by the data received from the survey.
- to create a data point for understanding housing need that may not be captured by the HHP waiting list.





## **Delivering the Objectives**

The following are the ways in which the subgroup expects to deliver the objectives:

- By meeting regularly with member organisations to encourage the progress of the housing projects.
- With the help of key stakeholders, use numerous methods to reach Harris residents with the Housing Needs Survey to collect data.
- By developing the Housing Action Plan document, in connection with the Harris Plan, to bring together all housing aspiration projects in Harris to one working document.



## Measuring the Success

The success, or otherwise, of the subgroup will be measured via the following methods:

- The subgroup would regularly seek consultation with all member organisations to understand how they could work more efficiently and overcome the housing crisis. The success of the outcome will be measured by all housing aspiration projects being progressed through the subgroup for support, advice, and direction.
- To be representative of the community the Housing Needs Survey must reach 70% of the population and have, at least, a 50% return rate.
- To be a relevant data point the above statistical return is also required to determine whether there is a Housing Need that is not being captured by the HHP waiting list.



## Conclusion

The creation of the Harris Forum Housing Subgroup, with the input from key external stakeholders and the approval of the mission statement, is a significant moment in the current housing crisis experienced in the Isle of Harris.

Harris has been struggling economically due to the housing market not being able to support the labour market sufficiently meaning that many Harris businesses are not able to reach their full potential, and for some, risk not being able to survive. When taken alongside the trend of depopulation crisis the future, as things stand, looks bleak for the socio-economic landscape of Harris.

The surveys carried out on Housing Need & Demand by local organisations become outdated very quickly which underlines the importance of gathering relevant data.

The Strategic Housing Investment Plan by CnES highlights 36 housing units to be developed in Harris through the vehicle of Hebridean Housing Partnership by 2026. However, the current feeling is that this number could be enhanced by further housing development options.

There is a need for the Housing Subgroup to carry out a Housing Need & Demand survey for the whole of Harris. It is hoped that the survey will show the current situation on the ground in the best light to influence delivery partners to develop in Harris as soon as feasibly possible. There is also a need to determine whether there is Housing Need for other types of housing that is not being captured by the HHP waiting list.

The partnership working, from Harris Forum member organisations and external stakeholders, shows that all groups are united in the joint desire to overcome the current housing crisis and to bring forward innovative projects. It is hoped that by continued partnership working, sharing resources, and carrying out the objectives highlighted in this document that the Housing Subgroup would be successful in reaching its goal of **making Harris Home** for a growing community.



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