

NHT Community Consultation 2022 Summary

Draft Action Points as of January 2023

Feedback points from our community consultation process held in November 2022 were presented to the NHT board of directors at the December 2022 board meeting. They were discussed by the board and divided into broad categories according to the NHT Strategic Plan of People, Economy, and Environment. Staff were asked to look at the points raised in detail and develop workable actions to be presented at the January 2023 board meeting.

People

Housing Provision

It was recognised that more housing availability is required in the area, particularly in Tarbert but also in other townships throughout the estate. It was thought that NHT should take a multi-faceted approach to housing provision. Part of this is developing its own properties, but also working with private developers and HHP wherever possible to increase provision. It was thought that NHT should consider buying existing properties rather than building, although associated upkeep and maintenance issues may preclude this in many cases, and funding streams often favour new-builds over the purchase of existing stock.

NHT has a strong focus on housing provision and has opportunities at Miabhag and West Tarbert to develop its own projects. In West Tarbert the model is innovative and may lead to a new way of delivering housing for young people who are the group most in need of affordable housing. We are also working closely with HHP to secure around 16 affordable housing units in Tarbert.

Action: Continue to develop existing NHT projects and support companies/individuals/other groups to develop housing where possible.

Public Parking Provision

Increasing public parking provision was raised for key locations where visitor pressure is experienced. NHT has planned to improve parking provision in Scalpay in 2023 and this work has been partly funded. Other key locations throughout the estate were costed in 2021. Out of these, the highest priority locations are assessed to be new parking at the Dam Track to the east of Amhuinnsuidhe and increasing parking provision at Miabhag. These were costed at £14,235 and £7,266 respectively.

As funding is not currently available, and parking provision is a lower priority in the estate maintenance budget than other infrastructure which requires attention, such as footbridge replacement, further parking provision cannot be delivered at present.

Action: NHT will monitor funding opportunities which may fit with improving parking infrastructure and assess the recently implemented charging system at Huisinis at the end of the 2023 season. This could be a model which allows the provision of increased parking infrastructure in other locations.

Community Engagement

NHT was commended on its good communication and community engagement as part of the 2022 consultations. It was suggested that more community meetings like these should be held, and newsletters or updates should be circulated regularly. In addition, it was recognised that the Trust website requires an overhaul as it has a dated appearance. Staffing for meetings, newsletters and online content is severely limited. However, a part-time student placement will be in place from February to July 2023.

It was suggested that NHT should be more representative, democratic, and transparent. We have been actively attempting to increase engagement and openness within the community. We can be easily reached by phone, email or at our offices. Meeting minutes are published on our website, and we strongly encourage members to attend the NHT AGM and stand for NHT Director vacancies.

Action: Marketing Assistant to refresh website, increase social media output, contribute to the De Tha Dol? and possibly draft a newsletter.

Action: Satellite meetings outwith Tarbert will be considered around the time of the AGM in March 2023. Online public/community meetings will also be considered at this time.

Community Activities

It was suggested that NHT should place a greater emphasis on developing and support community activities and events. NHT have plans to develop a West Tarbert Growing space by the end of 2023, dependent on funding availability.

Action: NHT will hold an event to celebrate 20 years of the Trust in summer 2023.

EV Charging Points

NHT has recently installed an EV charging point at Ardvourlie. The installation was funded through an HIE grant and it is forecast to operate without profit for the foreseeable future. Therefore, installation of further EV points throughout the estate (including at Huisinis Gateway) would require funding to cover installation costs.

Action: NHT will keep abreast of EV funding opportunities.

Support to the Crofting Community

It was suggested that NHT should remedy livestock issues, including facilitating common grazings fencing where necessary. However, these issues are the responsibility of each common grazings committee, therefore NHT will not become directly involved unless approached by the registered committee/clerk.

It was thought that NHT should work more closely with the common grazings committees and crofters. NHT considers that as a community landlord it has a good open relationship with tenant crofters in general, offers an excellent factoring service, is understanding and supportive of its tenants and can easily be contacted via the usual means.

It was suggested that NHT should act to increase the availability of croft tenancies on the estate. This could be through the creation of new crofts and/or asking the Crofting Commission to act on absentee crofters. NHT have investigated the creation of new crofts in recent years, however this is not a simple process, involves planning and significant associated admin costs. The resultant return for NHT and the community is not thought to be worthwhile. The Crofting Commission are actively being pursued on crofts where no rent has been received for a number of years, to no avail. The Commission are aware when croft tenants are absentee, as this is a matter of public knowledge, and have acted recently to terminate two tenancies in North Harris. NHT supports these measures where other avenues have been exhausted.

There was also a suggestion that croft rents should be increased further – to hundreds of pounds per annum. Given that NHT standardised rents at £10 in 2022, which meant an increase for most tenants, we are unable to increase rents again for some years. A significant increase in the region of hundreds of pounds per tenancy would likely trigger a land court case on fair rents and be unlikely to lead to the increases suggested. The right-to-buy and rents on grazings shares also further complicate matters. Therefore, while we understand where this suggestion comes from in seeking to reflect the value that a croft represents, it is unworkable.

NHT were commended for their work on the Native Habitat Restoration project which began to be implemented in 2022, particularly the provision of useful stock fencing for local crofters. Some disappointment was expressed that not all offers of fencing were accepted.

Action: Continued NHT openness to working with the crofting community, particularly to facilitate the broad use of common grazings and to support the replacement of crofting infrastructure where possible.

Roads Signage

It was highlighted that the B887 (road to Huisinis), may benefit from improved signage encouraging the proper use of passing places to permit overtaking.

Action: NHT will refer this matter to CNES Roads.

Economy

Donation Revenue

It was appreciated that as a charity, donations are a potential source of significant income to NHT. It was suggested that donations could be increased by offering a Will writing service in exchange for a bequeathment. It was also thought that NHT should explore ways to take advantage of the tourism opportunity in general, which is currently run on a voluntary donations-based system which does not generate large revenues except in Huisinis which has moved to a charging model.

Action: The John Muir Trust will be asked for their recommendations on increasing various donation paths as part of the NHT website renewal process.

Action: General donations shall continue to be monitored including the move to a charging system at Huisinis, and analysed for ways to increase revenue.

Foreshore Ownership

NHT was commended on securing ownership of the foreshore from Crown Estate Scotland, and the associated benefits that this represents immediately for local users of the foreshore as well as possibilities for future opportunities. It was highlighted how this enshrines the right to sustainable non-commercial use of the foreshore by the community, while providing an opportunity to generate income from commercial activities.

Action: NHT policy on the community use of the foreshore and its' resources should be produced.

Supporting Local SME

The need for more and better jobs was raised, and the potential for NHT to increase support for SME highlighted. Past opportunities that NHT have facilitated, such as the Scalpay School Craft Village were praised for the benefits they brought. It was thought that further projects such as this should be developed and craft-based SMEs were thought to be a particular opportunity which may attract funding from various sources. When developing other projects, including housing, it was thought that retail space should be considered as an inherent part of each project.

Action: Projects that would lead to SME business space creation shall continue to be developed where there is a likelihood of job creation. Funding possibilities also need to be explored.

North Harris Recycling Centre

It was thought that the profile of the Crofting Supplies business could be raised in the local community, including the breadth of supplies that it offers. It was also considered worthwhile to continue to diversify activity at the Recycling Centre and seek more commercial opportunities.

It was suggested that Recycling Centre staff should be given more work, e.g. making products for sale.

Action: The new Marketing Assistant shall promote the Crofting Supplies business once formal permission for the retail operation has been secured. The NHTC Board shall be asked to discuss how revenue can continue to be increased at the Recycling Centre site.

Renewables

The possibility for both Wind and Hydro power generation should be explored as a means to generate revenue for NHT and the local community. In the past these possibilities were limited by grid capacity, however as the interconnector comes online, it will be worth exploring how this affects the feasibility of projects. Past projects which could be revisited are a small-scale run of river hydro scheme in the Abhainn Mhàraig system, and wind turbines of various scales in multiple locations. With the end of the Feed in Tariff scheme, the financial feasibility of these projects may be more challenging than in the past.

Action: Staff shall keep up to date with progress on grid capacity increases, and when appropriate make contact with potential project delivery partners for both wind and hydro options.

Environment

Paths

Maintenance is urgently required on the Bogha Glas Track, which has become impassable as the path surface has been completely eroded in a few places and the peat/clay substrate is a waterlogged morass. Contractors have been asked for a quote to carry out the necessary works including drainage renewal on the first 800m of the track between Bogha Glas and Àirigh Gill Luisge and replacing the substrate with rock where the surfacing has eroded. This work should be completed before April 2023.

Building on the success of the new Lacasdail Circular Path, new paths should be considered elsewhere in the estate. Particularly for routes which are shorter and more attractive to regular local walkers. One example is the Scalpay waymarked routes which could be upgraded to more accessible paths.

Action: Route possibilities shall be assessed but taking options forward will be dependent on funding availability and the facilitation of associated parking provision.

Whaling Station

Following the recent publication of *The Whalers of Harris* by Ian Hart, there is renewed community interest in giving a proper sense of place to the Whaling Station at Bunavoneadar.

Any work on the site is heavily regulated due to its registration as a Scheduled Monument, and the surrounding site topography also severely limits development. NHT is in the process of gaining Scheduled Monument Consent to facilitate the removal of asbestos from the site, this work should be complete by April 2023. Further works will be unlikely to attract funding from Historic Environment Scotland or other sources, and would therefore require at least some direct NHT spend.

Action: The feasibility and cost of a small interpretation panel to explain the site history will be investigated for installation adjacent to a passing place overlooking the site. Extending this passing place to ensure road traffic is not unduly affected will be explored.

Estate (Un-)Tidiness

The general untidiness of the estate was commented upon. It was particularly highlighted that the public environment is deteriorating in Tarbert, with problems around the delivery of grass cutting in the village and the good presentation of public spaces.

Action: NHT staff will make an increased effort throughout the estate on car parks, bins, roadsides, beaches and so forth during 2023.

Action: NHT will seek a way to deliver a tidier Tarbert in summer 2023 working with Harris Voluntary Service, the Harris Forum, CNES and other partners.

Exclosure Maintenance

It was raised that fencing maintenance is required at the Gleann Miabhaig and Langadail exclosures.

Action: The sites shall be assessed in Spring 2023, the progress of native woodland establishment recorded, and a decision made on the future for the two exclosures.