

UNITED KINGDOM- SCOTLAND

Tiree Island: Tiree rural centre

Tiree is an island off the west coast of Scotland with a total population (in 2008) of 770 people in 339 households. The island is classified as 'remote rural' - separated from the Scottish mainland by a 4 hour ferry crossing which is served by one ferry a day in the summer and less in winter. The island is sparsely populated with 0.06 people/Ha. The economy is dominated by agriculture and tourism. The Tiree Rural Centre project is a community-led initiative bringing together the agricultural community of the island of Tiree with the wider rural community, through creation and running of a multi-purpose rural centre.

1. Project details:

Nature of the project: The Tiree Rural Centre was opened in 2002, primarily to provide an auction mart where the agricultural producers of Tiree could market their livestock. The livestock on Tiree are highly sought after for their quality and health status, particularly as replacement heifers for suckler cattle herds on the mainland as well as for finishing animals. Tiree producers were disadvantaged by having to transport livestock to sales on the mainland, where they would lose their unique selling point and often be obliged to accept a lower price than desired to avoid having to pay transport costs back to the island.

Significant areas of Tiree are designated under Natura for nature conservation, for globally important machair and wetland breeding and wintering bird populations as well as for corncrake. The environmental interest is of such quality that the whole island contributes to the Natura site objectives, even though only part of the island is designated. Management of these areas depends on maintenance of the agricultural systems used there; hence supporting the agricultural infrastructure of the island and the viability of the 80 or so agricultural businesses there, is of key importance to supporting the environmental interests of the island. The agricultural businesses are all taking part in agri-environment measures.

Initially, the Steering Group on the island identified a need for an auction mart to help retain agricultural value on the island. The group recognised that Tiree's community and economic viability is critically wrapped up in the sustainability of livestock and natural heritage, more uniquely than in many other farming communities.

Funding for an auction mart proved difficult to source so a much wider project for a multi-functional centre was developed, following extensive community discussion. The Rural Centre now houses an auction mart, offices, meeting space and an occasional cinema as well as a tearoom and soft play centre. Interpretation boards around the walls introduce visitors to the rich environment of the islands and the centre is also a source of leaflets and up-to-date information for the agricultural community.

This project connects European Regional Development policy (the significant funder of the project was the ERDF), with Rural Development policy, through which the agricultural businesses manage important habitats and species.

Links between agriculture and the rest of the economy

The mart services both the cattle and sheep sectors on the island, with 5 livestock sales per annum, for which buyers fly to the island. This provides better returns to the producers on the island and

increases the value of the agricultural sector – a principal economic sector on the island as well as the main land use.

The mart links to the wider rural economy through the provision of other facilities in the same building. It provides a franchise to run a tearoom within the centre and provides offices and meeting space for rent, in the absence of any similar facilities on the island.

Links are strongly made between agriculture and the rest of the economy through this project. The Tiree Rural Centre has a more critical role in livestock trading amongst this farming community than most other farming communities (where they have other equally available livestock marketing opportunities which Tiree doesn't have). Additionally, Tiree Rural Development Ltd has made a particularly strong link between the centre's contribution to livestock sustainability and natural heritage outcomes. The facilities available at the centre serve a high proportion of the community, supporting the social and economic infrastructure of the island.

Scale of the project

The project provided a rural centre to serve the island.

Beneficiaries and supporters

The project was proposed by the community of Tiree and was developed by the Tiree Rural Development Company, which is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. It's members are all the land managers of Tiree with members of the wider community as associate members. The development of the project was supported by agencies of the Scottish Government. In the case of Scottish Natural Heritage – the statutory conservation agency – this was on account of recognising the connection between the viability of agricultural businesses and social infrastructure on the island with the sustainable management of the natural heritage.

Finance

Capital funding of 640K was required to complete this project. 50% of this came from the European Regional Development Fund with the remainder from the local authority, the public sector enterprise agency, the statutory nature conservation agency, charitable trusts and the community itself.

Results

The Rural Centre project is a success – providing facilities for increasing returns from agriculture through 5 auction sales a year - as well as other much-needed community and business facilities. The centre is self-sustaining – generating income from renting the mart, offices, meeting spaces and the tearoom. Tiree Rural Development Company runs a number of spin-off land-based, access and tourism projects for which management costs are incorporated into the project funding.

2. Relevance of case study experiences for others

Problems: The biggest problems were in relation to securing funding and encouraging government to see the connections between the economy and environment of the island.

Transferability and mainstreaming potential: The project is an interesting example of joining community aspirations, with agricultural/rural policy and regional policy funding support. It was developed to address a particular set of circumstances, but understanding and supporting the

interaction between agriculture, environment and quality of life in remote rural areas is something that would be easily replicable in other situations.

Innovation: The project is innovative – it is very unusual for auction marts to be combined with facilities for the wider rural community. This innovation is being developed further through improvement of the auction ring as an occasional cinema – it has been used as such in the last few years, but was draughty and not particularly comfortable. Funding was won through a recent competition to enable the cinema facility to be improved.

Institutional aspects: The project began with the Objective One Programme Steering Group and was taken on by a newly-formed community company. This company was supported by public sector agencies and the local authority.

Social aspects: the café currently provides the only space on the island where young mothers can meet and entertain their children in a soft play area. It is also well-used by older people in the community as a meeting place for coffee and lunch. There are occasional art exhibitions in the foyer, attracting visitors and locals alike and the centre is well-used for meetings and surgeries.

Environmental aspects (for projects that are not strictly environmental): Although not an environmental project, this project is hugely important to the natural heritage interest of Tiree, which depends on continued sustainable agricultural management. Maintaining viable agricultural businesses and developing the social infrastructure of Tiree is fundamentally important in ensuring the European designated sites continue to achieve favourable conservation status.

Sustainability: The project is now self-sustaining and has strengthened links between the agricultural and wider community and between the community of the island and public sector agencies charged with economic development or nature conservation.

Lessons to pass on: A principal lesson from the project is the need to ensure that, in a small community, all decisions are clear, transparent, made according to pre-determined criteria or procedures and well-documented so that no-one feels aggrieved if they fail, for example, to win a particular contract.