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GALLAN HEAD COMMUNITY TRUST

Press Release:

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Community Buyout completes: environmental project starts to create local jobs and reverse decline

**Remote community unlocks “the Seven Wonders of a Secret Land”
CETUS programme stays on track.**

Residents of Aird Uig at the most north-westerly point of the UK have today successfully completed their community buyout of a former cold war surveillance site. Projects are already underway to help the local economy of a remote area by creating work and learning opportunities for local people.

Made possible by funding from the Scottish Land Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Big Lottery, and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the buyout has stimulated exciting plans for environmental schemes aimed at sustainable economic development and providing interest and enjoyment for thousands of visitors every year.

The Comhairle's Chair of Sustainable Development, Councillor Alasdair Macleod congratulated the achievement of the Gallan Head Community Trust (GHCT). *“Ownership of land that has been denied to the general public for so long as a prohibited area in Uig, Isle of Lewis will ensure that the community improves their environmental, social and economic well-being and the Comhairle congratulate their successful effort to acquire their land.”*

The buyout is the result of successful completion of the Scottish Government Community Right to Buy process, during which the community needed to address potential risks and liabilities arising from MOD tenure. GHCT says the MOD has been very supportive and helpful throughout the rigorous process, but that still left significant challenges to tackle. It seemed at times that the community might not be able to find the resources to take on the land and deal with the issues. After more than 100 meetings however, and with help and

support from many sources including HIE, the Comhairle, and the Scottish Government, all obstacles were overcome.

Jane Macintosh, Head of Strengthening Communities, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) said: *“Along with HIE and Scottish Land Fund, I am delighted that the Gallan Head Community Trust has completed their successful community buyout, which is a tribute to the hard work the group and community have invested in the project. Acquiring the land will give the local community the resources and control they need to deliver innovative projects for the benefit of people living in and visiting the area, to protect and promote their natural environment. We are looking forward to working with the trust in the future to help them realise their ambitions, and HIE is delighted to be supporting their crowd funding campaign to raise money for their exciting environmental projects.”*

Artist and author Jill Smith, chair of GHCT said: *“We are so fortunate to have this opportunity to share our amazing landscape and heritage to benefit our own and neighbouring communities. The Trust is highly motivated to make the most of the opportunities we now have. Small steps are already making a big difference. On behalf of the Trust I would like to express our great appreciation of the help and support we have been given by so many people.”*

The land formerly known as MOD Aird Uig does have some very special qualities. The community plans to return the land as much as possible to its natural state and to achieve a blueprint for conservation and land use consistent with a remarkable natural environment. Working with the Comhairle, the Trust has applied for remediation funding and awaits a decision next month.

Working with partners SA Instrumentation and Stornoway Astronomical Society, the Trust is striving to deliver the first phases of development during 2016. These include the installation of a marine hydrophone so that visitors can “have a cup of tea and listen to whales”; and hopefully the installation of a planetarium inside one of the former MOD buildings. The Trust will be working hard to find the funding necessary to continuously deliver small projects for the benefit of visitors and the environment.

A crowd-funding campaign is being launched today www.crowdfunder.co.uk/whales-and-tea . All support will be greatly appreciated. Funds will go towards the creation of a visitor centre for opening this summer. The Trust also launches its prototype website today at www.gallanhead.org.uk. Information about a planned volunteer scheme can be found there.

Martin Hayes, GHCT project manager said *“Our approach will be to develop in small steps, engaging the community, our partners and the public at every stage. We especially want to involve young people wherever we can and we hope that our projects will help to encourage young families to settle here. Our flagship project, CETUS, aims to establish a multi-purpose observatory for the study of dark skies and marine wildlife”.*

CETUS Patron, Astronomer Royal for Scotland Professor John Brown, is to visit Aird Uig soon to meet local people. Whilst visiting, the professor plans to visit the Nicolson Institute to discuss opportunities for encouraging and recruiting student interest.

Work has begun on converting a house for use as the Gallan Head visitor centre, and health and safety improvements are underway to make the land safe for public access. An opening celebration is planned for May.

Weather permitting (84mph winds are forecast), a smaller celebratory gathering today will replace an imposing “keep out” sign with something more aesthetic and much more welcoming. From that point, the land will be accessible to all comers and its secrets revealed for the first time in 65 years.

The Seven Wonders of a Secret Land (in no particular order....)

- 1 Geography** The most north-westerly point of the UK, overlooking the fishing grounds of the beautiful Loch Roag: West to Greenland: North to the Faroe Islands, spectator to the journeys of the Norse and the Vikings, the migrations, the convoys, and the shipping routes of today. Some of the UK’s highest cliffs and biggest sea caves.
- 2 Landscape** In a National Scenic Area, breath-taking views north to the Islands of Berisay, Old Hill, Pabbay, up the west coast of Lewis, across the Barvas moors, over the Uig and Harris Hills, down to St Kilda (on a clear day”!) and across to the Flannan Isles. “Amongst the finest scenery anywhere in Scotland”
- 3 Dark Skies** There is no light pollution. On a clear night the milky way appears as a white stripe across the sky. A very good vantage point for the aurora borealis.
- 4 Contemporary History** 100 years of surveillance through two world wars. An important part in the cold war and in operation through to 2010.
- 5 Heritage** The Norse occupation, early theologians, the greatest fisheries, evictions and migration, last stand of the Lewis Macleods, prehistory settlers, archaeological mysteries, the missing lighthouse men; all happened here.
- 6 Marine wildlife** Whales including Orca, Pilot, Humpback, Minke; Basking Sharks; Sunfish and porpoises, dolphins and seals. Fish shoals and many seabirds. Amongst the clearest and least polluted of Uk waters.
- 7 Weather** Anything can happen at any time – but you can see it coming! Wind speed in the January 2015 hurricane were estimated at 170mph. Waterfalls sometimes go uphill, sea spray crosses the peninsula from west to east.



www.gallanhead.org.uk

www.crowdfunder.co.uk/whales-and-tea

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For more information, please contact the Trust at info@gallanhead.org.uk

Notes to Editors: Gallan Head Community Trust was established in September 2014 by the small and very remote community of Aird Uig on the Isle of Lewis. The purposes of the Trust are:

- To manage community land and associated assets for the benefit of the Community and the public in general.
- To provide, or assist in providing, recreational facilities, and/or organising recreational activities, which will be available to members of the Community and public at large with the object of improving the conditions of life of the Community.
- To advance community development, including regeneration within the Community.
- To advance the education of the Community about its environment, culture, heritage and history.
- To advance environmental protection or improvement including preservation, sustainable development and conservation of the natural environment, the maintenance, improvement or provision of environmental amenities for the Community and/or the preservation of buildings or sites of architectural, historic or other importance to the Community.