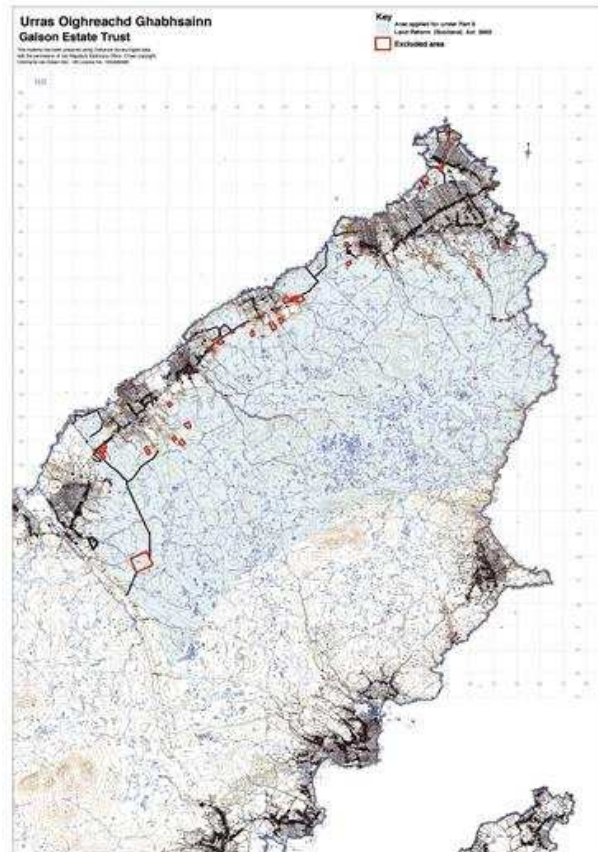


## Innovative Community Communications



### **Galson Estate Trust working in partnership with Lews Castle College, UHI**

**A new community limited company is in a unique position to play a key role in the social, economic, and environmental development of the area in partnership with Lews Castle College UHI. This collaboration has been brought together by an innovative project called HI Links led by the UHI Millennium Institute.**

Galson Estate Trust was incorporated in 2004, with over 1150 shareholders covering an area of 22 crofting townships on 56,000 acres of land. They started to explore innovative new ways of applying learning technologies and software for collaborative working to enable new and more efficient ways of sharing information with company members, local residents, and visitors.

UHI HI Links provide companies in the Highlands and Islands with a unique service by linking them to Scottish academic expertise. Specifically they provide one-to-one free consultancy and financial support and guidance to help develop new business ideas ([www.hilinks.uhi.ac.uk](http://www.hilinks.uhi.ac.uk)). With the help of a grant from UHI HI Links, Galson Estate Trust were able to commission Lews Castle College, a key member of the UHI Millennium Institute, based in the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, to conduct a feasibility study on their behalf.

The work was undertaken by Dr Frank Rennie, Head of Research and post Graduate Development, assisted by Mairi MacIver and Professor Robin Mason of the Open University. They investigated the possibilities of creating an interactive website for Galson Estate Trust in which the content would be generated by the shareholders, community organisations and businesses on the estate.

The aim was twofold: to investigate ways to generate increased tourism for the area and to explore community ownership and interaction as a sustainable tool for local development.

The availability of broadband networks throughout the area was a major criterion for considering the following features:

- The utilisation of social software to establish online communities for the greater sharing of information and better management of the business between Board and shareholders (e.g. social networking software such as Elgg or Basecamp)
- The utilisation of existing free (Open Source and Creative Commons) interactive software to provide online interpretive facilities on the natural environment, heritage, and culture of the area both for tourism and to project a self-determined brand image of the company and its region (e.g. applications such as wikis, blogs, Flickr, YouTube, and location-based narratives)
- The development of a community portal to provide a focus for local businesses and organisations operating on the estate in order to support and stimulate the local business environment (e.g. Google maps, podcasts, and merchandising outlets).

There have been a number of positive outcomes from the feasibility study. It has generated considerable enthusiasm and commitment by the members of the UOG board and the businesses and other residents of the estate involved in the study.

A local business, which specialises in Open Source software, emerged as a useful contributor to the study bringing valuable skills and expertise to the project. Their suggestion to use a publishing software package, to develop the website will significantly increase the commercial impact of the project, particularly a built in e-commerce facility whereby users (e.g. tourists) can book and pay in advance for their services such as accommodation, meals etc.

Most significantly, the feasibility study has enabled the proposers to develop a successful bid to the highly competitive HIE "Tourism, Heritage and Technology Challenge Fund", where an award of £40,000 will enable the project to move past the feasibility stage to full implementation of a new website and processes. To see the website please visit <http://www.galsontrust.com>

The use of Open Source software and Creative Commons license, together with the concept of user-generated content provided by community volunteers means that the project will be self-sustaining without further financial support. As forecast, opportunities for UOG to act as consultants to other communities have already emerged and future knowledge transfer should provide a small income to UOG.

"**HI Links** is a project supported by a SEEKIT grant from the Scottish Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and UHI"

