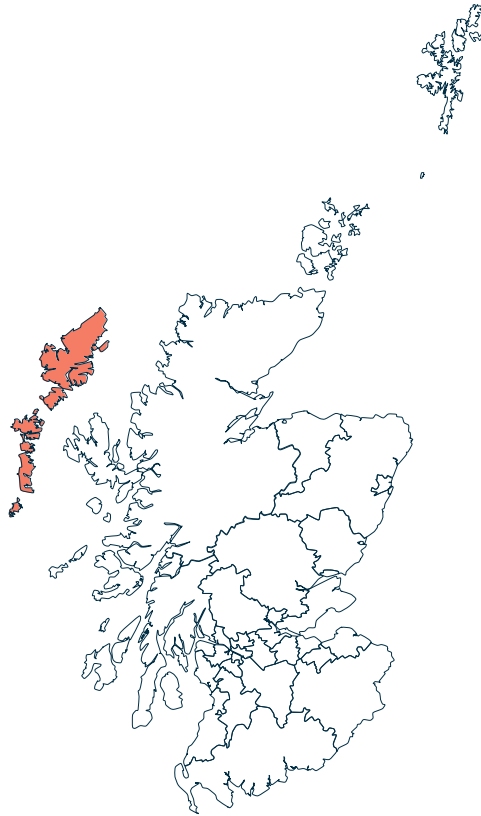


Keeping an island project on track – resetting ambition to protect public value



LOCATION: Western Isles / Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

DATE: September 2026

OUTCOME:  Investment

The challenge

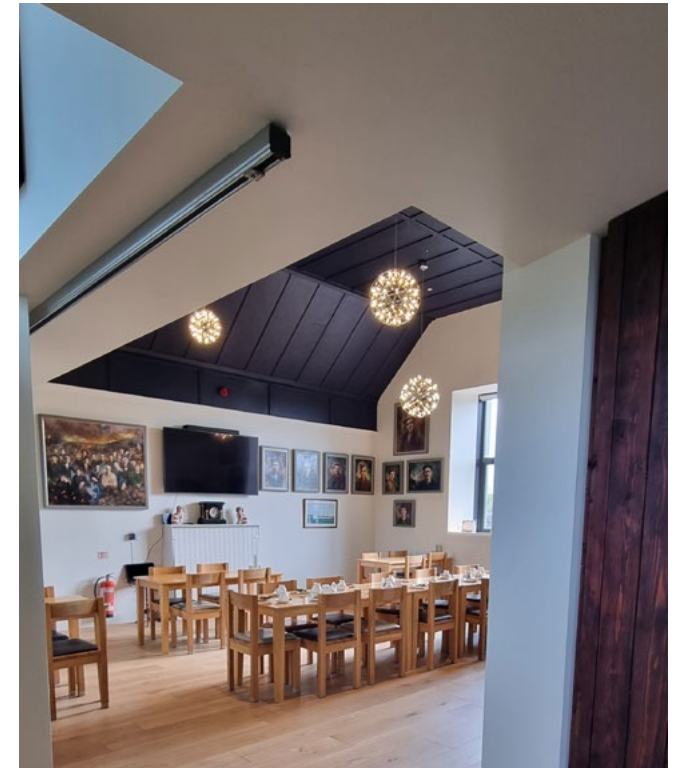
Comunn Eachdraidh Nis (CEN) on the Isle of Lewis in the Western Isles plays an important role in the community of Ness, supporting local heritage, culture and economic activity.

In autumn 2025, the centre was awarded £195,230 through the [Scottish Government's Islands Programme](#) to help expand and adapt its facility to meet growing demand for space.

The wider project, with a total cost of £291,181, was designed to improve accessibility, particularly to the café, create greater flexibility for year-round community use, and strengthen commercial activity and income generation. Highlands and Islands Enterprise provided additional funding.

But as the project moved towards procurement, a significant problem emerged. Tender returns exceeded the original budget and the available Islands Programme funding. The design had evolved into a more ambitious and bespoke refurbishment than the funding brief required, increasing costs and construction risk.

With the end of the 2025/26 financial year approaching, there was a real risk that the funding could not be claimed within the required timeframe – potentially putting the wider project at risk.



Picture credit: Comunn Eachdraidh Nis



A proportionate reset

The challenge was not simply about finding more money. There was a fundamental misalignment between the purpose of the funding, the level of design ambition and the project's affordability and governance arrangements.

SFT's Islands Programme and Place, Housing and Economic Investment teams worked closely with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES) officials to help bring these elements back into alignment.

As the year-end deadline approached, SFT provided technical support and helped create a focused, constructive conversation between CnES, CEN and its architects. Rather than attempting to preserve every element of the original design, the focus was on identifying what was genuinely essential to make the project viable and deliverable.

SFT helped anchor those discussions around three simple questions:

- 1 What are the non-negotiables?
- 2 What are the minimum requirements needed to make the project viable?
- 3 What changes to governance are needed to maintain cost and delivery control?

These questions provided a practical framework for resetting the project without losing sight of its wider ambitions.

Protecting investment and moving forward

The resulting reset gave CnES a clearer basis for making decisions, bringing the project back within a realistic delivery framework while maintaining constructive relationships with CEN.

Crucially, the approach protected the £195,230 Islands Programme award, which was successfully claimed within the required deadline. It also established a more realistic platform for future phases of development once the initial works have been stabilised.

The project is now progressing, with completion expected in September 2026.

The wider lesson

The experience highlights an important lesson for publicly funded projects: successful delivery is not always about finding a way to deliver the original design. Sometimes it means having the right conversations early enough to reset ambition, manage risk and protect public value.

By bringing together technical insight, funding requirements and delivery realities, SFT helped turn a potential funding and affordability challenge into a structured reset – keeping an important island investment on track while creating a stronger foundation for what comes next.

Having SFT involved at a critical point in the project gave us the clarity and confidence to move forward. Their practical approach helped us focus on what was essential, manage the challenges around cost and delivery, and protect the funding that is so important to the community's plans.

TINA MACLEAN, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OFFICER FROM COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIA

