

P24 Acheninver Hostel Restoration



Project Overview:

Acheninver Hostel is set in Coigach and has been an iconic part of the local landscape for a long time and was recorded in the 1875 Ordinance Survey. It is a former 18th century croft house, owned by Scottish Wildlife Trust as part of Ben Mor Coigach Estate. The croft house became a Scottish Youth Hostel Association (SYHA) youth hostel in 1938 when hiking and hostelling was the new big thing. Since then, people of all ages have stayed there: walked The Rock (the Postman's Path from Ullapool); climbed the local hills, enjoyed the scenery and made friends. Many have returned and remember the hostel fondly as their introduction to the area. In 2015, after 77 years SYHA gave up their lease on the building. Coigach Community Development Company (CCDC) was set up in 2010 to help create a sustainable future for the community. CCDC supports and promote any projects which it feels will benefit the community. The Scottish Wildlife Trust advertised the hostel for long term lease. And following a joint interview process by Scottish Wildlife Trust and CCDC, a local, young family was selected from 9 applicants and took on the lease.

Acheninver Hostel is a traditional drystone lime mortar building providing sleeping accommodation for 23 persons and is a highly valued asset for the Coigach community. The facilities have been upgraded as an independent hostel with the development of 4 self-contained Sleeping Pods, improved showers and addition of WiFi for guests, while still providing the 'foot in both worlds' feeling of being close to wild nature. As the main building is an 18th century croft house it also requires upgrading and expansion to provide sufficient accommodation of a modern standard for today's visitor. Much of this work will be done by the hostel tenant but significant capital items that cannot be done in this way is lime mortar repointing repairs to external walls, and installation of new windows.

Project lead organisation and other organisations involved: Scottish Wildlife Trust/ Acheninver Hostel

Project Location: Coigach

Project dates: Sept 2019 - Sept 2020

Project Outputs

Measure	Target	Delivered	Notes
Upgrade kitchen facilities to accommodate 23 persons	1	1	Kitchen upgraded.
Building will be suitable for overnight stays, by groups of up to 23 persons.	1	1	Exterior walls rendered and windows refurbished.
The building will demonstrate traditional building techniques and offer a sympathetic addition to the area's landscape and infrastructure	1	1	Exterior walls rendered with lime mortar.

Scheme Outputs

How has the project contributed to the CALLP Scheme Outcomes:

	1. The key features of the Coigach and Assynt Landscape will better understood and restored with a fit for purpose system in place to ensure the benefits are sustained.
	2. Where appropriate the connectivity and diversity of selected habitats will be mapped.
	3. Increased awareness and understanding amongst all individuals and groups of what makes Coigach and Assynt special and the threats to the unique heritage.
Y	4. Important elements of the built, cultural and natural heritage will be recorded, improved, made publicly accessible and celebrated by the local community. <i>The exterior walls of Acheninver Croft House have been rendered and the windows and kitchen refurbished.</i>
	5. People will have gained new skills in researching, restoring and understanding their heritage.
	6. Collected data, information and interpretation will be more accessible in the public domain including posting on appropriate websites.
	7. Local groups and individuals understand, enjoy, value and take action in the Coigach and Assynt area in ways they did not at the outset.
Y	8. Increased access infrastructure at key strategic locations enabling people to enjoy the natural and cultural heritage of the area. <i>Acheninver Hostel continues to trade allowing people to enjoy the natural and cultural heritage of the area.</i>
Y	9. Increased opportunities for informal recreation that promotes health and well-being benefits. <i>Acheninver Hostel continues to provide a base for exploring the landscape and natural heritage of Coigach.</i>

Reflecting on the last 5 years, what's the one thing that you're most proud of that has come from your project being part of CALLP?

Iconic Hostel Shines

The project has provided a makeover to the iconic Hostel that now literally shines in the sunshine. The work of the rendering required the chipping out previously applied cement and replacing it with lime mortar. The finish will ensure that the Acheninver Hostel will be able to continue to accommodate visitors and support the tourism industry of Coigach.

What difference has this project made to the built, cultural and natural heritage of Coigach and Assynt?

The exterior walls of the iconic building have been restored using traditional techniques, removing ill-advised cement patching and rendering with lime mortar, ensuring the Acheninver Croft House is now watertight. The refurbishment of the kitchen and the replacement of the windows will encourage visitors to stay and ensure the croft house is still in use and maintained for decades to come.

What difference has this project made to People?

The project has supported the iconic hostel that has been operating for more than eight decades and is remembered fondly by past visitors, and visitors to come. In a location where affordable accommodation is at a premium the Hostel provides a refuge to less affluent visitors. The outcome of the project is that the Hostel will continue to provide benefit to visitors for decades to come.

"Support from the CALLP Scheme has been invaluable in upgrading the quality of visitor experience at Acheninver Hostel. The deterioration of the external walls was causing damp at the best of times and pools of water in the downstairs rooms during heavy rain. The condition of the windows had whistling drafts coming into the bedrooms. The kitchen was run down with broken appliances and an old gas fire that added to the condensation. Now the hostel is not forced to close in the winter because of not being able to offer warmth and comfort to guests all year round. This extension in opening season and general upgrade in quality of facilities will contribute to Acheninver Hostel continuing as a sustainable business for the decades to come. Providing affordable accommodation in Coigach and facilitating access for visitors from all walks of life to the landscape and community."

Ruth Bradley, Hostel Manager

Acheninver Hostel is very popular site with both international and domestic visitors. On Freetobook, the primary online booking platform for the hostel, the review scores are 4.8/5 with 489 reviews. On Booking.com the review scores are 9.4/10 with 354 reviews.

This review is typical of how guests write about their stay:

"The location is absolutely spectacular. A short walk down a country path with a lovely stream brings you to the hostel where you are met with breathtaking 360 views. Exceptionally clean with more amenities than we expected and the value for money is terrific. Would definitely stay here again."
21/08/21

"The restoration work on Acheninver Hostel using traditional lime work and a sympathetic use of newer technologies has helped to maintain the building for future generations while making it a more energy efficient and inviting space." Iain Simpson, local resident

"I'm delighted to see the hostel restored to its former glory. It's an iconic building in the local area - distinctive with its red roof and white walls and a good example of highland vernacular building. The hostel sits by the Acheninver burn, on a popular walk, now known as the Acheninver Coastal Path which has also been improved as part of the CALLP Scheme. The two projects complement each other - the hostel is now more easily accessed due to the improved path, and the improved exterior of the hostel, enhances the walk. The hostel building features in numerous photographs of the area, but while it remains picturesque it's a working building appreciated by the local community and visitors alike."
Julia Campbell, hostel neighbour

"It's brilliant to see investment in the Hostel - it's such an iconic building and must be a wonderful place for people to stay. A healthy well-looked-after hostel is important for the whole area." Lizzie Williams, hostel neighbour

"We both think it's great to see the hostel up and running again especially with the new pods and renovations which fit in so well in the location." Iona Macleod, neighbouring Crofter

Useful Links

<https://acheninverhostel.com/>

<https://www.coigach-assynt.org/>

<https://en.freetobook.com/>

Future Plans and Legacy

The Hostel will continue to trade and provide accommodation in the coming decades. The Hostel tenant is committed to maintaining the building.

Lessons Learned

What are the three positive lessons gained from the scheme:

1. Importance of understanding the full ramifications of the different phases of a build project on operations of the hostel business. The ability to time the main lime mortaring for the first COVID lockdown was fortuitous as I did not have a complete understanding of what 'covering the mortar to slow drying' meant and the 3 weeks of having the main building fully covered in tarps would have been a big obstacle had guests been onsite.
2. Learned the chemistry and practical applications of lime mortar and how to maintain the building with periodic applications of lime wash.
3. That the hostel is held in high regard by people all over the village, the UK and the world and the positive feedback on the restoration works is ongoing.

What are the three negative lessons gained from the scheme:

1. That you can get used to things not working and deteriorating to the point where it's functionally invisible and now that the hostel is restored it feels imperative to maintain and continue to improve this standard for the benefit of visitors both using and viewing the hostel buildings.
2. Complex project management in remote areas of the Highlands is made more difficult when scheduling tradespeople to be onsite. Need to factor in a lengthy timescales to make sure they are available when needed.
3. Even a well planned project is vulnerable to unpredictable circumstances. The impact of the pandemic and lockdown on supply chains made some delays as the lime mortar contractor had difficulty sourcing protective face masks and builders sand.

Funding Partners



Scottish
Wildlife
Trust



Photographic Evidence



Acheninver Hostel Croft House before and after rendered front southern wall and refurbished windows © R Bradley



Acheninver Hostel Croft House refurbished kitchen © R Bradley



Hostel manager Ruth Bradley promoting a more hospitable and warmer Acheninver Hostel Croft House © Ruth Bradley



Project completion recognition © R Bradley