

# CASESTUDY: COTHROM'S INTEGRATED & HOLISTIC SUPPORT

## KEY INSIGHTS

- ✓ As a community learning and development centre, Cothrom is a good example of a community enterprise that is deeply connected to its island community, committed to meet the changing needs of the local island community for over 30 years. Some 200 learners attend Cothrom every year, and it has employed 20+ staff for many years.
- ✓ Because of their commitment to and understanding of the local community, Cothrom delivers diverse services that seek to provide integrated and holistic support tailored to the needs of each individual learner, by addressing educational, social, economic, financial and housing needs, mental and physical health, childcare, as well as environmental challenges.
- ✓ To deliver integrated holistic support, community organisations develop a dense web of partnerships with public, private and community partners. In Cothrom's case, examples include the local council (CnES) and public sector support services, local businesses, e.g. for employability and apprenticeships, and local community organisations like Caraidean Uibhist which delivers befriending and dementia support. Cothrom participates, and in some cases chairs, a wide range of local partnerships, for employability, community learning and development, health and social care, substance misuse and child poverty.
- ✓ The diverse services of local organisations like Cothrom deliver many positive externalities for the local community and economy. For example, Cothrom's furniture restoration centre, ReStore, set up to provide opportunities for skills development and employability, reduces how much waste goes into landfill, contributes to a circular economy, and ensures anyone in crisis has access to free furniture in their new home through Furniture Hardship Grants. By delivering full-time childcare all year, the nursery, Cothrom Òg, enables local parents to work, and to attend vital learning and social opportunities at Cothrom while their children are looked after. Cothrom's horticulture activities provide opportunities for skills and qualifications, and also increase local food production. As an accredited learning centre, Cothrom has in fact trained many of the nursery staff in centres across Uist and Barra, and the workers promoting horticulture, for example at Tagsa Uibhist.

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*"We have a focus on those with complex learning barriers, like young school leavers and parents looking to enter/re-enter employment. The best way to explain our approach is through case studies. One example is a young man who joined us in January 2023 having moved to the island and then subsequently finding himself homeless following a family fall out. Within the hour staff had accessed temporary accommodation through our partner network; within 48 hours he had permanent accommodation, staff applied for crisis grants so he could purchase white goods, we completed an application for the hardship furniture fund and delivered it to his new home. He was unemployed and wanted to work in construction, so we enrolled him on our Practical Skills course alongside supporting him to gain his Construction Health and Safety and CSCS card (needed to work on sites). We then contacted local companies and managed to find him employment. He is still in employment and is now self sufficient with his income allowing him to have a higher quality of life."*

Kevin Morrisson, Chief Executive, Cothrom

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## CASESTUDY

Cothrom (Gaelic for Opportunity) is a Community Learning and Development organisation, based in South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, serving a population of approximately 6,000 in a chain of nine inhabited islands stretching 100 miles from Berneray to Vatersay (Cothrom has a small satellite learning centre on Barra).

Each year 200 learners attend Cothrom, including many facing unemployment, learning challenges, disability, mental health conditions, addiction, social isolation, lack of services and/or poverty. The team of over 20 staff, from learning tutors to specialist staff like the recovery worker, have in-depth experience and expertise in supporting individual learners, each with their own individual learning plans. Cothrom's services use a person-centred approach to support individuals to build resilience, self-efficacy and self-confidence as well as learning and skills.

### Some of Cothrom's objectives reflecting its holistic approach

In addition to delivering qualifications and employability skills to support learners (back) into work, Cothrom also seeks to enable learners to achieve outcomes like the following:

- feeling increased self-worth
- increased physical health
- increased understanding of mindfulness and coping mechanisms
- increased lifeskills, such as cooking and budgeting
- enhanced social interaction amongst peers
- increased access to practical support (from agencies, hardship funds, etc.)
- increased support, skills (employability, financial, etc.) and free events for families, including those affected by someone's substance use
- enhanced prevention by reducing isolation for individuals and enhancing the ability of families to cope during the cost of living crisis



As a community owned and managed charity and social enterprise, Cothrom derives 70% of its income from contracts and grants for delivering services, and 30% from nursery provision and ReStore sales.

Initially set up in 1992 to support women returners to work, Cothrom has always had a strong commitment to providing childcare. When it opened its purpose-built learning centre in 2017, the centre of course included a nursery, the only all-year full-time nursery in Uist, and also fully Gaelic immersive in keeping with the local culture. Cothrom Òg now takes children from 0 to 5 years.

As an established SQA accredited training provider, Cothrom delivers a diverse portfolio of opportunities, formal and informal, for adult learning and skills training, from Scottish vocational qualifications special programmes for those furthest from the job market. The vocational qualifications are focused on key sectors in the local economy, like childcare, health & social care, hospitality, food & drink, horticulture, business & administration, and health & safety in construction; also adult learning (from core skills like ICT, numeracy & literacy to mental health units) and employability provision; and training in a wide range of business skills, from bookkeeping to driving theory. Of particular value for skills training and building self-confidence has been Cothrom's purpose-built furniture upcycling/recycling unit and shop, providing opportunities to develop skills in, for example, furniture repurposing, woodwork, textile work and upholstery, painting, IT and retail.



Geographic isolation has meant that access to services is often very limited. For 30+ years Cothrom has continuously sought to meet the changing needs of local communities in Uist, and in Barra. Over this time Cothrom has developed a proven track-record of supporting adults, young people, families, and the most vulnerable, not just to increase their ability to access employment and to enhance their household income, but also through day services, an addiction recovery programme, parental and family support, homelessness and advocacy support, a Youth Café and a wide range of community programmes.

And recently the cost-of-living crisis has had a huge impact on many learners and their families, so Cothrom has developed more services, including financial (hardship) support, social and education activities to address these challenges, delivered by Cothrom staff and by using the centre as a safe confidential space for learners to meet with statutory services. Cothrom's Inclusion Officer is developing and coordinating activities to address the increasing numbers of individuals and families who are excluded, including through economic hardship, and is also engaging with local partners like community councils to address community-wide strategies of support.

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*"I think the reason Cothrom works so well is because we're integrated into the community and there are so many different parts to it. We've got a lot of community engagement projects, learning opportunities and we try to support families with whatever their needs may be, as they need them. We work closely with a number of different organisations locally and we use our resources as best we can to support anything else that might be going on in the community."*

*"With the additional funding under this community action project, we have developed a bespoke parent focussed return to work programme and use our on-site nursery to provide funded childcare while parents study. The programme is in place to support parents to apply for higher skilled jobs that will increase household income and bring more families out of poverty."*

Kevin Morrison, Chief Executive, Cothrom

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## DELIVERING ON SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

This casestudy shows very clearly how community organisations and enterprises can deliver on so many Scottish Government priorities, for example within the [National Performance Standards](#), including its core purpose of “opportunities for all ... to flourish through increased wellbeing, and sustainable and inclusive economic growth” and its values of “a society which treats all our people with kindness, dignity and compassion”. Cothrom delivers directly to all of these **outcomes**:

- We are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society
- We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential
- We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe
- We are healthy and active
- We tackle poverty by sharing opportunities, wealth and power more equally
- We value, enjoy, protect and enhance our environment

### Some challenges in Uist

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Forty percent of Universal Credit claimants in the Outer Hebrides are in low skilled employment, and there are high levels of underemployment across the islands, including among young people and young parents. Young single parents in particular face challenges with childcare spaces and costs prior to them being eligible for the 30 government funded hours at the age of 3. At the same time, there are a lot of skilled posts available on island which face significant recruitment challenges.

Addiction remains a significant challenge within the community, with the limited availability of statutory services in the islands to reduce these numbers, which can be compounded by homelessness. Individuals within the islands can also face social isolation.

Most recently the cost-of-living crisis has significantly added to challenges. Energy costs for households in the Outer Hebrides have risen by 240%, **with 80% of households in fuel poverty in 2023**. There has been a marked increase in referral rates to the home heating energy fund for which Cothrom is a referral partner for the Scottish Government. This is in spite of the fact that the 40+ wind turbines across Uist, almost all community owned, could fulfil energy usage in all the seven inhabited islands of Uist.

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There are also many Scottish Government commitments that community organisations like Cothrom deliver on, for example **holistic whole family support**: “Holistic support should address the needs of children and adults in a family at the time of need rather than at crisis point. This will help families to flourish and reduce the chances of family breakdown, and of children entering the care system. The same preventive interventions should also support parents’ ability to engage with the labour market. These interventions could help parents/carers to pursue qualifications or progress in employment, thereby enabling them to improve their financial situation.”

This casestudy demonstrates how community organisations and enterprises can deliver directly for the second **Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan**, [Bright Start](#), [Bright Futures](#), including early learning and childcare, employment services and accessing family benefits.

This casestudy is also an example of best practice of how community organisations, enterprises and anchor organisations deliver **community empowerment**, “enabling disadvantaged communities to deliver projects, services and activities that address poverty and disadvantage on their own terms”. This is in line with the place principle by encouraging more joined up collaborative approaches to services and assets to achieve better outcomes for people and communities.

## The Place Principle (see [here](#))

... promotes a shared understanding of place, and the need to take a more collaborative approach to a place's services and assets to achieve better outcomes for people and communities. The principle encourages and enables local flexibility to respond to issues and circumstances in different places.

The Place Principle supports the [National Performance Framework's](#) collective purpose for Scotland. It helps partners and local communities unlock the Performance Framework and make it applicable to where and how they live and work.

Place is where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose, and is at the heart of addressing the needs and realising the full potential of communities. Places are shaped by the way resources, services and assets are directed and used by the people who live in and invest in them.

A more joined-up, collaborative, and participative approach to services, land & buildings, across all sectors within a place, enables better outcomes for everyone and increased opportunities for people and communities to shape their own lives.

And community organisations like Cothrom are critical for contributing to the **Addressing Depopulation Action Plan** (2024). The Depopulation Action Plan “endorses the importance of local leadership and seeks to exemplify the maxim ‘local by default, national by agreement’. We know that a place-based approach to applying national, regional, and local policies will be essential to sustainably and effectively address depopulation.”

Cothrom delivers qualifications, learning and support to enable people to access the many local job vacancies, and has itself employed 20+ people for many years now. And Cothrom's diverse and holistic services address not just educational, but also social, economic, financial and housing needs within the local island communities, mental and physical health, childcare, as well as environmental challenges.

The Social Enterprise Place Award that Uist received in 2021 showed very clearly that Uist would never have been able to sustain its community and local economy without the huge contributions made by so many community enterprises and groups. They have played a critical role in addressing historic depopulation by attracting many young people and families to return, settle or stay in Uist.

*We're thriving in terms of what we're doing, absolutely, but there's always a worry that funding might be stripped from the third sector. It's not just us, it's also other community groups within the third sector. We need to be supported, financially. Community empowerment needs to come with funding resources to allow activity to happen.'*

**Kevin Morrison** (see [here](#))

## LINKS FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Cothrom: [www.cothrom.net](http://www.cothrom.net) and [www.uist.co/kevin-morrison](http://www.uist.co/kevin-morrison)

Caraidean Uibhist: [www.caraideanuibhist.org](http://www.caraideanuibhist.org)

Tagsa Uibhist: [www.tagsa.co.uk](http://www.tagsa.co.uk)

Social Enterprise Place Uist: [www.codel.scot/social-enterprise-place-uist](http://www.codel.scot/social-enterprise-place-uist)

