



Comann Eachdraidh Sgìre a' Bhac

Chair / DO Report for AGM

6th October 2026, 7.00pm—Loch a Tuath Community Hut

Introduction

This has been a year of progress on many fronts. Our regular activities have gone from strength to strength, new initiatives have begun, and work is going ahead with the Taigh Coinneamh Ghriais project. We would like to thank Jane Davidson, Development Officer prior to November 2025, for her hard work, as well as Coinneach MacIomhair, Don MacDonald, Angela MacIver and the rest of the Committee.

The Development Officer role is now shared by Caitriana Nicholson and Diana MacPhail. As of September 2026, this has been funded at 1.2 FTE, thanks to the Coastal Communities Fund.

Membership

We currently have 256 ordinary members and 33 junior members, a total of 289. This is a net increase of 9 members since last year's AGM. Since March 2025 to date, there have been 5 online sign-ups of ordinary members and 7 of associate members.

Online Presence

In the year between 1st October 2025 and 30th September 2026, there were 45053 visits to the CEBac website. This is about 20% higher than the June 2024 - June 2025 figures reported at the last AGM; however, figures for June 2025 - June 2026 were similar to last year, so more data is needed to see longer-term trends.

Our presence on social media has grown, with more regular and frequent posting on Facebook and Instagram. From 1st July 2025 to 30th June 2026, there was a net growth of 247 Facebook followers, or just over 20%. Our current number of followers is just over 1.5k. We have recently launched a fresh Instagram account, to allow the DOs to post content more easily, and this is growing quickly.

On our YouTube channel, between March 2025 and September 2026, there were 40k total views, 6.1k hours of video watched and a net increase of 112 subscribers. In the year from March 2025 to February 2026, there were 28.6k total views, 4.6k hours watched and 73 new subscribers. This represents an approximately 30% increase in total views and hours of video watched. The most popular videos have been those of the cèilidhs (2.5k, 1.5k

respectively), reminiscences prior to removal of the pews at Back Free Church (2.4k), and a number of individual interviews and recordings of events with over 1k views each.

We would like to thank Don in particular for managing the website and the YouTube channel, taking videos at events, and editing them for online distribution; and Coinneach MacIomhair for his work in conducting interviews.

Regular Activities

Our ongoing regular activities include the weekly Wednesday morning drop-in, Cothrom Cabadaich, and our winter talk series.

The Wednesday morning cèilidh has gone from strength to strength, with 15-20 participants each week. The sessions are highly valued by the participants and have also been a source of new material for our archives, including photographs, documents and oral history recordings. In February the group visited An Taigh Cèilidh in Stornoway.

The Cothrom Cabadaich group began in October 2025, led by Erica Macdonald and meeting on Thursdays 1-2pm during termtime. The group aims to build confidence in spoken Gaelic through relaxed conversation. Average attendance before the summer holidays was around 6 participants each week and is now around 4, as some have been unable to return after the summer.

The monthly events over the winter of 2025-26 were well attended. These included talks on the Merchant Navy (by Neil Stewart, Angus MacLeod (Rollo) and Alasdair Murray), Gress Cemetery (by James MacArthur and Iain “MhicDougall” Stewart), the Coll Diaries project (by Ian Quigley), and on school days and life as a mechanic (by Malcolm “Kiwi” MacLeod); a “Dealbhan agus Cuimhneachain” photo evening; and our first “open mic” community cèilidh. The 2026-27 series has started with our second community cèilidh, which was very well attended. To the fullest extent possible, these events have used Gaelic (with simultaneous translation when needed).

Two historical walks were also held. Coinneach Smith led a walk to Càrn a Mharc in February, and Holley McCoy guided an archaeological walk around Gress Beach in April.

CEBac was approached by Kenneth Angus Macdonald (“Kinky”) with regard to hosting a “Sgoil Fhonn” or Gaelic psalmody class. This ran from February to May 2026 and was well received, as well as attracting some media attention (BBC Naigheachdan).

Summer Activities

During the summer holidays, a pop-up “Micro Museum” was trialled. This ran for four weeks, with a rotation of themes including “An Dachaigh”, “Cogadh”, and “Muir is Tìr”, using artefacts and photos from our own archives as well as items borrowed from members of the community. The Micro Museum proved popular, attracting around 112 visitors, both local residents and tourists. We hope to repeat the “Cogadh” theme in November around

Remembrance Day, and to repeat and extend the Micro Museum next year. It has had the additional effect of increasing our visibility in the community and increasing donations or loans of material for the archive.

Using Summer Youth Activities funding from the Western Isles Development Trust (£365), we developed sets of children's activities and "Explorer Packs" for families to borrow and use to explore the heritage of the area, as well as running a Youth Photography Competition. The activity sheets and Explorer Packs are now available for ongoing use e.g. during school holidays and have been appreciated by those who have borrowed them.

We were grateful to have the help of summer student Freya Mullin for all these activities.

Schools Work

Collaboration with Sgoil a' Bhac has been further developed, with Diana working with teachers on history / heritage-related projects. This has included a project in partnership with Keep Scotland Beautiful; class visits to the portacabin to see some of our archive photos; a class visit to the Wednesday morning group; a peat-cutting experience; and current plans for events marking the 60th anniversary of the "new" school.

"Tung gu Griaies" Exhibition

This initiative, showcasing John MacLean's photographs of the area from his 30+ years of photography, was originally planned by Sandra and then delayed due to lack of funding. This year we were awarded up to £7000 by Bòrd na Gàidhlig, part of which is earmarked for the Tung gu Griaies exhibition along with previous funding received from the Stornoway Trust. A launch event is planned for Saturday 10th October, after which the exhibition will run until Saturday 24th October (throughout the school holidays). The children's Explorer Packs will be available, as well as activities centred around the photographs.

Archives

Our archive is growing steadily, as people continue to contribute photos, artefacts and documents of historical interest. Work continues on scanning all photographs, and on cataloguing the archive.

Oral history recordings are an important part of our archive. In addition to our Wednesday mornings, Coinneach MacIomhair has continued to record interviews with those connected to the district. Since the last AGM, Coinneach has recorded another 10 interviews (with individuals or small groups), most of which are available on our YouTube channel. We would like to thank him for the time and expertise he has invested in this.

We would also like to especially thank Rhona MacDonald for all her work, with Coinneach, in transcribing the K.D. Smith radio scripts, a very valuable addition to our archive.

Taigh Coinneamh Ghriais Redevelopment

We have been awarded a total of £37,884 towards the Taigh Coinneamh Ghriais (Gress Mission House) project, redeveloping the building as a community heritage hub. Funders include the Architectural Heritage Fund (£11,594), the Western Isles Development Trust (£10,000), the Scottish Government (£2004) and the CNES Creative & Cultural Industries Fund (£14,286). This is enough to fund the first phase of the project, up to the submission of a planning application.

The plot on which the Taigh Choinneimh sits has now been feu'd, with Gress Amenities Trust as owners. We have engaged BARD Ailteir Ltd, led by Ruairidh Moir, as architects and project managers; it is expected that community consultations, design work, surveys and planning work should be completed by February 2027.

Community Action Plan + Areas of Linguistic Significance

We have begun work towards a Community Action Plan for Sgìre a' Bhac. Initial input from other community organisations has been received and on that basis a Proposal has been drafted. This will be circulated to other organisations for comment, then a series of information-gathering and feedback sessions held (stakeholder meetings, survey, drop-in sessions etc) before a plan is drafted.

This is expected to be done in conjunction with the development of a Pathfinder Plan for the Areas of Linguistic Significance legislation, which will be an important source of investment in the communities of Loch a Tuath. CEBac has been nominated to co-ordinate the administration of the ALS work in the Loch a Tuath ward and we are discussing this with other community groups between Tong and Tolsta. The development of these plans is likely to be extremely helpful in future applications for funding.

Publications

The 2026 Calendar, prepared by Margaret Stewart, Jane Davidson and last year's summer student Seumas Smith, sold well. We are now planning a 2027 Calendar.

We are down to the last copy of *Nine Archaeological Walks*, and have sold out of the *Sgoil a' Bhac* and *Vatisker Diaries* books. We are currently assisting Gress Amenities Trust in producing the Gress Village Lunch recipe book, which will be on sale through our online shop as well as other outlets, with CEBac receiving a 20% commission on online sales.

Office Upgrade

As we now have two DOs working concurrently, as well as a summer student and others from time to time, more desk space and IT equipment is needed for the portacabin. Funding of £2600 has been awarded from the Stornoway Trust Small Grant Community Fund, towards new office equipment and utilities.

Use of Cabin

The Cabin is now in use Monday-Friday, with both DOs working from the office, as well as for committee meetings and meetings of external groups.

From October, through the winter months the local Knit & Natter group will use the meeting room on Monday afternoons, on a donation basis. We have also been approached about potentially hosting a monthly archaeological society meeting.

Looking Ahead

We expect the next year to see important developments as we liaise with other community groups in producing a Community Action Plan for Sgìre a' Bhac and an Areas of Linguistic Significance Pathfinder Plan for Loch a Tuath, and as work proceeds on the Taigh Coinneamh Ghriais project. We also hope to investigate additional methods of income generation using the Old School site, to make CEBac more sustainable and less reliant on external funding in the long term.

We hope to see further development of our oral history recording, extending the work of the Wednesday morning group to reach those who may be housebound or unable to take part in a large group setting. We are also exploring interest in a local Book Club (English and/or Gaelic) to read and discuss historical books together.

Work with Sgoil a' Bhac this year is likely to focus on the 60th anniversary of the "new" school. Diana is discussing several activities with the school.

It is hoped to run the pop-up Micro Museum again at other points through the year, especially at school holidays and for significant occasions such as Remembrance Day.

We are also preparing to contribute more to the work of Hebridean Connections. A couple more volunteers are needed to help with entering and checking genealogical data from the area.

Thanks

We are grateful to all who have served on the Committee this year, especially to Angus as Chair, Coinneach and Stewart as Vice-Chairs, Don as Secretary and Angela MacIver, our

Treasurer. As Angela steps down after three years of hard work, we want to thank her especially.

We would also like to thank our funders: Comhairle nan Eilean Siar through the Coastal Communities Fund, the Creative & Cultural Industries Fund, and the Sgeama Greis Gnìomhachais; the Stornoway Trust; the Western Isles Development Trust; Bòrd na Gàidhlig; the Architectural Heritage Fund; and all our members and members of the wider community who have supported us through donations, baking, all sorts of volunteering, and coming along to events.