The final part of the funding package for Lews Castle Museum in the Western Isles has been announced.

John Swinney, Finance Secretary, confirmed that £1.8m from the European Regional Development Fund is being invested in the project when he visited the site in Stornoway.

£14m in total is to be spent on restoring and converting the building, which has been shut for almost twenty-five years.

The Museum will use Gaelic as its first language encouraging visitors of all ages to tell their stories of the Islander life.

One of the many permanent displays will be six of the world famous Lewis Chessmen, which will be an important new resource for academics, and families, along with local schools and colleges.

Finance Secretary, John Swinney, said: “The development will create new jobs, in both the short and the long term, and contribute more than three million pounds to the local economy during the construction phase alone. The tourism industry will benefit from this, with people travelling from far and wide to find out about their ancestors or to learn about the history of the Western Isles and their way of life.”
Animal Rights Group Condemn Geese Cull Call

An animal rights group has attacked the Uist crofters’ call for more powers to shoot geese. Since the 1980s the population of geese in the Western Isles has risen dramatically, and is now having a catastrophic effect on crofting. Recent meetings organized by the Scottish Crofting Federation in North Uist and Benbecula, heard that the effect of geese on grazing land was the single biggest threat to the future of crofting.

Crofters are calling for more powers to control geese numbers, and also to allow goose meat to be used as food. However in a letter this week, Ben Williamson of PETA said culling animals was not effective in finding a long term solution. He said “As long as an area remains attractive and accessible, animals recognize that they can survive there and will move in from surrounding areas to take place of the ones who have been killed, creating a perpetual slaughter cycle that does nothing to provide a long term solution to the conflict.”

He added that it was a ‘cruel paradox’ that the crofters want to protect their crops from the geese which they will then use as animal feed for livestock which will then be slaughtered. Patrick Krause, Chief Executive of SCF said they would welcome any ‘constructive advice’ from the charity as to the conflict. It is now estimated that the Uists alone are home to more than 10,000 greylag geese, and in 1986 it is estimated that there were only around 150 pairs in the whole of the Western Isles.

Derek Flyn, Chair of SCF said: “The rapid increase in the number of geese is accounted for by several factors, People used to shoot geese for the pot, but that gradually stopped when supermarkets came. Reseeding under the IDP gave the geese the supply of feed that inevitably attracted them to stay and breed. Then a crow eradication programme got rid of the goose’s only predator. And despite these vast numbers, geese are still protected by law.”

Rebecca Cotton, Project Manager of Machair Life+, a European funded programme that runs a Crop Protection Scheme said this was a very serious issue, the Machair Life+ project finishing phase had not been secured. She said SNH Adaptive Management four year trial would not work on its own to reduce numbers to manageable levels. Ms Cotton also said to lose a year of the joint crop protection and adaptive management work would mean geese would threaten the growing of corn and therefore the raising of cattle in the Uists.

Crofters want to see further funding for the protection of crops and to change the law regarding geese control and meat sales.

“Crofters and their families are now the endangered ones, warned Mr Flyn.”

New Lease of Life for Valtos Outdoor Centre

The former school at Valtos on the west side of Lewis is to be demolished, to make way for a new purpose built outdoor centre to open in Spring 2015.

Many island residents will recollect school trips and youth group visits to the site, which has not been used fully as an outdoor centre for nearly a decade. A project to revive the centre has been an aspiration of the local community for several years, and significant progress has now been made with all funding in place to take forward the plan. The Valtos Centre Trust has secured a £1 million package from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and from the European Regional Development Fund to get underway.

Comhairle Convener Norman M MacDonald - who many will remember in his role within the Comhairle’s Community Education team at the centre during the 1990s - is a director on the Valtos Centre Trust, along with colleague Cllr Cudig Macleod. He said this week, it had been a long journey to get to this point. “I am delighted to get to this stage, it has been quite a complex project to put together and initially the plan was going to be refurbishment but through the process we found it wasn’t viable to do this on the 150 year old building and he added, we will demolish the existing building, the old school, and construct a new purpose-built facility to cater residentially for up to 40 plus people.”

Bringing the site back into use as a key location for outdoor activities is also hoped to boost the local economy. The building has to be finished by December 14th 2014 and the Trust are planning to open in the Spring of 2015.

The current building at Valtos was a school until the early 1970s when it closed, and was shortly after re-opened and developed as an outdoor centre. From that time it became a major fixture in the educational calendar for island pupils and groups such as Girlguides, Scouts and other youth groups. It was tradition for Primary 7 pupils to spend a few days at the centre in their final year of primary before moving on to secondary school.

Animal Rights Group Condemn Geese Cull Call

Geese Numbers Greatest Threat to Crofting

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Crofters are calling for more powers to control geese numbers, and also to allow goose meat to be used as food. However in a letter this week, Ben Williamson of PETA said culling animals was not effective in finding a long term solution. He said “As long as an area remains attractive and accessible, animals recognize that they can survive there and will move in from surrounding areas to take place of the ones who have been killed, creating a perpetual slaughter cycle that does nothing to provide a long term solution to the conflict.”

He added that it was a ‘cruel paradox’ that the crofters want to protect their crops from the geese which they will then use as animal feed for livestock which will then be slaughtered. Patrick Krause, Chief Executive of SCF said they would welcome any ‘constructive advice’ from the charity as to the conflict. It is now estimated that the Uists alone are home to more than 10,000 greylag geese, and in 1986 it is estimated that there were only around 150 pairs in the whole of the Western Isles.

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Island Schools Compete in Euroquiz 2013

Lionel, Stornoway, Laxdale and Balivanich primary schools, recently participated in a Scotland-wide Euroquiz sponsored by the Scottish European Educational Trust.

All the teams were fully prepared for this challenging and exciting competition.

This year’s local winners, Stornoway Primary school, represented the Western Isles in the national final held in May, where twenty nine schools battled it out. The final was held in the debating chamber of the Scottish Parliament, and they proudly reached the quarter finals.

The winning local team pictured left with Quizmaster Zena Stewart

Comhairle Report Highlights Biodiversity Achievements Over Last Five Years

The second progress report on implementation of the Western Isles Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) for the period 2007 to 2011 has been published by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, at the local action Global Impact Showcase Event held at Sgoil nan Loch last Thursday. Implementation of the action plan is the responsibility of a range of organizations and agencies which are represented on the LBAP Steering Group.

Phase 1 of the LBAP was launched in May 2004, and this was followed by Phase 2 which was launched in August 2005. A first progress report for the period from May 2004 to January 2007 was published in December 2007. The second progress report highlights the many achievements over the last eight years in implementing the action plans. These include the management of land to the benefit of habitats and species through a number of schemes and initiatives e.g. SRDP – Rural Development Contracts (RDC) and Land Managers Options (LMO), arable stock scheme, RSPB corncrake schemes, and the Conserving Scottish Machair Life+ Project.

However there have also been issues and constraints that have hindered implementation of actions and delivery of action plan targets, such as lack of resources. Efforts have been made to raise awareness of biodiversity and to encourage local involvement in the biodiversity process. Events and activities have been organized annually to coincide with Scottish Biodiversity Week. In addition the 2010 International Year of Biodiversity was celebrated at a selection of Gala Days, Games and Agricultural Shows across the islands. The summer programme of shows provided the opportunity for local groups to work in partnership to celebrate biodiversity. As well as highlighting key achievements, the results of monitoring of the species and habitat action plan objectives and targets are summarized in the report. Many of the LBAP actions are implemented through agri-environmental schemes such as SRDP – Rural Priorities, and it is clear that continued support for such schemes is vital for maintaining and enhancing biodiversity management is considered.

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy encourages the wider use of an Ecosystems Approach. The Ecosystem approach is a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way. An ecosystem approach to delivering biodiversity action allows action to be taken at a larger scale than just a single species or habitat, and means that the needs of people are included at the same time.

The Western Isles LBAP Steering Group will be considering an approach for Biodiversity Action in the Western Isles after 2014 when Phase 1 of the action plans is to be reviewed. They would welcome your views on how this approach can be achieved locally. A copy of the report is available to view online at http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/biodiversity/progressreport0711.asp or at Comhairle offices and libraries.
Europe Day– May 9th Birthday Event

The Comhairle has recently secured European funding for five years to set up and run a Europe Direct Information Centre, one of three in Scotland, whose aim is to give information to the public about all matters European, and how that impacts on the Western Isles.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar’s Europe Direct information centre - Outer Hebrides, celebrated the Europe Day - May 9th birthday event, alongside Stornoway Library’s birthday celebration and offered a variety of free promotional items.

Europe Day is an annual celebration of peace and unity in Europe, also known as Schumann Day, commemorating the historical declaration by French foreign minister Robert Schuman, regarding the formation of the European Union sixty years ago.

The Europe direct information centre’s Outer Hebrides had a manned stand at the Library in Stornoway, from 10 until 5pm where 375 visitors attended the Library in that period. The Manager of the Europe Direct information centre, Linda Cunningham, informed over 200 of the visitors regarding the significance of the celebration, and was assisted by the Comhairle’s Modern Apprentice for Communication, Alice Macdonald.

Linda Cunningham also took the opportunity to inform many of the visitors that 2013 is the Year of the Citizen, where information events regarding their rights in the European Union are to take place, locally, regionally, and nationally.