

Interview with Maggie Mulholland, Chair, Cultarlann Inbhir Nis
(<https://cultarlann.scot/>)

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Wilson McLeod

'S e mise Wilson MacLeòid, cathraiche Ionad Gàidhlig Dhùn Èideann. I'm Wilson McLeod, chair of Ionad Gàidhlig Dhùn Èideann, and I'm very pleased to be talking this morning to Maggie Mulholland, who is the chair of Cultarlann Inbhir Nis. And Maggie's agreed to tell us a bit about what they've been doing in Inverness to develop a Gaelic hub there. So mòran taing, Maggie, airson ar cuideachadh le seo.

Could you just tell us a bit first off, how the campaign or the idea got started? What prompted you to work toward developing a Gaelic hub in Inverness?

Maggie Mulholland

I suppose there's always been talk about the need for some sort of Gaelic hub, or community or building of some kind. You know, that idea has been around Inverness for decades. And there have been various attempts over the years to sort of put something together. But it's never really been structured, and it's never really been thought out previously as to what that might look like.

So on a personal basis for me, my children all went through Gaelic medium education. They did Gaelic at secondary school, they came out, and there was really nowhere for them to use the language after they left school. Neither was there anywhere for them to use it when they came back from university or to meet up with their friends socially. And interestingly, my youngest son was back from Edinburgh Uni and he and one of his Gaelic medium friends had gone out to the pub, where they bumped into some young Canadians who happened in the conversation to say that they were from Nova Scotia, and they'd actually come to Scotland to hear Gaelic being spoken, and to meet other young people who had an interest in Gaelic, and that they had been completely unsuccessful in Inverness in finding anybody that spoke Gaelic. And my son and his friends both started speaking Gaelic to them, and the two chaps from Nova Scotia were just so overjoyed to find other young Gaelic speakers because they were both, they both had some Gaelic, and they were from Gaelic families. But it was their sole reason for coming to Inverness. So when my son mentioned this to me, I just thought, this is really shocking. We've got to do something about it. So I guess for me personally, that was the impetus. That was a personal jab if you like to make me go out and try and do something about that situation.

Wilson McLeod

And how did you go about organising things, taking things to the the next stage?

Maggie Mulholland

I was involved in an organisation called Alba Heritage Trust. And I'd also been over to Ireland. I'd visited various cultúrlanna [Irish language hubs] over there, and been very impressed by their projects, and already had in the back of my mind that some of these projects would be great to develop here in Scotland. And I knew about the Scottish

Land Fund, and I thought that might be a way for the Gaelic community to be able to purchase a building of their own. Being a director on Alba Heritage Trust meant that we had a ready made vehicle, a charitable company that could apply for funding, to carry out a sort of community survey. With that we commissioned a local sort of social enterprise company, the Impact Hub, to carry out a sort of feasibility study on our behalf. They put an online survey up asking people would they be interested in the idea of a Gaelic cultural centre. The survey sort of explained roughly what such a centre might offer and some basic ideas, but asking people for their own suggestions as well as to what they would like to see and what impact this could have in Inverness. So the survey was up online for about, I think it was two weeks. And they they got an incredible response, incredible feedback, 90% extremely positive.

So with that, the Impact Hub wrote up a report and one of the recommendations was that an organisation be set up specifically to take the idea forward. And that's kind of what we set up, we started identifying people who might be interested in being part of this new organisation.

Wilson McLeod

And how did you go about publicising and promoting your work in the community?

Maggie Mulholland

I think the initial idea was to organise a crowdfunder. We knew that a crowdfunder would provide some basic money to move forward with the idea. But the main idea of having a crowdfunder really was to spread the idea and to get people's buy-in and feedback. If nobody was interested, the crowdfunder wasn't going to be successful, and we would know that there wasn't sufficient support there. But the crowdfunder was very successful. We organised a launch, and lots of people turned up for the launch event and the crowdfunder moved forward very quickly, and that showed us that people were keen on the idea. We had a hashtag slogan, 'Bidh mise dol ann' and we invited prominent Gaels to record themselves saying 'Bidh mise dol ann' and showing their support online, which lots of people volunteered to do. And we're very grateful for them for that.

But the crowdfunder as a method, if you like, of creating community awareness and getting people to support the idea was very successful. And so that was the first crowdfunder. Thereafter we started running lots of events just within the community, within the resources we had. We had some support from Bòrd na Gàidhlig for that and people were extremely enthusiastic and supportive. Even people who didn't have any Gaelic, visitors to the town, absolutely desperate, desperate for us to be running all these different activities and loving the music and the Gaelic song, as well as Gaelic medium families who were really keen to see more activities happening for their young people. And older Gaels in the town, too, were just loving the idea that something was being done to take this idea forward.

Wilson McLeod

Great, great. And I think recently you've actually managed to secure a building. Could you tell us a bit about that? How you got the funding for it, and especially what the building is like and what you're doing with it?

Maggie Mulholland

Yeah. So the Church of Scotland was selling off, I think it's 200, or is it 400 churches across Scotland? And this one came up on the market. We knew that church building was coming up, and and we thought that it might meet our needs. But we had to conduct an options appraisal. So Impact Hub did that on our behalf, where they looked at ten buildings in Inverness and the pros and cons, and they evaluated which one best suited our needs. And as it turned out, the East Church in Inverness matched our requirements best. So that was the one that we applied for the funding for. We'd done another crowdfunder specifically aimed at purchasing that building. We then got support from the Inverness Common Good Fund, and also Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and with that support we were successful in buying it. The church itself is an amazing building. It's got Gaelic roots going back to the 18th century. There's been Gaelic services there over generations. There's the actual sort of church building part, then there's a hall behind it and rooms upstairs as well as a commercial kitchen. So for the sort of things that we want to run it's absolutely perfect. There's space for ceilidhs and concerts and Gaelic classes, family activities, drama, the whole range, all the sort of things that we hope to be able to run, we can do in that building.

Wilson McLeod

That's great. And thinking about next steps, what are the next steps you've got to deal with, the next sort of challenges going forward? How do you see the future for the Cultarlann?

Maggie Mulholland

So we've started to run a few activities. And we're in the process of applying for an entertainments licence. Although the building is usable for these sort of activities, there's a lot of upgrading and refurbishment needed to make it suitable for modern standards. So it needs a lift and it needs extra toilets, etc, put in. The building also needs insulation and a better heating system.

So we're trying to raise funds to be able to put together a sort of capital programme and get a designer in to actually look at what we want to do with the building. So there's a big fundraising campaign ongoing at the moment. But we need to keep activities going in the building at the same time. So we're sort of trying to do both. At the moment we're looking for more volunteers as we need to expand our own capacity to be able to develop the way that we want to.

Wilson McLeod

Great, great. And just a final question. You've told us a great deal, but do you have any other advice for an organisation like ours in Edinburgh or other places in Scotland looking to develop a hub. What are the lessons you've learned, or the things that surprised you along the road to where you are now?

Maggie Mulholland

I think in many ways lots of people will see it as the logical next step, because we do have hundreds, thousands of young people, young, enthusiastic folk coming out of schools, but as long as there's, if there's nowhere for them to use their Gaelic, and to meet other speakers, there's an issue there, and I think you know everybody is aware of that. And seeing that that is the case, so that will be the impetus, I'm quite sure, in many areas for similar projects like this to arise. I think it's just getting a good team of people together. We're very fortunate. We've got a fantastic team with a mixture of skills, a good team of folk and building good relationships with your community and with your potential funders.

Wilson McLeod

That's great. Mòran mòran taing, Maggie, bha sin anabarrach inntinneach, anabarrach feumail. That's been really, really useful and we're very grateful to you. So mòran taing a-rithist.

Maggie Mulholland

'S e do bheatha.