

Miriam Hamilton

Location: Isle of Lewis, Scotland

<https://www.westernislesdesigns.co.uk/>



Image: Rural Youth Project

Main Challenges



Enterprise support



Digital connectivity



Transport

“Most young people on the island want to go to university and then have a career. You can't really have a career here - there isn't any progression.”

- Miriam Hamilton

Background

Miriam Hamilton is a woman of many talents and skills; she is a weaver of Harris tweed, a seamstress designing beautiful clothing, a jewellery maker and watercolour artist. She sells her many creations online, and through her shop, The Weaving Shed, which she built at her home on the Isle of Lewis.

After making the move to the islands from The Forest of Dean two years ago with her husband and extended family in tow; Miriam reflects that, despite concerns about being incomers to a small island community, she and her family have been warmly received and well supported.

This community support has been vital in terms of establishing her business; from buying a loom off a local retired weaver who then taught her to weave traditional Harris Tweed, to the encouragement she has received to launch her shop, and the local support network of crafts people.

Miriam has a positive outlook on overcoming the challenges of a being a young person in a rural area. Despite moving to a more geographically isolated area, in many ways Miriam feels more connected.

“I've got a bus service that goes past the door, we've got shops five minutes away, we've got an airport five minutes away. So, we actually have lots more amenities here than we did growing up – even though it is technically more remote.”

However, the rural challenges she does recognise on the islands are connectivity, transport, and support for new businesses.

With just two ferries available each day, high prices and regular weather disruptions – transport not only acts as a barrier to tourists visiting the islands, but can be a huge problem for islanders who find themselves unable to get to the mainland when they need to.



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- Miriam Hamilton

Background

The islands’ economies are increasingly reliant on tourism, yet often the ferries can be booked for months in advanced and for many are unaffordable.

In terms of connectivity, Miriam is lucky to live in an area of Lewis where the broadband connection is good, however there are many others on the island who still have no connection at all. This is a huge obstacle for young people and businesses more generally. Certainly, during the Covid 19 lockdown and with little chance of thriving tourist trade returning to the islands this summer; Miriam’s business is utterly reliant on her internet sales.

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Miriam also recognised that for young people living on the island it can feel like there are limited opportunities.

“Most young people on the island want to go to university and then have a career. You can’t really have a career here - there isn’t any progression.” However, she is a strong believer that there are opportunities on the islands for those with an entrepreneurial spirit, commitment, and drive.

“You can definitely make it work here, but you need drive and you need support.”

Miriam emphasises that what is most needed is the support to get them started. A big challenge and potential barrier for young new entrants is the lack of options for financial support to start a new business. Miriam found it difficult to find and access financial support to set up her shop. She would like to see clearer signposting for help and clearer guidelines for the requirements to make it more possible for those who don’t have financial flexibility themselves.

“I was lucky because I could borrow against my house, others don’t have that opportunity.”

Solutions

1. **Community and intergenerational learning and collaboration:**

Miriam demonstrates how learning ancient skills from elders is not just a way of preserving and protecting the heritage and traditions of a place, but when combined with her young flair, has enabled an entirely new take on the traditional and resulted in a prosperous business.

2. **Enterprise:** Miriam has created a business that is varied and flexible. She has capitalised on both local tourist market, and internet platforms that allow her to sell her products worldwide. This has not only increased the success but has made her less vulnerable – this has become particularly evident during the current Corona virus pandemic.

3. **Skills:** Perhaps surprisingly, Miriam proves that arts and heritage can become a strong foundation to build a business.




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