

The **co-operative** loan fund borrower case study

West Highland Free Press:

Co-operative Loan Fund makes for headline news

West Highlands Free Press has become the UK's first employee-owned newspaper, after a loan was approved from the Co-operative Loan Fund and ICO Fund PLC to support an employee buyout. With the help of Co-operative and Community Finance and the Baxi Partnership, West Highlands Free Press is now owned by 10 of its employees who will ensure the paper continues to remain independent and rooted in the community.

The paper was founded by five friends in 1972 as a left-wing weekly newspaper, but with the principal objective of providing its immediate circulation area with the service that a local paper is expected to provide. It carries the masthead An Tir, an Canan, 'sna Daoine - 'The Land, the Language and the People' and this is something that the five original shareholders wanted to abide by when putting the paper up for sale.

Rather than selling the business on the open market, which founder Brian Wilson explains was "never an option"; they approached the employees of West Highland Free Press to see whether they would be interested in buying the company's shares.

Ten employees now own and run the business, and the creation of an employee benefits trust will ensure that the paper continues to run at the heart of the community.

Brian Wilson, the paper's founding editor and still an active contributor to the paper, said: "This was the right thing to do and the right time to do it. We wanted the paper to remain independent while offering a great opportunity to the employees who have served it loyally.

Paul Wood, Director of the paper said: "The successful move to employee ownership marks a significant achievement for the staff of the Free Press and an apt reward for the hard work, skill and loyalty they have shown the company. "

Ian Taylor of Co-operative and Community Finance said:



"West Highlands Free Press is a fine example to show how employee buyouts can increase the motivation and job satisfaction of staff. For this company, employee-ownership was the only business model which would enable the paper to continue running at the centre of its community and ensure all members of staff job security."

Staff at the Free Press are excited about the buyout as editor Ian McCormack explains: "We will work to ensure that the main aim of the company remains the publication of a top-class newspaper with first-rate staff writers, photographer, production and advertising and admin people as well as some of the best columnists in Scotland."

In addition to the weekly newspaper, West Highland Free Press also produces an annual publication known as 'The Visitor' which provides information about places to see and things to do in the West Highlands.

For further information about West Highland Free Press visit www.whfp.co.uk

For more information about The Co-operative Loan Fund please contact the fund managers, Co-operative & Community Finance, on 0117 916 6750, email info@co-opandcommunityfinance.coop or visit www.co-operativeloanfund.coop