# HebCelt festival’s local roots and economic boost defy depopulation fears



As the Hebridean Celtic Festival (HebCelt) gears up for another year of celebration, anticipation is palpable in Stornoway, the heart of the Isle of Lewis. Running from 16th to 19th July, this much-loved festival has become a cornerstone of island culture, attracting thousands and delivering significant economic benefits to the area.

Operations Coordinator Carol Ferguson, a dedicated volunteer for the past ten years, knows firsthand the excitement that builds in the community as the event approaches. “There’s a buzz that something is coming,” she explains, reflecting on the way local shops begin to adorn their windows in preparation for the festivities. Over its history, HebCelt has transformed into an international spectacle, uniting not just locals but enthusiastic visitors from around the globe.

Festival Chair Iain Macphail shares a similar sentiment, emphasising the importance of the festival to both the local community and economy. Since first volunteering at the tender age of 14, Iain has witnessed firsthand the growth of the festival, which last year welcomed approximately 19,500 attendees—an 8% increase from the previous year—with over 50% of visitors coming from outside the local authority area. This surge marks HebCelt not just as a local gathering but as a critical player in highlighting the cultural vibrancy of the islands.

The festival has been a boon for local businesses, with reports indicating a contribution of £4.1 million to the Lewis economy in the last year alone. This year, it is projected to have a £40 million impact by its 30th anniversary in 2027. Carol asserts, “Our impact comes not just from ticket sales, but our deep commitment to working with local suppliers.” This local engagement helps ensure the festival serves as a robust engine for economic revitalisation in a region grappling with the effects of depopulation and economic stagnation.

Notably, HebCelt doesn't just cater to established acts; it is a platform for homegrown talent. Impressively, 34% of the over 70 performers in 2023 were from Lewis and Harris, highlighting the festival's commitment to nurturing local artists. This encouragement is exemplified in the case of Elias Alexander, whose evolution from a festival volunteer to an emerging performer illustrates the opportunities the festival creates within the community.

HebCelt also prioritises sustainability and inclusivity, becoming one of the first major festivals to ban plastic straws and ensure a gender balance among performers. “Our commitment to gender equality is reflected behind the scenes as well,” Carol affirms, pointing out that the festival’s leadership team boasts a significant female presence. This approach not only enhances festival diversity but underscores a genuine dedication to progressive values.

Amidst financial challenges posed by the current cost of living crisis, HebCelt has managed to maintain stability, thanks in part to a three-year funding commitment from Creative Scotland. Such backing allows the festival to plan confidently for the future while also striving to keep ticket prices accessible for the community. Carol shares that they decided to retain ticket prices for 2025 at 2024 levels, a move intended to ease financial burdens for attendees.

As preparations continue, both Carol and Iain express excitement for the upcoming lineup, which features major artists such as Lulu and Skerryvore alongside local talents. Iain enthusiastically describes the range of performances, highlighting the festival's diversity. “It showcases what can be done in our community,” he shares, underscoring the festival as a vital expression of local identity.

Looking ahead, HebCelt stands as a beacon of community resilience, creativity, and economic opportunity. Carol firmly believes that the festival not only entertains but also serves as an inspiration, providing a platform for the islands to showcase their potential. “We aim to inspire people to stay,” she states, underlining the festival's role in combatting the concerning trends of depopulation, especially among younger generations.

Ultimately, the Hebridean Celtic Festival is more than just a music event; it is a vital cultural celebration that exemplifies the strength of community spirit in the face of modern challenges.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25218083.hebcelt-festival-fights-depopulation-lewis-harris/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://www.hebceltfest.com/news/news/3/hebcelt-2024-gives-4-million-boost-lewis-economy)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25218083.hebcelt-festival-fights-depopulation-lewis-harris/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.eventimpacts.com/research/hebcelt-2023)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg3lg6jx8vxo), [[5]](https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/highlands-islands/1587995/hebcelt-brings-major-economic-boost-to-the-islands/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.eventimpacts.com/research/hebcelt-2023), [[6]](https://www.hebceltfest.com/news/news/2/hebcelt-festival-delivers-vital-12million-economic-boost-western-isles-over-three-years)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25218083.hebcelt-festival-fights-depopulation-lewis-harris/?ref=rss), [[7]](https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/hebcelt-music-festival-boosts-isles-economy-by-ps20m-1500435)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25218083.hebcelt-festival-fights-depopulation-lewis-harris/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg3lg6jx8vxo)
* Paragraph 7 – [[3]](https://www.hebceltfest.com/news/news/3/hebcelt-2024-gives-4-million-boost-lewis-economy), [[2]](https://www.eventimpacts.com/research/hebcelt-2023)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25218083.hebcelt-festival-fights-depopulation-lewis-harris/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://www.hebceltfest.com/news/news/3/hebcelt-2024-gives-4-million-boost-lewis-economy)
* Paragraph 9 – [[6]](https://www.hebceltfest.com/news/news/2/hebcelt-festival-delivers-vital-12million-economic-boost-western-isles-over-three-years), [[2]](https://www.eventimpacts.com/research/hebcelt-2023)
* Paragraph 10 – [[1]](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25218083.hebcelt-festival-fights-depopulation-lewis-harris/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.eventimpacts.com/research/hebcelt-2023)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25218083.hebcelt-festival-fights-depopulation-lewis-harris/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.eventimpacts.com/research/hebcelt-2023> - A report by MKA Associates highlights that the Hebridean Celtic Festival (HebCelt) in 2023 contributed £3.6 million to the local economy. The festival attracted 19,500 attendees, marking an 8% increase from 2022. Notably, 53% of visitors were from outside the local authority area, with 21% visiting Lewis and Harris for the first time. The event also showcased a commitment to sustainability by using hydrogen-powered lighting and portable battery storage generators, reducing reliance on diesel-powered units.
3. <https://www.hebceltfest.com/news/news/3/hebcelt-2024-gives-4-million-boost-lewis-economy> - The Hebridean Celtic Festival (HebCelt) 2024 provided a £4 million boost to the Lewis economy. Held from 12th to 15th July 2023, the festival attracted over 19,500 music lovers, surpassing the previous year's attendance. The event featured 70 performances, including 40 in the main arena, nine late-night sessions, and three family concerts. A significant 34% of the 265 performers were based in Lewis and Harris, highlighting the festival's dedication to supporting local talent.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg3lg6jx8vxo> - An economic study revealed that the Hebridean Celtic Festival (HebCelt) in 2022 generated £4.2 million for the Western Isles' economy. The festival, celebrating its 25th anniversary, attracted 18,540 attendees, a 4% increase from 2019. Over 20% of attendees were visiting the isles for the first time. Visitors spent an average of £1,104 during their stay, an 84% increase from the £600 average spend in 2018. The event featured acts like Texas, Seasick Steve, and Tide Lines.
5. <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/highlands-islands/1587995/hebcelt-brings-major-economic-boost-to-the-islands/> - A report indicates that the Hebridean Celtic Festival (HebCelt) in 2016 contributed £2.1 million to the local economy. The festival, headlined by Deacon Blue and The Fratellis, sold out all four nights, with nearly 18,000 attendees. Over half (56%) of the audience came from outside Lewis and Harris, including 5% from outside the UK. The festival attracted visitors from Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with 66% of non-locals stating HebCelt was the main reason for their visit.
6. <https://www.hebceltfest.com/news/news/2/hebcelt-festival-delivers-vital-12million-economic-boost-western-isles-over-three-years> - Over a three-year period, the Hebridean Celtic Festival (HebCelt) delivered a £12 million economic boost to the Western Isles. The 2024 festival drew over 17,800 attendees and contributed £4 million to the local economy. The event featured a diverse lineup, including established acts like Tide Lines and emerging artists redefining Celtic and folk music. Flexible payment plans were introduced to make the festival more accessible, aiming to celebrate the heart and soul of the Hebrides.
7. <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/hebcelt-music-festival-boosts-isles-economy-by-ps20m-1500435> - The Hebridean Celtic Festival (HebCelt) has generated £20 million for the Scottish island's economy over its 20-year history. Initially attracting about 1,000 local followers in 1996, the festival now draws crowds of 15,000 annually to Stornoway, with half coming from outside the islands. Over the years, fans from over 100 countries have attended, making it the biggest annual event in the Outer Hebrides and a vital economic generator for local businesses.