

Scottish Rural Gathering

Summary report of Workshop Sessions

Local Priorities Workshop

Workshop Leader – Nick Wilding of the Carnegie Trust

Nick provided some background to the Carnegie Trust explaining that it covers the whole of the UK and Ireland and has three main objectives in terms of rural communities:

- Act as a repository for research & development
- Working to ensure joined up community thinking
- Follow an asset based approach – build on existing strengths

Nick explained that there was a step change in funding culture and it was now focusing on 'what do we have that we can build on'.

He focused on the need for improved communication, the need to share and tell our community stories and experiences with our own and other communities, and not just focusing on case studies and bullet point presentations. Some of the most valuable stories are those that were a real struggle or even projects that went wrong, but people are not too keen to share this.

The workshop then looked at the Eden Project and how it had worked through outreach programmes with neighbouring communities to encourage creativity and spark to projects. The aim was to help people connect with a new story for the local area, not the old story of collapse. 4 'eco-towns' had been set up, each setting their own local priorities, but working together on joint projects. Communication and knowledge sharing had improved through initiatives such as 'Tea Treats' whereby communities had come together to share stories over tea and cakes, and community information fairs.

The group looked at the petal model and a charter for rural communities, how do rural communities and businesses connect with education, health, arts etc.

Community resilience was also explored and Nick highlighted the Atlantis Project in Oban where the local community had taken over the running of the local leisure centre.

A discussion followed and it was felt that being able to network effectively was a real business skill and consideration should be given to some formal training qualification.

It was also felt that the more elderly members of communities had lots of wisdom and experience that would benefit the wider community, but the issue was the best way of capturing this information, given that older people are less likely to use social media.

Rural Housing Workshop

Workshop Leader – Derek Logie

Derek started the workshop by providing background to the Rural Housing Service, Scottish Government Rural Housing Policy Development and various rural housing & planning enquiries.

Some of the key issues affecting rural communities are:

- Rural house prices are on average 17% higher than urban areas
- The definition of 'rural' needs to be addressed in order to assure appropriate government support
- Significant development costs in rural areas
- Poor identification of housing need in rural areas
- Planning issues – there is a presumption against development in rural areas
- Planning restrictions create imbalances and stop relatively small but important development from proceeding
- Reductions in housing grants and budgets

Conclusions:

- Planning needs to be 'rural proofed'
- SHIP requires greater discussion and visibility of need
- Need increased usage of rural housing enablers

Solutions:

- Suggestion of establishing a rural housing budget
- Local authorities need to improve targeting of available resource
- Develop a network of rural housing enablers
- Review/increase the role of self-build and use of local materials
- Easier, more relaxed approach to land use and planning conditions e.g. roads, lighting, parking, trees – not the same as required in towns and cities
- Need for a rural housing policy (as per Scottish Homes?)
- Rural proofing of guidance for developing housing strategies and needs analysis
- Develop networks of local development forums that include rural community representatives
- Local authorities & SG need to refine approaches to housing policies – insisting on mixed communities and resisting commuted sums
- Need for a database to be developed to signpost access to expert information e.g. renewables, rural design and planning

Retail Challenge Workshop

Workshop Leader – Gordon Bell

Gordon highlighted that rural retailers fall into the SME category and that Scotland was lucky to have CO-OP network in many rural towns and villages.

He presented a case study of rural retailing in the 1950's when many small villages had a range of retail outlets including mini-markets, bakers, butchers, garage, post office and tea room. In 2009 many villages have only one shop linked with the post office (if they have one at all), even though village populations have increased. The remaining shops play a hugely important role in the community particularly for elderly residents.

Many village shops are not commercially viable, but as community businesses are viable, with surpluses being kept to maintain quality of service and range of products. Research shows that the personality of the shop owner is important as to whether the shop is used by the community. People will support a community shop in the knowledge that the money goes back into the local community.

Gordon advised that the management of a community shop was important and gave information on specially designed software for EPOS systems which manages stock and provides systems which means a high level of retail experience is not required.

As a result of the recession people are moving back to buying locally and there are opportunities for community shops to encourage people to come back to their local shop.

The group discussed how supermarket home deliveries had affected rural shops, but local communities are desperate to keep their local shops. The key was to bring in as many services as possible to keep shops viable – the closure of post offices had the affected viability of many shops.

An example was given of Kirkmichael Village Shop which became a Community Interest Company in May 2009; slight worry was that the company does not own the premises. The shop has been busy over the summer with tourist trade, with lower levels of business in the winter. Have seen a more positive approach to shopping locally and many producers bringing in produce to sell.

The dangers of a community project were identified as:

- Ensuring quality & consistency of the managing committee
- Lack of structure
- Important to have a clear auditing process which can be monitored

Communities need to think about what is required in the future – a new model to pull people in which can make money and be sustainable in the longer term, need to move further in the direction of shops becoming the 'community core' offering space for people to sit down and chat over a tea & coffee, internet access points etc.

Agriculture and Communities Workshop

Workshop Leader – George Lawrie

In his presentation George explained that rural Scotland accounted for 98% of Scotland's total land mass, 20% of the population and 5.6m hectares under agriculture. In rural areas farming is the dominant land use and is vital to a vibrant rural economy.

Agriculture clearly supports the local community but how does the local community support agriculture?

There are issues to do with structures and the supply chain:

- 80% of produce heads south
- Only two food packaging companies left in Scotland
- The best quality products go to supermarkets

Therefore it is difficult to supply produce locally as the structures are not in place.

There is now pressure to change structures and ensure food can be distributed to local retailers and users.

There is room in Scotland for all sizes and types of farmers as this helps in supporting the diversity of food production, and farmers markets are starting to play an important role in this process. At the end of the day the bottom line is what route is the most profitable!

More research needs to be undertaken by the NFUS into how the community can benefit agriculture but can include developing linkages between food producers and local users, tourism diversification and providing a pool of labour at key points in the growing season.

Key issues identified in the workshop included:

- Communities and agriculture have been drifting apart and we now have to identify opportunities to bring them together again e.g. farmers markets, food paths, environmental improvements, education and classrooms in nature
- Food security – we are relying too much on imports, need to turn to local producers and buy and consume produce from our local areas and Scotland
- The supply chain is not working properly
- Look at the community and agriculture working together to reduce carbon foot prints e.g. wood burning biomass, anaerobic digesters, and wind power.
- Issues with grants and subsidies and how they are perceived by the public
- Government departments need to work together e.g. education, health & rural economy
- There are far too many organisations at project level

Bio-Diversity Workshop

Workshop Leader – Paul Walton

Paul highlighted a very specific and new bio-diversity project focusing on the machair in the Western Isles.

The area is fantastically rich in bio-diversity, and is unique. Over 70% of the world's machair is in Scotland, the machair is a product of both the physical and natural environment and comprises of a coastal grassland habitat on a thin alkaline layer of sand which is maintained by a low intensity of cattle based crofting agriculture.

The machair is 35 miles long and 1 mile wide and attracts 16,000 pairs of waders (birds) and a rich diversity of plant and invertebrate life.

Paul went on to highlight the various bio-diversity legislation and policies and also the various funding streams available.

The group went on to discuss opportunities to innovate in bio-diversity including the use of agricultural machinery, identifying new working practices, looking at bio-diversity in arable areas.

The key issues were identified as:

- Lack of local sources for machinery/infrastructure and project support services
- The Machair Project is very targeted, all bio-diversity projects must also focus on the wider agricultural environment and securing bio-diversity benefits across other systems
- Crofters/Communities will need to own, and feel ownership of projects.
- Farmers and crofters must feel recognised, not just financially supported, but recognised by society for the bio-diversity projects they deliver
- Projects need to build concurrent initiatives among communities, especially education and art
- Explore potential for new products and added value to existing products from bio-diversity projects e.g. Could Machair Beef be successfully marketed?

Village Halls Workshop

Norman MacAskill – Workshop Leader

In his presentation Norman highlighted the important role village halls play in rural communities and many of the issues affecting them such as:

- Many halls need major capital injections – research indicated over 2/3s of halls are more than 50 years old
- Difficult to get 'new blood' on village hall committees
- Halls need to become ever more enterprising in order to survive
- Lack of opportunities to share best practice and knowledge

SCVO is in the process of developing a quality standard for village halls, and are also responsible for managing the 21C Hall Programme.

A discussion followed and covered the following areas:

- How should Village Hall Committees interact with the wider community
- The need for Hall Committees to look at the bigger picture, and in many cases it could be more appropriate for another community group to lead on a project
- Essential to have community consultation on the direction of local village halls – they are the customers
- Some fears that Village Hall Quality Standards could be yet more regulation and red tape – but could be useful if there are people on the ground to help deliver it
- Blogs would be useful for finding out/hearing about other communities experiences

Some general observations made included:

- Where halls have been refurbished then usage has increased
- Re-furbished halls stand a greater chance of a sustainable future
- Lottery funding is increasingly difficult to obtain
- Would be beneficial to see a mentoring system developed

Key issues emerging from the workshop included:

- Process in redevelopment was welcome – sharing experiences of re-development was enthusiastically supported
- General fear that a quality standard would generate extra work which would not add anything of value, though some agreement that quality standards would assist in any re-development processes
- An online guide to redevelopment of village halls would be useful

Climate Challenge Fund Workshop

Workshop Leader – David Gunn

David gave an overview of the Climate Challenge Fund including the application processes and priorities for funding. Some of the key messages included:

- Short window of opportunity to apply to the fund
- Key to liaise with the Fund administrators early in order to maximise the chance of a successful application
- Future funding is uncertain
- Ensure that applications are supported by appropriate evidence to support bids
- There are other funding streams available for areas not funded by the Climate Challenge Fund

Key issues to emerge from the workshop included:

- Different schemes fund different areas of activity e.g. renewable energy equipment not funded by CCF but can be funded by CARES
- No financial support for NGOs to provide consultancy support e.g. Scottish Enterprise & Business Link. Communities can submit applications but grants can only be paid on delivery of projects. The role of NGOs in the process needs to be reviewed.
- Groups need to demonstrate 'legacy', projects need to be sustainable after project funding ends – application needs to clearly demonstrate the projects ability to be sustainable in the longer term.

Food Networks Workshop

Workshop Leader – David Lamb

David explained that he worked with food producers and networks in rural areas.

Across Scotland there are some 15 main food networks all with different agendas, including:

- Marketing local food producers
- Promoting provenance
- Sourcing food locally
- Food and Health
- Tourism

Key topics for discussion in the workshop are ‘what’s next’ for food networks and are the food networks and various policies doing enough?

Carole Inglis gave a presentation on her food network project from the Isle of Skye, and explained that the project had been set up to support and grow small food producers on the Island, and had included setting up a food distribution network on the island to ensure local producers could easily get their produce to local users.

Her experience was that:

- Projects can be too focused and need to be able to adapt and change as they move forward
- Volunteers can only do so much, then need paid project officers in order to ensure continuity and good practice
- Projects need to have good project officers who are passionate and enthusiastic

Dave Smith of the Dumfries & Galloway Save the Flavours Group explained that the group had initially been set up in 1993 to help existing producers, set up new producers, provide advice and develop the ‘Save the Flavour’ brand. The group has subsequently developed further and now users e.g. restaurants, hotels and retailers are members of the group.

Key lessons learnt to date are:

- Funding streams don’t always fit with what you want to deliver as a project
- Main funding for initiative went with the reorganization of Scottish Enterprise
- Major funding gap until new funding became available through Leader
- Needs to be a partnership of both suppliers and users and cover all aspects of food & drink
- Projects will fall or stand on the quality of the project officer

Other discussion points included:

- Beneficial to establish additional food networks and increased networking opportunities
- Issues and experiences relating to getting individual producers to down play their own identity for the greater good
- Need to enable people to work together to create a critical mass for projects e.g. establishing a local abattoir
- Need less obstructions/restrictions which prevent the establishment of food businesses
- How do you establish quality control amongst food networks across the system as a whole

Key issues to emerge from the workshop included:

- Continuity of funding for projects is essential – 3 years is just not enough, 5 years would be more appropriate and ensure greater chance of long term sustainability
- Need longer term funding for longer term fixes
- Need a pool of professional and enthusiastic project managers