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Building Stronger Communities Pilot Project Final Report

March 2017

A study of community strengths in four communities within Cairngorms National Park

1. Background & Context

Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) was set up in 2003 to co-ordinate the achievement of four aims as set out in the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000:

1. To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area
2. To promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area
3. To promote understanding and enjoyment (including enjoyment in the form of recreation) of the special qualities of the area by the public
4. To promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities

CNPA adopts a partnership approach and works with local partners, businesses, land owners and communities to develop long term plans for the Park to collectively achieve these aims.

In relation to the 4th aim, CNPA and Cairngorms LEADER Local Action Group (CLAG) commissioned the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) to deliver a Pilot Project to assess and build community strengths and capacity in four distinct communities using the Building Stronger Communities (BSC) Framework. This was approved by the CNPA Management Team and LEADER in March 2016 and the Project ran from July 2016-March 2017. The four areas selected by CNPA and LEADER to participate in the pilot project were:

1. Kingussie and Newtonmore (Highland)
2. Tomintoul and Glenlivet (Moray)
3. Ballater (Aberdeenshire)
4. Blair Atholl and Killiecrankie (Perth & Kinross)

The communities were selected from four different local authority areas so that as many partners as possible were involved in the project and to ensure a variety of experiences from partners across Cairngorms informed the process. The rationale also extended to applying the approach in communities with different contexts, for example the need to review the Regeneration Strategy for Tomintoul and Glenlivet, and Ballater having suffered from a significant flood which required significant community effort in recovery and redevelopment. Since both instances involved the collaboration of a broad spectrum of community bodies, it was felt the approach would build on the strengths of communities to mobilise around common issues and interests, an important feature of the BSC framework.

The objectives of the project were:

1. To provide baseline information on community capacity and support networks in four areas across the National Park:
 - Baseline to be used to inform strategic planning and decision making (long-term)
 - Baseline to be used to monitor impact of specific interventions (medium-term)
2. To produce Action Plans, which will maintain and improve community capacity and support networks across these areas
3. To provide an assessment of how useful the BSC Framework is in rural areas
4. To produce an evaluation of the overall project, highlighting good practice and what worked and what didn't

The objectives were designed to assist CNPA to move beyond the use of anecdotal or qualitative information to inform investment and work around community development and establish an

approach that would provide more measurable information and evidence to inform strategic planning to support communities.

A Steering Group comprising CNPA and CLAG representatives was set up to oversee and monitor the pilot project and early discussions with local stakeholders who could participate in lead groups for the four areas took place prior to the commencement of Project activities.

2. Project Methodology and Activities

The BSC framework sets out a three-stage process of research, assessment and action planning to build community strengths and capacity, and address any gaps in capacity building support available from local agencies. The process is designed to be participatory and involves local community groups self-assessing their strengths and capabilities, and identifying areas for improvement that will increase their capacity to organise and respond to local issues affecting the quality of community life. Agencies with a role to support communities are assisted to assess their individual and collective support provision, with a view to developing collaborative strategies and interventions that further strengthens community capacity.

In each of the four areas, SCDC conducted the following activities to undertake the three-stage process:

- **August 2016:** An initial meeting with the lead groups to agree the on-line survey questionnaires for both community groups and support agencies. The surveys were compiled using a sample questionnaire provided by SCDC under the four key themes of community capacity building – organisation, skills, equalities and involvement/influence.
- **Sep – Dec 2016:** Distribution of the on-line surveys via email with hard copies made available on request. Lead group members provided contact lists and contacted local community group members in advance of the survey being sent out, and again to increase responses prior to the deadline date. As numbers were lower than anticipated we agreed to extend the deadline in all areas to allow more responses from local groups.
- **January 2017:** Self-assessment workshops were organised for community group members and support agency representatives to discuss the survey findings and assess their current strengths under the four key themes using a traffic light system:



Red =: low level of community strengths and support available



Amber = some work being done but gaps identified



Green = support easily accessible and groups can/do work independently

In Ballater and Kingussie & Newtonmore, the findings for the surveys were compiled into a report and distributed to participants in advance of the sessions. In Blair Atholl & Killiecrankie and Tomintoul & Glenlivet the survey findings were used at the session to check assumptions/perceptions of strengths as assessments were being made.

- **February 2017** – Baseline Assessment Reports were compiled comprising both the survey findings and assessment ratings, with comment and analysis from SCDC on emerging issues. These were distributed to participants and lead group members.
- **March 2017** – Action planning sessions were conducted in Ballater and Kingussie & Newtonmore with community group members and support agency representatives to discuss

emerging issues and identify actions to address them. Improvement Plans were then compiled and distributed to participants for agreement and implementation beyond the end of the pilot project. Following discussion between CNPA and SCDC, the session for Tomintoul & Glenlivet was cancelled due to a lack of sign up by both community and agency members. The session for Blair Atholl & Killiecrankie was also cancelled following concerns expressed by community members and CNPA that there was little clarity on the purpose and benefits of the project. The reasons for this are explored in section 4 of the report.

An evaluation discussion between CNPA and SCDC took place on 22nd March and invitations were extended to lead groups members actively involved in the process. Representatives attended from Marr Area Partnership, VABS and PKAS to reflect on what worked well, what didn't and lessons learned in applying the approach which are captured in section 4 of the report. SCDC also had a separate conversation with a staff member from Moray Council who couldn't attend the meeting.

3. Summary of Assessment Findings

The Baseline Assessment Reports for each area comprising the survey findings and community strengths assessments were distributed to all community and agency participants and are available on request from CNPA and SCDC, as are the Improvement Plans for Ballater and Kingussie & Newtonmore.

The community strengths self-assessment rating for each area are summarised in the following tables. Due to a high level of community group representatives from both Kingussie and Newtonmore participating in the self-assessment workshops, their assessments are reflected in separate tables. Further, both communities discussed the theme of building involvement and separated their assessments into two distinct categories: the extent to which groups supported community members to be involved in community activities (building involvement); and the extent to which they felt able to exert their influence with public agencies and within decision making processes (building influence). In some instances, the tables indicate a split between amber/red and amber/green. This occurred when agency or community participants felt that a combined rating best reflected their strengths for a particular theme.

Ballater

	Agencies	Community Organisations
Building Organisations	Yellow	Yellow
Building Skills	Green	Yellow
Building Equality	Red	Green
Building Involvement	Yellow	Red

Kingussie

	Agencies	Community Organisations
Building Organisations	Green	Yellow
Building Skills	Green	Yellow
Building Equality	Yellow	Green
Building Involvement	Yellow	Green
Building Influence	*considered with involvement	Yellow

Newtonmore

	Agencies	Community Organisations
Building Organisations		
Building Skills		
Building Equality		
Building Involvement		
Building Influence	*considered with involvement	

Blair Atholl and Killiecrankie

	Agencies	Community Organisations
Building Organisations		
Building Skills		
Building Equality		
Building Involvement		

Tomintoul and Glenlivet

	Agencies	Community Organisations
Building Organisations		
Building Skills		
Building Equality		
Building Involvement		

The ratings vary across areas but in each case the community strengths identified far outweigh any weaknesses or gaps in support. There were some differences between agency and community ratings but since the sessions were conducted separately from each other it is reasonable to expect some differences in perceptions and interpretations of the traffic light system. Where differences occurred, these were explored at least to some degree in the workshops and highlighted in the Baseline Assessment Reports.

4. Learning from the process and approach

SCDC invited key agency stakeholders who were involved in the process to participate in an evaluation discussion to identify what worked well and what didn't. Key learning points from the discussion and observations made by SCDC throughout the process are captured below.

Survey Questionnaires – there was agreement from most stakeholders that the survey questionnaires were too lengthy and tried to capture too much information from groups and agencies who already have busy workloads. Similarly, the high volume of information generated was onerous to synthesise and summarise in a user-friendly format. Some community group members stated that did not see the relevance or value in completing the questionnaire and returns from lead group members were also low indicating it was not a priority for them to engage in this stage of the process. Although the length of the questionnaire was off-putting for many, the response rates ranged from 21% - 31% which is a reasonable level of return for a survey of this nature.

There was consensus that the SCDC sample surveys should be used as a menu and condensed to focus on particular aspects of the community it is being applied in. Further, it was recognised that inviting community members to co-design the questionnaires as part of the lead group would be

beneficial in securing greater buy-in from other groups, as well as ensuring surveys are both relevant and manageable for their community.

Lead groups – the lead groups for each area were set up by CNPA at a very early stage and support agencies indicated their willingness to participate and assist with project development. However, participation in conducting/responding to the survey and assessment workshops was low with only a few key members for each area assisting in carrying out activities to support the process. In some instances, this extended to not conducting actions despite agreeing to do them. As specified in the BSC Framework, an active lead group is critical to successful completion of each stage, especially as lead group members have established relationships with local group members and can secure their participation more easily than SCDC as an external organisation. Participation of community members was reasonably good when support agency staff actively encouraged them to engage.

Self-assessment workshops – SCDC and other lead group members felt that the self-assessment workshops worked well in most areas, particularly in supporting a dialogue between a range of groups on each of the four key capacity building themes. The workshops were less successful in both Blair Atholl & Killiecrankie and Tomintoul & Glenlivet largely due to a lack of clarity on the purpose of the sessions as indicated by community members who felt that they had insufficient information on what the sessions were about and why they should be involved. In both these areas SCDC accepts that more could have been done to communicate to community members the purpose and benefits of participating in the project and regret that this caused frustration and confusion which is at odds with the approach to improve community capacity. This was a particular cause of frustration for groups in Blair Atholl and Killiecrankie so it is commendable that despite this community groups have met to discuss how they can work more closely together on common issues and concerns.

Applicability of the BSC Framework in rural communities – a distinct objective of the project was to assess whether the framework was useful in assessing the community strengths of rural communities. In practice, the framework supported both group members and support agencies to identify their contribution towards building strong communities and helped focus attention on the four key capacity building themes to identify and address capacity building issues. There is no indication that the process is not applicable to rural communities, but it was noted from the evaluation discussion that it may work better when used in communities with lower capacity. The reasoning for this is that it almost appeared contradictory to use a tool that's designed to build community strengths when strengths are already high, and that high capacity communities tend to be involved in a high level of activities which either limits their availability to participate, or adds to the burden of an already demanding workload. This was a useful insight that SCDC is happy to share with others who are interested in using the approach, and particularly in deciding which communities may benefit most from the process.

5. Conclusions

Overall, those participating in the evaluation discussion felt that the process was a useful one and that the assessments helped identify priority actions to further build community strengths in at least two of the participating areas. The actions contained in the Improvement Plans will help facilitate better connections between groups, improve awareness and co-ordination of community activities and issues, and help support agencies respond to critical issues i.e. supporting groups to exert their influence with public agencies and/or in decision making processes that affect their community.

There are clear benefits in adopting a more robust, evidence based approach to plan and assess strategic capacity building support, although the process relies on a reasonably high level of staff capacity to fully reap the benefits of such an approach. A key lesson learned is to involve community leaders and/or key group members at the earliest possible stage as a critical factor for success.

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