

Community Development in the Cairngorms

SUMMARY

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A Research Report by

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INTRODUCTION

This document presents a summary of the research report *Community Development in the Cairngorms* prepared for the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), the Cairngorms Community Councils Group (CCCG) and the Cairngorms Leader + Programme. The full report comprises Volume I (Main Report), Volume II (Annexes) and a CD containing full documentation, community profiles, raw data, the research website, and demonstrations of digital data presentation.

The research involved the following tasks.

- The generation of profiles of the main communities in the Cairngorms
- A strategy for community development in the Cairngorms
- Recommendations for a system of effective communications between community groups and agencies
- Recommendations for improvements in the capacity of community groups to make representations

The geographical area covered by this report is that of the former Cairngorms Partnership. The research was conducted using a variety of methods including: -

- Interviews with organizations
- Street Interviews
- Street Polls
- Focus Groups
- Literature Review and Data Capture

A distinctive part of the research work was the generation of profiles designed to provide social and economic data on the main communities within the Cairngorms Partnership area. The profiles contain information on: -

- Demographics (settlement pattern, sex and age)
- Housing (stock, tenure and households)
- Social Class
- Employment (status and sector)
- Community facilities (health, education, shops, petrol stations, post offices, internet access and community websites)

These profiles suggest that community strengths include: -

- Healthy employment
- Active and energetic local interest groups
- A strong sense of place
- Lively and informative local press and media (including internet)

However, four main problem issues emerge: -

- Availability of affordable and secure housing
- Employment and services in more remote parts of the area
- An ageing population
- Vulnerability of the strictly rural areas in terms of employment, housing and services.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The report reviews the strategic context within which community development in the Cairngorms takes place. This includes national issues such as: -

- Scottish Executive Rural Development Policy
- Social Inclusion Policy
- Local Government in Scotland Act 2003
- New forms of communications
- Land Reform
- The emergence of Community Interest Companies

In addition, there are issues specific to the Cairngorms that have a bearing community development including: -

- Consultation fatigue
- Conflict between environment and development
- Landownership
- Geography
- Existing Capacity

WHO IS THE COMMUNITY?

At the outset we suggest that 'the community' is not seen as an isolated issue to be dealt with, planned for, and 'strategised' for. The community is not simply a collection of people in a geographical area who need to be consulted about other people's agendas and whose participation is now a central part of official policy in other people's agendas. In the context of the CNP the idea of community is not solely synonymous with the 'fourth aim' of the National Park but is integral to the successful attainment of all the objectives of the Park. Landowners, businesses, tourism operators, naturalists and public services are all located in and are part of the community.

Community development is the process of improving the lives and future prospects of people living in the Cairngorms. With this in mind we suggest that the various strands of this research (community development, communications and representation) should be seen as part of one integrated strategy for community development since effective communication and representation are part and parcel of this process.

AN OVERALL STRATEGIC APPROACH

A vision for communities in the Cairngorms might be framed in the following terms: -

Strong communities with healthy age profiles, adequately housed and skilled, with good social and physical infrastructure and with control over as many aspects of their lives as possible.

In order to achieve this it is suggested that an integrated strategy be developed that aims to promote the following three goals: -

- Social strength and vibrancy
- Political organization and capacity
- Economic vitality

Social strength and vibrancy is about being active in the social arena of, for example, playgroups, childcare, sport, church, care in the community and having the human capacity, skills and finance to develop such activities.

Political organization and capacity is about the ability of communities to understand their own situation, to engage with other actors and to mobilise opinion and views to advance their interests. It is concerned with skills, democratic processes and organisational structures.

Economic vitality is central to the social and cultural well being of communities. It involves not just the traditional private and public sectors but increasingly also the social economy - communities delivering a wider range of economic activity themselves through the delivery of services and management of assets.

To achieve this an effort will need to be made to: -

- build social capital (the web of relations and participative structures at the local level)
- invest in social infrastructure (community councils, associations and businesses)
- develop community assets (land and property)

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Community development involves change for the better in social and/or economic terms. Present high level policies are encouraging a shift from planning FOR communities to a process of planning WITH if not actually BY communities. This shift highlights the importance of local community agents and the need for networks to support them. The concept of the social economy is explored and the need of a more coordinated system of providing information, training and support in developing it is noted. It is also noted that no single model of best practice in community development has yet emerged. The challenge is to be flexible in supporting systems that best suit the social and economic contexts of different communities.

The existing situation in the park is varied. Small community groups manage to build their skills and social capital on their own while some of the larger ones get information, training and support from a wide range of different sources. Amongst these, this section briefly highlights the MBSE community agents scheme and the forum for community economic development coordinators working in Local Rural Partnerships (LRP) in Aberdeenshire. The existence of effective networks and partnerships is seen as crucial to ensuring coordinated activity and the best use of existing resources.

The research generated many specific recommendations for how community development might be encouraged. These have been sorted into six main strategic groups: -

- Become more open to ongoing learning and mutual enabling
- Build the capacity of communities to develop themselves through networking and information sharing
- Encourage and promote local involvement
- Promote awareness of, and encourage imaginative use of new policies and legislation
- Promote the development of the social economy
- Provide resources to support the above

COMMUNICATIONS

The existing situation in the Cairngorms is characterised by a wide variation in the quality and quantity of formal and informal messages that flow along the various channels of communication. There are also some cutting edge examples of best practice. There is therefore much scope for peer learning and for making better use of existing mechanisms.

Many specific recommendations emerged from the research. In summary they suggest that the CNPA should: -

- Be a learning and enabling organisation
- Be a beacon of best practice in communication
- Harness and hone best practice in consultation techniques
- Have an interactive digital presence as a beacon and a gateway
- Identify local learning needs and arrange to have them met in user friendly ways from different social backgrounds get together.

REPRESENTATION

Having a voice is as important as having a vote when it comes to representation and it is important that in a pluralist democracy the voices of all relevant stakeholders are heard and represented. For full public involvement it is not enough that people are consulted about overall strategy; it is also important that they are involved with the details of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The existing situation in the park area is mixed with 28% of people feeling that their views are well represented while 23% claim that their views are poorly represented. While there is a degree of consultation fatigue and cynicism about the value of consultation processes the situation is improving and there are many local facilitators who can mount popular and interactive consultation processes. The CCCG has a good track record of representing community views and the CNPA itself is structured in a way that guarantees a strong voice for local views.

The research generated many specific recommendations for how representation might be improved. These have been sorted into the following five main strategic groups:

- Help improve effective influencing at all levels
- Develop more robust representational structures
- Encourage local involvement
- Ensure representational inclusiveness
- Resource the process

A recent SCVO Policy Committee Discussion Paper notes "*There are three dimensions to community empowerment – the transfer of formal decision taking powers, the development of a locally controlled economic infrastructure, and the growth of a vigorous local civil society. Each of these objectives can be pursued independently but none will flourish in the absence of the others*¹.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of this research, we make a series of 24 main recommendations on how to take forward a strategic approach to community development in the Cairngorms. This

¹ SCVO - Community Empowerment - A Policy Committee Discussion Paper
http://www.scvo.org.uk/policy/new_politics/community_participation/app2_community_empower.htm

approach needs to be implemented through a Cairngorms Community Development Programme that can draw in more detail on the findings of this research.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – A STRATEGIC APPROACH

1. In response to the Park's fourth Aim of promoting sustainable social and economic development of the area's communities, *the CNPA should draw up and implement a Community Development Strategy for the area.*
2. The promotion of the fourth aim does not exist in isolation from the Park's other aims, none of which can be delivered without the active participation of local communities and *the CNPA should ensure there is appropriate integration and balances between its strategic approaches to community development and other sectors.*
3. The CNPA shares its commitment to community development in the area with other bodies with related interests and responsibilities and *the CNPA should develop its role in ways that produce a co-ordinated and focused approach with its public sector partners and others.*
4. The Park cuts across the boundaries of many communities and thus *the CNPA should ensure that its Community Development Strategy sufficiently involves the communities immediately around the Park in the Cairngorms area.*
5. The CNPA needs to have a clear view of the local communities within the Park and *the CNPA should use the relevant Community Councils and Associations represented on the Cairngorms Community Council Group as representing communities at a local level.*
6. There is often confusion in what is meant by local community and *the CNPA should define a local communities as including all interests within the local area, be they individuals, businesses, social groups or others.*

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – A POLICY FRAMEWORK

7. Support for community development in the Cairngorms has been relatively fragmented and limited to date and *the CNPA should bring a new and very positive level of focus, co-ordination and support for community development in the area.*
8. There is now a substantial body of experience, national and international on community development and *the CNPA should ensure that all its involvements with community development follow and build on current knowledge and understanding of best practice. If necessary, the CNPA should employ staff with expertise in areas such as the social economy and learning support.*
9. Public policy, best practice experience and the nature of the CNPA's remit, mean that *the CNPA should see its role in community development as a facilitator and enabler that can also provide some direct support and assistance both with funds and in-kind help.*
10. In supporting locally based community development, *the CNPA should develop policies that help communities to build social capital, invest in social infrastructure and develop community assets.*

11. In encouraging community enterprise and the social economy locally, *the CNPA should explore with others means by which community bodies can meet their core costs without diverting their scarce funds from other development work.*
12. The legislative and policy environment is rapidly changing and *CNPA should adopt the principles of a 'learning organisation' and maximise the benefits to be realised for the area through existing legislation and public policy such as, for example, the Land Reform Act, Title Conditions Bill, Local Government Act and social inclusion agenda.*

A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

13. Most of the communities in and around the Park are at different stages of development and *the CNPA should design a programme to implement its Community Development Strategy that is flexible enough to match the circumstances of individual communities.*
14. As part of acknowledging the diversity of the area's communities, *the CNPA should see the capacity of a Cairngorms Community Development Programme to be tailored to the particular support required by different communities, as a defining character of the programme.*
15. In its role as a facilitator and enabler, *the CNPA should establish with others an autonomous and non-hierarchical network of skilled and experienced community agents or facilitators throughout the area.*
16. Given the relatively advanced community development in some parts of the Cairngorms area and the limited progress in others, *the CNPA should ensure that its network of community support can span the advice and assistance needed from the first stages of community development in some areas to the specialised requirements of the more established community enterprises in and around the Park.*
17. The skills and abilities of young people are critical to the success of the National Park, *and CNPA should promote schemes to support young people in education and business through, for example, scholarships and mentoring programmes.*

COMMUNICATION

18. In tackling its wide ranging communications needs, *the CNPA should have a well developed and co-ordinated approach to communication with the people who live in and around the Park.*
19. Effective consultation relies on trust and transparency, *and the CNPA should develop a Consultation Code of Practice outlining the standards and procedures that are to be adopted.*
20. There is already an established pattern for consultation in the Cairngorms Area, including a network of local facilitators, and *the CNPA should continue to use and develop the existing network of Community Councils and Community Associations to manage local community consultations.*
21. Digital technology is of increasing value to communications, *and the CNPA should promote best practice in the use of websites, support the development of existing community websites, produce an annual CD-ROM and seek ways to popularise the use of GIS technologies.*

REPRESENTATION

22. There are many potential ways in which local views can be represented *to the CNPA and the CNPA should be an open and engaging organisation that takes full account of the views of the people who live and work within the Park.*
23. Community Councils are the lowest level of statutory democratic representation and *the CNPA should continue to use Community Councils as the channel through which the views of local communities are represented.*
24. There is a clear need for improvements in the operation of Community Councils and *the CNPA should support the Cairngorms Community Council Group by means of a strategic support package that assists them and promotes improved capacity in terms of communications with their electorate and enhanced turnout levels for contested elections.*