



**Cairngorms National Park Authority
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Sustainable Living in the Cairngorms National Park

The All Abilities Perspective, Morag Redwood, HIEF

Thank you for the kind invitation to speak today on a subject which I am somewhat passionate about!!!

First, a word about HIEF:

ESF project, lead partner, SCVO, raising awareness of equalities & diversity

We are increasingly involved in going beyond awareness-raising to supporting various agencies make the culture shift to one which values diversity. Why is this? – Partly it is due to heightened social awareness – the moral case of respecting our fellow citizens – but it is also due to an awakening realisation of the need to build social and economic sustainability.

Although this is something that most of you in the room here today probably know more about than me, I would like to just touch briefly on some background to the Highland demography here. Let's start, then,

with some statistics – a bit colder than the human side of sustainability but important nevertheless.

DEMOGRAPHY

Population in rural areas is decreasing and moving to urban areas – Inverness in particular. In 2001, statistics showed that despite a Highland population growth of 14% and an employment growth of 56%, only 68% of the working-age population (aged 16-64) were economically active. All of this leaves our rural communities fragile and vulnerable to sudden change – and facing the dual challenge of ensuring that there is a viable local workforce along with an equally viable customer base.

Whilst we cannot predict with any certainty what the future will be for the Highlands, the predictions for demographic change made by the HWBA based on the census of 2001 seem to be being borne out.

Skilled projections show that population growth alone cannot address the main challenge which faces *us* – and the rest of the country – that of an aging population. By 2017 almost no regions within Highland will have 20% of young people in their communities – and all will have at least 50% over the age of 45 – ie people who are reaching the latter stages of their working life and who are less likely to have young families.

So the lesson here is that we need to ensure that all who are able to work in our communities are given every opportunity to do so. To encourage young families to come here to live – and to encourage them to stay, we need to set out a meaningful ‘welcome’.

VALUING PEOPLE

But, enough of hard facts – let's return now to thinking of real human beings. People who are already in the area together with new residents – all want to feel valued – and they should be valued. As folks want to contribute to their community – socially and politically as well as economically, we need to ensure that there are no barriers to them doing so. That is not to say that we want to force people into anything – or off benefits. (Benefits are there for those in society who cannot secure an independent income). And we don't want to encourage tokenism.

So, how do we make that happen? Well, there is a raft of equality legislation that seeks to prevent the discrimination of marginalised groups, and this covers gender, race, disability, belief & religion, sexual orientation and age. But legislation alone is insufficient to change the prevailing culture, although the new public duties in regard to race, disability and gender are powerful elements in ensuring that we all work together on identifying and addressing key issues. The various step actions within the specific duties can serve as a blueprint to others in the community – in the private and voluntary sectors as well as to the general public – of how we should be aiming to move beyond fire fighting claims of discrimination and exclusion to thinking in new ways of how we can prevent the discrimination happening in the first place.

In fact, one of the key elements in the new public duties is the stipulation that public authorities (and CNPA is one such body) must work with those who have specific knowledge to help create new and positive relations in the community. The CNPA was already ahead of the rest of the crowd when it came to the creation of its Disability Equality Duty in December of last year, because it already had given support to, and built a

relationship with, the ‘All Abilities Network Group’. This was a group of people with direct experience of living with a disability who wanted to make the Park accessible for all. Their willingness to give their time and expertise, and to share their knowledge to bring about real benefits, has been a real asset to the Authority – and to the success to date of the Park. Thanks to them, the park has good accessibility as the All Abilities Network Group met directly with Landowners to discuss these issues. They also caused the Park’s magazine to be published in different formats.

Since the publication of the Disability Equality Scheme, the All Abilities Network Group has somewhat reinvented itself. It has expanded to include representation from other marginalised sectors of society and has renamed itself ‘Inclusive Cairngorms’. We now have a young man as our chair and I’m sure he won’t mind that I mention that he has a disability himself. One successful initiative recently was to bring people from the Big Issue up to visit the Park.

All of this brings a fresh way of looking at what we want from *our* national park. We want to involve everyone in the community who is interested in making the Park a good place in which to live, work and relax. This means really thinking through all events and actions (such as the Park Advisory Forums) to ensure that they really are inclusive. We want to go beyond merely talking about improvements to really making change happen. These initiatives should be self-energised and fun – not a chore!

It has been interesting, as part of the consultation exercise recently on gender, to discover where people feel that they might have a different

experience of living, working and relaxing in the Highlands because of whether they are a man, woman or transgender person. A recurring theme in Highlands has been the feeling that reinforced gender stereotyping is down to our ‘Highland Culture’. Whilst everyone stopped short of saying that this can excuse continued discrimination, there is almost a tacit – ‘well, what can you do?’ - attitude that should give us all concern. Surely our Highland Culture is not beyond challenge and change? This highlights the urgent need to educate people to question accepted prejudices. From HIEF’s training sessions on attitudinal change, participants soon realise that better understanding of different marginalised groups helps them to think of individual people rather than impersonal statistics and often misinformed stereotypes. When you get to know on a personal level people who you perhaps wouldn’t normally come into contact with – whether that is a transgender person, or someone with a mental impairment, or a young person with multiple body piercings – you realise how much we all have in common rather than where we differ. Hopefully we can move towards a society that doesn’t need to label people in an artificial and unhelpful way – thereby putting up barriers which then have to be broken down.

For the most part, it has to be said, people are keen to bring about these improvements. Thankfully, this seems to be mostly driven – not by economic necessity – but by humanitarian concern for everyone in our communities. For the Park, it means ensuring that everything that we do is considered afresh through the experience of different societal groups. It means thinking of the needs of different ethnic young people who are new to the area, truly understanding the frustrations of spending a day out with friends and family if you have a disability, and especially concentrating on the needs of those with low disposable income. It is

great, therefore, to hear of the ‘Cairngorms on a Shoestring’ initiative because it opens up the park to so many people, people who probably most need to be able to escape to the beauty of this area, to improve their health and wellbeing. Included in the most socially deprived are all of the marginalised groups I mentioned earlier – as well as the unemployed and young single parents who face real challenges in accessing facilities. A policy of real empathy towards those facing different experiences will bring wins for all parties – it allows all residents and visitors the same opportunity to enjoy the park and to spend their limited resources to the benefit of the local community. Working thoughtfully round the difficulties faced by some folks allows a better participation in local activity (both paid and unpaid) and facilitates true integration of our diverse population. And so we have a park that is viable on both social and economic fronts.

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

Equality and diversity are fast becoming ‘buzz words’ but it seems almost as though the more we hear about them in the media, the less we really understand that this is something which touches all aspects of our lives in very real ways. On 5th July in Inverness’s Falcon Square, we are hosting an event in celebration of the diversity of Highland Culture. Entitled, ‘Highlands R Us’ we hope to move away from the idea of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ feeling where ‘them’ is anyone new coming into the area. It is time to grasp the fact that we are all the new ‘us’ in the Highlands – and that we are made better and stronger because of our diversity. Embracing new change does not mean that we have to throw away the more traditional values or concepts of our culture – just that there is room for more. No-one should be seen as ‘different’ to some specified norm – we are all different one to another and that is surely good news.