

Cairngorms 2030 Communities Fund Panel

Bringing the examples to life

1. Collective models

Open collective

The fund holds an open day at the Cairngorms Business Partnership hub in Grantown. Anyone with a project idea can come. Forty people show up - applicants, previous grant recipients, community councillors, a few people who just heard about it and wanted to see. Each applicant has five minutes to describe their idea. Then the room deliberates together. Questions are asked, connections are made. Someone realises their project overlaps with another and suggests they collaborate. At the end of the day, everyone in the room - applicants included - votes on which projects should go forward. The people closest to the work are also the people making the decisions.

Closed collective

Six community development organisations from across the park meet quarterly to manage a shared pot of £150,000 for medium grants. They know their communities well and between them cover most of the park's geography. Each organisation brings forward projects from their area. The group discusses priorities together, challenges each other's assumptions, and reaches decisions by consensus. No single organisation controls the outcome. The fund belongs to all of them.

Rolling collective

In year one, seven projects receive grants from the small grants pot. In year two, those seven project leads are invited to join the decision-making group for the next round. They read the new applications, meet the applicants, and vote alongside the Involve team. They bring something no external panel could - they have been through the process themselves, they know what the money actually means, and they can spot both the potential and the gaps in what people are asking for. Each year, the cohort shifts. Last year's recipients become this year's decision-makers.

2. Community panel

Eight people sit around a table in Kingussie on a Tuesday evening in March - a crofter from Laggan, a retired teacher from Aviemore, a young woman who runs a community café in Boat of Garten, a ranger, a parent governor, and three others. They have each spent the previous week reading twelve applications. Tonight they discuss them together. One application is beautifully written but the panel wonders whether it really reaches the communities it claims to serve. Another is rough around the edges but describes something none of them have seen funded before. They ask questions, push back on each other, change their minds. By nine o'clock they have made their decisions. The money goes where the panel believes it will make the most difference, not where the best bid writer lives.

3. Criteria-based assessment

A local Community Development Trust has been applying for grants for fifteen years. They know the language, they know what funders want to hear, and their finance manager can produce a project budget before breakfast. In March, they submit a detailed application to the Cairngorms large grants pot - forty pages, three years of accounts, two letters of support. The Park Authority assessment panel reads it carefully against the published criteria. It scores well. It is funded. The Trust delivers a well-run project that meets all its targets. But in the same round, a small informal group from a remote glen submitted a one-page letter describing something genuinely transformational. It did not score as well. It was not funded.

4. Deliberation

In January, twenty residents gather for the first of three evening sessions to hear ideas for projects to promote people and nature thriving together. They have been randomly selected from across the park - different ages, different backgrounds, different relationships to the land. In the first session they hear from local ecologists, community workers and young people about what is happening in the Cairngorms. In the second they meet six project applicants and ask them challenging questions. In the third they deliberate. One participant comes in convinced that environmental projects should take priority. By the final session she has shifted - not because anyone told her to, but because she heard something in the second meeting that she could not unhear. The group reaches a decision together.

5. Distributed dialogue

In February, twenty-four community hosts across the park - a postie in Tomintoul, a youth worker in Aviemore, a farmer near Braemar - each run a kitchen table

conversation with six to ten of their neighbours. They all use the same three questions: what do you want this fund to do? Who should it reach? What would success look like in five years? The conversations last about an hour. Some happen in living rooms, some in village halls, one in a sheep shed. The outputs are gathered by the Park Authority and woven into a synthesis that shapes the fund's priorities for the year. No one had to travel. No one had to fill in a form. The fund came to the community rather than asking the community to come to it.

6. Ideas challenge

In spring, the fund launches a challenge: *How might your community help people and nature thrive together in the Cairngorms?* There is no prescribed project type, no long application form - just a two-page expression of interest or a two-minute video. A primary school in Kingussie submits a proposal to rewild their school grounds and run habitat monitoring sessions. A group of older residents in Ballater proposes a programme of guided walks that teaches younger people to read the landscape. A community energy cooperative near Grantown applies to install solar panels and use the income to fund local environmental education. None of these groups had thought of themselves as funding applicants before. The challenge gave them a door to walk through. *This could be combined with open collective models for a more collaborative approach.*

8. Public Vote (PB)

In October, the Cairngorms fund opens its doors for the autumn round. Forty-two projects have passed the eligibility check. Everything from a community woodland in Newtonmore to a youth cycling project in Braemar. For three weeks, anyone who lives, works or accesses services in the national park can vote. Polling stations open at the Grantown farmers' market and the Ballater community café. An online form goes out through the school newsletters. By the time voting closes, 2,300 people have had their say. The twelve projects with the most votes share £180,000. The woodland gets funded. So does the cycling project. A few established organisations are surprised to find themselves pipped by a small informal group who mobilised their village.

Mixed options

There are many different combinations of approaches and methods that you could design. These examples below attempt to bring just a few options to life.

Example 1: Public vote for small, local panel for large

The Cairngorms fund runs two processes simultaneously. For small grants, anyone in the park can vote - projects are posted online and at community venues every quarter,

and the public decides. It is fast, visible and generates real community buzz. For large grants, a trained local panel of eight community members takes over - reading applications carefully, meeting applicants, and deliberating together before deciding. The small grants process reaches people who have never engaged with a fund before. The large grants process gives complex, multi-year projects the scrutiny they deserve. Neither approach would work as well for the other grant size.

Example 2: Distributed dialogue sets priorities, local panel decides

Every spring, community hosts across the park run kitchen table conversations about what matters most in their area. The outputs are gathered and published as the fund's priorities for the year - written in the community's own words. A local panel then meets to read applications and decide which ones best reflect what communities said they wanted. The community's voice shapes the direction. A community panel holds the decision. From start to finish, no professional funder makes a judgement call about what is worth supporting.

Example 3: Ideas festival, then a public vote

Once a year the fund hosts a Cairngorms Ideas Festival - a day of open conversations, workshops and pitching across a few venues simultaneously. Anyone can come. Community groups, individuals, young people, farmers, businesses. The day is not about submitting applications - it is about making connections, developing half-formed ideas, and finding collaborators. Groups that want to take their idea further submit a short expression of interest in the weeks that follow. Eligible projects go to a public vote. The festival generates ideas. The community chooses which ones get funded.

Example 4: Distributed dialogue into ideas challenge into deliberative event

In January, the fund puts out a simple invitation across the park: host a conversation with your neighbours about what would help people and nature thrive together where you live. A toolkit goes out to anyone who wants to run one - three questions, a simple note-taking sheet, and a postcard to send back. Over six weeks, thirty-one conversations happen. A postmistress in Tomintoul hosts one after closing time. A ranger runs one at a path maintenance day near Braemar. A teacher organises one with parents at the Kingussie school gates. The outputs come back to a community-led coordinating group as postcards and voice notes and scribbled A4 sheets. Three themes emerge strongly across the park: access to land, intergenerational knowledge, and the economics of staying rural.

In March the fund hosts a Democracy Day in Grantown - open to anyone. Sixty people come. Community groups, individuals, farmers, young people, a few people who just heard about it and wanted to see. The three themes from the winter conversations are

on the walls. Groups have five minutes each to pitch an idea that responds to one of them. Then the room breaks into three café-style discussions where people can move between tables, challenge ideas, suggest collaborations, and add their weight to what feels most promising. By the end of the day, fifteen ideas have enough momentum to go forward to a full application. The winter conversations shaped the questions and the Democracy Day surfaced the ideas.