

Good Practice In Rural Development

No. 2

Community Involvement In Rural Development Initiatives

Rural Forum

and

**Rural Research Branch
The Scottish Office Central Research Unit**

1997

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Foreword

The Scottish Rural Partnership initiative was announced in the Rural White Paper 'People, Prosperity and Partnership' published in December 1995. Flowing from this, the Scottish National Rural Partnership has been established, charged with the task of promoting rural development.

The Scottish National Rural Partnership comprises of representatives of The Scottish Office, Scottish Tourist Board, Scottish Natural Heritage, Rural Forum, Scottish Agricultural College, COSLA, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Homes, Forestry Commission, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Landowners Federation, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, National Farmers Union of Scotland, CBI Scotland and Scottish Crofters Union. A list of objectives and targets for the Partnership is published in 'People, Prosperity and Partnership: Progress Report' December 1996.

To take forward the task of promoting rural development, the Scottish National Rural Partnership is publishing a range of titles in a series under the heading '*Good Practice in Rural Development*'. These highlight principles of good practice in a number of aspects of rural development. The good practice notes are intended for the attention of all those involved in rural development, particularly local rural partnerships, as guidance which merits careful consideration. Whether or not to follow the guidance in all cases is, of course, a decision for each local rural partnership or other body to make in their particular circumstances.

This publication is the second of the series, and addresses the issue of community involvement in rural development initiatives.

Other '*Good Practice in Rural Development*' titles will be published in 1997 and 1998.

Executive Summary

This guidance draws together information from a number of sources to set out the main points and principles that should be considered prior to, and during, work that seeks the involvement of rural communities. Case studies are used to illustrate some successful methods of working with rural communities in Scotland and some of the pitfalls that can be avoided. Government policy increasingly emphasises the need for programmes and projects to be taken forward with the close involvement of the people that will be directly affected by them and where possible for local people to be equipped with the skills and information to undertake this work on their own behalf. It is a central theme of the Scottish Rural White Paper and the Scottish Rural Partnership set up following the White Paper. The experience of others clearly shows that this way of working can bring great benefits to all concerned, but is neither easy nor straightforward. This guidance sets out some of the basic issues that need to be considered, to act as a starting point for further investigation and information gathering.

The main points made in the guidance can be summarised as follows:

- Before beginning a project, thought must go into the target population for the work. It is tempting to assume that everyone living in a particular geographical area constitutes the local community, but this may not be the case. The size of area chosen is important and certain groups of settlements may have strong cultural and social links, whereas others do not. Groups of people with common interests, social circumstances or cultural identity can also form a community.
- A preliminary phase can be a useful way to approach the local community before starting on the project itself. This will allow local people to understand what the work will involve before it starts and to shape the project so that some of their own objectives can be met.
- In many cases, rural communities are brought into projects which have been devised by another organisation. In this situation, the work should be seen as a bargain between two parties - the organisation that has initiated the project and the rural community itself. Both parties should be able to influence the objectives of the project, have a say in the way the work is done and benefit from the work once it is finished. The person responsible for the project should make sure that the rural community understands the reason that the organisation wants to do the work and the objectives it hopes to achieve, as well as the limitations of the project so that unrealistic expectations are not raised and misunderstandings minimised. In turn, local people should have an opportunity to shape the project from the beginning, so that they can fulfil some of their own objectives.
- Some projects which originate from within rural communities are then used by an outside organisation as a foundation for other work. In this case the outside body must take care that the rural community remains in control of the work and that they proceed with the full support of those involved, so that they are not perceived as 'taking over'.
- Some groups within rural communities tend not to become involved in these projects, for example young, elderly and unemployed people. It would be impractical to involve every individual in a rural community in a project, but it is worth considering how the broadest audience can be reached, so that the widest range of views is available and important issues are not missed.
- A wide range of tools and methods for community involvement have been developed and the person managing the project must be familiar with and able to use the main

techniques. The guidance contains a brief discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of some of the most common methods.

- Community development agents have been used successfully in a number of rural projects. These workers can come from within the rural community and may already be active in local projects and simply need some additional support, or they can come from outwith the community and have particular skills or experience to offer the project. To be effective, community development agents must be familiar with or trained in rural development techniques; they must be properly resourced and supported; they should be available to the rural community for a sensible period of time - this may be years rather than months; and, if they are employed by an agency, they should make the role and agenda of the agency clear to those they are working with and must be able to act with a degree of independence rather than narrowly follow a predetermined agenda.
- Community involvement projects may require a substantial period of time to achieve their objectives and in order to keep momentum going some short term as well as long term targets should be identified. Newsletters and social events have been found to be useful ways to maintain enthusiasm and keep local people informed of progress.
- It is important that arrangements are made to record the progress of the project and report on it at suitable intervals and certainly upon its conclusion. This information is of great value to others embarking on similar projects and should be preserved and made available.

1. Introduction

This guidance draws together information from a number of sources on the involvement of rural communities in Scotland in initiatives or projects that aim to deliver some aspect of rural policy. It is based partly upon a report prepared for The Scottish Office by Bryden *et al.*¹ which examined a number of cases of community involvement in rural areas and drew from these, and from academic work into the subject, a number of useful insights into the process of community participation and how it can be made to work successfully. This guidance sets out some of the points and principles that should be considered prior to and in the course of rural development work. Case studies are used to illustrate some successful methods of working with rural communities and some of the pitfalls that can be avoided. This series - “Good Practice in Rural Development” is complemented by the “New Ideas in Rural Development” series and in particular the third in the series “Involving Rural Communities - the CADISPA approach”².

The work on which this guidance is based clearly shows that involving local people in projects and initiatives can bring great benefits to all concerned, but that it is neither easy nor straightforward. Government policy has increasingly emphasised the importance of securing the commitment and experience of local people in development work and this type of approach is becoming the norm in many sectors. As a result, there is a need for more information, particularly about the experiences of others, to be readily available to anyone thinking of embarking on such an exercise. The research itself discovered that mistakes tended to be repeated from one project to the next because there was no well established method of disseminating experience about this type of work.

The guidance is aimed at anyone who is contemplating setting up a project in a rural area that will involve local people in some way. This might be people who live in a rural area and want to do some work that will need the support and input of the wider community, or staff based in the head office of a national organisation, or local agency, who want to work more closely with the rural residents who will be directly affected by their policies and programmes. Local rural partnerships may also find this guidance useful as they begin to engage with communities in their local area. The research found that it is those projects that are instigated by agencies outside the community that most often run into difficulties in trying to involve local people and this guidance will look particularly at how some of these problems can be avoided. This guidance provides advice, therefore, on projects initiated by local people themselves and on projects initiated by agencies and organisations.

The focus is on community involvement in rural development initiatives, and the guidance is, therefore, primarily project based. Community involvement is equally important in establishing partnerships and agreeing local development strategies, and much of the advice presented here will also be applicable to these tasks.

¹*Community Involvement and Rural Policy* by John Bryden, Drennan Watson, Catherine Storey and Jeroen van Alphen, (1997) The Scottish Office Central Research Unit

²*New Ideas in Rural Development No 3: Involving Rural Communities: The CADISPA Approach* by Geoff Fagan (1997) The Scottish Office Central Research Unit

There are many definitions of the terms “community” and “involvement” and to ensure consistency and clarity the following definitions have been adopted for the purposes of this guidance:

“community” is taken to mean a group of people who live in the same area, or share a particular feature (such as type of employment), have a common social or cultural identity, or a common aim or interest. More will be said below about the problem of choosing a community for a project;

“involvement” is taken to have a broad meaning, ranging from asking local people to fill in a questionnaire, to local people setting up and running the project themselves, with no help from any other quarter. Some people feel that community involvement requires an active role for the community and would see questionnaire exercises as consultation instead, but this guidance aims to include a broad spectrum of types of involvement in order to cover as many different types of project as possible.

2. Why involve rural communities?

Securing the involvement of local people in the delivery of programmes and projects is time consuming and labour intensive if it is to be done well. There are few short cuts in this type of work, although it can range from relatively superficial exercises to very intensive work. Sometimes it may seem tempting just to get on with the job, but experience shows that there are some important benefits to be gained from getting local people on board.

In recent years government policy has increasingly stressed the need to involve communities in the initiatives and projects that affect them, as an important way to ensure that decision-making is devolved to the most local level possible. It is a central theme of the Scottish Rural White Paper and the Scottish Rural Partnership, which has been set up following the White Paper. This policy background is not confined to rural areas and to some extent builds upon the experience of community involvement in urban regeneration strategies and projects, such as the four Urban Partnerships.

Working with local people gives good results when it is done well. Some organisations and outside agencies can run into difficulties, and often find that they are unable to pursue their projects, if they do not carry local people along with them; if they do not develop the trust that is required to work with local communities; and if they impose ideas based on their own interpretation of requirements rather than establishing those of the community themselves.

This approach is founded on the principles of democracy and local empowerment, but at a more practical level it can help to:

- defuse local tensions over a controversial project or development,
- create a sense of “ownership” of a project in local people, so that it is more likely to continue in the long term
- build skills and confidence in local people so that they are more able to carry out their own projects in the future.

Local people can also make a very valuable contribution of their own, to the benefit of the project concerned. This can include:

- offering labour and skills at a reasonable cost, or even on a voluntary basis,
- providing information about local networks and expertise,
- organising and managing the project, at a suitable point in its development,
- contributing to the long-term sustainability of rural initiatives.

It is also important to remember that in many instances successful projects that involved local people were instigated by rural communities themselves, with other organisations becoming involved later on. There is a great deal of activity in rural areas already - Highlands and Islands Enterprise estimate that there are around 3,000 voluntary bodies in existence in its area alone. This enthusiasm and energy can be built upon, and often organisations have found that their role is simply to offer support and direction to local communities, rather than initiate and run the whole process themselves.

3. Choosing the right community

“Communities are groups of people that talk to each other”

Before embarking on a community involvement exercise, it is important to consider who the target audience for the work will be. This is clearly less of a problem when the initiative comes from the local community, and in a sense, the community chooses itself. Projects initiated by an outside agency may, from time to time, run into difficulties because not enough thought has gone into exactly which rural community should be involved. Some issues that should be considered in making this decision include:

- is there a clear geographical location for the community that is to be targeted? Are there surrounding settlements that might also have something to contribute to the exercise?
- is the work about groups of people with common interests, rather than geographical communities? For example, the work might target all the unemployed people in a certain area, or all the young people, or all those with a particular health problem.
- are there social and cultural factors to be taken into account?. The project might only be of relevance to Gaelic speakers for example, or to those people who have recently moved to the area.
- are other agencies already working in the area and trying to involve the community?

Geographical, economic, social and cultural factors all play a part in defining a community, so simply picking a village might not be enough. One useful way to get started is by asking local people in the area of interest how they would define the local community. They will have a clearer idea of which settlements “belong” together and will have insights into which groups within the community might have most to contribute.

Finally, the question of size of the community must be considered. If the geographical area chosen for the project is too large, then the sense of belonging to the same community will be lost by the local people involved in the work. On the other hand, if the area chosen is too small, then the work that can be done will tend to be very specific to the area and there is a danger that broader issues will not be addressed. Again, local people will be able to comment on a sensible size for the area to be covered.

BLACK ROCK CAFE: ISLE OF SKYE

“If you involve the kids, they get more sense of ownership, more sense of responsibility.”

The Black Rock Cafe in Portree on Skye is a project which was initiated by local residents to provide young people in the area with a general meeting place and social facility. Problems with under-age drinking and vandalism sparked the project, which was taken forward by a steering group including the police, parents and the local Community Education Service. Discussions with local young people, teachers, parents and licensees highlighted the need for a venue, centrally located, where young people could enjoy their leisure time. The Community Education Service agreed to convert the Youth Wing at Portree High School to form the Black Rock Cafe, with support from local businesses, the LEC, the Council of Voluntary Service and Children in Need. Throughout the exercise, young people from the area were closely involved in the design and execution of the project and participate in the overall management and day to day running of the Cafe.

The Black Rock Cafe illustrates how a project initiated from within a community can successfully provide a new facility for a section of the community who can be difficult to engage. The Community Education Service played a key role in the venture and in this instance were able to act as community development agents, rather than being confined to an educational role.

4. Getting Started

“A major hindrance to community involvement was the fundamental lack of understanding between the partners...as well as the community as to what sustainable development is. The words themselves excluded 95% of the local community from getting involved...”

Ettrick and Lauderdale Sustainability Project

The initial stages of this type of project should be managed with special care. It is well worth taking time to think through how to approach a particular community, in order to avoid creating a poor first impression. Worthy projects have sometimes failed to get off the ground partly because the first approaches to local people were clumsily handled.

The first point of contact should be someone who has a legitimate claim to represent the community concerned. The chair of the community council is often a sensible first contact, but someone else, for example the local head teacher, the minister or the chair of the local WRI, might be a good choice, depending on the topic to be studied. In many cases several contacts might be made at the same time, in which case it is important that all those contacted know which other local people have also been spoken to. In making a first contact it is important that the purpose of the contact is made clear and that the nature of the project is properly explained.

A preparatory phase has been found to be a useful way to get started and avoid making people feel rushed into a project that they do not properly understand. It will also provide a sound foundation for the work which will help overcome any setbacks at a later stage. The preliminary phase might consist of a series of short exercises or meetings at which the background to the work and what is intended is explained. The preparatory phase might also cover:

- an explanation of what the work is for, what it will involve and how the community can be involved in the work;
- local peoples' comments on the choice of “community” for the exercise, as discussed above;
- the opportunity for the community to contribute to the objectives of the exercise and decide on how it should be run;
- discussion of the basic concepts involved in the exercise, so that local people are confident they have a sufficient understanding of the subject matter the project will cover;
- a decision by the community to opt in or out of the exercise once it has a full understanding of what is involved.

ETTRICK AND LAUDERDALE SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT

The Ettrick and Lauderdale Sustainability project was taken forward by a partnership of agencies including Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Borders Enterprise, Rural Forum and the local authorities for the area. The aim of the project was to explore what sustainable development could mean for the area chosen and the involvement of the local community was sought as key players in the social, economic and environmental future of the area. Consultants were engaged to undertake preliminary research and arrange the involvement of the community.

Lessons learnt from the project include:

- local people required a better understanding of sustainability before being able to contribute to the exercise fully. A preparatory phase might have been one way of familiarising the local rural community with the basic concepts involved;
- the area was chosen without consultation with local people and did not correspond to a local sense of “community”. Many felt it was too large for effective participation;
- the project did not leave enough room for the local community to contribute to its objectives, as it was already fairly well developed before the involvement of the community was sought. Earlier involvement of local people would have allowed greater scope for this; and
- more effective participation might have been gained if the project had been taken forward through existing local groups and organisations.

Despite these difficulties, the original project has led to the establishment of the Borders Forum for Sustainable Development, which is a locally based group aiming to identify and develop practical projects that will promote sustainable development in the area. Thus a project whose original aims were not primarily aimed at the rural community has led to a community-based initiative.

5. The next stage

Involving rural communities can be undertaken as a discrete exercise, which forms part of a particular project, or alternatively, can become a way of working for an agency or other group, so that all projects and programmes are carried out in partnership with local people. This section is addressed mainly at work that consists of discrete projects, although agencies that are involving local communities in this way should consider if a more comprehensive approach would be possible. Work of this kind can originate in one of two ways:

- a body external to the rural community, a public body which operates Scotland-wide or a voluntary body, decides to take forward a piece of work with the help of local people;
- the rural community itself decides to do a piece of work.

Projects which originate from either source can be successful and worthwhile. The issues that must be dealt with in the course of the work often relate to where the project originated. The findings of the research suggest that projects which come from communities themselves tend to have a better success rate than externally generated ones, for reasons that will be discussed below, but neither type is problem-free.

5.1 Projects initiated by a body external to the rural community

In many cases, rural communities are brought into projects which have been devised by another organisation. Sometimes the work may have been running for some time, but will have reached a stage where the involvement of rural dwellers is felt to be important. In other instances, the whole project is based upon the involvement of a rural community and would not be run at all otherwise.

5.1.1 Explaining the aims of the agency and project

Once the initial approach to a community has been made and agreement reached that the work will go ahead, the next issue that those managing a community involvement project must consider is how to ensure that there is clear communication and a shared understanding of what is involved in the project. There are other important considerations too, but good communication is basic to a successful project.

Good communication must begin with the organisation initiating the project being clear itself about the purpose of the work and what it aims to achieve. A good place to begin is with the project manager considering the rationale, or reasons, for involving local people in the work. The research on which this guidance is based identified 7 rationales for community involvement:

- the general aim of devolving decision-making to the most local level practical and making sure that action taken by an agency has local support;
- as a way to meet best the needs of clients, consumers and communities;
- in order to make use of local knowledge and expertise and to involve those individuals who have the power to act locally;

- to minimise tensions over controversial developments or projects and to influence the lifestyles of local people;
- to provide education and information for local people;
- to find mutually acceptable solutions to situations where there are conflicts of interest, either between different groups within a community or between an agency and a rural community;
- to encourage local people to feel 'ownership' of an agency's work and increase their self-reliance and confidence.

Many projects will have more than one rationale and there may be cases that do not fit neatly into one or other of the types listed here. However, it is useful to consider what the purpose of the project is, perhaps using this list as a starting point, so that this can be set out for the community to discuss and consider.

From the outset, the project managers approaching the community should be clear about the following:

- the reason that the work is being done in the first place, perhaps using the 7 rationales listed above as a starting point;
- the reason for approaching a rural community at this point, especially if the work has already been running for some time;
- the particular objectives that the organisation wishes to fulfil through involving the community and what it hopes the outcome of the work will be;
- how the organisation intends to involve local people in the work.

This should be communicated unambiguously to the community itself, perhaps as part of the preparatory phase.

Being clear about these issues will help to avoid:

- unrealistic expectations being established;
- the sense that the organisation has a 'hidden agenda' of some kind;
- encouraging groups with differing objectives to lobby for their particular cause.

It is important that organisations do not adopt a 'token' community involvement approach in order to secure funding for projects. The local community will feel the effects of this 'tokenism' and the end results will be detrimental to the project overall.

5.1.2 What's in it for the community?

The next issue to be considered for a project initiated from outside a rural community, is what the community itself can hope to gain from participating in the work. It may be helpful to see community involvement as a bargain between two parties. The organisation initiating the work is doing so for a particular reason, which it should identify and communicate to the rural community it approaches. The community itself will also have objectives that it wishes

to fulfil and will see the project as a way of achieving some of these. Successful projects tend to be those where the two parties have negotiated a common set of objectives that the work will aim to achieve, so that everyone gains something. It may be helpful to introduce some form of service agreement or contract, which sets out the responsibility that the organisation has to the community and the role it will play in the project.

The project manager should identify:

- the scope for flexibility within the project for local people to include some of their objectives. It may be that the objectives of the project can be set as a joint exercise between the agency and the community rather than community objectives being tagged to the end of the agency's aims;
- what the project can and cannot achieve, to avoid unrealistic expectations being generated; and
- all the possible benefits that the community could gain from participating in the work. Even if these do not figure in the community's own objectives, it is important that all potential benefits are spelt out, even the less tangible ones such as increased confidence or improved skills.

5.1.3 How will the work be done?

There are many different ways of conducting a community involvement exercise and these are described in more detail in a section below. In general though, it is important that the community understands how the work is to be carried out and what will be required of it. Ideally, the community itself should be asked to comment on what it thinks the best methods for doing the work will be. In choosing the method, the project manager should consider:

- The amount of commitment that may be required from individuals to take the project forward such as the time-span of the project, the number of meetings, the amount of work, the skills required and the expense involved;
- practical issues such as reimbursing expenses, the availability of transport for those attending meetings and accommodation for large meetings;
- the extent to which the community is already actively pursuing its own work. Communities that are relatively inactive and unaccustomed to this kind of project may need more preparatory work (as described in section 4) than communities that are engaged in development work already;
- the size and type of the community involved. For example different methods will be needed to work with a small group sharing a special interest than a large mixed group living in the same geographical area.

WESTERN ISLES, SKYE AND LOCHALSH LEADER GROUP

The EU LEADER programme is now in its second phase of assisting rural development throughout the European Union and will run until 1999. The Western Isles, Skye and Lochalsh LEADER group is currently managing the programme in these areas. Examples of the kind of work supported by the first phase of LEADER include: the setting up of an HNC course in rural development at Sabhal Mor Ostaig; the provision of assistance to local historical societies to record their archives; and the establishment of an information technology project in the Western Isles to enable local people to work in the area through phone and computer links.

Under LEADER II, the Western Isles, Skye and Lochalsh group are funding the employment of community resource workers by local rural communities. These workers will assist communities which have reached the stage of wishing to take forward specific projects, by assisting in the planning and management of the projects. The aim is to help the community to develop the skills that it will need to see work through to completion, by the setting of objectives and targets, structuring work programmes and monitoring progress. The role of these community resource workers will be similar to the community animators that were employed through LEADER I but they will contribute to the next phase of rural development, when communities have gone through the process of appraising their present situation and deciding what needs to be done and are ready to embark on practical action.

The LEADER II programme in this area has also funded a number of community appraisals. For example, the Uig community appraisal was carried out at a point where 3 local organisations, the Comunn Eachdraidh, the community council and the Uig branch of the Crofters Union, felt that work was needed to provide a basis for more community-led development. A leaflet was circulated to inform the community and a public meeting held, where a steering group was appointed. A questionnaire consisting of 119 questions presented in a variety of formats was sent to every household. This resulted in a response rate of 95%, an extremely high figure for this type of exercise. The responses were analysed and a report prepared for distribution to the community. This provides background information about the population of Uig, as well as the local community's views on a series of issues. From this an action plan has been prepared, which will give local people a sound foundation for developing their own projects and proposals.

5.2 Projects that originate from within the rural community itself

Projects that are initiated by local people themselves, by their very nature, should have already gained some degree of local support. In contrast to an agency-inspired project, they do not face the same difficulties of developing local support and enthusiasm for work which may only meet some of the community's aims and concerns. However, there are two situations in which locally-initiated projects will have to undergo the same kind of process as agency-inspired work:

- where a local group wishes to gain wider support from the local rural area for its work;
- where an agency outside the rural community wishes to build on a local project in order to take forward work of its own.

In the former case many of the issues relevant to externally-initiated projects also apply. Those managing the project should consider carefully:

- how the initial approach should be made;
- the choice of community that is to be involved in the work;
- the reasons for seeking broader involvement;
- the benefits to be gained from involvement in the project.

In the case where an outside agency is seeking to build on an existing community-based project, the key issues identified for externally generated projects will also be relevant. In addition the project manager should take care that the community remain in control of the project, as otherwise there is a danger that an agency is perceived as taking over.

CADISPA

“I think the project successfully helped to make all kinds of people welcome at the centre. The atmosphere was very easy-going and not discriminating. People could get involved informally with running the place, for example making tea, baking cakes. We have a visitor’s book in which people write comments and tell us what they think. I think the most needy people are coming along; they have heard about the project via word of mouth.”

LOCHRA/CADISPA local organiser

CADISPA (Conservation and Development in Sparsely Populated Areas) is an initiative which encompasses five European countries including Scotland, where it has been taken forward by the University of Strathclyde, initially in partnership with WWF UK. CADISPA aims to encourage and empower local people in rural areas to develop projects based on their understanding of sustainability and conservation. For example, CADISPA has worked with the LOCHRA project in Kyle of Lochalsh to provide a drop-in centre for unemployed people. The project was initiated by local single mothers and has secured funding from a number of local and national organisations.

CADISPA is managed and operated externally to rural communities, but has avoided many of the difficulties that such projects can encounter by focusing and building on existing work by local rural people. The notion of a “soft contract” is also central to the CADISPA approach. More detailed guidance on this way of working has been published in the series “New Ideas in Rural Development”¹.

¹*New Ideas in Rural Development No 3: Involving Rural Communities: The CADISPA Approach* by Geoff Fagan (1997) The Scottish Office Central Research Unit

6. Getting everyone involved

An issue which is rarely addressed in rural community participation projects is how broad a section of the community is actually involved in the work. There is a general awareness that some people in rural communities will be more willing and able to participate than others, but efforts to broaden the range of individuals involved in a project are seldom made.

It would be impractical to attempt to involve every individual in a rural community in a project, and it is unlikely that each piece of work will be of equal relevance to each member of the community. However, certain groups tend more often to be excluded from these projects, with the result that some important issues for the community as a whole may not be addressed and that some sections of the community do not benefit as fully from the work. Examples of those in rural communities that might be underrepresented are:

- young people;
- elderly people;
- women, especially those with young children;
- unemployed people;
- people with disability and additional needs.

There are no easy methods for gaining wider involvement in a rural community, but project managers should give thought to how this could be achieved. Ensuring that practical issues such as transport to meetings and childcare are addressed is one way forward, as is arranging special events targeted at particular groups with the advice of local people on how to best go about this. Allowing individuals simply to 'self-select' for the project is likely to result in a rather narrow range of individuals becoming involved and some important groups being excluded. One factor to bear in mind is the extent to which a rural community is already actively involved in development work. Areas where there is little or no activity are more likely to need extra effort to get a wide range of involvement than those which are relatively active.

Projects which have successfully engaged a full range of local people in the rural community are those which had this wide representation as an explicit objective from the beginning. For example the collaborative LOCHRA/CADISPA project found that providing a 'drop-in' facility with a relaxed atmosphere proved a good way to attract people that might not usually get involved. A visitor's book was a useful way to allow people to pass along their comments.

7. Methods for rural community participation

“The methods used ... depend on the local situation as well as the type of project. You should be flexible in the use of methods. With respect to Planning for Real type projects, it is sometimes very difficult to adopt and adapt this method to the actual rural situation.”

Seaboard project respondent

A wide range of techniques for community involvement have been developed and used, these range from 'off the peg' techniques, such as Planning For Real, to the employment of community facilitators, or very intensive approaches such as that used in the CADISPA project.

Care must be taken in choosing the right tool for the job, as using an inappropriate method is likely to result in the project losing credibility with local people and it is very difficult to restore faith in this type of work once it had been lost. As before, consulting the community on the right mechanism is a good starting point. Factors that are relevant to this decision, whether taken jointly with the community or by the agency alone, are:

- the size of the community involved;
- how much preparatory work is required before the community will be ready to participate fully;
- practical considerations as outlined above, such as remoteness, availability of transport or social factors;
- the reason that the work is being done. For example, work which aims to provide local people with the skills and confidence to undertake their own development projects will require a different set of techniques to one which aims to settle local differences over a planning proposal.

It is important that the project manager consider the full range of tools available and is familiar with the pros and cons of each. This guidance sets out in summary form the main tools available for community involvement and an example of their use in practice. It is beyond the scope of this guidance to give a detailed account of participatory methods and it is recommended that project managers and others responsible for work of this type use this guidance as a starting point for further study and training in the available mechanisms.

7.1 Conferences, public meetings or seminars

These have their place in community involvement work, but have generally been found to be more useful as a means to disseminate information rather than as mechanisms for participation and involvement. They are generally best left to a later stage of the work, when the community is relatively well-informed about the work and have had an opportunity to develop opinions and experience which can be transmitted in this type of setting.

7.2 Ready-made techniques

There are a number of well-developed “off the peg” techniques which can be used. These include Planning for Real, Participatory Rural Appraisal and manuals and videos produced by

specialist organisations. These can be valuable methods if the following points are borne in mind:

- those using the tools must be properly trained in the method;
- the tool must be adapted to the particular situation. Some have been developed in the urban context for example and must be adjusted to reflect rural considerations; and
- the technique should not be used so rigidly that there is no opportunity to adapt to changing circumstances or follow the wishes and suggestions of local people.

7.3 Focus groups

This technique has been used fairly frequently with mixed results. It consists of holding a series of small meetings of selected individuals to consider a particular issue or undertake an exercise. This method has the advantage of concentrating attention on certain issues and can be fairly productive as a result. Participants are less likely to feel intimidated than at a large meeting or conference and this allows more information and local opinion can be gained. Focus groups are useful tools at certain stages in the development of a project, but will rarely be a sufficient method by themselves. There is a danger that certain groups will be excluded if focus groups are the only method used and they should be complemented by other techniques which aim to gain access to a broad range of opinion.

7.4 Questionnaires, surveys, circulation of papers

These methods are rarely sufficient in themselves, but can be a useful and cost-effective way of gaining basic background information or assessing opinion on selected issues. The response rate to questionnaires and surveys is generally rather low and rarely exceeds 50%, so a significant proportion of the community may be excluded if this method is used alone. However, the questionnaire designed and used by the Uig group, described above, secured a much higher response rate, so this method can be successfully used. Another example of an effective use of this approach is the Douglas Valley Initiative, where local people designed and administered their own questionnaire on transport issues. This is described more fully in 'New Ideas in Rural Development no. 2'¹.

Project managers should bear in mind the following points about this type of technique:

- what the survey is attempting to do
- questionnaires and surveys may benefit from being professionally designed and administered. When used in large numbers, machine processing of the responses will probably be needed and resources devoted to this;
- respondents should be clear about the capacity in which they are being asked to comment. Many local people serve on a number of different groups and need to know if they should offer a personal view or their perspective as a member of a group, or the consensus view of the people they represent;

¹*New Ideas in Rural Development No. 2: Action on Scottish Rural Transport - Helping Local Communities Tackle their Transport Problems* by Stephanie Herbert (1996) The Scottish Office Central Research Unit

- household surveys often only ask for the view of one person, which may exclude other family members views being considered.

7.5 Community development agents

The appointment of an individual specifically devoted to pursuing a project with the local community has often been found to be valuable and successful. Such workers go by a variety of names, including animateurs, development officers or facilitators. The term community development agent is used here and these workers can either be specially recruited for the job, or an individual within the community who is already active in the topic area can be given appropriate support and training. A later section is devoted to the use of particular personnel in rural community involvement projects and considers in more detail the issues that relate to them.

7.6 Education and training

These can be seen as one of the rationales for community involvement, but are also a mechanism for helping rural communities to get involved in projects. The community education service, for example, has been found to be a very effective method for community involvement in rural areas, assisting projects such as the Black Rock Cafe and St Abbs Community project. This suggests that including an element of education or training in a community-based project is worth careful consideration and may be sufficient as a method in itself, if an integrated service such as the community education department is used as a vehicle. Education and training is useful in situations where:

- local people are relatively unfamiliar with the terms and concepts that they are likely to encounter in the course of the project. Offering some basic information and training in these will increase the confidence of the community and its ability to contribute to the project;
- the main objective of the project is to establish a stronger skills base in the rural community, or to encourage local people to undertake their own development projects.

The research found that education and training were particularly effective techniques where they were coupled with the use of a community development agent.

PLANNING FOR REAL

Planning for Real was first used in Scotland with the communities of Kyle of Lochalsh and Kyleakin on the west coast and has subsequently been used widely by local authorities with rural communities to improve their involvement in the planning process. It has been used as a way of gathering local views on contentious proposals and hopefully to help compromises to be reached. It has also been used as part of the consultation on local plans, with the information and views gathered being taken into consideration as the plan is prepared.

Planning for Real exercises can be undertaken in a number of ways. For example in the Kyle and Kyleakin exercise a large 3-D model of the area was created which was used at a community consultation day. Local people were invited to contribute their views and concerns by way of symbolic flags which were placed on the model.

Generally, the exercise was felt to have been worthwhile with the following benefits being identified:

- it provided a non-confrontational setting for exploring the issue
- local people felt more confident about expressing their ideas than at other events, such as public meetings
- some welcome contact between local people and officials was provided
- local people felt better informed about the issues and were able to identify some common objectives and concerns

However, some criticisms were expressed and primarily the feeling that the event constituted a public relations exercise for the council. Some participants felt that only those ideas which suited the council's agenda were adopted. The exercise was more successful in Kyleakin than in Kyle and this has largely been attributed to a more homogenous population in the former community and a stronger consensus over the important issues. This suggests that such exercises will be most successful if:

- the agency leading the work ensures that the community are aware of the extent to which they can influence the agenda and, ideally, ensures that some flexibility exists for the concerns of local people to be taken on board.
- the nature of the rural community in question is carefully considered and action taken to prepare the ground in areas where there are likely to be very diverse views on the issues under discussion.

8. Who should do the work?

The choice of personnel to take a rural community involvement project forward is often made on the basis of convenience, cost or previous practice. There are a range of different types of personnel that can be given the lead in this type of work, or used at various stages in the project and thought should be given to the most appropriate staff for each exercise. This section discusses the options identified by the research and the factors that influence their effectiveness.

8.1 Community development agents

The use of community development agents in securing the participation of rural communities in projects has been found to be very successful for a number of reasons:

- rural communities often feel that they are relatively powerless in comparison to public bodies, or are unable to access funding and information because they are not confident with the systems and language of public bodies. Community development agents are able to provide information and expertise that the community lacks, assist them in developing their own ideas and objectives, and help develop these skills within the community for the long term;
- they are often perceived as independent from both the agency and local rural community. This allows them to act as an 'honest broker' in situations of conflict; and
- co-ordination of activity between different agencies and between agencies and local people can be problematic. Community development agents can help to make sure that work is properly co-ordinated, in particular between agencies who might have different sets of objectives for a project.

The following factors can be identified as important in allowing community development agents to work successfully with rural communities:

- they must be properly trained in rural and community development and be familiar with and able to use a range of techniques for participation;
- they must be familiar with the policy framework in which the project operates, the administrative systems relevant to it and the potential sources of funding available to the community;
- they must be properly resourced and supported;
- they must be available to the community for a sensible period of time - this could be measured in years rather than months, depending on the particular circumstances;
- they must be able to act independently, rather than follow the agenda of the agency that employs them. As noted above, one of the particular benefits identified from the use of community development agents is that they are able to act as advocates for rural communities and to negotiate between agency and community where there are conflicts or differences in priority. In theory this might lead to a dilemma for the community development agent that is employed by an agency about where their loyalties should lie, but this will not occur if agencies accept the benefit of this

independent role and have a clear understanding of the role that the community development agent is expected to play.

Care and thought must go into the choice of individual for such a role, as personality and background can contribute significantly to their success in a particular setting. In some cases, projects may require an officer with a specific background such as in youth work, or someone with experience with mental health issues. Of less importance is whether the community development agent is already a member of the local rural community, or is brought in from “outside” the community. A local person acting as a community development agent can be expected to have a good knowledge of the local community and its problems and to already have a degree of local acceptance. A person from outside the community, on the other hand, comes to it without preconceptions or existing loyalties and can offer a fresh perspective, which can be of equal value. In all cases, the community development agent must appreciate the issues that are important to rural communities in Scotland generally and to the particular rural community that will be involved in the work.

THE CORROM TRUST

The Corrom Trust is a charitable organisation which assists communities to begin a process of regeneration. Essential features of the Corrom Trust's way of working are:

- local people must lead the process, identify the issues and shape the action and research;
- local staff are recruited to act as Community Agents and local businesses and consultants are used wherever possible;
- a reference group is established bringing together local people with representatives of public and other bodies to guide the process;
- a vision statement is prepared after the first round of consultations, which is taken forward through an agreed programme of work to tackle issues at a practical and policy level.

All the Trust's work is based on the following principles:

- regeneration must come from within communities and be shaped by them;
- sustainable regeneration draws upon all aspects of community life - social, cultural, economic, environmental;
- regeneration is a long term process that cannot be rushed;
- effective regeneration requires a partnership of communities, businesses, public and voluntary bodies.

The Corrom Trust is working with a number of rural communities in Scotland. For example the area encompassing Moidart and Ardnamurchan began a regeneration process with the help of the Corrom Trust in July 1995. Since then these communities have adopted a vision statement which includes a number of strategic objectives, currently being pursued. This includes:

- work to attempt to secure a viable population for the area, beginning with the development of a community profile and a 'returners questionnaire' which will investigate the factors that might help those that have left the area to return;
- a business survey and a series of business ideas workshops, from which have come a number of practical suggestions to assist local businesses. This has been supported by business advice sessions for local people, work to secure workshop units and action to encourage the use of information technology;
- the use of personal housing plans with local people who are in housing need. These will be used as the basis for a housing development plan for the area;
- the identification of priority training needs for local people; and
- projects to enhance and improve community facilities, such as the Kilchoan Village Hall and the upgrading of Kilchoan jetty and waterfront.

8.2 Outside experts or professionals

Some projects have also used 'outside experts' to advise on particular aspects of the work or carry out specific tasks. This can be helpful where some technical knowledge is required, of the legal or planning systems for example, or where detailed explanation of some aspect of the project is needed, such as the interaction between farming practice and freshwater pollution. However, this type of expertise must be used carefully. In particular, problems could arise if outside experts are regularly brought in for short periods of time and local people are not given time to become familiar with any one individual. In addition, professionals brought in to undertake specific tasks must be familiar with the local context and the issues of concern to the rural community.

8.3 Agency staff

Agency staff themselves undertake community involvement work on a fairly regular basis, especially where they already work in a regional setting, for example local government or the local office of a national organisation. They are often very skilled and successful at this type of work, but the research uncovered a number of difficulties that face agency staff in undertaking these projects. The following factors are important in helping agency staff to work effectively in rural community projects:

- staff must be properly trained in this type of work, separately from their expertise in the subject matter of the project. For example, in order to enable a rural community to undertake economic development work, a staff member must not only have expertise in economic development, but also in community participation techniques;
- staff must be properly resourced and supported and made available for sufficient periods of time. This work is intensive and time consuming and it is likely to demand a substantial part of a staff member's time, which should be allowed for;
- there should be some flexibility in the aims and objectives of the project. Rural dwellers often feel that agency staff are operating to a fixed agenda which is dedicated to the aims of the agency and that there is little room for the community to influence the project.

The most successful projects run by staff from an organisation external to the rural community itself tended to have one or both of these two features in common:

- initiatives stood a better chance of success if they built upon existing work by the rural community rather than attempting to establish a new project. In this way, local people had a bigger role in shaping the objectives of the project and gaining a sense of ownership over the work;
- projects taken forward by partnerships of agencies rather than one organisation on its own also tended to be more successful, particularly where the rural community was seen as one of the partners in the exercise. Again, this gave local people more opportunity to influence the project and the negotiation involved in partnership working prevented any one set of objectives from predominating.

8.4 Community Councils and other community groups

The research found that community councils represent an important and underused resource for rural community participation work. Although there are often many local groups in a

rural area which deal with specific interests or issues, the community council is the only general representative mechanism which operates at a local level since local individuals are elected to the council. They offer a locally based structure for involvement and participation, and in areas where they have been given sufficient resources and functions have been devolved to them, they have operated very effectively as a focus for local action and consultation.

Councils of Voluntary Service are also well placed to co-ordinate and articulate the views of the local voluntary sector and community groups, and one of their aims is to enable local people to become involved in decision making that affects their local community.

9. Keeping the momentum going

Successfully engaging and working with a rural community takes time. Although this can vary from project to project, agencies should realistically expect to devote several months at the very least to this type of initiative and possibly several years in certain cases. As before, a great deal will depend on the purpose of the project in the first case. For example, if the project is simply to establish local views on a planning case, then the work might be concluded fairly speedily, but where the project aims to enable the rural community itself to eventually take forward its own development work, the timescale will probably be much longer.

From the outset, some estimate of the length of the project should be made and related to the agreed objectives. It is important that a rural community can see that the work is achieving results and for this reason it is well worthwhile setting out a series of practical targets to be reached at suitable time intervals during the work. This is particularly useful for projects where the ultimate objectives are open-ended or ambitious, otherwise there is a danger that enthusiasm will wane if progress is slow or intermittent.

Once a series of targets has been agreed for the project, along with a realistic timetable, then arrangements should be made to note publicly the achievement of each target. Making sure that the community is kept informed of progress is also important. Some ways in which enthusiasm and momentum can be maintained include:

- the holding of social events to mark the achievement of major (or minor!) targets;
- publishing a newsletter, or using an existing newsletter, to inform the local population of progress and events;
- repeating exercises such as questionnaires and surveys at suitable intervals, both to check on any shifts in perceptions or concerns and to keep attention focused on the project.

The experience of some projects shows that groups are often disbanded once the original objective of the work has been achieved. This is appropriate in many cases, where the reason for the project was very specific for example. But in others, valuable experience and skills can go to waste because momentum has been lost at this stage in the initiative. It is important that community-based groups are aware of this possibility and take steps to regularly review progress and look beyond the current set of objectives. In this way, development work can become a continuous process, with new challenges being identified in advance of the existing work plan being achieved. This has the additional benefit that if certain objectives are not fulfilled - a proposed development cannot go ahead because of a planning regulation for example - there are other tasks that the community can turn to, perhaps with better success.

10. Recording and reporting

Rural communities in Scotland have already instigated or participated in a large number of successful and effective projects. The case studies in this guidance are only a very small sample of the work that has been, and is being, done in this field and the research gives information on a larger number. The guidance given here is itself gathered from the experience of some of these projects. However, the research found that in many cases there had been no attempt to formally record the experience gained from the work. It is important that project managers consider how each stage of the project can be recorded and make arrangements for this to be done. This might culminate in a published report which could be circulated to other organisations and individuals involved in this type of work through one of the networks available for this purpose. In this way the lessons learnt and expertise gained from each rural community project can be made available to others. Such a report can also be a valuable achievement for all the local people involved in the project, as one of the concrete results of their efforts.

It is also important that progress is monitored regularly. In some projects community involvement has become an objective in itself, so that great effort is put into holding meetings, and circulating newsletters but little economic or social development results. Projects may benefit, therefore, from building in stages to their planning process that ask, "Are we getting anywhere?".

11. Conclusion

The research on which this guidance is based clearly shows that encouraging rural communities to participate in projects is worth doing and worth doing well. This is a skilled task however, and thought and planning must go into this type of exercise well before as well as during the work itself. The broad lessons that can be identified from the research can be summarised as:

- consider the possibility of a preparatory phase of work to ensure that the rural community is fully informed about the work and willing to take it on;
- make sure that there is good communication between all the partners in the project. This is especially important when the work has been instigated by a body which is outside the rural community;
- be clear about the reasons for the work and what it is hoped will be achieved by it. Be honest about any limits to the action that can be taken;
- wherever possible give the community a joint role in deciding the objectives and outputs for the project and the method by which the work will be done;
- consider carefully the techniques that will be used in taking the work forward and be flexible about the methods used;
- the use of community development agents can be very effective. These and other personnel involved in the work must be properly trained in rural development and participatory techniques;
- think about ways to engage sections of the rural community that might not normally get involved in this type of initiative, such as elderly, young or unemployed people;
- identify a clear set of targets against objectives and make sure that these are both short and long term. Use newsletters or other methods to keep local people informed of progress and maintain enthusiasm;
- put in place arrangements to record progress and report on the outcome of the project.

This guidance can offer some general lessons on community involvement. Detailed guidance on particular approaches to rural development has been produced and more is planned. However, this is no substitute for networking with others involved in this type of work and learning from their experiences. It is recommended that this guidance is used as a starting point for further study and information gathering, particularly through discussion and contact with other practitioners in the field, perhaps via one of the networks set up for this purpose such as the Rural Action Network established by Rural Forum.

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