

## **Communities on the Edge – Another Model of Rural Development for Scotland**

### **Introduction**

The 'Communities on the Edge' Project uses a new approach to enabling rural estates and communities in the South of Scotland to work together. The project has been running for three years and has delivered identifiable outputs and convinced the participants of the worth of continuing to run the project for a longer period of time. Factors, land managers, amateurs, community groups and community members have all recognised the benefits of the approach both for the processes it adopts and the outputs that can be achieved. This brief article describes the project, compares the approach to other approaches to rural development currently predominating in the Highlands and Islands and used by the Forestry Commission. The paper advocates that the Communities on the Edge project be enabled to continue to run in order to further test this model.

### **The Southern Uplands Partnership**

The Communities on the Edge Project was conceived and is managed by the Southern Uplands Partnership (SUP). The aim of SUP is to keep people living and working sustainably in the Southern Uplands of Scotland by;

- Integrating; bringing people together to discuss upland issues and to find new ways forward that benefit the people of rural South Scotland.
- Informing; Promoting public awareness of rural issues and practical solutions related to living and working sustainably in the uplands.
- Initiating; Stimulating and delivering innovative and sustainable rural projects.

The Southern Uplands Partnership has been in existence for seven years and has been funded by a wide range of organisations as well as its members over that period. It was set up to address a range of issues including the lack of interaction between agencies, land managers, environmental NGOs and community representatives. It was also set up to identify approaches to land use policy and reform

appropriate to the South of Scotland, based on a recognition that much of existing policy had a Highland bias.

### **The Communities on the Edge Project**

The aims of the Communities on The Edge project are to help local communities secure and create local jobs that help them meet their needs in an environmentally sensitive way, over the long term. The Southern Uplands Partnership was aware that the links between private rural estates and local communities have gradually weakened over time. It was also aware that communities need new enterprises to help provide a better balance in terms of services available and the age structure of the population. Also that estates have many resources, some of which were under used. Natural resources can be used to support jobs but it is wise to avoid degrading these resources in the process. The project proposed to bring communities and estates closer together and enable new sustainable jobs to be created as a result.

The project initially employed one project worker to work in three areas across the South of Scotland – with Buccleuch Estates and the community in Langholm, with Douglas and Angus Estates in Lanarkshire and with Roxburgh Estates in Yetholm in the Scottish Borders. The project worker quickly built good networks and relationships and with communities, took forward a number of pieces of work.

The initial phase of the project coincided with some work done as part of a Transnational Interregional Project in Langholm – The Agate Project. This project brought together a diverse group of stakeholders to look at ‘Living with the Land’ and invited the group to look forward fifteen to twenty years. The project identified a range of interventions that could be adopted to promote positive outcomes. The findings were very supportive of the Communities on The Edge approach and aims. The research done by AGATE, combined with the initial progress made with the Communities on the Edge project, led to discussions by SUP with the Carnegie UK Trust who agreed to fund a second phase of the project for one year initially.

This new investment has allowed the project to create three new full time equivalent animateur posts in each of the three areas previously involved in the project. These posts were filled in the autumn of 2006. This enabled further development work to be done in each of the areas using an action learning approach. The animateurs were also offered the opportunity to participate in the 'Rural Leadership Programme' run by Falkland Centre for Stewardship in Fife.

As a result of the employment of local animateurs, a local COTE presence has become more apparent in each area and this has given the project a far more local identity than had been possible in the past. Projects have developed in all three areas and many are beginning to bear fruit. Some of the outcomes to date are outlined below.

## **DOUGLAS**

The early years of the project focussed on the village of Douglas in South Lanarkshire, 'on the edge' of Douglas and Angus Estates. Relationship building at this early stage was key to securing the trust and willingness required to allow the project to move forward. This early 'foundation laying' has meant that projects have been able to move forward at greater speed in the last year.

The Douglas Community Involvement Project was funded by a grant of £5000 from the Social Capital Fund and allowed the project officer to carry out wide spread community consultation and discussion. This process led to the formation of a number of locally led working groups, two of which are outlined below:

### **Composting/ Recycling/ Growing Group**

This group has been operating now for over two years and has become more focussed on local growing and food production. A piece of estate land was secured and the group were assisted and supported by COTE throughout the process. Local people are now benefiting from a Community Garden which has been funded by a number of external sources, with assistance and support from COTE. There is a long term

vision for this project which will see it become more sustainable and hopefully create a number of local jobs in the longer term.

### **Community Sports Facility**

This group was already in existence locally. The arrival of the COTE project allowed this group to consider a number of different options which had previously never been considered. The benefits of building an ecological facility and using local materials and local labour was advocated and an architect specialising in such design employed. A member of the group was also supported by COTE to complete a training course in social entrepreneurialism and as a result was able to compile a business plan for the project.

This project has suffered a number of different set backs but the group remain optimistic. It is currently unclear as to whether the proposed facility will be built or whether different options, such as upgrading the existing community facility, will be considered. COTE continues to advocate wide community involvement in decision making processes and ongoing communication with the local community.

### **Women's Group**

This group of young local women have identified a number of local issues which they'd like to focus on over the next few months. Their current focus is on local play and recreation facilities.

Alongside the development of these local working groups, the relationship building process was started in Yetholm and Langholm and a COTE presence developed in these places.

## **LANGHOLM**

### **Farmer's Market**

Local amateurs in Langholm planned and hosted a Farmer's Market Taster Day in partnership with a local group, 'Network West'. This

event was a tremendous success and as a result a local committee has been formed to take the project forward.

### **Composting/ Recycling**

This project continues to grow and now employs a full time project worker. Planning applications have been submitted and the future is bright for this project. COTE continues to be linked to the project but now plays a less active part in its development.

### **Growing**

With assistance from COTE, a group of local people have been allocated a piece of estate land on which to develop local allotments/ growing space.

### **YETHOLM**

Work in Yetholm has been realised at a slower rate due to some staffing difficulties in the first months of animateur employment. These problems have since been resolved and progress is being made.

### **Open Space**

This exciting event was a COTE first and enabled local people in Yetholm to come together and discuss local issues. The agenda for the day was set by those in attendance. The event has resulted in the identification of a number of themes which animateurs in Yetholm have already begun to follow up.

### **Current approaches to Rural Development in Scotland**

The Highlands and Islands has witnessed the growth of an approach to rural development that has not been replicated to the same extent in the south of Scotland. The approaches of transferring land ownership into community hands and asset based community development have had not been widely used in the south to date. The Scottish Land Fund, which is managed by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, has been accessed by a wide range of communities across the Highlands for a wide range of projects. The South of Scotland had not seen the same community willingness or interest to purchase land or community assets and applications to the Scottish Land Fund have been limited.

The reasons for this are likely to be wide and varied and are likely to result from historical, political, cultural, economic and social processes that are complex and difficult to unravel.

The South of Scotland has different contextual features from the Highlands and it is likely that different approaches will emerge. That difference needs to be recognised and better understood if we are to find ways to achieve a similar degree of social and economic development and population growth as the Highlands and Islands. It is important that a range of models of rural development can be tried out in the South and avoid the 'one solution fits all' approach that can so often be prescribed by development agencies in other parts of the world.

Another approach to land use management in Scotland has been adopted by the Forestry Commission which manages forests owned by 'the nation', where communities have been invited to become involved in the management of local forests. Communities are given the option of becoming involved in a range of ways and the Forestry Commission is committed to 'increasing the involvement of people and communities in the sustainable management of the Forestry Commission estate'. Some progress seems to have been made in engaging communities with numerous community forest projects across Scotland. Interestingly the Forestry Commission states:

'All are unique, there is no standard model. What we do share is the recognition that successful partnerships require a broad understanding of all the points of view and a commitment from all players to work together to make the best use of available resources.' (Forest Enterprise publication undated)

The approach adopted is based on the concept of rural development forestry which is designed to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits to rural communities. A piece of research published in 2001 showed that rural development forestry could increase jobs, provide training for local people and support the tourist infrastructure (SNH 2001). The approach was found to unlock sources

of funding which the landowner did not have access to and enabled additional expertise, ideas and voluntary input to be brought to the management of the woodland. Further benefits related to visitors, schools and enabling funding bodies to gain positive public relations benefits whilst disbursing their funds. There are some similarities between this and the Communities on the Edge model.

### **The Communities on the Edge Model**

The Communities on The Edge model is unique in Scotland in that it aims to create 'win-win' rural development utilising existing resources. The model promotes and develops better communication and a different dynamic between rural estates and the communities on their doorsteps. The animateurs employed by the Southern Uplands Partnership provide 'neutral' facilitators who can work with the estates and members and groups within the communities. This can enable estate managers to find ways of working more closely with the community and enable mutual benefits to result. It can also help the community to be able to articulate ways in which the estate can help achieve sustainable development for and with the local community. The intermediary agency i.e. the Southern Uplands Partnership acts as a broker between estate and community and can enable the social distance that has grown over the years to be mediated.

The model avoids the need for community buy outs and community ownership by enabling ownership of land to be retained by the estates but simultaneously enabling the community to access land and other resources to build sustainable jobs. However, if the project is enabled to continue there may be opportunities for transferring land ownership if and when appropriate. This approach has not been ruled out.

While strong advocates of the community ownership approach may see the COTE approach as limiting the potential of a community, it is true to say that it is not always possible to identify people within a community willing to take responsibility for a community asset. This is particularly true when people are risk averse, have limited entrepreneurial skills or see limited benefit to themselves or their community.

It could be argued that a lack of awareness raising of the community benefit of asset ownership in the South of Scotland has resulted in this situation, but experience of people working in the area believe that it is partly because of the different historical and social conditions that feature in the South of Scotland. However, the Communities on the Edge model has advantages to the buy out approach in that it does not require large amounts of financial resource to enable communities to gain access to land or other resources.

### **Conclusions**

The paper has described the Communities on The Edge project and compared the approach to rural development taken in the Highlands with community buy out currently predominating and, the approach taken by the Forestry Commission. The summary of the COTE project shows that it is testing out an innovative model of rural development in the South of Scotland. It employs processes that take time to deliver outcomes but in spite of that the project has already seen tangible outcomes. For this model to be further tested it is essential that funding is found to ensure the project be allowed to continue for at least another two years. Following that, a full report of this approach should be produced. The project findings so far indicate that the methods employed can be effective in developing rural communities in the south of Scotland. The article is not critical of the community land ownership approach as such, but suggests that there are alternatives to this approach and that it is not always a viable alternative for communities to pursue.