

# **Community futures: local community planning and development - the opportunities for community learning**

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## **Overview**

Community Futures is an approach to local community planning and sustainable community development that aims to encourage active citizenship and build local democracy. Community Futures was designed by the Small Town and Rural Development Group and we have assisted in the development of Community Futures Programmes in Stirlingshire (Community Futures Stirling) and in the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park.

Community Futures Stirling was originally a pilot project targeted at four rural communities. It was established in 1999 and assisted these four communities prepare plans for their future and then worked with them to develop local organisational capacity to implement priority projects and actions. CFS won the Royal Town and Planning Institute 2002 National Award for Planning's contribution to Social Inclusion. The programme was extended throughout the Stirling Council area, and has also been a model for developing a similar programme for 25 communities in and around the new National Park.

## **Participatory Planning**

The Community Futures process encourages widespread participation of local people in preparing a Community Action Plan for their community. Community Action Plans contain:

- a vision for the future of the community
- views on the community now
- the identification of the main strategies for community development
- priorities for action

Action Plans are prepared following an extensive participatory process in communities which includes:

- Stakeholder focus group interviews
- Community Views Household Surveys
- Preparation of a Community Profile
- Convening of a Community Futures Workshop

The process is typically managed by a local Steering Group that brings together representatives from a cross section of the community.

## **Organisational Development and Action**

Community Futures Stirling and the Community Futures programme in the National Park have gone on beyond the planning phase to help communities build organisational capacity and to implement their Community Action Plans. Out of 4 communities participating in the original Community Futures Stirling pilot phase, 3 went on to establish Community Development Trusts and raise funds for a number of priority projects. Of 25 communities participating in the National Park programme, around 18 have taken similar action.

Priority projects and actions undertaken by communities are wide ranging but typically fall under a number of main headings:

- Improving opportunities for young people
- Providing more social and community facilities and activities
- Improving access to services
- Developing local paths networks and community woodlands
- Making more of the local heritage
- Developing local economic infrastructure and supporting local business
- Developing and managing local tourism

### **Programme Management**

The work at the community level to plan, organise and take action has been supported and encouraged by programme management groups which have brought together a number of agencies and organisations. CFS is managed by a programme management group consisting of representatives from Stirling Council, Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley, Scottish Natural Heritage, and the communities themselves. Community Futures in the National Park is managed by a Community Partnership which brings together representatives from the Association of Community Councils, four local authorities, three local enterprise companies, Scottish Natural Heritage and the National Park Authority. These partnerships provide a mechanism for listening and brokering the local community plans and linking bottom up and top down planning.

Following on from the preparation of local Community Action Plans communities have been encouraged to come together to look at their common needs and aspirations. In the National Park the 25 participating communities have been assisted to form four Area Networks. The Networks have been used to share experience, identify common issues and jointly organise around common priorities.

Programme resources include a mix of agency staff, external technical assistance and local people who are trained and employed to assist in the planning process (Community Agents). In the National Park programme 25 local people were trained in Community Action Planning and 8 were eventually employed as Community Agents. They became the programmes' front line staff working with the volunteer local steering groups to carry out Community Action Plans. They are now being trained and supported to enable them to deliver organisational and project development support.

At the heart of Community Futures are the local people who participate and volunteer. In the National Park CF Programme which covered 25 communities and a population of 12,000:

- Over 400 people have been involved in local steering groups
- Over 30% of all households returned Community Views Surveys
- Over 2000 people attended Community Futures Workshops
- Over 800 children and young people attended local focus groups, completed youth surveys, and participated in Community Futures Workshops.

### **The impact of participation and involvement in the Community Futures Process**

There has been a wide range of outcomes from the Community Futures process. Some of the most pertinent in the context of Community Learning are the opportunities for local people to:

- Share their views on their own community
- Learn and discuss how their own views are the same or different from others
- Learn more about the social, economic, cultural, heritage, and environmental aspects of their community and region
- Learn more about public and democratic processes
- Become involved in the future of their community
- Become more involved in decision making
- Become involved in planning and project development and management

- Learn about community organisational structures
- Become involved in local organisations
- Learn how communities can work with other partners in the public, private and charitable sector

The knock on effect of providing these opportunities within communities has been:

- More people wanting to take part in shaping the future of their community
- Increased membership of existing local groups
- Creation of new community organisations
- Increased local capacity to develop and manage community projects
- Changing and more sophisticated leadership within communities
- Communities shifting from being reactive to proactive
- Communities becoming partners in their own development
- A wide range of community projects and initiatives
- A greater ability for communities to partner with public agencies to deliver services

### **Making the connection**

The Community Futures Programmes have provided a context that has given local people the confidence to participate in planning the future of their communities. This has created opportunities for active citizenship and community learning. This has in turn helped to strengthen and change communities. We would argue that programmes such as Community Futures are therefore important to support in the context of Lifelong Learning and Community Learning. However to date this connection has not been fully explored and has not been their main source of support. Community Futures could be greatly enhanced by such resources and more could be made of the learning opportunities that this participatory approach to the development of communities affords.