

DRAFT

MORAY FIRTH PARTNERSHIP

PAPER TO THE MFP MANAGEMENT GROUP FROM THE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT TOPIC GROUP

Introduction

This small group felt that if the Partnership is to really to be that with communities then it requires a clear and transparent commitment to communicating effectively with communities. While the principle is stated within the MFP's aims there has to be a strategy for involving communities, not just through statutory bodies and government agencies but, directly.

Vision

Our Topic Group took as its vision:

A strategy for communication, between the Partnership and the communities living within its sphere of influence, which acknowledges both the right and the responsibility of the citizen to have access to the Partnership for the purposes of making and responding to proposals which will influence the quality of life in these communities.

Information

In seeking to achieve this we sought existing sources of information. It was first thought that to divide up the coastal periphery of the Firth would suggest geographical areas from which we might draw on local knowledge to establish a baseline of information. From the 3 areas represented on the Topic Group it quickly emerged that there was a great deal of variation in information available in different stretches of the coast. In some there were databases from registers of community groups to directories of local clubs held by local government, and other agencies. The quantity and quality of this could vary from place to place making the coverage patchy. It also quickly became obvious that there already existed several organisations which if approached could avoid the Partnership having to 're-invent the wheel' in this matter.

Agencies which could act as 'door-ways' to their constituent members identified as Voluntary Service Organisations; Community Councils; Community Education Services; Associations of Sports Councils; Scottish Council for Voluntary organisations; Highlands and Islands Forum and Rural Forum would probably cover most potentially interested parties. It was agreed to seek the support of these bodies to use their networks in telling their constituents about the existence of the Partnership so that those members whose interests coincided with those of the MFP would register with the MFP and so gain access to the work of the Partnership. The most recent issue of the newsletters has therefore been used to begin this process. It was recognised that this approach may still leave some organisations or individuals uncontacted but the circulation of the MFP newsletter and the involvement of such groupings as were represented by the foregoing networks would in time 'sweep up' any other interested parties. It would however be important for deliberate action on the part of the Partnership to be used to organise meetings with people at various places along the coast.

It might well be the Community Involvement Group in some re-incarnation which could take a lead in this and there were various kinds of mechanisms which could be used to bring people together. There was a concern that while many of the Management Group members worked in spheres where there were conventions in professional communications these were not necessarily those which would bring about effective communication with communities whose sophistication in many of the topics might vary greatly and for whom past experience might well have left a cynical legacy when it came to being convinced that their views made a difference. Concern was known to have been expressed at an early stage in the life of the Partnership on this issue which illustrated the need to remain particularly sensitive to this view.

Issues and Opportunities

The principal issue therefore for the Partnership from the Group's viewpoint, once the Partnership's knowledge of communities is established, is to decide whether or not, and if so how, it is prepared to address the communications problem.

There is a major opportunity to engage with groups from civic trusts to uniformed organisations to conservation bodies because society has never been more environmentally aware. The international demands of such as the Rio summit; ideas like sustainability and biodiversity are far more widely known, if not understood, than previously. The development pressures in the Moray Firth and their potential impact on the present environmental and amenity values of the area; the concern of citizens for jobs; security in all its meanings, and the long-term future for their children are active concerns of people and their various voluntary organisations. The Partnership should capitalise on these contexts to actively promote its existence and its advocacy for community involvement by seeking to establish at a number of places along the coast, mechanisms through which to inform, share, discuss and debate the value of its role. To be seen to have credibility and worth will mean acquiring resources to do more than talk with communities. It will either have to be resourced to put money into communities to support their goals or 'know a man who can' and point communities to 'him'. Above all it will have to avoid the kind of inflexibility in its thinking which in the past has brought about disillusionment on the part of people who thought they were being consulted to some purpose but to whom in the end it appeared to have been a waste of their time.

DBM

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