



Local Involvement in Countryside Management

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT IN COUNTRYSIDE MANAGEMENT - WHAT IS WORKING?

Highlights of 2007 Conference

In October 2007 over 120 people including farmers, community representatives, outdoor enthusiasts and rural development workers gathered in the Glendalough Hotel for a two-day conference to answer the question '*Local Involvement in Countryside Management – what is working?*' Through a combination of field trips and indoor sessions, participants engaged in discussion on farming, forestry, countryside recreation and rural planning, looking at how all of these subjects can be addressed through working in partnership.

A number of threads ran throughout the conference – the importance of sustaining rural communities, the challenge of achieving balance between different expectations of our countryside, and the need for authorities and agencies to respect local knowledge. Participants got to see, and discuss, successful models of local involvement in countryside management; examples which suggest how wider local involvement might be achieved. This account gives a flavour of some of the activities and discussion which took place over the two days.

Wicklow models

As the lead partner in organising this event, the Wicklow Uplands Council experience was in the spotlight. Following presentations on Wicklow Uplands Council's structure and current projects, Philip Maguire gave a farmer's view of the Wicklow Uplands Council, mentioning a number of factors which he believes make involvement worthwhile. These include having a forum for exchanging views and building understanding; the strength of a united voice and the capacity to undertake worthwhile projects. He identified the main challenge as the time and effort required to build relationships with statutory bodies. Philip concluded by highlighting the vital role which farming plays in the Wicklow uplands and the opportunities which arise from increased demand for quality food and alternative energy sources.

On a field trip to Glenmalure, participants listened intently as farmer Pat Dunne described his involvement in the Wicklow Countryside Access Service (WCAS), a pilot project to develop short access routes for hillwalkers. The access routes are



Farmer Pat Dunne speaking about his involvement in an access project.

permissive paths; not public rights of way. On the Dunne's land extensive work including construction of a wooden footbridge and restoration of an old stalker's path, was carried out by Mountain Meitheal, the voluntary footpath repair crew. On other routes within the project the farmers who own the land are being paid to carry out any necessary work. Upon completion of each route, insurance is undertaken by Wicklow County Council. Visitors were keen to learn more about this positive example of an innovative, partnership-based solution to the difficulties related to access to upland areas.

The WCAS model grew from the success in developing the Tinahely Railway Walk, a 2.5km walking route along a former railway line developed by Tinahely Area Development in partnership with local farmers. Members of Tinahely Area Development proudly shared their story of voluntary effort and landowner goodwill, combined with advice and funding support from local development agencies. The outcome is an amenity which attracts visitors to the area and provides safe and pleasant recreation for local residents.



Helen Lawless of Wicklow Uplands Council talking to participants at the conference.

Eamonn Doran from the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) enthralled visitors to Tomnafinnoge Wood, which adjoins the Tinahely Railway Walk, explaining the work carried out in restoring the woodland and creating walking trails for the public. The Derry river, which had been flooding the woodland, was freed of debris and through restoring the natural flow, fish have now returned. The key to this success was partnership between NPWS and the local fishermen, emphasising the true value of local knowledge.



Tom Lyng (Coillte), Bill Murphy (Coillte & Mountain Meitheal) with Gerry Patterson (Mountain Meitheal) at the conference dinner.



Joss and Nora Lynam and Prof. Frank Convery at the Conference Dinner.

The challenge of landscape management

Local knowledge was also central to Brendan Dunford's presentation on the BurrenLIFE project in Co. Clare. Brendan highlighted the need for future landscape management to be grounded in the understanding of the land held by landowners and local communities. He propounded that supportive land management models are required, which turn the legal obligation to maintain our environment into an opportunity for farmers.

Brendan noted that through the Rural Environment Protection Scheme we are starting to place a value on scenery, water sources and having a diversity of habitats. The practice of compensating landowners for providing environmental and related services is now taking shape. The next challenge is to achieve a land management regime that seeks to support, rather than control farmers, that gives farmers the scope to move forward, rather than be frozen in time. This is in concert with the Heritage Council's vision for the future of the Irish landscape, which CEO Michael Starrett quoted in his opening address to the workshop:

"... a dynamic, living landscape, one which accommodates the physical and spiritual needs of people with the needs of nature in a harmonious manner, and as a result brings long term benefits to both."

The challenges in achieving the balance which is inherent to this vision were particularly evident in the discussion sessions on rural planning, where inconsistencies in planning policies, lack of capacity in local authority planning departments and contradictory national policies were all highlighted. The planning group concluded there was need for a fundamental re-think of planning in rural areas, and that this should be centred on ensuring sustainability of rural communities.

Partnership and local communities

Over dinner, guest speaker Prof. Frank Convery, Chairperson of Comhar, the Sustainable Development Council put forward a view that all statutory organisations – given authority and resources by the citizen – should be obliged to engage seriously and substantively with communities and relevant non-governmental organisations in a two-way partnership. In his view, such partnerships require mutual respect, enthusiasm, professionalism and good information to enable informed decision-making.

A discussion session led by Mary Tubridy from the Irish Uplands Forum and Billy Murphy from the County Wexford Partnership sought to identify the fundamental principles in establishing a partnership to promote local involvement in countryside management. A set of principles emerged, based on an earlier draft from David Rowe (see table).

Overall the conference demonstrated that there are many successful models of local involvement in countryside management. There are good programmes and initiatives in place, yet there is a sense that these exist in isolation; national policy and structures need to be more embracing

and supportive. While this unique conference helped to move forward thinking on some very important issues, it is not the final word. In the context of rising population (particularly in the east coast area), the soaring cost of commuting and the loss of basic services in rural areas, it is perhaps time for further debate, at a national level, on how we can achieve sustainability in rural communities.

This conference was jointly hosted by Wicklow Uplands Council and the Irish Uplands Forum with funding support from the Heritage Council, Wicklow County Council and Wicklow Rural Partnership (Leader+). Presentations from the event and reports of discussion sessions are available on www.wicklowuplands.ie. The organisers extend their thanks to all those who contributed to this conference, including funders, speakers, field trip leaders, reporters and of course the participants, in particular we want to thank all those who contributed their time in a voluntary capacity.

Principles for establishing local sustainable development partnerships

1. **Represent all relevant views and organisations.** Groups should not be excluded because they disagree and the partnership may need to take particular measures to represent women and children. If the partnership is area-based all members should be familiar with the locality. As the local community/environment is the host of the partnership, members from outside should be aware that they are there at their invitation.
2. **A good chairperson is essential.** A good chairperson is not involved in issues, steers clear of personalities or overheated discussion, and maximises the potential of all to contribute to the partnership. Every representative must feel wanted. If they don't feel good about the partnership they won't contribute to it and it won't work.
3. **An Executive is necessary.** Operating things by part-time voluntary assistance is too unreliable. Funding is therefore necessary. If you believe in what you are doing you will get funding – but never as much as you think you need!
4. **Be creative** in demonstrating the partnership. Carry out a project, something that is interesting, which is evidence of the results of the new partnership approach as soon as possible.
5. **Partnerships should not be shy about looking for external assistance.**
6. **Assume that co-operation and consensus will not happen on some occasions and that not all members will be equally engaged with all issues.** Make arrangements to deal with conflicts. eg. if there is disagreement over an issue agree to park it for a while and work on areas of agreement.
7. **A new partnership should try to get a good relationship going quickly with the most relevant statutory body.** Make sure some early projects are done with significant inputs from the statutory sector, semi-states or voluntary bodies. Close links with a LEADER company (or similar body) are particularly valuable.
8. **Keep in touch with grassroots.** This is not easy, but if not achieved a new local partnership can become just another organisation to distrust. Newsletters, newspaper and radio reports, seminars on subjects of local interest, school projects – all help.
9. **Belief.** Always believe in the huge potential of what you are setting out to do.