

Sine Gillespie, Meg Telfer and Vanessa Halhead
on behalf of the Dùthchas team

Background to the Dùthchas Project

The Dùthchas Project was set up in 1998 by a partnership of public agencies, to address issues of sustainable development in some of the most remote and fragile communities of the Scottish Highlands and Islands on the north west periphery of Great Britain. Dùthchas is funded under the EU LIFE Environment Programme as a demonstration project, which may have the potential to transfer to other areas.

The aim of the Project is to develop local strategies and actions for sustainable development, based on the collective knowledge of the local people and the public agencies and that this information/involvement would be generated through the use of participatory methods. Dùthchas has three pilot areas in the Scottish Highlands and Islands – North Sutherland, Trotternish in Skye, North Uist in the Western Isles. The project is founded on the principles of participation and partnership. It involves all of the people living within the three pilot areas, along with governmental and non-governmental agencies, twenty-one in total, who are ‘partners’ in the project. This article provides an account of the first part of the Dùthchas project as facilitated and experienced by the local project workers.

Selecting the Scottish Communities to go forward under the Dùthchas Project

There are many distinctive features which contribute to the uniqueness of northwest Scotland. The natural world here is outstandingly beautiful in the perpetually changing patterns of land and sea, of mountains and lochs. It is no surprise that globally endangered birds find sacred sanctuaries here or that discerning cultural tourists discover brilliant outdoor holidays in the region – but what of the people who make their homes here?

Traditionally, local people here have survived by working the land and harvesting the sea. This area has been home to the ‘Gaels’ for at least 1,400 years and their native tongue, Scottish Gaelic is still spoken by many of the people who live here today.

The economy of the area is rural, based on ‘crofting’¹ and fishing, and the population has been increased through immigration to the area. However, the region has suffered from lack of investment and we are distant from important

services. Furthermore, our infrastructure is sub-standard and unemployment is high, whilst primary commodities like food, petrol and energy are very expensive. Tourism is our prime economy but it scarcely offers seasonal security for local people. All of this affects us in the worst possible way, by diminishing our population through the out-migration of young people from the area. Therefore, it is our challenge to address all of the features that make up sustainable societies, which is what we have been doing with the Dùthchas Project. The three pilot areas of Dùthchas (North Sutherland, North Uist and the Trotternish Peninsular) were selected following a wide consultation process of public meetings and negotiations with agencies and had been identified as particularly ‘fragile’ for sometime.

‘Dùthchas’

Dùthchas is a very old word from Scottish Gaelic. It speaks of an empowered people with a strong identity who cherish their inheritance, have a proper say in their own destiny and who carefully consider future generations. In other words, this is precisely what the Project is aiming for – strong, sustainable societies. Yet, how can a process of involving communities in the sustainable development of their local areas be started?

Creating partnerships

Communities can become more powerful on their own, but they need support at a national level. If you can imagine a big dispersed family, that is what *Dùthchas* is. The twenty-one project partners are responsible for bringing their knowledge of opportunities back home, but also for taking the ideas and needs of the communities out to the policy makers. Each partner represents a different agency, each with a specific responsibility to the *Dùthchas* communities. The partners also have staff at local level, who sit on our local advisory groups.

Tapping in to the well of local knowledge – ‘divide but don’t rule’

The project established local advisory groups which meet about four times a year to steer the local *Dùthchas* agenda. These local groups are made up of people who, in equal numbers, represent the local communities and the partner

¹ A special form of land tenure based on small scale holdings within a ‘township’ with access to common grazing land

agencies. It would be wrong to assume that these groups govern the project, because that would be against the concept of *Dùthchas*. From the beginning, one of our main goals has been to maximise the potential for the participation of the whole community.

How are we doing this?

Although local people selected the pilot areas as 'cohesive' communities, they were too large to look upon as single units. So they were divided into 'sub-areas': four in the Trotternish peninsula, six in North Uist and eleven in North Sutherland. This was our starting point for zooming in to the local level. It took the management team almost a year to arrive at this point. A lot of hard groundwork had been done to prepare for this day to ensure the support and involvement of all of the many players needed to make this a success. Now we were ready to embark upon 'The Initial Review' of the project. This would involve the harvesting of local views and would later form the foundation for the *Dùthchas* strategies for sustainable development in the pilot areas.

Equipping ourselves with new skills

By October 1998, the project staff, all local people, were in post. This has been critical to the harnessing of local good will and involvement. As soon as the local staff assumed their duties, the whole *Dùthchas* team began an intensive period of training. This broadened our understanding of sustainability, and gave very practical training on how to facilitate community involvement.

Open public meetings

The first technique we used to derive community views was to hold open meetings, in each of the sub-areas, to which everyone was invited. As people came in the door to the meeting, they were asked to record, by means of a dot, where they lived on a wall map. They were also asked to record their age group and sex on a separate wall chart. Everyone was given a name label, which also had a coloured dot on it, for sticking to their jacket. This would later indicate in a random manner who would become grouped with whom. On each table there was a map of the immediate community, as well as pens and 'post-it'² stickers. Once in their seats at tables, each person was asked to undertake a simple exercise by identifying with pens and colour-coded 'post-it' stickers the following:

- three things that they liked and valued about their community;
- three things that they disliked about their community; and,
- three ideas or changes that they wanted to see for the future well-being of their area.

There was no conferring in this exercise and we did not record who said what. The object was to look for as broad a range

² Small pieces of coloured paper with an adhesive edge so that they can be stuck on to maps, charts, etc. with ease.

of views as possible. After a period of time, all participants were asked to place their 'post-it' stickers onto the table map. Each group then appointed a spokesperson who reported the ideas for change back to the whole meeting.

Figure 1. Dùthchas project co-ordinators facilitating public meetings



Photo: Project Staff

Action plans

Thereafter, each group developed an action plan, working through the most popular ideas that had come out from the mapping exercise. The action plan demonstrated how individual ideas and knowledge might be drawn together to design a way forward for a number of ideas. Some of our action plans identified some good ideas. For example, one idea was to get the rock for a much needed breakwater to shelter the Uig Pier from the construction of a tunnel through a nearby rockface, which would thereafter replace a dangerous bend on the road connecting three crofting townships. On one occasion only six people turned up to a meeting, but they produced some of the best action plans of the Project to date. The *Dùthchas* action plan process posed the following questions.

- What is the idea?
- Why is this needed?
- Where on the map is this needed?
- What knowledge already exists on this idea – (a) locally and (b) elsewhere?
- Who from the communities could be involved – (a) locally and (b) elsewhere?

This information provided a starting point for taking ideas forward.

Focusing on everybody

The meetings were open to all members and ages within the community – well, everybody over the age of ten to be precise. All of the publicity for the project emphasised the socially inclusive aspect of it. The staff worked hard at breaking down barriers. For example, some people have an aversion to the word 'meeting' and there is the problem those who are so accustomed to hearing their own voices

almost exclusively at public meetings that they tend to dominate over others. Instead, the staff focused on making the meetings all-inclusive by working hard to encourage attendance and by use of the participatory methods described.

Getting the word out

In order to publicise the project, the staff of *Dùthchas* opted for colourful posters. This is a busy world, and your meeting stands at least a chance if your poster is at least seen! We also tried to word the posters in a friendly way in order to encourage those people who don't usually go to meetings to attend. We also used the media by placing adverts in local newspapers, participating in radio and TV interviews, and through taking advantage of local Gaelic broadcasting stations. What was even more useful was to put a word of encouragement in people's ears when they were filling your car up with petrol, selling you milk and bread, or picking your children up for school. In rural communities, the chances are strong that you know the people. And that can work for you, and against you.

Knocking on doors

We also did live community interviews with the members of the public in each of the sub-areas. We went to places where we would be sure of finding a captive audience, for example in shops, petrol stations, schools, youth clubs and nurseries. In addition to this, we knocked on people's doors for spontaneous interviews. The exercise conducted was to ask people the three specific questions as outlined for the open meetings: three things that they liked; three things that they disliked and three ideas for change. In the beginning, we also developed action plans, as described above, during these live interviews. However, this was found to be time consuming, impractical and unfeasible, given the time *and weather* available for the research. Winter surveys in North Scotland have their problems! Everyone who was interviewed by the staff was recorded according to their age group, sex and the mapped location of their homes.

Trekking and tracking

At an advanced stage of the research, the staff assessed their work in terms of geographical and age representations. At that stage, we were able to identify any gaps and to further pursue additional interviews in an attempt to fill them. Many good interviews were done on the 'phone, by asking the questions in the morning and 'phoning back at night for the answers. In the meantime, of course, the pile of information from the communities was growing. Things were getting exciting, and all too quickly, the information was translated into a medium suitable for display at exhibitions.

Feeding back all of the good ideas in their own words

The next step was to hold a travelling exhibition to display all of the information gathered to date, in a transparent and

entertaining way. This was an important way of sharing individual views with the wider community, as well as using the occasion to heighten awareness of the role of local agencies in the project. The agencies had also been busy recording their own views about the *Dùthchas* areas and these were part of the exhibition as well. Interestingly, much of the agency input on strengths, challenges and ideas was mirrored by the community's input. The exhibition was also used as an opportunity to ask people to cast their votes on the collective ideas being displayed. An important function was that the exhibition showed, through all the information on display, 'an increased confidence in the area' and the '...pride and awareness of our culture and traditions' from the community.

A travelling exhibition

A travelling exhibition was needed in order to visit all of the individual communities in these large and dispersed areas. To set the travelling exhibitions off to a good start, and confirm the good work done by our communities, we invited the Government Minister for Rural affairs in Scotland to Trotternish. This ensured the attendance of senior staff from the partner agencies, as well as all of the communities, and the Minister's enthusiasm ensured the continuing support of for the work.

The project workers in Sutherland had a stroke of genius. Their exhibition was clearly going to be a monumental task. They had a huge territory to cover, with 11 'sub-areas'. Scratching their heads, they came up with the idea of hiring 'Magnus the Arts Bus'. This bus was a highlight of community life in Sutherland during the winter of 1999. People crammed into the bus to cast their votes and share in the fun, and Magnus ventured into communities where no bus had gone before!

Asking people to vote on ideas

We tried to get people to vote on the many ideas on display by listing all of the ideas that the communities had presented on posters. They were asked to vote on the ideas for their own area. Each person was given 10 sticky dots with which to cast their votes. Votes could be cast in any way that they wished and was not private, but in full view of other people. We thought later that this might have been a mistake, as individuals were sometimes influenced by the voting of others. Popular votes were for improved slipways and roads, a youth cafe, an upgraded community centre, a new surgery etc. For our exhibition, we included artwork from local schools, fossils and museum artifacts, local crafts, books and tapes by local artists etc. in an attempt to boost community confidence. For example, an art piece might be accompanied by the dialogue - 'I like *Sollas* [the place I live] because my Mum can let me out for the day without worrying about me.' (i.e. This is a safe community).

Making a film of their story

To go with the exhibitions, an audio-visual tape-slide presentation of the three *Dùthchas* areas was specially commissioned. Each of the three scripts was prepared locally and told of each community's values, challenges and ideas. The tape has since been made into a video. The colourful and moving use of local voices, music and pictures is perhaps one of the reasons that this is amongst our favourite outputs. In just 20 minutes, the listener gets a powerful essence of the *Dùthchas* story and the issues that the community faces on a daily basis. The video has a message for all rural communities on the fringe – no matter where in the globe they are. A paper version of the video was also printed and circulated to every household in the three areas – 'what we value about our place'.

Reflections to date – what we've learned so far

By the time the exhibitions were over, we were all exhausted! The 'Initial Review' had taken just over five months of hard work, but how effective had we been? One thing we all knew was that we were learning fast. We were frustrated by how quickly we had to get to the exhibition stage. All of us would have liked more time to take the survey to even more people. However over 300 people had been directly involved in each area and project timescales required that we move on. But what had the experience taught us thus far?

This kind of work is time consuming, and needs concentration. For the meetings, you have to be well organised. Sometimes, we found that our participatory 'exercises' irritated some people. For example, a frequent cry was 'Not more 'post its'!'. Sometimes people preferred to do an exercise collectively and we found that it was helpful to ask people what they themselves felt comfortable with. We had to be prepared for difficult questions as well. Sometimes, we encountered cynicism, and learned neither to respond with cynicism nor to be 'thrown' off course by a dismissive or difficult comment. When someone makes challenges on a subject you do not know, we found that it was possible to turn it around by inviting them to part with their own knowledge. *Dùthchas* is all about sharing knowledge for our mutual benefit. When you spot someone who is really clued up on a particular topic – make a note of their strengths and their telephone number – and ask them to come on board.

The last thing you want is to be wishy-washy by merely enduring these meetings. You are there to gather ideas and boost confidence, but you have to stand back as well. You must be participatory and demonstrate a genuine interest in what is going on and it is important to thank everyone for coming. We always felt remorseful if we had forgotten to acknowledge people's efforts. We also found that we had to give people an idea at the end of an evening what was going to happen next.

As well as community meetings, we found that much information came from the door-to-door interviews. Not everybody has their ideas articulated in their mind ready to be shared in plenary sessions. Some will take longer, and a bit of coaxing, for their true feelings to be shared. Some don't perceive themselves to be the meeting-going kind. There might be an assumption that they themselves have nothing to contribute – people said this to us again and again during interviews. The interviews offered the opportunity for people to put across their views at an intimate level without having to speak out at a meeting. Also, some preferred you to write their thoughts down, so we did. You have to go with the flow, and some of the best comments of the whole survey came from people with whom we shared cups of tea during door-to-door interviews!

This is only the first chapter in the *Dùthchas* story. If you want to learn what we did with all the information gained or how the communities shaped it into creative, inspired and well-informed strategies and projects for the sustainability of their areas, or if you want to see the video and read the reports, you could contact us at the Project office.

**Vanessa Halhead, Project Manager,
Dùthchas LIFE Project, Bridge House,
20 Bridge Street, Inverness, IV1 1QR, UK.
Tel: +44 (0) 1463 244202; Fax: +44 (0) 1463 244286;
Email: duthcas.info@duthcas.org.uk
Website: www.Dùthchas.org.uk**

Notes

The project has eight members of staff: Vanessa Halhead, Project Manager; Issie MacPhail, Project Officer; Wilma Chestnut, Administrator. Project Workers: Sine Gillespie and Iain Macdonald (job share) – The Trotternish peninsula, Meg Telfer and Kerry Conlon, (job share) – North Sutherland, and Caitriona MacCuish, North Uist.