



## **Inquiry into the future for England's upland communities**

### **Main messages from North West regional hearing, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> May 2009, Penrith, Cumbria.**

This report summarises the main messages arising from the CRC's sixth and final regional hearing in Penrith, Cumbria on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> May 2009. It is intended to give a flavour of the breadth of issues and topics raised over the course of the two days, rather than provide a fully comprehensive record of all the views expressed. A full verbatim transcript of the formal inquiry hearings is available on request from the CRC Upland Inquiry team (see below).

The views and experiences recorded in this report are those raised by participants in the inquiry session. They are reported without comments and they are not necessarily shared by the CRC. The report will be used, together with reports from the five other regional hearings and other research by the CRC as part of this inquiry, to identify and to understand how upland communities function and develop and promote realistic policy recommendations to support a sustainable future. The inquiry will report its recommendations in the Autumn 2009.

For further details about the CRC's uplands inquiry, please contact the uplands inquiry team at: [uplandsinquiry@ruralcommunities.gov.uk](mailto:uplandsinquiry@ruralcommunities.gov.uk).

We are very grateful to individuals and representatives of the following organisations who kindly gave up their time to meet the inquiry panel and share their views and experiences:

**Action with Communities in Cumbria**  
**Age Concern Carlisle & Eden**  
**Ambleside Online**  
**Carnegie UK Trust**  
**Church of England - Carlisle Diocese**  
**Country Land & Business Association**  
**Cumbria Action for Sustainability**  
**Cumbria Rural Enterprise Agency**  
**Cumbria Rural Housing Trust**  
**Cumbria Tourism**  
**Cumbria Vision**  
**Cybermoor Ltd**  
**Eden District Council**  
**Energy 4 All Ltd**  
**Federation of Cumbria Commoners**  
**Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**  
**Forestry Commission**  
**Foundation for Common Land**  
**Friends of the Lake District/CPRE Cumbria**  
**H&H Bowe Ltd**  
**Inter Hydro Technology Ltd**  
**Lake District National Park Authority**  
**Lakes Tourism & Conservation Partnership**  
**Lancashire Economic Partnership**  
**National Farmers Union – North West Region**

**Northern Fells Group**  
**Northwest Regional Development Agency**  
**North West Rural Affairs Forum**  
**Paragon Vets**  
**Penrith Methodist Church**  
**Pentalk**  
**Tenant Farmers Association**  
**University of Cumbria – Newton Rigg**  
**Upper Eden Community Plan**  
**Westmorland Ltd**  
**Wright Bros Coaches**

## **Main Inquiry Messages**

These have been grouped into the following 6 themes:

1. Communities
2. Economies
3. Public Goods and Benefits
4. Farming
5. Policy and Practices
6. Solutions

### **1. Communities**

**Communities of interest:** Not just communities of place in the uplands, but communities of interest are equally important, such as those who manage, regulate, use and enjoy the commons land. A need was identified to facilitate trust and partnership working between those with a shared interest in, but differing objectives for, the commons.

Other communities referred to included Methodists, sheep dog owners, and livestock farmers whose common interests transcend places.

**Changing communities:** One suggestion made that uplands are “becoming less and less of a community” based on a perception that population levels are falling over the years and the changing composition of those communities means fewer and fewer of them are farming the uplands.

This was countered by an alternative view that the increasing diversity within communities was a strength and would secure the future of life in the uplands.

**Importance of the “glue” :** Communities were described as having many “layers” but the so-called “glue” was considered by some contributors to be a real concern. The loss of focal points within communities such as the Post Office, shop, church, pub or school removes a place where “people bump into one another” – the places where people interact and generate community activity.

**Investment in “human infrastructure”:** policies need to recognise the value of skills, knowledge and experience within communities and have flexible funding mechanisms to enable communities to help themselves instead of having to ‘fit existing boxes’ for eligibility.

**A place to live:** Concern was expressed that the growth in second home ownership has created some significant localised challenges for several communities in the uplands. Examples such as Coniston in the Lake District now have very high proportions of second and holiday homes, so much so, that the school has become increasingly dependent on children from families in either social housing or housing with local occupancy agreements (“Section 106 Agreements”).

Young people migrating out of the uplands to find affordable housing was described as a significant driver affecting the future viability of services and schools in upland communities.

Reference was made to specific examples of local planners restricting the conversion of farm buildings to secure homes for members of farming families and farm workers – this despite the provision to apply agricultural occupancy agreements.

**Local leadership:** The most isolated communities were described as the most challenging to identify local leaders because “there is a reluctance for people to put themselves ahead of anybody else” and yet this does not necessarily diminish their strong sense of community.

**Access to services:** public transport in sparsely populated uplands is costly, almost impossible without public funding and evidence suggests services are often cross-subsidised by school contracts. Example given of the challenge of investing in transport infrastructure – in one case still not viable even with 50% public matched funding.

## **2. Economies**

**New economic models:** Agriculture is considered as ‘small but vital’ to the uplands economy, conserving the landscape and creating provision for recreation, but also increasingly contributing to greater diversity in the economy – farming being the basis of an increasing number of new enterprises.

Agricultural production in the uplands was described by one as marketing meat from animals fed on hill grasses, whilst taking payments from Natural England to deliver environmental goods. It was described by another as primarily serving the needs of a visitor economy with traditional farming practices being part of the ‘quality of experience’. New economic models ‘must address public goods and services’.

Importance of changing composition of upland communities in developing a wider range of economic activity – no longer just about one or two sectors. Suggested that new economic models should be about developing the relationship between sectors and addressing all their needs. Specific reference made to growth in home working and what an inquiry panel member referred to collectively as “smart cottage industries”.

Similarly, not all business models are the same, and point made that motives in the uplands can vary considerably with “portfolio” careers likely to be much more common in remote areas. The message from businesses in the uplands that ‘we aren’t all the same’ is directed at investment strategies which assume conventional “urban” models apply, and work, everywhere.

**Production v conservation:** The compatibility of some production systems with some conservation methods can still seem uncertain, and the Inquiry Panel heard an inconclusive debate over the extent to which it is economic or environmental drivers that determine stocking rates in the uplands.

**Negative Perceptions:** There is a common misconception that employment in tourism industries is always poorly paid, but this was criticised as a generalisation. Examples were presented of specific businesses offering a wide range of pay scales and reference was made to new highly skilled jobs in new growth areas such as adventure sports breaks.

## **3. Public goods and benefits**

**Landscape and recreation:** determining the most appropriate stocking levels and the significance of grazing to the ongoing management of the landscape and access for recreation remains a contentious topic. Too much and the consequences of over-grazing are highlighted in one quarter, too little and the consequences of under-grazing are highlighted in the other.

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has explored the concept of 'going back to nature', with more tree cover, scrub and natural vegetation, but questioned how people would cope with that. The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is not natural but man-made, so will society be prepared for something very different?

**Renewable energy:** Hydro-electric schemes often referred to as an economic as well as an environmental opportunity in the uplands, but this notion was challenged, with one suggesting that they 'cannot find one that would make money' and advised the inquiry that 'small schemes don't stack up financially'. This was then countered by evidence that one local scheme is forecast to make money once it's beyond the initial ten years.

**Health:** example given of 'Great North Swim' attracting over 5,000 swimmers to participate in the inaugural event in Windermere, in addition to the millions who already visit to walk the fells.

#### **4. Farming & Management of Commons**

**Threat to cultural landscape:** hill farming described as vital to the cultural landscape but land-based economy described as collapsing and its continuing existence is severely threatened – described by one participant as having "only about 20 years left!"

**Partnership working:** a 'new model of community' working in partnership with government agencies and authorities, with mutual respect and trust, is required to secure the longer-term management of commons.

Initiatives such as Pentalk have facilitated on-line networking across farming communities and opened-up a means to communicate globally and take advantage of food market opportunities – though a greater sophistication of skills is needed.

**Significance of Public Funds:** On more than one occasion reference was made to the proportions of farm income typically derived from public 'subsidy' or payments, suggesting that this has been measured at 46 and 56 per cent combining the income from the Single Farm Payment and agri-environment agreements. Agricultural production was typically around a third of the income and other sources of income such as those through diversification made up the rest.

Not only does the above evidence highlight that many hill farmers depend on public funds but if the income from farming production falls too low then experience suggests many farmers may lose their sense of purpose and drive to get up in the morning.

**Payment for goods and services:** "subsidy" mentality is damaging and language should refer to land managers/farmers having a contract with Government to deliver goods or services for the public, i.e. time to establish a new relationship.

**'Unnecessary' Regulation:** Several strong views were expressed that the introduction of Electronic Identification system for sheep was not justifiable given that, in their view, the existing system of licensing 'works perfectly well'.

**Changing markets:** Auctions company highlighted figures that demonstrate a considerable fall in numbers of animals, in recent years, going through their marts and pointed to the consequential impact on income for their business and others around them.

#### **5. Policy and practices**

**Need for more integrated approach:** Summed up by one contributor as: "Too many spinners. Too few weavers." This referring to the number of external interests and influences on the uplands, each pursuing their own objectives or agendas, rather than working with local communities to ensure a more harmonised approach.

**Lack of leadership on the uplands:** One questioned where the leadership was and highlighted the continuing difficulty people have with too many public bodies dealing with life and work in the uplands – reference to RDPE and perception of problems administering programme across the uplands when it straddles two or three regional boundaries (e.g. northern uplands).

**Distant and centralised decision making:** The panel heard that “communities feel more isolated than ever before” as a consequence of seeing decisions about funding and regulation being made by regional and national bodies with little or no understanding of their needs.

Suggested that many Local Area Agreements, and Local Development Frameworks need to do more to support the development of upland economies.

**Short-term funding and initiatives:** Many projects can and do make a difference but the short-term nature of funding is criticised as part of the problem, described as having an unhelpful focus on “new” rather than an emphasis on learning lessons and developing established good practice. Timescales are invariably determined by funding bodies rather than need.

**Presumption against development:** Strategic planners described as having overly protective interpretation of countryside/uplands, perceiving small settlements as unsustainable and not considering how to help them to become more sustainable – ‘if all the housing goes to the towns, is that where we want everyone to be?’

**National Park priorities for uplands:** Three priorities were outlined to the inquiry:-

- i) Delivery of public goods
- ii) Diversification of economy
- iii) Food production and niche markets

## 6. Solutions

**National Park Vision for 21<sup>st</sup> Century:** policies that promote a place of diverse economies, vibrant communities and attractive landscape will need to ‘break the strait-jacket of settlement hierarchy’.

**Providing focal point to community:** reference was made to an initiative to address the needs of a community faced with losing their communities focal point for meeting, such as the village shop, post office or school. Crosthwaite Exchange in Cumbria was highlighted as an example of an initiative seeking to address this need for people to have a place to interact.

**Community enablers:** examples of Rural Community Councils and rural housing enablers named as examples of good practice in making things happen, helping local communities to find local solutions to their needs.

**Energy Services Agency:** new agency needed to smooth the path for micro- and local renewable energy generation schemes, to avoid the expense and wastage of each community having to learn how ‘to cross the hurdles’.

**Visitor payback schemes:** Example of voluntary levy scheme in the Lake District demonstrates how such initiatives can raise awareness of the benefits of a managed environment and raise funds for specific conservation/community projects.

**Re-use of rural buildings:** planning policy statements recognising the potential for the conversion of rural buildings not only for employment but for providing much needed homes for farming families, and other local people.

**Task Force for the Hills:** it was suggested that many of the recommendations prepared in 2001 by the Task Force for the Hills were not given the attention they deserve due to the outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease and should be revisited.

**Farming Connect and Tourism Connect:** two separate initiatives based on joint advice and funding were considered to be largely successful in securing a future for agri-enterprises and developing tourism businesses, but funding 'dried up' for both.

**Planning Facilitation Service:** a 'tested concept' that aims to 'smooth the path' for business development 'to make things happen'. Suggestion that the Government should promote its application beyond the North West region.

**Farm Tourism Initiative:** suggestion that much of the experimentation and testing has been done but the lessons have not been learned. Reference made to the success and positive evaluation of a Farm Tourism Initiative which has been discontinued due to withdrawal of funding support.

**Board of Upland Management:** one idea put forward was a private sector led Board that would promote economic development in the uplands.