



Inquiry into the future of England's uplands communities

Main messages from North East regional hearing, 18th & 19th March 2009, Alnwick, Northumberland

This report summarises the main messages arising from the CRC's third regional hearing in Alnwick, Northumberland on the 18th and 19th March 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 Uplands 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.

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:

2D Weardale & Teesdale Council for Voluntary Service
Age Concern Northumberland
Church of England – Rev'd Jane Grieve
Citizen's Advice Bureau Northumberland
Durham Rural Community Council
Federation of Northumberland Development Trusts
Forestry Commission
Haltwhistle Partnership
Hill farmer – Jane Wilson
Land agent – Jon Williams
Newcastle Diocesan Officer for Rural Affairs
North East Country Land and Business Association
North East National Farmers Union
North East Rural Affairs Forum
North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
Northumberland County Council
Northumberland National Park
Northumberland Energy Executive
Northumberland Strategic Partnership
ONE North East
Tarset 2050
Teesdale Local Strategic Partnership

Main Inquiry Messages

For ease of reference, 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

Strong community spirit: The upland communities in the North East are diverse with a mix of incomers and indigenous population. People are willing to collaborate and work together on various projects and provide social support e.g. Tarsset 2050 initiative. Strong informal networks of support exist. 'Asset mapping' exercise in Tarsset parish demonstrated rich and diverse range of interests, skills and knowledge within its local communities.

Evidence that communities are continuing to change included specific reference to village of Greenargh where in the past many were employed in forestry, but today contractors are brought in from much further afield.

Former 'pit communities' described as having sense of self-help in their culture, sharing skills and knowledge to run local facilities, e.g. Teesdale Village Halls consortium.

Some experiential evidence did, however, reveal some frictions with occasional clashes of lifestyles between the more traditional land-based families and those apparently seeking a more "suburban" life in a rural area.

Voluntary Networks: Upland communities have strong voluntary networks. However some voluntary networks are being lost, in part due to short-term funding. Experience suggests it is often hard to encourage unpaid volunteers to continually support and manage projects. There is also a decline of succession into volunteering e.g. maintaining village hall management committees, leading to the deterioration and even closure of community buildings. Evidence suggests there is an over-reliance in many small communities on a small 'core' of people who are active and keen to ensure their communities survive. This makes some support services and facilities extremely fragile and reference was made to fears of 'a slow erosion of the community'.

Faith: Faith is still important in rural areas and communities often have shared values. Congregations are smaller but the village church provides important community services. A significant number of people recognise the church as a facilitator in the community and it is often supported by a wide range of people. Upland areas often don't have a "centre" and churches provide a meeting place for the community.

Church buildings could be used for a wider range of community activities but rules frequently prevent the extended use of these buildings.

Young people: There is a perceived lack of provision for children and young people in the uplands. There needs to be a better understanding of young people's lifestyles to provide services. Incentives could be introduced to stop young people moving away and also encourage young people to return to the area.

Affordable Housing: The uplands have a very limited and ageing supply of housing. Affordable housing is desperately needed and the National Park Authority limits housing development to certain villages. Perception that all new housing is being focused on larger towns to detriment of smaller communities.

Housing is also needed for key workers. Landowners and communities could do more to work with housing associations to “unlock” potential land for development. Rural Housing Enablers are an important resource and provide much needed professional support to communities in need of housing.

Community Land Trusts: Community Land Trusts have been successful in a few parts of Northumberland. Lessons learnt from setting up existing Trusts include the use of technical support throughout the process and suggestion made that Trusts should support each other sharing advice and best practise.

Parish councils: Parish councils described as spending a lot of their time defending the existing services in the area, but many remain keen and active in their community. Some feel that they should have more responsibility and money devolved to them. However, parish councils were criticised for being “behind” on technology, and unwilling to make more use of their precept, leading to difficulties moving the parish forward.

Parish planning: Parish planning needs communication between people and local authority planners at the start of the process. An example was given of a community that worked together to produce a parish plan which wasn't then used as intended. However the process was found to be equally as important as the outcome because it brought the local community together. There should be more joint parish planning and parishes working together.

LEADER groups: repeated reference to the principles of LEADER being the right ones and the Local Action Groups being seen very much a part of ‘the solution’ for the future of upland communities.

Transport: The uplands suffer from a lack of public transport infrastructure. This leads to elderly people being forced to drive and car ownership can push people into poverty. There should be localised and tailored services for the uplands areas to ensure equity for all.

Financial exclusion: Financial exclusion is a problem in upland communities and can lead to poverty. Benefit uptake is low and voluntary organisations don't have the funding to run awareness raising campaigns to encourage uptake. The highest proportion of enquiries to the Citizens Advice Bureau was about debt problems. There is also a heavy reliance on the informal sector. A loss of the telephone service to the CAB could disadvantage people in remote locations.

2. Economies

Vulnerability of the upland economies: The uplands were described as fragile places and the communities were slowly being “eroded away”. This could be explained in part by local business people retiring and not being replaced. The lack of succession into businesses was highlighted as a major concern because it can lead to a loss of skills especially traditional skills. The local economy is vulnerable to major environmental or animal health upsets e.g. Blue Tongue. There needs to be a diverse economy to ensure survival and a mix of age groups in the community.

Lack of jobs: There is a shortage of jobs generally and apprenticeships specifically in the uplands, and where there are jobs they are often relatively low paid. Reference made to well paid jobs previously available for local people in Northumberland with the Forestry Commission, but contractors now tender for the work. Perception that local firms are losing out to contractors from other parts of the region and UK, and concern that short-term cost benefits of competitive tendering are taking precedence over longer-term sustainability goals.

Technology: Broadband availability is an issue in the uplands of North East England. There are problems with connectivity because of the distances from the exchanges. The towns are usually first to receive broadband because they have infrastructure in place before it goes out to remote areas.

Northumberland County Council's current broadband project is in response to businesses moving out from rural areas to urban areas because of poor broadband speeds and connectivity. State aid is only received if market failure can be proved in rural areas. The Government and EU have promised investment in connectivity. There is a danger of the technology gap widening between urban and rural areas.

Satellite reception is an issue in rural areas because there is a delay in the signal. Mobile phone coverage is poor and also impacts on businesses.

Regulations: Perceived growth in number and frequency of government regulations are described as constraining small business growth/development.

3. Public goods and benefits

Renewable Energy: There are many opportunities for renewable energy in the uplands especially with rising energy costs and securing future energy sources. The renewable energy schemes can earn farmers significant amounts of money. Renewable energy schemes can be financially viable but need grant support to get started but once underway can produce significant savings. The lack of knowledge can be a barrier in the communities and it can be a challenge to persuade people to change from gas and oil. There is a general lack of advice to local groups.

There are currently 6 upland renewable energy projects in Northumberland involving wind energy, biomass and geothermal energy as well as micro hydro electricity. The Northumberland Energy Executive is currently developing a community guide on renewable energy.

4. Farming

Second incomes: Hill farmers are needed for managing the environment of the uplands. Some are starting to provide other services such as building and environmental management. Diversification can weaken hill farming skills.

Environment management vs. Food production: Hill farming is the backbone of food production and tourism. Farm subsidies focus on environmental management of the land. Food shortages will lead to food production becoming more important. View expressed that the public can't have cheap food unless they subsidise farming. Conservation organisations don't understand farming and livestock. Farmers can interpret the current environment schemes as "wanting farmers off the hills".

Conversion of agricultural buildings: Repeated criticism that buildings now redundant for modern agricultural systems can receive planning permission to be converted to farm shops or holiday lets, but not affordable housing for farming families or local people.

5. Policy and practices

City Regions: Big structures like City Regions partnerships and public investment programmes could lead to remoter places becoming disenfranchised.

Unitary authorities: Concerns were raised about the move to a unitary authority in both Northumberland and Durham. The main issues raised were about centralised decision making far away from upland areas, and fears of losing support when local district councils are abolished.

There are concerns around how unitary authorities will rural proof their policies. The fear is that without strong rural proofing upland areas could miss out. The Rural Community Councils should be embedded in the new structure.

“Checklist “approach to sustainable communities: Local authorities have adopted a checklist approach to determine whether a community is sustainable. This has left some villages being labelled as unsustainable because they have not fitted the marking criteria. Government at all levels need to work with the community to gain a better understanding of the area and act as a facilitator within the community.

Area Action Partnerships: The new Area Action Partnerships (AAP) were discussed and concerns were raised about a lack of consultation with local people in the uplands. The smaller villages have a lack of voice. However under this structure rural AAPs will receive the same amount of funding as their urban counterparts.

Social Care: Local groups used to provide services in their communities however these groups lost contracts to city based companies. Under the new unitary authorities all contracts go out to tender. The centralisation of services could lead to difficulties providing outreach and support services in upland areas.

Bureaucracy: The national park was criticised for being ‘slow’ and ‘too bureaucratic’. Their planning restrictions were thought to be in a “time-warp” and stopped development for the future.

Voluntary groups now have to tender for funding and there is often a lack of knowledge and experience about the tender process.

LEADER within Rural Development Programme for England : The Leader model doesn't always work in the uplands area. The regulations and possible breaches of contracts could disenfranchise local and community groups where Leader is their only source of funding. Leader money should come with the condition of working with isolated communities. Some thought Leader was becoming too bureaucratic e.g. conditions for tendering for goods and services.

Short term funding: Community groups and voluntary groups would like to see consistent, long term funding and a more sustainable investment strategy. Often projects have to stop because funding runs out or the solutions are short term and are then retracted.

Voluntary organisations need funding to provide “non-existent” services in the uplands. EU funding is seen as a “waste of time” for the voluntary sector and when funding ends they often lose key staff.

6. Solutions

Communities: A central bank of information for communities and voluntary groups would be useful because community groups are struggling to find the right places and people to go to for advice.

A central body for the uplands could be set up to specifically help people living and working in the area. The body could provide expert advice and practical support to community groups.

Government agencies could make use of the voluntary sector to contact and work with communities in the remoter upland areas.

Members of the community could be paid to develop their community. They could develop a hub of resources and it could incentivise younger people to get involved with their community. With support and training they could also generate income in a small community.

Economies: Economic policies shouldn't be a “blanket” policy and should be tailored to the upland areas. There could be better links with economic development officers and businesses in these areas.

Policies & practices: The local authority needs to engage more with communities with regards to planning policy. A better relationship and communication between the community, the local authority's economic development department and planning department could help progress developments in the future.