

Added Value of Networking



Exchanging experience through thematic events

Scottish National Rural Network



Source: Scottish NRN



ENRD Connecting Rural Europe

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Executive summary

The Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) developed a series of themed events to support networking and the exchange of best practice within key sectors seen as either providing opportunity or demonstrating a source of threat for rural areas in the country. The themes were initially identified during information events held in each Local Action Group area, where delegates were asked to rate their areas of work and particular interests. This enabled key 'hot topics' to be identified and later explored with the support of thematically focused specialist organisation. The NRN was then able to define the themes of most interest and deliver a programme of relevant networking events which have been both current and made use of the most recent research.

The events engaged over 600 participants from across the country ranging from local voluntary practitioners to university researchers. These stakeholders were supported to network effectively, share knowledge and best practice and identify indicators of success. Seven themed events were run during 2011 and 2012 covering distinct thematic areas and delivered with the support of specialist partners. They involved presentations, workshops and networking opportunities, which inspired lively debate.

The events provided a successful forum for networking between a wide range of organisations and people, enabling them to meet, share experiences, hear information relevant to their work and interests and establish lasting connections. The success of the events is supported by the evaluations undertaken and the legacy developed after their completion.



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Background

The SNRN has been running an annual programme of thematic networking events since 2011. These events have provided an opportunity for participants to hear inspirational presentations, share experience and ideas, network and celebrate success.

Themes for the events were initially identified following the first year of the Scottish National Rural Network contract, where twenty information events were held across Scotland, one in each Local Action Group (LAG) area. Delegates at those initial networking and information events were asked to rate their areas of work, sectors of interest, and to indicate where they felt there were opportunities and threats in rural Scotland. This information was then used to devise a potential list of key 'hot topics' to explore in greater depth with the support of the appropriate agency, organisation or others experienced in the sector. Through activity on the SNRN website, and guidance from the Scottish Government and other key stakeholders, it was also possible to gauge the emergence of additional priority topics and opportunities.

With these two factors combined, the SNRN was able to define the themes of most interest and deliver a programme of relevant networking events, which have been current in their outlook and supported by the most recent policy and research evidence.

This Case Study was developed with the support of the SNRN, documentation they provided and information on the events available on the Internet. Data was also taken from the evaluation forms completed by event participants.

Participants of networking

Participants at the thematic events have been broad ranging. Individual events have generally been delivered in partnership with relevant expert organisations and attendance has included LAGs, potential applicants and project deliverers, community volunteers, businesses and local organisations. To date, partners have included the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Community Energy Scotland, Scotland Food & Drink, Cairngorms National Park, Carnegie UK Trust, Green Tourism Business Scheme and Care Farming Scotland.

Objectives

These thematic events were developed to enable improved working in the sectors most relevant to rural Scotland and raise awareness of the opportunities available to individuals and rural communities.

Added Value of Networking



The specific objectives of the thematic events included:

- Supporting networking between sector based stakeholders;
- Create learning opportunities through the use of case study presentations;
- Share experience and know how both horizontally and vertically;
- Explore the key factors in creating success and celebrate best practice examples.

Each event also included theme specific objectives which were focused on the needs of that particular group.

The process and main activities

A total of seven themed events were run in 2011 and 2012 covering the following sectors:

- Village Halls and Community Buildings
- Young, gifted and rural!
- Renewable Energy
- Food and drink
- Community Transport
- Green Tourism
- Care Farming

Further four events are planned for 2013.

The first event focused on community buildings and was delivered in partnership with the Scottish Agricultural College, attracting 160 participants from across rural Scotland. Presentations explored the context and current situation of community buildings, opportunities for funding, different social enterprise structures and innovative ways to generate additional income. The afternoon was spent discussing the issues raised, networking and exchanging best practice and also saw the launch of the new Keystone Award established to support communities to understand, manage and implement the appropriate legislation in relation to their own community buildings.

The second event invited young people and those who work with them to come together in a 'Young, Gifted and Rural!' workshop delivered together with the Carnegie UK Trust. Over 40 young people attended to talk about why they get involved in their communities, what motivates them and what they'd like to see happen next. The presentations were delivered by young people showcasing best

Added Value of Networking



practice examples of projects they had been involved in with facilitated group discussions taking place afterwards. The benefits of study tours and cultural exchanges were also highlighted with much enthusiasm shown for an additional, larger event to be run under this theme.

The third theme focused on renewable energy attracting ninety participants interested or involved in the sector. This theme was delivered in conjunction with the Royal Society of Edinburgh and Community Energy Scotland. Presentations looked at the findings of a recent report on climate change, the support available to local communities and the importance of networking. The afternoon session then focused on six stages of developing a project from feasibility to managing income.

The food and drink networking theme delivered in partnership with Scotland Food and Drink and Cairngorms National Park Authority attracted around seventy-five people, involved in a variety of food and drink initiatives from across the country. Presentations were delivered on the food and drink market in Scotland, the need for greater networking to market the provenance of local products, developing an integrated approach to the sector and best practice examples from a food service businesses specialising in local products and a local branding scheme. A busy market place showcasing the products from eighteen exhibitors enabled participants to network and share products, experience and develop new markets before ending the day with a tour of a local brewery.

The next theme focused on community transport and was delivered in partnership with the Community Transport Association Scotland. Approximately fifty participants attended listening to presentations highlighting the latest key research on the state of the sector and several best practice examples. Four workshops were then also run exploring legislation, funding, working with volunteers and establishing a scheme. There were many networking opportunities built in to the event to ensure as much information could be shared as possible.

The event on green tourism was delivered with the support of the Green Tourism Business Scheme and attracted over fifty participants from across Scotland. Presentations outlined the purpose of the Green Tourism Business Scheme and the benefits of joining, this was followed by a number of case study presentations from tourism businesses already delivering on the green agenda. Workshops in the afternoon explored the Green Tourism Business Scheme further, the need for a green marketing strategy, and how to reduce waste and energy in tourism businesses.

The final event attracted around fifty people to hear more about care farming initiatives in Scotland and to network with individuals and groups either interested in setting up schemes or already running them. The event was delivered with Care Farming Scotland and involved presentation which reported on the

Added Value of Networking



latest developments and research in the theme followed by a series of case studies from existing initiatives. Participants then spent the afternoon networking and discussing the benefits of care farming and the actions required to support its development in Scotland.

The SNRN organised all aspects of the events, identified and arranged speakers, promoted the opportunities through various channels including social media, provided facilitation, produced materials for the website (including event reports, photographs and film footage), and undertook evaluations for each event. The event evaluation summaries were also sent to each delivery partner to assist them with their on-going planning and monitoring.

The role of the partners has varied from event to event but has generally included detailed input into the agenda, identifying speakers and planning workshops, delivery of presentations and support on the day, marketing materials and assistance with event promotion.

Resources

Delivery of these events has cost in the region of £50,000 per annum, averaging approximately £12,000 per event. This has included staff time on management and administration, marketing of the thematic events, venue hire and refreshments, presenter's expenses and material costs.

The 'added value' of networking

The events have provided a successful forum for networking between a wide range of organisations and people, enabling them to meet, share experiences, hear information relevant to their work and interests and establish lasting connections. The success of the events is supported by the evaluations undertaken, which show that participants have generally found the events very useful.

These events have also enabled research activities and their results to be presented directly to rural practitioners and local communities. This has brought together two groups of stakeholders who often have few opportunities to communicate and network directly. It is hoped that this approach has encouraged the practical application of much of this research work.

It is hoped that the events will have a lasting influence on many of the participants and the partner organisations. This has certainly been the case with the 'Young Gifted and Rural!' event, which created interest in establishing an initiative to increase the involvement of young people in their rural communities. A sub-group of young people, brought together through both the thematic networking

Added Value of Networking



event and the associated detailed project visit, are currently working on a social media app to support youth voluntary activity in Scotland.

Another example of how this networking has added value to the sectors involved is the 'Care Farming' event, which has influenced the development of Care Farming Scotland's strategy and on-going plans and helped them to reach a wider audience than had previously been possible.

A key success factor for successful networking at each of the thematic events was having the right partner. This approach not only meant that the actual event was a success but also ensured that a lasting legacy was created from the events. It has also been important to evaluate the events in order to learn what worked well and what could be improved when delivering them in the future.

The SNRN has used its skills and experience in bringing people together and facilitating discussions, sharing of experiences and good practice. Coupled with the expertise of partner organisations on each of the themes, this has resulted in events which are well run, relevant to participants and influential. Without the SNRN, a number of these events would not have taken place.

What networking obstacles exist?

The two biggest obstacles to delivering effective networking through these thematic events have been time and supporting follow up. As all the events were run over a day the opportunities for networking and to facilitate discussion were a little limited. The events were therefore all designed to include inspirational or research presentations in the morning, leaving the rest of the day to focus on both informal and formal networking and discussion opportunities.

One of the greatest risks with delivering events such as these is participants who feel inspired on the day returning to work or their other commitments and not pursuing the opportunities and connections they developed at the event. In order to mitigate this situation as much as possible the events were delivered in conjunction with a key specialist organisation, which was committed to ensuring a legacy was developed from the activity which took place at the event.

Future challenges

These events have proved very successful with positive results reported through the evaluation forms. Their success and the importance of networking within these thematic areas should not be underestimated, however providing an evaluation of their long term impact has proved impossible. It is

Added Value of Networking



vital that those in key strategic positions during the next round of the Rural Development Programme are supported to understand the value of these events and other activities which compliment them.

Further information

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