

# Assynt Development Trust Limited

## Notes of Democracy Matters event, Lochinver Village Hall, Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018

This event was held at Lochinver Village Hall on the evening of Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> October, as part of a national discussion about local communities deciding their own future, launched by the Scottish Government.

The event was organised and publicised by Assynt Development Trust (ADT), following discussion with Assynt Community Council, and was facilitated by John Sturrock QC, assisted by Charlie Woods, both of *Collaborative Scotland*. (John Sturrock had previously run a successful “Better Conversations” event in Assynt in October 2017, and it was due to the success of that event that ADT invited him to facilitate this “Democracy Matters” event.)

Present on the evening were 22 Assynt residents, including representatives of Assynt Community Council, ADT, Assynt Foundation, Connect Assynt, and local tourism providers and other local businesses. Also present were two non Assynt-residents representing North Highlands Initiative and Coigach-Assynt Living Landscape Partnership.

### Summary of main points raised in discussions:

#### Current Situation:

The current council model is damaging Assynt, increasing our loss of services and facilities and increasing our loss of young people and working age population. It is also not representing good democratic practice, and is not fair, including in terms of fairness of council expenditure. Council decisions affecting Assynt are made by a council and by councillors based over a hundred miles away (there are no locally-based councillors) and are often made from an urban east-coast perspective and, arguably with a bias which benefits the urban east coast, with lack of consideration given to our localised issues including remoteness from key services. Such a large and centralised council structure also causes problems from being overly bureaucratic, and inflexible to localised needs and differences.

The local community council has good levels of engagement from the community (eg. high local turnout in community council elections), but is largely unable to effect change, as it has no real fiscal power and very limited influence on Highland Council.

Local community-run organisations, as examples of local decision-making, suffer from lack of communication, with each other and with the wider community. Lack of funding or sustainable income sources, and other problems such volunteer fatigue, also hinder their ability to achieve objectives for community benefit.

#### Proposed way forward:

Those present proposed that the current council model should be changed to enable more localised decision-making and fiscal control. One option is to give community councils more decision-making power and direct control of certain local services/assets including associated fiscal control.

In Assynt, these services/assets could include:

Roads including winter roads maintenance, education including school buildings maintenance, transport including bus services, enterprise and development, renewable energy, environmental services, elements of healthcare and social care, planning consent decisions for built development, tourist information facilities, Lochinver Harbour facilities, and other vital things such as refuse collection and street cleaning.

An alternative option to empowering community council/s as above would be to recreate a second tier of the council at a much more localised level, with that localised tier controlling many of the above services/assets, and the with the community council inputting into its decision-making about these.

It was proposed that the Scottish government could be asked to consider Assynt Community Council acting as a pilot in terms of being given direct decision-making control of key local services/assets including fiscal powers. This could possibly happen sooner, compared with waiting for change at a nation-wide level as a result of national discussion being fed back to the Scottish Government.

In relation to existing community-run organisations, it was proposed that joint meetings be arranged for multiple community groups to communicate with each other. ADT was actioned to organise a first such meeting in the near future.

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## Appendix 1

### Fuller Minutes of the event:

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#### Minutes of Democracy Matters event, Lochinver Village Hall, Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018

Present: John Sturrock (facilitator), Charlie Woods (assistant/recorder for facilitator) (both of *Collaborative Scotland*), Willie Jack (chair of Assynt Development Trust (ADT)), Nigel Goldie (ADT director and Assynt Foundation director), Jane Tulloch (Assynt.Biz (Assynt Foundation's trading company) director), Greg Allen, Adam Pellant (ADT staff), David Whiteford (North Highlands Initiative, non-Assynt-resident), Madeline MacPhail (ADT director), Chris Puddephatt, Dorell Pirie, James Pirie, Keith Allwood, Aileen Mitchell Stewart, Boyd Alexander (ADT director and Coigach Assynt Living Landscape Partnership staff, Ullapool resident), Vanessa Ling (Community Council member), Marie-Anne Hutchison (Community Council chair and ADT director), Keith Williams, Iain Young, Jane Young (Connect Assynt director), Helen Simpson, Alex Dickson, Maurice Tomkinson, Ewen MacLachlan (ADT staff), Mairi-Anne Macleod, Sarah Macleod (ADT director).

(Notes of discussion/comments are here generally non-attributed, and written/paraphrased as stated, even if subjective opinions or questionable or incorrect in terms of factual accuracy.)

Started 6.30pm.

*John Sturrock opened by asking groups to*

- **Tell us about your experiences of getting involved in decision-making processes that affect your local community or community of interest. What works? What frustrates you? What needs to change?**

*After groups considered this, a representative of each group, and then wider individuals, spoke. Notes of issues raised as follows:*

Lack of democratic representation. No surgeries held by HC councillors.

Decision-making often isn't local.

Don't know how to effect change.

Building regulations/planning requirements/processes are complex and arcane which can hinder or prevent development.

Prefer for decisions to be made at a more local level, eg. West Sutherland.

Council area being divided into north and south, or/and east and west, could be better.

Funding should be allocated not just per head but taking into account factors like remoteness.

It is often unknown who is on local committees of community groups, and these groups lack sufficient communication. Different channels of information aren't always utilised, eg. facebook, paper, word of mouth. A possible radical step would be for all directors of these groups to step down, then seeing which groups/committees were actually required. [John suggested this could be done as a useful thought experiment, thinking what would happen if..., rather than in actual fact.]

Community group committees aren't working. Directors can chop and change. Individuals can stay on committees for too long or too short a time. No surprise that some people leave them quickly (hard work, demoralising, volunteer fatigue). Committee members are often retired, other people are often too busy to get involved.

Sutherland Partnership – Community Councils aren't allowed to speak at their meetings. If Sutherland Partnership was working well and taking feedback it could be a useful group.

Centralised control of services means there is no understanding of local area.

Ward Forum could be reinstated (although it's a big ward).

There was 60% turnout in Assynt Community Council Elections which shows high level of involvement by the local population.

If young, local people will be less likely to be listened to or given credence.

Communities like Assynt don't count with central government or HC, eg. lack of consultation on toilet closures.

What could change to help that?

More localised council. Three wards were put together and now we have three councillors in one large ward with no divided responsibility for different parts of the ward, so all three councillors could be based in one single location within the ward.

Community Council could work much better.

Could abolish the Community Council system and replace it with something like the French or Scandinavian model of smaller units with taxation income and fiscal responsibility. Experience of those systems working very well.

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What works well in Assynt? – Bin collection, sense of community, personal energy.

HC is a faulty model. HC tell community what's needed/wanted – should be other way round, with HC sorting out issues or else giving the community the resources to do so.

As individuals we're entitled to the same things as other people get in less remote areas, eg. east coast, as we pay the same tax.

Arguably it costs more to provide services to remote rural communities, but rural communities arguably bring in more income, eg. through tourism.

Do the government *want* local communities in 'remote' areas?

HC don't think outside the box and, eg. send workers from Brora to pick up a mattress in Achmelvich.

Lack of trust. We are capable and could easily manage our own services.

Lack of being heard and being able to do things.

*John Sturrock then asked groups*

- **Would you like your local community or community of interest to have more control over some decisions? If yes, what sorts of issues would those decisions cover? What difference could that make? How would it work here in Assynt?**

*After groups considered this, a representative of each group, and then wider individuals, spoke.*

Most groups raised similar areas for which they thought localised decisions/control would be good. These included:

Integrated transport, a local tourism centre, roads and winter roads maintenance (gritting and snow-clearing), schools including school building maintenance, development and enterprise, renewable energy, and upgrading of power grid, planning (ie. decisions about planning consent for developments etc), environmental services(not HC at present?), possibly areas of healthcare, elderly care (residential care home in Assynt was taken out of community ownership by HC who then closed it, leaving no residential care in Assynt), social care, nursery care (childcare provision is needed), possibly community control of Lochinver Harbour (as a mechanism for bringing profit from harbour dues to the community rather than to the wider Highland Council area).

*John Sturrock asked which of these could be community-managed now.*

Community bus exists but doesn't offer regular bus routes. Connect Assynt received no support from HC in running a community ballot to get ideas for preferences/needs for community bus routes.

Roads, schools, various smaller things like litter, dog dirt, street-cleaning.

Questioned how the finances and structure could operate for increased community control of such things.

Possibly through third sector type community groups, but with finance (presumably through higher government channels eg. HC, HIE etc.)

There could be a second more localised tier of council, like pre-1996, with some things staying centralised and others being controlled at the more local level.

The head of HC is not elected by the general public.

No local control over council housing / social housing allocation.

Pre-1996, in rural areas around Edinburgh, there was a 'closed housing list' whereby locally-working or local-family-connected people had a higher chance of housing allocation than people on a wider housing list.

*John Sturrock then asked what 'local' means to the people present and their community.*

- **When thinking about decision-making, 'local' could mean a large town, a village, or a neighbourhood. What does 'local' mean to you and your community? What would be a practicable and workable "community" for this area?**

All agreed Assynt as the preferred definition, on basis of geographical, social, cultural, historic, and emotional reasons.

[Boyd Alexander left.]

*John Sturrock then asked*

- **What existing forms of local level decision-making could play a part in exercising new local powers? What new forms of local decision-making could work well? What kinds of changes might be needed for this to work in practice?**

If decentralising council powers, to whom? Community Council maybe, with fiscal / tax-raising powers.

Harbour could become a community trust.

A more empowered community council would need to welcome speaking/participation from local people.

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Local community groups, if better governed and teaming up, could achieve better results. eg. Assynt Foundation and other land owners could use their land value as borrowing capital for other groups.

Keep community council but call it Assynt Council. Give it more money and more things to manage, with office and staff. This could be a pilot scheme.

We would need to talk with HC (and wider government) to achieve this.

We should learn from other good examples of local-level management, including Europe, and England and Wales.

Alternatively to a more empowered community council a more localised second tier of the council, who listen to community councils, could work too.

*John Sturrock then asked about anything important that hadn't yet been covered.*

- **What other comments, ideas or questions do you have? What else do we need to talk about this evening?**

Police was one area not discussed.

Rulebooks (regulations) can prevent some good ideas from being progressed. We need new rulebooks.

Services lost, including bank, often in private sector, so outside of council control.

We should want our share of what is provided through HIE and others, to help set up microbusinesses etc. We need access to enterprise and skills development.

UHI mentioned in this context. Assynt needs more housing too though, besides more business enterprise / training / employment opportunities.

A skills register of the local community could be made.

There should be a local tourism strategy. We don't have a proper tourist information centre anymore. ADT can lead on such things.

NC500 – ruining roads, roads needing much more maintenance and repair.

*There then followed some setting of next steps / actions:*

*John Sturrock then asked*

- **What are the immediate first steps? By whom? By when?**

ADT can call a meeting between local community groups.

ADT can progress tourism matters including a forum meeting of tourist service providers.

Asking Scottish Government to consider the possibility of a pilot of Assynt Community Council being given increased powers.

Jane Young offered to arrange a meeting with ADT before the end of November.

Encouragement given for people to join ADT and to attend the ADT AGM on 28<sup>th</sup> November.

Have faith in what's already here in Assynt (and use local services and businesses to help keep them).

Encourage others to engage.

Regroup within 6 months to report on progress.

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