

Highland Voluntary Sector Manifesto

In Highland, it's time to Value the Voluntary Sector

In advance of the 2007 Scottish Parliament and Highland Council elections in May, this Manifesto outlines solutions to many of the problems facing the Highlands today. We look to the future with optimism, confident in the knowledge that a healthy, vibrant voluntary sector has the potential to benefit the wellbeing of everyone living in the Highlands. But we cannot achieve that goal unless our elected representatives have a true understanding of the value of the voluntary sector.

EVERYBODY KNOWS VOLUNTEERING is a good thing, but it is easy to under-estimate the value of the voluntary sector to our communities. There are 50,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland, involving 120,000 paid staff and more than a million volunteers. In Highland 45% of the population volunteer formally and 84% of the population volunteer informally. The sector has an economic value of £2.6 billion. The Highland voluntary sector is a major player, with over 4,700 organisations known to SCVO and many more operating at local level.

Highland voluntary organisations play a major and ever-increasing role in service provision, working in partnership with the public and private sectors. Despite the problems and costs of working in a sparsely populated rural area, Highland voluntary organisations deliver high quality health and caring services, community transport, employability, environmental initiatives, youth projects, arts and educational work, advice services, community halls – and so much more.

We ask you to enter into a Highland COMPACT which sets out shared principles, values and commitments and outlines an agreement that public and voluntary bodies have developed together to define and manage their relationships.

Voluntary organisations are a catalyst for community development and wellbeing. If they vanished overnight much of our community, social and cultural life would disappear with them.

Because they are so rooted in their communities, voluntary organisations also contribute a huge amount of time and effort to strategic initiatives, consultations, policy and planning.



People working in the voluntary sector are dedicated, hard working, and professional. But their work is hamstrung by constantly having to chase funding to sustain their organisations. Much of their funding is on a project by project basis but they also need core funding that will allow them to plan and develop effectively.

A stable, sustainable, realistic funding framework must be delivered for the voluntary sector with five year funding agreements.

The government's commitments to Full Cost Recovery, Best Value and longer term grant funding need to be ensured and must be taken seriously by local Councils.

We ask those who are seeking election to Highland Council or the Scottish Parliament to listen to the voices of the voluntary sector value their work and create a climate in which the voluntary sector can flourish.

Highland Voluntary Sector Forum provides a venue for discussion and a common voice for voluntary sector organisations throughout Highland. The Forum reaches out to more than 1000 organisations. Its manifesto is a unique collaboration of many different voices from across the voluntary sector in the Highlands.

Voluntary sector organisations can reach and engage individuals where other sectors cannot and can bring models of service delivery that are truly flexible and responsive to individuals' needs. The following is a snapshot of some Highland voluntary organisations and their essential services.

Equalities

The voluntary sector has, and will continue to have, a principal role in challenging and eradicating inequality and injustice and positively promoting the attributes of an equal, inclusive and participative society. The Highlands & Islands Equality Forum (HIEF) raises awareness of equality and diversity issues in all sectors of the Highland community. They have held some 75 roadshow events, several large scale conferences and innovative events such as the Euro truck visit in 2004 and the 'Diversity as a Resource' event in 2005. HIEF have developed over 40 training courses of awareness-raising activity to over 1500 people. This 'forum' gives HIEF a network with which to consult on major issues, so delivering the 'Highland Voice' on national issues.

Environment

A sustainable future is part of the vision of the voluntary sector in the Highlands. However making the vision a reality is the great challenge for all sectors. Sustainable development must be built into all decision making by public bodies on the Highlands. The voluntary sector in the Highlands is extremely well placed to undertake environmental projects and raise public awareness of issues of sustainable development. There are many voluntary sector projects helping to deliver on a whole range of issues from biodiversity, to waste reduction and renewable energy. For example, RoWAN's (Rosshire Waste Action Network) Waste Free Households project has significantly cut waste produced by households by providing education and advice. Many village halls, too, are at the forefront of demonstrating renewable energy generation and bringing it into communities throughout the Highlands.

Volunteering

Through its specialised partnerships, resources and expertise the voluntary sector can offer advice, support and assistance. Volunteering shouldn't be the last option you think of but the first. The uniqueness and the flexibility of the service offered by volunteering places us in a position where sometimes we can achieve the unachievable. A 16 year old boy who was recently diagnosed with a degenerative disease was directed to Volunteering Highland by one of its many referral partners. Within a very short time he was placed with a sports club and is currently their designated Media and Development Officer for wheelchair sport. This enabled him to achieve a goal which he believed was no longer an option for him.

Rural Transport

There are almost 40 community transport groups in Highland providing vital services to some of Highland's most marginalised groups. Community Transport Schemes

are voluntary sector organisations providing three levels of service across Highlands. First, they provide access to sporting and culture experiences thus meeting the access need. Second, they meet specific transport needs such as bringing children to special needs playgroups, which is highly valued by children and their carers. Third, they bring people to basic day care services such doctors and optician appointments, shopping, and bathing and hair appointments. Often it can be to the local lunch club or the bingo which is the only trip out in a week for many. It is right that these communities provide the solutions to rural service delivery and access but policy and lack of funding can often be detrimental to this infrastructure rather than support it.

Mental Health Services

Birchwood Highland, a Mental Health Service Provider in Highland offers 24-hour support, 7 days a week, to 90 people with major mental illnesses – helping them with inclusion, independence and recovery. Recovery is a concept of increasing importance in mental health in Scotland and internationally and is something Birchwood Highland is working hard to lead on in Highland. We work practically and quietly alongside colleagues in Health, Housing and Social Services. Often it is our workers who see service users the most and the Agencies rely on us. Like other voluntary organisations we are professional in our approach. Supporting People made a huge difference to peoples' lives, increasing self-respect and giving choice. However the reductions in Supporting People funding to voluntary organisations has not demonstrated primary respect for the sector. We fear that the E-procurement imperatives may change the face of service provision. Small to medium local Highland service providers may disappear and be replaced by large national providers.

Children's Services

SNAP (Special Needs Action Project), originally set up by parents who wanted to improve services for their children, has just celebrated 10 years of providing services for young people in the Inverness area who have special needs. Currently 70 youngsters, aged between 5 and 18, access SNAP and 15 young people aged 18–25 are enjoying a newly developed club. SNAP offers an opportunity for youngsters to socialise with their peers outwith school and access mainstream activities. For parents and families, SNAP offers a form of respite in the knowledge that their child is in a safe and happy environment. Like all voluntary organisations SNAP faces the continuous challenges of raising funds to enable it to function and provide much needed services – however it would not be where it is today without the support of parents, valued staff, and volunteers, Highland Council, local donors and other Grant Giving Trusts.

Young Carers

Amy stopped going to school when she was 13 years old. She was self harming and wasn't coping with helping to look after her mum. She was beginning to get into trouble and starting to use drugs. By joining in young carers' outings organised by Highland Community Care Forum she began to develop trust; people began to take an interest in her life as a carer. Amy is once again going to school. She is one of nearly 5000 young carers in Highland. Because of HCCF's work more and more young carers are being identified and supported by schools, health and social services and other voluntary groups. Amy now helps to organise and raise funds for more events.

HUG

10% of young people experience mental health problems and the Highlands has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe. The Highland Users Group (HUG) is one of Highland Community Care Forum's programmes of work. HUG's groundbreaking Young People's Educational Programme ('Tackling Taboos: Broadening Minds') has received national recognition for its work in raising awareness of the difficulties faced by young people experiencing mental health issues and in challenging young people's stigmatising attitudes towards people with mental health problems. Through this work HUG promotes the diversity, visibility and credibility of people with mental health problems. Young people gain increased knowledge of mental illness and know where to go for help and support. Young people experiencing mental health problems feel more confident in receiving support and understanding from their peers. The major challenge we face is long-term, sustainable funding.

Counselling Services

CRUSE Bereavement Care Scotland – East Sutherland Branch was launched in May 1998 after considerable work undertaken by the local CVS to help people understand their grief and cope with their loss. All our counsellors are volunteers, but must undertake the foundation course in bereavement counselling provided through CBCS. This is costly and time-consuming. As well as working on a one-to-one basis with clients, ongoing training, support and supervision are an integral part of being a counsellor. CRUSE supervisors must be trained through the national body as well. At present our nearest supervisor lives in Nairn which means our counsellors must travel to Nairn once a month for supervision. Referrals of clients come mostly from NHS staff and Social Workers. The service receives no funding and relies on local fundraising to deliver a much-needed service.

Elderly People

There are numerous projects in the Highlands set up and run for the benefit of older people by older people themselves. The benefits of these projects are immeasurable. They range from front line services such as lunch clubs to the many activities such as Movin About exercise classes for frail older people and computer classes where older people are the tutors for older beginners. These all contribute to the wellbeing of older people – both the participants and the volunteers involved. The value of the volunteer contribution from older people in keeping projects going within communities is underestimated. Despite the fact that there is evidence of the success of these 'preventative' programmes they are under-resourced and suffer from short term, insecure funding. Voluntary effort requires support.

Employment

The voluntary sector plays a vital role in meeting the needs of the labour market, helping to reduce the migration of young people and key labour market skills. Voluntary organisations tackle social exclusion and help marginalised individuals enter or return to the labour market on a daily basis either as part of their core service delivery or as a result of their core service delivery. There are over 45 organisations involved in the direct delivery of employability provision for Highland's most disadvantaged individuals, and over 4000 organisations that have a role in creating a more sustainable labour force and labour market.

Drugs and Alcohol

Drugs and alcohol misuse is often a primary barrier for people entering the labour market. The voluntary sector in Highland is providing critical drugs policy and information by working in partnership with others to co-ordinate effective responses to drug use. There are a multitude of Voluntary Organisations working in this field who aim to support and represent, at both local and national levels, a wide range of interests, promoting collaborative, evidence-based responses to drug and alcohol use.

Culture

The Highlands and Islands rely very heavily on the voluntary sector for the delivery of key cultural services: some 70 arts festivals; around 80 local promoters, 30 Feisean, over 200 historical and heritage societies, etc. Even in the rare cases where paid staff are employed, these enterprises are managed by voluntary boards. A 2001 study estimated that, in the arts sector in the Highlands and Islands alone, 615 voluntary organisations had a membership of 15,980, donating 27,300 volunteer days per annum promoting and hosting arts activities, the equivalent of 119 full time employees, or an estimated value of £1,023,750.

The public sector and the voluntary sector both have great strengths. We can combine these strengths and increase our mutual understanding through working together in true partnership for the benefit and wellbeing of everyone living in the Highlands.

The Highland Voluntary Sector Manifesto calls on national and local government to take action in response to our proposals:

▶ Enter into a Compact

- Enable the voluntary sector to flourish by building a better relationship between public and voluntary bodies.
- Work in partnership with the voluntary sector to develop a more mutually beneficial relationship.
- Work in partnership with the voluntary sector to improve co-operation, understanding and respect.
- Agree a set of shared principles and working practices.
- Help to develop and agree a Highland COMPACT between the voluntary sector and public sector bodies.
- Commit to promoting the compact and its principles within the Council.

▶ Fund us for Success

- A stable, sustainable, realistic funding framework must be delivered for the voluntary sector with five year funding agreements.
- Ensure public sector 'belt tightening' does not disproportionately affect voluntary organisations.
- Do not prioritise newness over effectiveness when allocating public sector funding.
- Implement the Strategic Funding Review within six months of the election.
- Allocate funds to support Full Cost Recovery.
- Ensure consistent and fair application of the 'Best Value' principle for public sector contracts.

▶ Cut Red Tape

- Enable voluntary action and the growth of voluntary organisations by reducing existing constraints.
- Review and reduce the burdens placed on voluntary organisations by regulatory and monitoring bodies through real joint working and a 'charter of best practice'.
- Consider the potential application of the 'Better Regulation Task Force' recommendations in Scotland.
- Routinely assess proposed changes for their regulatory impact on the voluntary sector.
- Work towards reducing old or unnecessary regulation.

▶ Empower Communities

- Voluntary organisations are the means by which communities speak and act in their own interests.
- Enable local and national voluntary bodies to engage with the community planning process.
- Give Highland's most disadvantaged communities the right to opt for 'empowered' status with spending power over local budgets and enable community ownership of assets.
- Deliver the next phase of development of the National Volunteering Strategy.

▶ Public Service Delivery

- Truly open the door and give the voluntary sector the chance to deliver in all areas of service delivery.
- Champion the voluntary sector's role in public service delivery.
- Ensure that Full Cost Recovery becomes a standard of funding good practice.
- Enable true involvement of the voluntary sector in the move to commissioned services.

▶ Support Voluntary Sector Trustees

- Trustees and the infrastructure that supports them are the bedrock of voluntary action in Highland.
- Work with the voluntary sector to encourage more people from all backgrounds to become trustees.
- Fund and support the development of voluntary sector infrastructure to give support to trustees.
- Support the development and use of National Occupational Standards for Trustees and Management Committees.

▶ The Rural Dimension

- The voluntary sector plays a key role in the development of thriving and sustainable rural communities.
- Recognise the key role played by the voluntary sector in delivering the services uniquely required in rural Highland.
- Ensure that all rural strategy and funding adequately supports communities 'beyond the farm gate'.
- Put sustainable and thriving rural communities at the centre of rural policy making and involve them in decisions on priorities and spending.

For more information about Highland Voluntary Sector Forum or more copies of the Manifesto, please contact Alison Cairns on 01463 251721 or alison.cairns@scvo.org.uk