



Identity and Rural Equality

Seminars 2009/2010

Report

List of Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. Executive Summary	3
3. Exploring the complexity and subjectivity of the concept of identity, and the implications of this for our communities' views of diversity.	7
3.1 Considering the links between identity, stereotyping and discrimination	8
4. What is already working well in our rural community	9
5. Vision of an inclusive rural community	10
6. How to achieve an inclusive rural community	10
7. Sustaining an inclusive rural community	11
7.1 We need to grow networks and build relationships	11
7.2 We need to support national and local agencies	11
7.3 We need to engage with key influencers	12
7.4 We need to help ourselves	12
8. HIEF's recommendations	12
8.1 Listen to people's stories	12
8.2 Build confidence of local equality agents	13
8.3 View equality through the new lens of identity	13
8.4 Support networked approach	13
8.5 Empower and support community action	14
8.6 Give a voice to excluded groups and individuals	14

1. Introduction

Over the past few years the Highlands & Islands Equality Forum (HIEF), together with those with knowledge and experience of equalities in rural Scotland, have been on a 'journey' to grow our understanding of rural equalities. This 'journey' has taken us from a large conference in February 2008 in which we identified the barriers faced by under-represented groups and marginalised individuals in rural areas; through a series of round table discussions in the spring of 2008 in which we discovered an appetite for a Scotland-wide network to take forward our understanding of rural equalities; as well as the creation of this Scottish Rural Equality Network (SREN) and further country-wide discussions in 2008/9 on how we might grow the network; and most recently, seminars on Identity and Rural Equality in which we looked at how the processes of identity effect how we include or exclude people from our communities.

Seminars on Identity and Rural Equalities ...¹

These seminars aimed to encourage Equality & Diversity (E&D) stakeholders to critically examine the processes of building multi-layered rural identities, and through a better understanding of the dynamics of social groupings be able to consider new approaches to local community inclusion. It was hoped that learning from the seminars would empower local groups to build on what is already working within the local community and encourage them to share ideas on how to cascade information on identity and rural equality in more sustained pieces of work locally.

2. Executive Summary

Our action based research into equalities in rural Scotland has delivered powerful evidence of distinctively rural challenges to social exclusion and the need for empowered, community-based solutions supported by national networking and information sharing across the country between those working with common objectives and daily challenges.

Each delegate brought to the seminars an artefact that they considered summed up their rural identity and photographs of these have been incorporated into a lasting visual artefact which captures the diverse nature of rural identity across Scotland, a map of Scotland created in felt work by Moray artist Alison Johnston. This artwork was deliberately made light, durable and portable in the hope that community and equality groups across the country will display it at local events.

¹ This report refers to the Seminars on Identity and Rural Equality: Separate Reports for earlier SREN development are available at <http://www.hief.org.uk/id42.html>

2.1 Our flexible and varied programme included:

- Story-telling: We used personal testimonies as a powerful way of reminding ourselves of the human aspect of social exclusion and how unfair treatment affects real people's lives
- Use of artefacts and self-reflection on our own personal identity: We made the agenda personal by thinking of how our own position, feelings, attitudes, and responsibilities influence our interaction with others in the community. Reflection on what makes us 'us' (included in our group/community etc) and 'them' (those who are 'other' or 'different' to our group) is a useful way of understanding the multi-layered aspects of identity and we can use this knowledge as a new lens through which to examine who is included or excluded in our rural communities.
- Thought-provoking conversations: We used the World Café format of holding lots of small group discussions with a wide range of different people to highlight recurring themes and new areas of interest
- Positive approaches to the way forward: We used Appreciative Inquiry methodology to focus on how we can build on what we already do well whilst discarding anything that hasn't been helpful to date
- A developing agenda that reacted to, and grew from, what worked well and what didn't work well with each seminar

2.2 Our key findings from the seminars on Identity and Rural Equality:

2.2.1 Local identity is collectively shaped and require local approaches to meeting community needs:

- Rural identity is seen as different and 'other' to urban identity:
 - It holds strong values of neighbourliness and looking out for others; doing things for ourselves; community spirit; resilience and flexibility; personal interest in people and concern for their needs
 - There are close links between rural identity, the natural environment and community culture
 - We feel a bond or 'sense of belonging' with those who share a community identified by a common geography, history, dialect, religion and industry
- Rural identity is very localised and often strongly influenced by the nucleus of the old County Towns
- Communities benchmark themselves against neighbouring communities which they consider as 'other' to themselves.
- An outsider's concept of a community may differ from those inside that community
- There are different interpretations of what is rural or remote rural. In central Scotland, towns that were 'near the countryside' were deemed to be rural - a different concept from the rurality of the Highlands and Lowlands.

Therefore, there are great challenges in delivering uniform services over larger areas fairly and evenly whilst taking account of diverse localised needs

2.2.2 We understand what makes us feel included in the community:

- Friendliness and a welcoming attitude
- Being sought out for our skills, company, involvement in the community
- Being known or recognised in the street
- People brought together to gain better understanding of diversity
- Being treated with dignity and respect

2.2.3 Useful support measures:

- Agencies who work to bring people together
- Legislation which supports fair treatment for all
- Different sectors working together for the common good in joined-up approaches to issues
- Effective communications which take account of the challenges of rurality
- Good community support
- Funding

2.2.4 We want our communities to:

- Comprise happy people who want to stay rather than move on; who celebrate as a community and welcome all
- Value diversity and respect 'difference'; encourage integration without assimilation; afford dignity and respect
- Be informed so that everyone knows where to get help and support
- Communicate well at all levels and in all directions and provide social hubs
- Be built on citizenship values of fairness and rights; value everyone for who they are; deliver equal opportunities
- Be empowered; allow opportunities for personal responsibility and for a diversity of individuals and groups to have a 'voice' which is listened to, valued and influential
- Be open to new ideas and accepting of change
- Adopt a 'can do' attitude which encourages community involvement
- Provide neighbourly support that is built on genuine care and compassion for each other
- Be safe and environmentally friendly

A socially-inclusive community should have no need for an 'Equality Agenda', equality should be a consequence of people working together to make life good for all.

2.2.5 To create a positive way forward for rural communities, we need to:

- Foster a sense of belonging that is built around respect for diversity
 - Care for people at an individual level
 - Increase awareness of key issues of social inclusion and exclusion
 - Provide transparent communication and welcome packs
- Understand and accommodate the needs of the full range of diversity in the population
 - Bring people together
 - Involve the full diversity of residents in local politics
 - Celebrate the positive value of diversity
- Benchmark ourselves against others
- Go beyond legislation from compliance to confidence
- Encourage the media to portray more positive images of diversity
- Empower grass-roots up approach, providing skills development as necessary
 - Engage with and challenge key decision makers
 - Take radical action that encourages ownership, responsibility and a range of different ways in which people can become involved in the shaping of their community

2.2.6 The hidden 'them' excluded from rural communities

At each seminar, only one group of people was labelled as 'other' to 'us'; who we define as 'them'. These were newcomers to a community, referred to variously in different regional areas as 'incomers', 'sooth moothers', 'ferry loupers', 'interloupers' etc.

2.2.7 Notable conclusions

There seems to be a primal sense of territorial rights that belong to the 'us' in the community who have family links or are said to be 'born and buried' locally.

We found it remarkable and concerning that delegates, reflecting on our sense of belonging to a rural community and the concept of social inclusion, made next-to-no mention of the lack of voice for other diversity groups such as people with disabilities, gay, old, young etc. This suggests to us an urgent need to raise awareness of our misconceptions of who is included in our sense of 'us', and the hidden aspect of social exclusion.

Our learning to date would seem to reinforce the idea that inclusion at local community level is the foundation stone of enabling minority groups and individuals to live safe and happy lives in Scotland.

2.3 Next Steps: SREN National Conference 16th June 2010

'Rural Diversity Uncorked... Putting the Fizz back into Community Action' is a national conference with a difference. This 'virtual' conference, designed with the challenges of rurality in mind, will network together meeting groups across different parts of rural Scotland as they interact with a common agenda. Delegates will be encouraged to support each other through the network by exchanging knowledge, information and handy tips as they refresh existing knowledge, hear of new ideas from key speakers and case study examples of successful community action projects. The ultimate aim of the conference is to re-invigorate local debates on social inclusion and leave a lasting legacy of empowered local capacity that will facilitate the next steps in the bid to make things better for those who currently face discrimination and exclusion.

More details on Identity and Rural Equalities

3. Exploring the concept of identity and implications of this for our communities' views of diversity.

A pre-event preparation exercise gave local equality stakeholders the opportunity to explore, through the experience of self-reflection, the multi-layered nature of personal identity and in particular, the sense of belonging to a rural area that they experience as part of their own personal identity. Each delegate brought to the seminars an artefact that they considered summed up their rural identity and photographs of these have been incorporated into a lasting visual artefact – a map of Scotland in feltwork created by Moray artist Alison Johnston which captures the diverse nature of rural identity across Scotland.

The artefacts were incredibly varied and no icebreaker was needed to get people interacting as everyone was eager to both talk about their own choice of item and to learn about others. In fact, the seminars seemed to satisfy a human need to take time out to talk about equality issues in a personal way. Initial discussions that explored local collective rural identities evidenced that there is no one rural identity. What was perhaps more surprising was that neither were regional identities a strong feature except in the islands where the physical geographic boundaries seemed to define the extent of community identity. In fact, the strongest influences on local identity appear to be the legacy of the old county towns.

Our learning from this is that, what may appear to someone from outside the area to be an obvious regional identity may differ from that viewed by those inside the area. In particular, the notion of 'rurality' is itself subjective and may not align with the government's definitions of what is rural or remote rural. In central Scotland, towns that were 'near the countryside' were deemed to be rural - a different

concept from the rurality of the Highlands and Lowlands. This throws up challenges to agencies who may need to appreciate the various internal views better in order to deliver support and services effectively. Even at a regional level, agencies reported the challenges of delivering a 'fair', 'uniform' experience to all their residents over many diverse local communities with different characters, needs and expectations.

Rural identity, as with all other aspects of personal and community identity, is shaped by the social values, thoughts, feelings and behaviour which form part of our day-to-day lives, and as such, is constantly changing. Outputs from our seminar discussions reinforce previous knowledge that we feel a bond or empathy with those who share the same history, language, religion, and (predominantly) geography as ourselves, with those who have been shaped by the same forces as we have. Connections with the natural environment and historical roots strongly influence a rural community's 'sense of belonging'. Culture and industry tied up with these feature strongly in traditional rites and customs, which are then acted out collectively to reinforce a local identity that allows us to feel safe and grounded. We need, therefore, to understand that change can be a threat to this 'rooting' of identity and that embracing diversity, may be perceived by some rural communities as a threat to identity in a more immediate way than in urban life and work.

3.1 Considering the links between identity, stereotyping and discrimination

One strongly identified section in the community comprises 'those who are born and buried' there. This seems to create a division between those who are deemed to have an inherent right to belong and those 'incomers' (people who are not born in an area but have moved there to live and work) who have to justify that right. We found this view evidenced from both sides of the equation as 'incomers' also identify themselves as such and may even place themselves within a hierarchy that gives more rights to those who have lived longer in the community. It was very marked that almost all the discussions focussed on 'incomers' as though they are the only group seeking inclusion in a rural community. Understanding of the exclusion faced by disabled, gay, transgender, old and young people etc wasn't voiced (even when prompted), something which is of concern and needs addressing as we further develop awareness of the links between identity and social inclusion and exclusion.

From our contact with approximately 90 people across the country, many of whom defined themselves as 'incomers', it does appear that this group is very 'visible' and 'other' to the rural identity. We did not have the time to explore whether there is more acceptance of people coming from other rural areas rather than from the cities but interestingly, comments were made about the acceptance within the fishing community where seamen travel to other areas to work. It was also remarked that it is easier from a person from the countryside to be accepted into a city than for a city dweller to be accepted in a rural community.

The repercussions of this 'visibility' and sense of 'other' is crucial when a community faces times of hardship such as we have seen in the recent recession. When houses, jobs, resources etc are limited, we collectively redefine who our community can sustain; who is 'in or out'; who is 'them or us'; and 'incomers' who may have been

previously welcomed into a community may subsequently be seen as a threat. Even liberal-minded citizens can revert to a basic instinct that claims territorial birth rights and such (often subconscious) thought processes can lead to stereotyping of both 'native' and 'incomer' groups which in turn can give rise to tensions and discriminatory practice in our communities. Our sense of community identity is key to how we define what we value as 'fair' and how we include or exclude individuals and groups. This is not a linear process: Times of hardship and reassessment come in cycles and discrimination does not have to have been in evidence for generations for it to lead to significant inequalities.

Crucial to all of this is the perception of who has or who may gain power. If we accept that power lies with the (majority) mainstream population and if mainstream society is taken to be the longstanding residents, then (minority) incomers who are moving into positions of influence in local authorities, taking active roles in local community politics and activities etc, may be seen as a threat to the traditional way of life in a community. By understanding all of these influential factors and where we identify or don't identify with certain groups, we can perhaps begin to explore how we can reassure those who may give vent to their fear through prejudice and discrimination. Hopefully, we can be instrumental in conveying a more positive appreciation of the benefits of new contributors to community life, and our message should be that diversity strengthens rather than threatens rural communities. Accepting our difference one to another supports rural identity and does not lead to a bland, cosmopolitan community.

4. What is already working well in our rural community

Seminar delegates were asked to reflect on what makes us feel that we belong to, and are included in, our rural community. There was an overwhelming consensus across the various parts of the country that we feel included when we experience a warm welcome. Again there was a strong sense that that inclusion is seen to be something that newcomers to an area experience rather than something that other, hidden minority groups in society are denied. That said, there is something about the fact that those who identify themselves as 'outside' of the community can experience a sense of belonging when they are given a warm, sincere, personal invitation to meet and talk with others, are respected as an individual, and encouraged to participate (or 'allowed' not to participate) in community life. Key to this were rural community aspects of 'neighbourliness', acceptance as an individual human being and people wanting to know about you on a personal level. This comes across as a very important identifier of rural life and perhaps even as what makes rural communities 'other' to stereotypical views of urban communities.

We know from our previous research that this 'knowing' about people can be both a good and a difficult thing as some can feel suffocated by what is seen as an invasion of privacy, especially if you are keen to keep your sexual orientation or mental health issue etc confidential and out of public scrutiny. Interest in people as individuals can sometimes be viewed as 'nosiness' or even judgemental rather than neighbourly, and it is why some of the cited barriers to inclusion in rural areas include the 'small town mindset' and the village 'rumour mill'.

Delegates identified factors which support provision of a good experience of inclusion such as effective equality legislation, effective communication and transparency of decision making, flexibility of practice and opportunities for personal choice. Most important were activities and opportunities that bring people together to learn about each other and break down barriers.

5. Vision of an inclusive rural community

Thinking of what makes people feel included, delegates went on to visualise aspirations for their rural community. We would seem to hold the shared value of a community that is safe and happy and in which people want to stay put rather than move away; one that has a collective sense of caring, resilience and self-reliant responsibility. For full social inclusion of a wide diversity of civic society, communities must understand and satisfy the individual needs of all of its residents to have choices; to be respected, invited and encouraged to 'belong'. Each community needs a social hub as its lifeline; a village hall, community centre or shop in which residents can meet together collectively and in small interest groups. Our image of a good community is one that functions holistically from the grass roots up and has no need of the jargon or artificial separation of the 'equality agenda'.

6. How to achieve an inclusive rural community

By reflecting on the kind of community we aspire to and our experience of what makes us feel included, delegates were able to identify how we might work toward our collective goal of an inclusive rural community. At this point, old habits of considering barriers and solutions resisted many of our attempts to anchor thinking to identity. Conversations veered very much towards service provision and how the local community can interact with the Community Planning process.

However, strong themes also emerged around the importance of bringing people together; residents, special interest groups, decision makers together with residents and groups etc. The need for effective, open communication and transparency were voiced in all venues and we should take note how key this is to empowering a community and fostering communal trust.

It is thought important that people within communities collectively celebrate the successes of different groups within that community. Diversity and the value of individuality in a community which identifies itself in a 'people centric' way was also seen as something positive to be celebrated locally and not just in national and regional events.

Because communities identify at local level, there is a need to benchmark themselves against other local communities to reinforce their own sense of themselves as being 'other' to nearby communities. This separation of ourselves from others plays a crucial role in how we assess fair treatment. We want to both ensure that regional and national support is being applied fairly and also because of the need to take pride

in what we can achieve at community level. It was felt amongst our delegates that more should be done to reach out, link with, and learn from other communities.

7. Sustaining an inclusive rural community

7.1 We need to grow networks and build relationships:

Local Equality & Diversity Forums play an important role in bringing together marginalised and support groups to create a 'voice' that allows the needs of under-represented groups and individuals to be heard and addressed sensitively by service providers and the wider community. This 'voice' needs to be channelled through Community Planning and Single Outcome Agreements to ensure that the community is empowered as a whole from the grassroots up. Delegates' reports of feeling disheartened in the face of limited capacity and resources gives weight to the need for information sharing and support through the growth of local, regional and national networks.

As we approach 2011 and the move to a more 'localised' agenda with the re-organisation of the Councils of Voluntary Service (CVS) and Volunteer Centres (VC) into local Single Interfaces, individual CVS/VCS and other third sector groups are finding it very difficult to take on board yet more new ideas at the same time as having to deal with difficult organisational challenges. Cuts in public sector funding will put pressure on everyone to sustain development of social inclusion as a vital part of the solution to community prosperity in hard times rather than being viewed as an expensive 'optional extra', and there will be even more pressure on the voluntary sector to ensure that minority groups are not left without adequate support when public services are threatened.

The growth of the Scottish Rural Equality Network offers an alternative to 'going it alone'. Those of us who face the daily challenges of trying to improve social inclusion in rural areas have an opportunity to work together to find innovative solutions, collectively formed through sharing ideas, information and resources. The only certainty about funding at the time of writing is that there will be less about, and we will need to call on what seminar delegates themselves said was the characteristic resilience of rural identity and community approaches, to find exciting new ways of strengthening communities by valuing and harnessing the positives of diversity.

7.2 We need to support national and local agencies:

Legislation is recognised as an important support tool for local equalities work and there were calls to acknowledge the rural dimension in this. For example, it was felt an urban-centric approach to audits of public sector duties leads to a focus on demographic numbers rather than the needs of a widespread community and individuals in more remote locations. The public sector, however, faces immense challenges in complying with legislation: Collecting data, benchmarking progress, delivering a uniform experience over a diverse geographical spread, balancing the different needs of urban and rural communities, and measuring change to people's lives etc are some of the more obvious. It is also difficult to engage with isolated

groups and individuals in the community as there seems to be a 'glass wall' which impedes connecting with people other than 'the usual suspects'.

7.3 We need to engage with key influencers:

A prevailing mood of scepticism about the political landscape gives rise to feelings that there is little incentive for our elected representatives to look to the needs of minorities when social and cultural change is slow to progress and cannot be achieved within their short term of office. The comment was made that 'there are no votes in minorities'. Engaging with, and being able to effectively 'bring onside', key influencers who hold the power to effect real change in the community decision makers was identified as a challenge in most areas (more so in particular areas) and the frustration and discouragement experienced by delegates was evident during the seminars. This would seem to be an important topic on which SREN members can share learning to help those who are finding this a major barrier to their work. Calls from equality leads in the public sector repeatedly ask for more enforcement of the law to force their senior officials to give more serious commitment to engaging with and addressing the key issues.

7.4 We need to help ourselves:

Delegates were keen to emphasise that responsibility for the wellbeing of a community lies with everyone, not just public agencies. With limited capacity in both the voluntary and public sectors and an evolving legislative framework, delegates were keen to use an increased understanding of our multi-layered identities and hold tight to a people-centred approach which re-assesses how we see others and how others see us. Time and again, delegates emphasised the self-reliant, caring nature of rural communities and understood the importance of celebrating diversity; celebrating our sense of belonging - our sense of being 'us', not 'them and us'.

8. HIEF's recommendations

8.1 Listen to people's stories

Seminar delegates found consideration of identity as thought-provoking and a new and interesting way to view equalities. They valued being able to talk about themselves and their personal and local community issues with 'like-minded' people who could appreciate their messages. 'Talking Shops' are valuable as 'stories' need to be told and heard before we can move on to actions. Delegates were able to clearly identify rurality as something different to an urban identity, and when considering their region in relation to others in the country, began to appreciate differences at this level. However, they most strongly identified at a more local community (old County Town) level.

8.2 Build confidence of local equality agents

However, the seminars did not fully achieve the objective of enabling delegates to translate the feeling of what makes us 'us' into actions that ensure that everyone is included in the local community society. In fact, within the limited cross-section of community representation provided by seminar delegates (essentially professional people whose daily work involves equalities and diversity), there was a definite unease about who has 'legitimacy' to say who is 'us' given that many of those working in the public sector identified themselves as 'incomers' to the area and as such, felt 'other' to the community identity! It would seem, therefore, that there is still a stepped approach piece of work to be done to ensure that the 'movers and shakers' in the equality agenda have the confidence to progress things in the wider community. Local challenges require local community solutions.

8.3 View equality through the new lens of identity

Delegates told us that the subject of identity and rural equality offers a welcome and exciting new lens through which to re-energise an agenda which suffers at times from a negative, stereotypical, 'PC-gone-mad' image, but we also appreciate that new ideas need to be reiterated and reflected upon to reveal their potential for effecting change. As it was, delegates regularly reverted to thinking in terms of barriers and solutions and some discussions struggled with a lack of energy to think of fresh ideas where previous activity had been thwarted by the lack of understanding and commitment of those with the power in the community. The lack of engagement of elected members and the time it takes to go through 'due process' in the public sector, as well as the unremitting difficulties of funding and resource in the voluntary sector can make challenges seem insurmountable.

8.4 Support networked approach

Current and future funding challenges necessitate a practical approach to what can be achieved with limited resources. Going on the premise that collectively we have the knowledge required to improve social inclusion in rural communities and that amazing new ideas come when we all brainstorm together, joint working and sharing learning will help create innovative solutions and will maximise the capacity to address issues without everyone repeating the same painful, costly and time-consuming learning curves. This suggests to us that the priorities for national agencies such as the Scottish Government, the EHRC and the SHRC are to support measures which bring people together, understand and take note of the particular challenges within strongly-identified rural communities and find ways to ensure decision makers are brought 'on message'. This will include enforcement of equality legislation to ensure that senior personnel listen to their equality leads, as well as measures which support attitudinal change that is required to overturn existing inequable practice.

8.5 Empower and support community action

Community members have a key role to play in ensuring that socially diverse, vibrant, rural communities are built to reflect the needs, values and vision of a wide cross-section of the population. Those working in the public, private and voluntary sectors are equal partners as residents in their communities, and all moves towards improving equality should demonstrate good principles of respecting every individual contribution to the common good.

Individually and collectively, we should make it clear to our elected representatives that votes can be earned by delivering on a more holistic approach to community life. Successful community action projects demonstrate the power of the grassroots' voice and we can learn from those who work outside of the artificial labelling of an 'equalities agenda': Good communities are created by people driven by a need to make life better for their residents, not to fulfil some legal policy. Agents, including HIEF, should appreciate that support is not something that is 'done to or for' local communities but should be more of an offer to facilitate and provide help as required.

8.6 Give a voice to excluded groups and individuals

Care must be taken to ensure that an empowered community voice fully represents the diversity of its members, and given that seminar delegates focussed on 'incomers' as the main excluded group, there is a piece of awareness-raising to be done to highlight the isolation of other groups and individuals. There needs to be both capacity building and empowering of excluded groups within the community to help them find their 'voice', whilst also raising awareness amongst the mainstream community about who is not being consulted, listened to, or included. Bringing different groups together responds to the need for people to get to know each other and take things forward on their own merits, and it encourages collective action.

Report ends