

Autumn/Winter 2007

Newsletter



of the Sutherland Partnership

INSIDE THIS EDITION

These have been interesting times in the life of Sutherland Partnership, with new core funding having now been identified. Read about SP's exciting future in the Manager's editorial - page 2.

Also, Sutherland Partnership Transport Group has been active in promoting Sutherland's transport interests. Read about this on page 2.

Read about the exciting new Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) and how SP hopes to be involved. See page 3.

SP has a new chairman – Councillor Robbie Rowantree. Read about him and his new Highland Councillor colleagues on page 3.

... .. and what a six months these have been for our Geopark. Read about its achievements, and its plans, on page 4.

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<i>(a particularly busy time for our Geopark!)</i>	



NEW ERA FOR TOURISM FORUM

Joan Campbell, well-known bed-and-breakfast entrepreneur and "Northern Times" tourism columnist, has stood down after years of loyal and distinguished service to Sutherland Partnership, as a former director and as chair of its Tourism Forum. Joan is retiring from her business at The Sheiling, Melvich, and is cutting back on her tourism work across Scotland. In her final Forum meeting in Lairg recently, Joan was presented with a fine crystal bowl by her successor as SPTF chair, Durrant Macleod.

Joan commented, "It has been a privilege to play my part as chair of Sutherland Partnership Tourism Forum. SPTF does excellent work in Sutherland in bringing together members of the tourism trade and representatives of the various agencies involved in promoting tourism. I look forward to seeing SPTF continue to add value to tourism in Sutherland."

Durrant, company secretary of North Highland Tourism, commented, "Joan will be a hard act to follow, but I know how important SPTF work is, and I am determined that it will continue to be highly effective."

SPTF is currently looking for new members from the tourism trade in Sutherland. IF YOU WANT TO JOIN SPTF, CONTACT THE MANAGER – SEE BELOW!

Sutherland Partnership Contacts ...

Manager	William Sutherland	01549 402646
New Futures Sutherland / Working For Families	Mary Macleod	01863 766183
NW Highlands Geopark	Issie MacPhail	01571 844000



From the Manager

In our last edition I reported the imminent ending of the current the Sutherland Partnership funding round in March 2008. I made it clear that, in the current difficult financial climate, and against a background of huge changes in the Scottish community planning landscape, there were no guarantees as to the future of Sutherland Partnership beyond that date.

Well, now I have good news to report: future funding has been found, to extend our activities for at least another year until March 2009. A one-year funding round has been decided on, because the time is not right for a longer funding period. With the new Scottish Government still to give high-level direction on community planning, and with the new Ward Forums just settling in, we need to assess the requirement for future action by SP – and work to chart the way ahead will take place over this interim year 2008-9.

A key part of this will be, I believe, to forge new and stronger links with Highland's community planning partnership, the Highland Wellbeing Alliance, and to ensure that our future strategy matches theirs.

I am most grateful for the strong support of SP partner organisations. I believe it is a mark of their faith in SP that our new interim funding has been found so quickly, and that money for it has come from our funding partners. For the interim year, NHS Highland has joined Highland Council, HIE Caithness & Sutherland and Scottish Natural Heritage in providing Sutherland Partnership funding. Thank you to all these.

Sutherland's Postbuses and Motor Fuel Network

The Sutherland Partnership Transport Group (SPTG), set up a year ago under the chairmanship of Councillor Ian Ross OBE, has maintained its fast start. Having produced a "Transport Vision for Sutherland" (TVS) document last May - which you can find on the internet at:

<http://www.sutherlandpartnership.org.uk/Transport-g.asp>

Now, we have moved quickly to tackle two key transport issues for Sutherland –preserving postbuses, and maintaining a viable motor fuel network here.

Postbuses. On the subject of Royal Mail post buses, in a statement to the press, SPTG chairman Cllr. Ian Ross stressed the particular current concerns over the future of post buses, which provide a vital public transport service across Sutherland. There are worrying examples of such services having been withdrawn in Sutherland and the wider Highlands – where there had been 30 such services, we now only have 14.

Cllr. Ross stressed the importance of transport at the heart of a sustainable future for Sutherland. On behalf of SPTG, he has written to the Minister responsible for the Royal Mail – Pat McFadden MP – expressing concern and emphasising the very important contribution of Royal Mail post buses.

Ian Ross said, "All too often decisions which have a major impact on our area are made at urban centres remote from the locations most directly affected. There is not the level of real understanding of the transport challenges which exist across Sutherland and the extent to which they influence and at times determine the future sustainability of many of our fragile communities. This seems to be particularly the case with Royal Mail and post buses."

SPTG agreed to make further representations to Royal Mail and the Mail regulator. The Group felt there was a need to promote a more integrated approach to service provision and encourage a recognition that the work of one service can be significant in supporting other areas of need – this was felt to be very much the case with Royal Mail and the significant contribution of post buses in rural areas.



Motor Fuel Network. SPTG is active on motor fuel networks also: numbers of fuel stations across Highland have reduced from 135 to just 100 in ten years. A recent SPTG meeting was addressed on this issue by Kenny McInnes of Highland Council, and a number of SPTG actions are planned, probably including: lobbying supermarkets to help small fuel stations as part of their social responsibilities; working with Highland Council to maximise the usefulness of fuel cards; lobbying the Scottish Government to make small fuel stations' trading conditions as favourable as possible; investigating an expansion of 24-hour automatic pumps in Sutherland; and exploring the potential of community ownership of fuel stations. Watch this space!

Scottish Rural Development Programme

The Scottish Government has recently published information on the new Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) 2007-2013, billed as “a major new programme delivering unprecedented levels of targeted support for rural development.”

Essentially, this is the Government programme to deliver European and Scottish Government funding for social, economic and environmental purposes over the next few years – so it is very important.

The aim is to build strong communities. Whilst specific Scottish Government guidance on the future of community planning has yet to appear, and whilst the Scottish Government’s programme is still subject to European Commission endorsement (so some things might change) it is clear that SRDP will be a key tool in developing Sutherland’s economy in an appropriate and sustainable way. This is particularly so as SRDP will henceforth include funding provided through the new LEADER programme, whose predecessor LEADER+ provided valuable support to SP for such projects as the Geopark and Youth Shelters.

Local delivery organisations will be needed to administer the new LEADER programme, and SP has made a bid to Highland Leader Group to be the local delivery mechanism for Sutherland.

The Highland proposals envisage a two tier system, with wards and their managers as the lower, local level and the upper, pan-Highland level served by the Highland Leader Group. In Sutherland, the two Ward Managers work particularly closely together, and we envisage a system whereby SP, as

the local delivery mechanism, would make recommendations to grant or not grant funding to individual Sutherland-based projects (as what has happened hitherto with CED group arrangements). Any project in Sutherland (whether in one ward or both) would be considered for recommendation for funding by SP.

SP already has the mechanisms and forums in place to deliver this, and the ability of SP to fulfil this role is clear.

SUTHERLAND LOCAL PLAN UPDATE – HAVE YOUR SAY!

The Sutherland Local Plan update has now been published. This is the land-use plan which Highland Council will use to guide development and investment in the area over the next few years. The aim is to accommodate likely overall increases in Sutherland’s population, and to enable communities to grow sustainably to meet their needs, whilst safeguarding the area’s important assets – built, cultural and environmental.

The new Local Plan will affect YOU, so make sure you have your say on it. Copies of the Deposit Draft Plan are available on the Highland Council website, or at Highland Council Service points and a number of other locations. Highland Council must receive any objections or representations you may have by **5 p.m on Friday 1 February.**

Sutherland’s New Highland Councillors – and SP Directors.

Sutherland Partnership has a new chairman – new Councillor Robbie Rowantree – and also has a number of new directors and board members. Last May, there was a wholesale change among those who represent the people of Sutherland on the Highland Council, with just one sitting Councillor – Ian Ross OBE – remaining. Highland Councillors are *ex-officio* directors of Sutherland Partnership also, so these changes also meant much “new blood” on the Sutherland Partnership Board. Ian Ross is particularly involved in the work of SP Transport Group (see page 2) but the five new Councillors have also made a busy start to their time, and all five have been quick to get involved in SP work, both on the Board itself and in other ways.

New Chairman Robbie Rowantree - already a Sutherland Partnership director previously representing the Association of East Sutherland Community Councils - was delighted to assume SP chairmanship from John McMorran at the 2007 AGM, and to have Alex Murray (HIE Caithness & Sutherland) as his new vice-chairman. Cllr Rowantree said, “Sutherland Partnership has a good record in tackling issues which are important to Sutherland, and also helps to preserve the identity of Sutherland, now that Highland Council’s old Sutherland Area Committee has gone. I am determined to ensure that SP continues its good work, and I am particularly keen to see its efforts focused on the economic agenda for the county.”

Following 2007’s HC reorganisation, we also welcome to the SP Board the Corporate Manager for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross Ian Hargrave, and the new Ward Manager for North, West and Central Sutherland, Andy Mackay.



Ian Ross OBE



George Farlow



Deirdre Mackay



Jim McGillivray



Linda Munro



Robbie Rowantree

GEOPARK NEWS

This has been a busy and successful time for our North-West Highlands Geopark (NWHG). Here is our report of a rewarding six month period.

GEOPARK HOSTS EGN CONFERENCE

In September, the NWHG hosted around 200 delegates, from the UK, Europe and beyond, at the Conference of the European Geopark Network (EGN) in Ullapool and the Geopark area itself. This was a great achievement, especially considering that our Geopark had been in existence for less than three years when the Conference was held, and especially in view of the fact that for almost all of that time we have had just the one, part-time Geopark employee – Geopark Officer Dr Issie MacPhail.



Mike Russell MSP

NWHG Chair Iain Muir

The Conference opened with high-profile appearances by top speakers, notably the Scottish Government's Minister for the Environment, Mike Russell MSP, who gave the keynote address. Iain Muir, Chairman of the NWHG Steering Group also made an important early speech. Over the subsequent conference and field trips, there was the opportunity to discuss the ways in which Geoparks can help sustainable development in their areas, promoting economic benefit whilst preserving and enhancing culture and landscapes. Field trips into the Geopark gave EGN delegates ample opportunity to sample the unique environment of our own area, with Geopark communities making a deep impression on many delegates from the UK and abroad. Measured by its impact, the NWHG-hosted EGN Conference was an astounding success. Congratulations to Issie for carrying it off!

GEOPARK REVALIDATION COMPLETE

All Geoparks which are part of the European Geopark Network are required to submit themselves, every three years, to an EGN inspection – or “revalidation” – to ensure that they continue to meet the standards demanded by EGN and that they are worthy holders of the “Geopark” award. NWHG underwent this revalidation process this autumn, with inspectors from France and Germany studying such diverse

components as its achievements in the EGN network, its success in raising its profile and its activity in its own Geopark area, its management systems and its financial stability. Now that the revalidation report is becoming visible to us, it is clear that only on the issue of the Geopark's future funding did the revalidators have any significant concerns. Sutherland Partnership has recognised that more Geopark resources will permit more Geopark activity, and that stable future funding will enable the Geopark to take huge strides forward. **Read on**, to learn what we have done on this.

OUR GEOPARK TO SET TO EXPAND!

Now coming to the end of its current funding round, NWHG has urgently needed to chart its future direction – and to find the funds to carry on. Thanks to HIE Caithness & Sutherland, NWHG has had the support of Seabridge Consultants in charting the way ahead. This autumn, Seabridge undertook research with stakeholders, convened a conference in Inchnadamph, and wrote the NWHG Strategy outline for the next four years – which envisages our Geopark as “a world-class geological ‘must-see’ and Scotland's leading example of successful, sustainable, economic and community development underpinned by the area's Geopark designation.”

To do all this, NWHG needs continuation funding – and more manpower! Sutherland Partner organisations – Highland Council, HIE Caithness & Sutherland and Scottish Natural Heritage – have been collaborating on a funding package which envisages a steep increase in NWHG staffing from a single part-time officer (currently Issie MacPhail) to an ideal staffing level of two full-time posts. The four years covered by the Seabridge study will be divided into two phases, with the first phase running from January 2008 to the end of March 2009. The main task of this period will be to put detail onto the Seabridge strategic vision, by drawing up a comprehensive business plan for the medium and longer term. At time of writing, this interim 2008-9 funding package is virtually complete, and the £90k secured will permit NWHG to instigate a step change in the volume of its activities.

FAREWELL TO ISSIE



Issie MacPhail

Since our Geopark's inception in 2004, Sutherland Partnership has been fortunate to have Dr Issie MacPhail as our Geopark Project Officer. With the move from a part-time to a full time post, however, Issie has decided that, with her work with Mackay Country and a host of other activities, she can't find time to continue as Geopark Officer. We thank Issie for all her hard work, congratulate her on her many successes, and wish her well.

Arrangements for recruitment of new Geopark staff will be announced soon.