

Draft Strategy for a Self-Reliant Black Isle

The following is a result of the community's response to Covid-19 and the responses from residents about what we've learnt and how we can do things better in the future.

The Black Isle Partnership – 'helping residents to help themselves'

Mission statement: To implement a series of projects that enhance the prospects of all those living and working in the Black Isle whilst safeguarding our natural resources for future generations.

Our Core Aims:

- Housing caters for the demands of existing and potential residents and conforms to the highest carbon neutral standards possible
- Energy requirements are provided locally through renewable sources
- A high percentage of our food is grown, produced and distributed locally – reducing food miles and food waste
- Jobs are focused on providing quality services - with a high proportion of earnings spent locally (circular economy)
- Social health and mental wellbeing are at the core of everything we do
- Waste is kept to a minimum through reducing, re-cycling and re-distributing
- Residents are able to travel within the area in a safe and sustainable manner
- Locals and visitors are kept informed on matters that affect them through a single, reliable source

Background

Even before 'lockdown' was officially announced the communities of the Black Isle self-organized to an impressive degree. Volunteers were readily recruited, with tasks identified to support those most vulnerable. Two organisations in particular, Black Isle Cares and Cromarty Care Project, expanded their operations to identify those most in need whilst applying their existing systems for maintaining confidentiality. The Sea Scouts in Avoch also took on responsibility for providing local food deliveries.

Most communities have a convenience store and these were able to continue operating, with many expanding their range to respond to increased demand. These and other local suppliers adapted their normal operations to include home delivery services. Informal support networks quickly took hold and 'neighbourliness' became the norm.

Community Councils took responsibility for co-ordinating efforts, or, where deemed appropriate, delegated responsibility to volunteer groups that had been established specifically for the 'crisis'.

A weekly Zoom meeting was initiated by one of the elected councillors, with representatives from all these groups invited to attend. It became a forum for sharing information, experiences and examples of best practice. When additional funding was announced, in the form of the Supporting Communities Fund, Black Isle Partnership was identified as the most appropriate pan-Black Isle body to act as 'anchor organization'.

From the period May – October 2020 BIP employed a part-time Community Resilience Co-Ordinator to assist with the distribution of funds in a fair and equitable manner. The weekly forum was a way to disseminate information about the funding which had been secured and to agree the projects that would be of most benefit to each of the communities.

The way forward

Governance

Black Isle Partnership intends to formalise the weekly meetings to become the Strategic Partnership. This requires each community council and other interest groups to nominate a representative to become a member of the partnership. This membership group will be the main decision-making body for the Black Isle. The key role of the Directors, beyond the standard legal obligations, is to ensure the smooth running of the strategic partnership and that all voices are heard and represented.

Communication

Central to the success of all future projects, and the dissemination of clear and intelligent information for residents, is strong communication. BIP will strive to produce a regular, consistent, and accessible news outlet. Initially this will be in the form of a newsletter, but we are looking at the practicalities of some form of Black Isle Community Broadcasting - either Radio or Television. There is also the desire for a physical 'hub' to act as a drop-in centre and 'a meeting place for ideas'.

Seven Key Themes

The survey produced strong agreement on the types of projects we should be pursuing to create a more sustainable community on the Black Isle. In furthering these BIP can play different roles depending on the nature of the project – either as advocate, lobbyist, project partner or project deliverer.

- Housing – affordable housing, refurbishment for reducing carbon emissions, planning for new builds, legislation on second homes, priority for young people/first-time buyers, rentals for residents.
- Fuel – community woodland (buy-outs), renewable energy projects - wind turbines, tidal and solar
- Food – local markets, community orchards/gardens, support for local produce, reducing food waste, reducing food miles, community larders
- Jobs/income – re-training/diversifying business, encouraging new business/entrepreneurs, job creation, job-share, apprenticeships, re-defining tourism (review tourism strategy), credit unions/financial support and incentives
- Social wellbeing – befriending projects, mental health support networks, informal training/activities (e.g. cycle clubs), social networking, arts/crafts/hobbies
- Waste – addressing litter issues, a re-cycling centre based on the Black Isle, community composting schemes, up-cycling workshops, thrift shops, swap schemes, tool hire
- Infrastructure – better roads and traffic management, reduced speed limits, improved public transport, cycle-paths and walking trails, community car-share schemes, improved broadband/mobile connectivity in blank spots