ADVICE AND INFORMATION SERVICES
IN RURAL AREAS AND
SMALL COMMUNITIES

Report on one-day conference at
the Gordon Schools, Huntly,
Aberdeenshire, 12 March 1983.

SCOTTISH CONSUMER COUNCIL,
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GORDON RURAL ACTION AND INFORMATION NETWORK,
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INTRODUCTION

More than 40 representatives from a wide range of community organisations, voluntary and public bodies (mainly from rural Grampian) attended a one day conference in March 1983 to consider the provision of advice and information services for rural areas and small communities. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) and the Gordon Rural Action and Information Network (GRAIN), which have made their own important contributions to the development of rural advice and information services. This report contains an edited version of the contributions from speakers at the morning session, with a short note on some of the issues raised from the small group discussions in the afternoon. Additional copies are available from both the SCC and GRAIN, whose addresses are given on the title page.
PARTICIPANTS

Conference Chairman: Dr James Shaw Grant
Author and former newspaper editor, one-time chairman of the Crofters' Commission, former member of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, chairman of the Scottish Consumer Council's advisory committee on "Consumers in Remote Areas", 1979-1982.

Speakers:

Mrs Jennifer Shaw Member of Rural Forum and Secretary of Innes Community Council, Inverness.

Mr Kenneth Beaumont Director of Consumer Protection, Grampian Regional Council.

Mr Graham Atherton Research Officer, Scottish Consumer Council.

Mr Stuart Watts Chairman, Rural Action and Information Network.

Other Participants:

Cllr. David Anderson Grampian Regional Council

M. Anderson Victoria Hall Association, Braemar

June Bird Huntly Area Peoples' Information Centre

Maureen Buterly Moray and District Gingerbread

Linda Clark Senior Community Education worker, Ellon Community Centre

M. Cooper Age Concern Counselling Service, Inverurie

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Ian Fraser Department of Physical Planning, Grampian Regional Council
G.A.M. Fraser  Public Transport Department, Tayside Regional Council
Jim Fair  Moray and District Gingerbread, Elgin
D. Galloway  Banff and Macduff Community Council
Susan Gray  Gordon Federation of Village Halls and Associations
G. Ingram  Torphins Community Council
M. Ironside  Scottish Rural Women's Institute, Hilton
J. Largue  Scottish Rural Women's Institute, Hilton
W. Law  Gordon Local Health Council
Bob Leonard  Area Community Education Officer, Alford
E. Mackie  Age Concern Counselling, Inverurie
Ruairdh MacLeod  Scottish Council of Social Service, Perth
M. MacRae  Nairn (suburban) Community Council
Shirley Mack  Huntly Area Peoples' Information Centre
E. Moir  Strathbogie Community Council
Raymond Moore  Department of Health and Social Security, Inverness
Mr. Morton  Auchterlees School, Aberdeenshire
Joan Oldman  Age Concern, Aberdeen
Alan Payne  Liaison Officer, Lothian Regional Council
Peter Peacock  Scottish Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Inverness
Hugh Prentice  Trading Standards Department, Tayside Regional Council
Mary Scott  St. Katherine's Welfare Rights Project, Aberdeen
Mr. Silver  Kincardine and Deeside Federation of Village Halls

3.
Sandra Strachan  Development Officer, Age Concern, Aberdeen
Rev G.R. Walker  Torphins Community Council
Douglas Williamson  Member of the Scottish Consumer Council
Mrs Wilson  Glen O'Dee Hospital, Banchory
PROBLEMS OF CONSUMERS IN RURAL AREAS AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

JENNIFER SHAW, Member of Rural Forum Executive Committee, and
secretary of Innes Community Council (Moray).

I wonder what the organisers of today were about, all those
months ago, when they asked me to lead off the first leg, as
it were, for this conference? I have tried to find out in
the intervening period, what sort of extra dimension it was
thought I could bring to an otherwise perfect line-up of
qualified people, to speak to the subject "Advice and Information
Services in Rural Areas and Small Communities". The only
clear message was: "get people thinking and set the scene".
I also realised, rather late on in consideration of my subject,
that the Scottish Consumer Council's phrase "Problems of Consumers
in rural areas and small communities" would not actually imply
that the consumers are the problem for rural areas (though a
case could perhaps be made out for that too!). I think what
I am meant to tackle here is "The problems faced by people who
live in rural areas and small communities". Well, we shall
see whether I can manage something on these lines, or at least
provoke some useful thought.

The remote and rural areas of Scotland are, for the most part,a
hostile, tough environment for man, and will remain so while
geography and climate remains as it is. As James Provan, rapporteur,
states succinctly in his draft report on the state of agriculture
in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and other severely
disadvantaged regions of the EEC (October 1982, part B, para 5,
page 4):

"The climatic and geographical problems of this area
are extreme. The decrease in temperature with
altitude on the mainland is very marked, with a
consequent very narrow margin between success and
failure in agriculture at higher altitudes. The
length of the growing season is shortened by 12 days
for every 100 metres of altitude and this together
with a variability from year to year and late frosts
confines stock farming and cropping to the valleys and
more favoured situations. The mean annual wind speed
is equalled by few populated land areas.

Much of the mineral soil is derived from infertile
rocks and this together with podzolisation, relatively
uncommon in Europe, results in soils of low phosphate
content and low productivity. The conditions of
high rainfall, as much as 4,000 mm in some upland areas,
leads to the formation of acid peat of low phosphate content; the value of which to agriculture is very limited, although suitable for forestry. Good agricultural soils are therefore confined to the alluvial stretches of the river valleys, the raised beaches around the coasts, and the larger pockets of brown forest soils which occur on the lower hillsides free from rock outcrops."

Just as our predecessors did before us, we need special skills in order to live in these parts. The means of coping and surviving, even prospering, and of living as "whole people", have been developed slowly, and have depended on local knowledge, loyalties and interdependence - and on sheer physical stamina - for success. Like our domestic livestock, raised and developed over the centuries, and which is still a principal (and once our only) source of economic wealth, the countrymen and women of Scotland, when they move into an easier environment, flourish exceedingly. It is perhaps also characteristic of the nature of the breed that along with this ability to do well after "out-migrating", or "re-settling", the pride in, and devotion to a harsh-seeming homeland is proverbial, and real. Such identification with roots is sustained over several generations, and I suggest, should be regarded as significant by all who have involvement with, and influence on, the present and future life of the people who inhabit our part of the world. The nature of the land conditions not only the crops, of all sorts, harvested therefrom by man, but it influences the people who live in it, both indigenous and "incoming".

Humankind has been around these parts, according to scholarly belief, since 6,500 BC or thereabouts (I am obliged to Dr. Ian Grimsle for rapid reference) but we can, for the purposes of today's subject move on to the period beginning some 300 years ago, when a series of revolutions began which shaped the nature of Scottish rural life today - warts and all.

The out-migration (albeit temporary) in war-like mood, of dissatisfied inhabitants who were not happy with central government, which at that time became increasingly "far-south based" - exacerbating the problems of distance and a sense of alienation - resulted in state intervention on a scale hitherto unknown. The policing armies moved in, introducing some military roads, and for the first time areas not accessible by sea became open to outside influences. In the wake of the 1745-6 troubles, which one must remember, were the last of a series lasting a century and more, there were punitive measures, indeed brutal ones, taken, but they were only one side of the story - not to concern us today except to note that the forfeiture of estates did provide considerable resources for public reinvestment in the highlands and islands. In addition to the military and judiciary,
the strategists, administrators, and planners moved in, and yes, even the tourists began to arrive. The days of local autonomy were beginning to recede. For the first time, the state of the highlands and remoter areas were graphically described in a variety of fascinating accounts: by General Wade, General Stewart, Thomas Pennant, by contributors to the Reports of the Commissioners for the Highland Roads and Bridges, Sir John Sinclair, the founder of the Board of Agriculture, and James Donaldson, reporting to that Board, by reporters to the Board of Trustees for Fisheries and Manufacturers, by James Boswell, Laughlan Shaw, and Dorothy Wordsworth, to name but a few.

The need for political stability to be established led to a new phenomenon in the remoter areas - an outside strategy for improving the lot of the native: roads, bridges, harbours, canals, and eventually railways, were built. Wheeled vehicles could replace travel on a garron, or, more usually, on foot. If you come to my home not three miles from Elgin I can show you the remains of the packhorse bridge, which so short a time ago was part of the trunk route from Aberdeen - only a matter of yards from the A96. The era of the railways came - surely a high point in the history of public transport - and at the same time very reliable horse bus and carrier services; we have their schedules to this day. However, the railways suffer the same fate as so much investment in our homeland - they don't pay. The problems of access and transport are always with us; it seems, one of the most crucial to rural life, and which surely needs the best corporate approach that can be devised - at national, regional and local level, with full co-operation between the private and the public sector.

Following hard on the political troubles, came the agricultural revolution. The methods of agriculture were transformed through the vision and research of a few, economic coercion by a few more, and the hard labour, sweat, tears and exhaustion of many - but what an achievement. The foundations of our industry today were laid from the late 18th century onwards, and the principles of land drainage, soil husbandry, cropping rotation, land conservation, were gradually pursued by all sections of the farming community. The problems to which I would draw attention, that are with us today, are the reduction in manpower requirement in farming, the trend to larger units in traditional farming enterprise, and lack of encouragement given to small unit development, new crop innovation, and for part-time farming. I hope that the ideas coming under consideration by, among other groups, the Rural Forum, will arouse widespread interest; and that the reports on the state of the farming, fishing and forestry industries, contained in the Provan Report, to which I have already referred - will have widespread effective results. The human tendency towards exciting specialist mechanisation (new toys - if one may venture a maternal sort of remark!) and
public subsidy for innovation rather than conservation, poses special problems in a less-favoured area. One cannot fail to notice that the more sophisticated the mechanisms become for the disposal of public funds to encourage the economic well-being of those in the primary producing and small manufacturing industries in less-favoured areas, the more difficult it appears to be to "get the mixture right".

I now turn to consider in a general way the life of communities in the rural and remote areas of Scotland at the present time, and the problems arising therefrom. The first point I want to make is that it seems to me that there is a general assumption that parity of provision of facilities, services, and standardisation in the material way of life as between rural and urban communities should be a goal. I believe this assumption should be questioned, and that if greater consultation between consumers and providers is achieved, it will emerge that rural solutions to meet rural needs will vary very much from urban solutions to meet urban needs. Everything requires resources, but urban solutions to rural needs, entail per capita expense which tends to prevent rural life happening at all.

Take something very simple and basic: like fuel for warmth. It is easier, and, probably, more economical, and healthier, to have larger public buildings in the bigger settlements heated by oil or gas-fired heating systems. In public buildings in remote areas, where climatic conditions may prevent supplies getting through, and depots are very faraway, there may be a case for coal, wood, or even peat, which can be stockpiled and used even when electric supplies may be cut. Ah yes, I hear you say - but the rules require a certain temperature to be maintained, and you can't fit thermostats conveniently to wood-burning stoves... I suggest that country people are quite used to fluctuations in temperature, and that they would prefer to supply their children with extra sweaters, and stick to their school work (if it is a school that we are talking about) than have them sent home because the tanker couldn't make it to replenish the tanks for several days. Flexibility and adaptability aren't easy when centralisation affects all our lives, but is that a reason to relinquish common sense without a murmur?

Since the end of feudal times, for those who were reared in the country areas and who developed ambition to "better themselves" (this usually meaning to "better" in material terms) — left, and pursued life away from their original home — that option remains, and, I suggest that despite recession and other difficulties, great opportunities are still available to the resourceful and determined. The idea that provision of every facility should be, as of right, on every doorstep is not, I think, the attitude of a country dweller. What they do resent, is to be forced into a situation where the old, self-contained
ways are denied them, replaced with new and expensive systems which cost far more than they do in built-up areas, and are then lost, withdrawn, or abandoned. The old farm widow, moved in her last months to terminal care many miles from her home, friends and family, is a different case entirely from the youngster entering a mobile labour force. Rural deprivation and poverty today may be partly due to standards being imposed, and policies in the past adopted by benign authorities - both private and public and with the best intentions - who could not sustain the improved standards within a reasonable budget. Voluntary out-migration is one thing, clearances are another - we are still at risk of clearances.

Having briefly referred to the Provan Report, which includes, besides a concise and readable set of findings, some important recommendations to assist remote areas, I want to draw your attention to the Report "Consumer Problems in Rural Areas" by Mackay and Leing, published last summer. It should be treated as compulsory reading for all who are concerned with the health and welfare of our rural areas; and for the slow readers, or desperately busy, there are useful potted versions in the campaign documents! No, I am not going into it now - because I want to take this opportunity to refer to a more recent, and hardly less demanding document. The Draft Written Statement (for consultation) of the Grampian Region Structure Plan, Rural Area - referred to by Regional officials as RASP, and by certain others, most uncivilly, as GRASP! Do not despair, Mr. Chairman, I am not going to meander all through this one either, but there are certain vital paragraphs to do with today's business.

On p. 20, para. 3/30: "The policies concentrate first upon the need to maintain a range of services considered to be essential in the Rural Area, namely, primary education, basic health provision, a post office, a general store, a petrol outlet, and a bus link. Information on the present distribution of these services and recent trends in their provision is incomplete, but there are indications that many parts of the Rural Area, particularly the more rural areas, either already lack such services or are in danger of losing those they currently possess. As well as improving information on service provision the strategy will provide opportunities for rural communities to join with public agencies in improving both the availability of, and access to, these basic support services."

On p. 22, para. 3/36, two points: "Exploration of a more flexible approach to meeting the needs of the Rural Area" and "Concentration upon new forms of partnership between public agencies and the community".

On p. 33, Policy E15 states: "The Regional Council will investigate the avenues available to assist in the reduction of
distribution costs in the Rural Area. Such avenues may include assistance in the formation of co-operatives, or the setting up of information/clearing centres."

On p. 68, para. 6.15, first sentence: "For the most part, information on the needs of local communities and the state of community services is deficient."

This is an amazing statement - the information could have been collected through an extensive network of existing voluntary organisations and from community councils. Does this not demonstrate that there is ample scope for advice and information to flow both ways?

On p. 68 again, para. 6.19: "At the most fundamental level, there is a need for a greater dialogue between local communities and the agencies providing services so that the wants of people can be clearly identified and, where possible, satisfied."

What are they waiting for? The structures exist to implement this any time - on the community side, anyway, certainly throughout the Moray area.

On p. 69, paras. 6.21 and 6.22: "An improved information network can result in better use being made of existing services such as those provided by the Regional Council's Social Work Department and the Grampian Health Board and a greater awareness of why services are threatened and ways in which this can be averted. The assistance of other agencies, such as the Health Board, community councils and rural post offices and shops, will be important in improving the distribution of this information."

"Both Regional and District Councils can help to stimulate activity by bringing public agencies and the local communities together, in order to help overcome these problems. Specific measures the Regional Council can take may include, for example, the wider use of Council premises for regular 'surgeries', including training and encouragement to those wishing to set up retail co-operatives, or bulk-buy clubs in areas where retail provision is lacking or at risk, as well as courses encouraging more efficient operation of existing outlets."

I shall now put on my community council, and former community association secretaries' hats and say that in my experience, it has happened that the enabling agency is the little grass-roots feller! But never mind who does it - let us for goodness' sake get on with it......

On p. 70, para. 6.26 and policy CS2: "The mechanism for such an integrated approach, bringing together all the agencies in the public, private and voluntary sectors providing and using services, already exists at the national level. The Rural Forum, as it is
called, has been formed by organisations working in the countryside with the object of improving the quality of rural life in Scotland. To be fully responsive to local needs, the possibility of setting up a similar body, covering Grampian Region only, should be investigated."

Policy CS2: "To encourage practical collaborative action in all aspects of support for community services, the Regional Council will:

(a) maintain its membership and participation in Rural Forum at the national level, and,

(b) assist in efforts to establish and co-operate with a branch of Rural Forum for Grampian."

As a former member of Rural Forum's steering committee, and now a member of its Executive Committee, I am naturally delighted with these proposals, and hope they will become a reality at the earliest opportunity.

On p. 70, policy CS1: "To establish closer connections with local communities, so as to be more fully aware of the demand for community services and to increase existing utilisation, the Regional Council will support extensions to its own information and advisory services as well as those of other public agencies."

What a pity this is not printed in upper case type, signifying a Statutory policy, rather than a supporting one.

Finally, p. 86, para. 7.19: "A report published in July 1982 by the House of Commons Select Committee on Agriculture, suggested that a Minister of State for Rural Affairs should be appointed. This would serve to protect the existing rural communities and also that part of the national heritage in them that is increasingly the object of public attention. The Minister's role would be to co-ordinate the diverse economic, social and environmental interests. This would serve to enhance the viability of rural communities, improve community services and simultaneously balance the requirements to conserve important natural habitats."

This point may be outwith the remit of today's discussion, but I feel it to be so important that I draw your attention to it here.

In reaching my conclusions, I want to venture one or two practical points which I feel should be borne in mind in considering the means by which advice and information may be transmitted. The existing channels are important and many are long-established and trusted: they include the Minister, the Doctor, the District Nurse, the Dominie, and the 'caring' members of the community,
including the successful business people and professional advisers. The agencies are the local (usually weekly) newspaper, particularly the advertisement section; the local radio station and other media, the councils of social service and other voluntary bodies, including particularly the SWRI; the elected representatives at Regional, District and Community level; the specialist voluntary agencies are active in many areas, for instance Marriage Guidance, Alcoholics Anonymous, and so on. There are community papers and newsletters in many areas. Two out of four of my community council area's community associations, for instance, compile newsletters which are delivered house to house by members of committee both in the villages themselves and in their landward areas. My community council are currently seeking funding to support the compilation of an information sheet containing up-to-date information on local services, amenities and facilities - to be an annual publication. Moray District Council have not, unfortunately agreed funding, in spite of strenuous efforts to persuade them to do so, by ourselves and particularly by our District Councillor, but the relevant departments will, I have no doubt, give their customary support in respect of supply of information, once we wangle the paper, printing and distribution resources from somewhere. These I give as examples of existing activity and service. The CAB network is unfortunately not complete, but I hope will slot into the existing scene to the advantage of all, in due course.
PROTECTION OF CONSUMERS INTERESTS IN RURAL AREAS AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

KEN BEAUMONT, Director of Consumer Protection, Grampian Regional Council.

Considering the widespread nature of Grampian Region and how it is constituted, I consider it very relevant to point our that while the area of the City of Aberdeen District is only between 2% and 3% of the surface area, the population of that district is 44% of the whole of the regional area. When we consider that Elgin is the second largest community within the region after Aberdeen and, particularly, when we consider that this population is in the region of 20,000, it becomes obvious that there are many small communities within Grampian Region. Each and every community has its problems, and this relates to consumer problems as it does to health, education, transport, indeed to every particular service. I should like to deal with the type of enforcement and advisory service which has been set up by Grampian Regional Council through the Consumer Protection Department during the period since May 1975. The primary duty of the Consumer Protection Department is that of an enforcement unit dealing with criminal legislation placed with it, while a secondary function relates to the Consumer Advisory Service operated within the department and dealing with the safeguards and rights of the consumer under civil legislation.

You will be aware that civil legislation provides the remedy by which an aggrieved consumer can enter a legal action against their supplier should it be considered that the goods or services which have been purchased are defective or are of a lesser standard than that which the consumer had been led to believe he will obtain. This, then, is what the Department sets out to do in our operation of the Consumer Advisory Service: to put the consumer in the picture regarding matters they are complaining about where the complaints are considered to be justifiable. It is often said, and in a critical manner too, that the service has no teeth; in saying this the critic is correct. I would suggest that by the giving of the best advice, and this must be relevant to the point in question, the Consumer Adviser is offering an important service to persons who simply do not know what to do, even when they have a complaint. The service is orientated to both sides of the counter, to the seller and to the buyer. A complaint must be fair, reasonable and logical; it has to relate to a relevant part of the law and there is nothing less likely to succeed than a complaint which is frivolous and illogical. It also lessens the effect of our service and, particularly, our rapport with traders. It is the duty of a Consumer Adviser to give careful consideration to any complaint which is brought to their notice, to be able to pick out the relevancy of the complaint and, more important, to be ready to inform the complainant that they have no real cause for complaint should this
be the case and cannot expect a refund of money which has been spent in the purchasing of the article which is the subject of the complaint. I consider that what I have already said refers to city, rural areas and small communities.

When we are discussing rural areas there is often a tendency or willingness for people to point out that rural people are more prepared to look after themselves and their own particular problems than are the majority of city folk. This is an opinion which is often used, and, indeed, I have used it myself. I consider it to be true but, because of this, should we take advantage of their willingness and ability to look after themselves? It is, I suggest, unfair, for the simple reason that where people are willing to look after their own interests they might not be as successful as they would be if they had had the advantage of receiving the advice of someone who is dealing with matters such as this as an every day part of their work. In 1975 Grampian Regional Council initiated a service which we thought would help the rural areas. We found that most of these areas, particularly in the County of Aberdeenshire, had what were called Area Offices; these offices were staffed by people who have good contacts throughout a wide area and who deal with all types of enquiries and, this being the case, why not consumer problems. These Area Offices became referral points to which consumer complaints could be referred prior to being processed by the Consumer Protection Department; it is not enough to have merely a referral point because each complaint is very often a major problem to the complainant. In using the referral points to advantage we can reach the complainant, we can discuss and we can advise on their problem; if necessary, we will act as a mediatory between customer and supplier.

It is a fact that the vast majority of complaints relate to the city areas rather than the rural areas, but this does not mean that the rural people do not require the assistance we can, and we do, offer them. Advice must be consistent and relevant to consumer legislation, which provides safeguards to people who feel they have been cheated. If a person when complaining to their supplier can quote relevant legislation and the complaint is stated reasonably, it can mean the difference between success and failure in resolving any matter satisfactorily. It has to be considered that a reasonable attitude must be adopted at all times. The complainants might be fiery and aggressive or they may be timid and very often afraid to complain as forcefully as they might. Conversely, the shopkeeper might equally be fiery and aggressive, but it might be true to say that it is not very often they are timid and afraid to put up a defence on their own account. After all they are in business, and anyone in business must make a profit if they are to stay in business - this has to be realised by everyone, whether a disgruntled customer or a shopkeeper.
In setting up a Consumer Advisory Service obviously one requires to have first class publicity but whether we are able to have ongoing publicity is another thing. The cost of publicity can be, and often is, high. What we hoped to achieve initially was simply that a satisfied complainant would be only too happy to spread the word relative to the help we had been able to offer and the success they had obtained when bringing notice of their complaint to their supplier. We hoped this would happen bit I regret to say it did not appear to happen very often. It is not unusual to find a complainant who has a reasonable complaint but is too embarrassed to bring notice of this complaint to, in many cases, the local shopkeeper; we in the Consumer Protection Department endeavour to overcome this embarrassment and have acted as mediators in arranging meetings between the two parties. Very often the information about a complaint which we bring to the trader's notice is the first indication he has that he has a dissatisfied customer. I think I might say that no trader likes to have a dissatisfied customer, particularly, if the dissatisfaction is real; the trader relies on the goodwill of his customers, just as the customers rely on the goodwill of the trader.

I have often been asked how I would like to see future progress on the subject of Consumer Advice. I would like to see the setting up of discussion groups between senior staff in the Consumer Protection Department and representatives of local organisations such as the S.W.R.I., church guilds and similar organisations within the rural areas, when consumer problems and consumer law could be discussed. The representatives could be put in the picture as fully as possible regarding safeguards provided by legislation. In no way am I suggesting that these representatives would be called upon to take part in legal discussions at depth; where any problem which arises might appear to be too complex to be dealt with at the local level, the subject of complaint would be referred to the Consumer Protection Department and taken up by one of our advisers. In short, what I am suggesting is that with the use of some common sense and the proper attitude by representatives of the organisations. Complaints which create much distress can be solved at a local level, and if this is not possible the Consumer Protection Department will take over and advise the respective complainants accordingly.

We have endeavoured to build up a rapport with traders. It has been our intention to ensure that when any of our advisers visit the shop premises of people alleged to have sold defective goods, these traders will not throw up their arms in exasperation, frustration or in irritation, but they will accept that what has been discussed previously has been reasonable, logical and, equally important, impartial. In this way we consider we have built up a reasonable service and, indeed, a new service since 1979. It is I believe a very necessary service. I believe that by the use of, or the adoption of, self-help schemes such as I have just described within the rural areas and small communities, we can reach the whole of Grampian Region on a scale which we have not yet been able to perfect.
EXPERIMENTAL ADVICE SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

GRAHAM ATHERTON, Research Officer, Scottish Consumer Council.

The need for advice and information services in rural areas and small communities

In a report published a few years ago, the National Consumer Council argued that citizenship included not only a right to civil liberty, a vote and a decent standard of living but also an important right to information and advice - a fourth right of citizenship. In Scotland, the force of this argument is reflected by fact that a third of a million enquiries are dealt with by generalist advice centres each year - more than five times the number handled ten years ago. This increase is due not only to setting up of more advice and information centres in Scotland, which now number about 100, but also to a greater readiness among the public at large to come forward with their enquiries or problems. This increase has been further triggered off by the greater demand for information and advice as laws and regulations change or become more complex. Growing unemployment and the social strains it produces is also likely to put increased pressure on advice services - as shown by the dramatic increase in social security enquiries in recent years. On average there is one advice and information centre for every 50,000 inhabitants in Scotland, with about 25 - or a quarter - of existing centres serving predominantly rural or semi-rural areas. In the sparsely populated highland area, there are citizens' advice bureaux at Lochaber, Inverness, Thurso, and Alness, with two extension bureaux in Ross-shire. Here in Grampian we find centres outside Aberdeen at Peterhead, Fraserburgh and now here in Huntly.

But these figures gloss over the very real gaps in provision in many parts of rural Scotland. Nine out of 25 district council areas in rural Scotland are without a general advice or information centre at all: they include Argyll and Bute, Badenoch and Strathspey, Kincardine and Deeside, Skye and Lochalsh and Sutherland. None of the Scottish islands contain a generalist advice centre, the Western Isles Council having had to close down its own mobile centre some years ago. Even larger population centres in some of these areas are without an advice or information centre, such as Elgin (pop.163 thousand) and Oban (63 thousand). The presence of an advice or information centre within a locality does not mean it is within easy reach. Inhabitants in Aviemore would need to

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journey 30 miles to reach their nearest centre in Inverness, for example. Even where local official sources of information or advice exist, such as post offices, local offshoots of local or central government departments, health centres, etc., their work may be too specialised to deal with the whole range of problems people come forward with – indeed their staff may lack the training to diagnose particular problems. For example, what is notionally a "housing" problem, such as a threat of eviction for non-payment of rent, may on closer examination be a problem about paying off fuel debts calling for different remedial action. A generalist advice centre may be in a better position to deal with this sort of problem in the first instance. And where people do rely on traditional sources of advice and information – doctors, clergy, school-teachers, health visitors, the police, etc. – the information or advice provided may not always be up to date, or be given as promptly or confidentially as people would like. Newcomers to an area may have difficulties in knowing which local people to approach with a problem. Local advice providers may move away from an area, perhaps with no-one to take their place, as when village shops, post offices, are forced to close (as did a third of them in rural Scotland between 1970 and 1980). Special difficulties in reaching traditional or official sources of advice may be faced by people without cars or who are housebound. It was with these considerations in mind that the SCC set up two experimental schemes of its own to bring advice and information services within easier reach of people living in rural and sparsely populated areas and other small communities. The two schemes are fully described and evaluated in the SCC's report A Call for Advice, supplied to participants.

Adviseline

The aim of this service was to link 15,000 inhabitants in the sparsely populated area of west Sutherland, wester Ross and in nearly the whole of Skye and Lochalsh to the citizens' advice bureau at Inverness, 40 to 100 miles away. This was done through a "freefone" line – by asking the operator for a certain freefone number, people dialling through any one of 55 telephone exchanges there were connected free of charge to the bureau during normal daytime office hours. The service was set up in October 1979 and has continued ever since. The cost of the freefone calls was met from SCC funds for the first 18 months, and thereafter the scheme, has been funded by Highland regional council and the three district councils in the area, with some assistance from the Scottish Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux. The scheme attracted over 550 enquiries in its first 18 months – about one enquiry for every 23 households a year. This represented at least four times the number of enquiries the bureau received from people
in the area before Adviseline was set up. Leafleting of all 3,000 households in the Ullapool telephone area resulted in an enquiry rate as high as one for every 11 or 12 households. The largest proportion of enquiries (nearly 15%) were about social security, compared with a national bureau average of 13% in this category. This suggests that the freephone facility particularly important for people receiving welfare benefits. Enquiries about housing, consumer goods and family and personal problems each accounted for around 10% of enquiries. Nearly a fifth of calls were made from public call boxes. It is very important that these are not closed down if people living in very remote communities are not to have their only lifeline to information and advice removed. We have received government assurances that this will not happen. The Scheme needs a lot of publicity to work properly. After the initial publicity and a second wave of publicity a year later, there was a significant tailing off in number of enquiries each month, though the number never fell below 20 or 30 a month, suggesting a recurrent need for service of this kind. Leafleting is expensive to carry out on a regular basis, but announcements in local press and local radio, advertising the freephone number to ask for, appears to be a cheap and effective method. It is desirable to have a special page in the telephone directory listing advice and information services in the area.

Although Adviseline cost about £1,000 a year to run in telephone charges - working out at £2.38 an enquiry - this has to be offset against three things:

(i) the higher costs and inconvenience of setting up mobile advice extension bureaux, or even fully-manned centres in less populous areas.

(ii) bureau volunteers providing their services free of charge

(iii) the saving each enquiry represents in terms of the time of salaried public officials who might otherwise have to deal with that enquiry

There was no evidence that the service was used frivolously or that it was unduly hampered by technical breakdowns.

Of the 900 householders replying to a questionnaire, nearly all of those who had heard of Adviseline greatly valued the sort of service it offered, with many wanting to see it continued. The saving in journey time and costs was particularly appreciated. People also valued the fact that enquiries could be attended to promptly and confidentially. Orkney islands council and SACAB are now funding a similar service, putting
putting islanders in touch with bureau at Alness. There is a possibility that service might extend to other parts of Highland region.

Information Link

The aim of this scheme is to put people living in small village and rural communities in touch with local volunteers or information links trained to deal with a wide range of enquiries from their homes or public meeting places such as village halls and schools. People may be referred to an individual or agency best able to deal with their problem where necessary. The SCC pilot scheme was started in 1978 and continued until March, 1981. Sixteen volunteers, mainly recruited from community councils, were initially attached to schemes to cover parts of rural Grampian. Volunteers included a community council secretary, a headteacher, a social and information worker, a postmaster, and a number of housewives. Areas served included Aberchirder, Crimond, Huntly, Kenmoy, Inoch, Premnay and Turriff. Five links stayed with the scheme throughout its duration, and a further three were recruited to bring the number to 8 at the end of the scheme, the other links having dropped out due to other commitments or to lack of enquiries.

The scheme attracted 426 enquiries in the 18 months up to March 1981 – about one enquiry for every 18 households. Seventy per cent of enquiries were dealt with by the link based at the Huntly information centre, where enquiries came from one in 12 households. A similar scheme has been set up by Castle Douglas CAB in Kirkcudbrightshire, where nine of the bureau's volunteers spend part of their time dealing with enquiries from their homes. The Link scheme, like Adviceline, attracted a large proportion of enquiries about social security – 35 per cent in this case. Around 10 per cent were each connected with housing, employment, consumer goods and family and personal problems. Publicity was through posters and leafleting of households, but some links carried out additional publicity of their own, e.g. in community council newsletters, which in many ways was more effective than the leaflets by continually reminding people about the link. But there was some evidence that the links were still not widely enough known or understood, over 2/3 of people still not having heard of the scheme after it had been running over 18 months.

Costs were limited to payment of a part-time co-ordinator to help recruit, train and supply links with information materials, such as leaflets. In the Castle Douglas scheme, this work was done by the bureau's Organiser. Running costs worked out at £3.50 an enquiry when publicity costs were included. The bureau-based Castle Douglas scheme was rather cheaper at £2.50 an enquiry when combined with bureau's other running costs.
Link schemes therefore may be as costly or more costly than freephone advice services - but they have the advantage of having a local person on the spot to deal with enquiries on a more personal, face-to-face basis and offer practical assistance, such as help with filling in forms or writing letters.

The public generally attached considerable importance to being able to turn to somebody with local knowledge when they had an enquiry or problem. Their main regret was that the scheme had not been well enough publicised. Links themselves thought the scheme worthwhile, even if they themselves had dealt with only a few enquiries. In its report *A Call for Advice*, the Scottish Consumer Council has recommended that:

* Regional, islands and district councils should review the provision of advice and information services in their area in conjunction with advice giving agencies there.

* The development of national and local policies for funding of advice services - at present the planning and funding of advice services is poorly co-ordinated.

* The extension of freephone advice services to other remote and sparsely populated areas of Scotland, the development of more link schemes for people in small rural communities.

* Community and voluntary organisations should campaign locally for better advice and information services in rural areas.

* Official leaflets and other publications should be made more widely available through local voluntary outlets.

* Special training should be provided for advice and information workers in rural areas.

Additional copies of the report *A Call for Advice* are obtainable from the Scottish Consumer Council, 4 Somerset Place, Glasgow. G3 7JT. price £2.00 (inc. postage).
RURAL INFORMATION AND ACTION NETWORKS

STUART WATTS, Gordon Rural Action and Information Network.

The Huntly Peoples Information Centre started as a joint initiative between the social worker and community education workers in Huntly in October 1978 because of the increasing number of enquiries relating to social security and unemployment benefit, which were being presented at the social work department. A part-time worker was employed by community education and the information centre established.

Originally the idea was that a room in the Community Centre should be set aside and the information worker amass as much information as possible and allow members of the public access to this information. It was found that this was impractical as the information worker inevitably had to also make herself available as an advice giver. A number of local volunteers were then recruited and trained and the centre was then manned on a rota basis whenever it was open.

The information worker was then appointed co-ordinator for the Scottish Consumer Council Link Scheme. The Huntly Centre then became a resource base for Links throughout the Grampian Region. During this period a number of individual enquiries led to the information worker acquiring a Community Development role and a number of projects were started and completed, i.e. a Craft Co-operative, two Luncheon Clubs (one at Insch and one at Huntly, funded by the social work department) a Single Parent Family Group and a Women's Opportunity Course, funded by the Workers' Education Association. In all these developments, the information worker acted as a catalyst, formed a committee and then gradually withdrew leaving an independent committee.

In March 1981 both Community Education and Scottish Consumer Council funding ceased and a decision had to be made regarding the future of the Information Centre, which had its own management committee. It was therefore decided to try and make it on our own. Fortunately we found premises with a shop front and office accommodation over the top. We therefore, initially (and still do) use the shop as a Thrift Shop to raise funds for the Centre. We also started looking for alternative sources of funding and soon found that a straightforward Information Centre did not attract money. So after some negotiations we eventually attracted funding from both the Social Work Services Group and Grampian Region social work department as a community development agency. Consequently in January 1982 we were able to employ a quarter-time Community Development Worker, and in April 1982 this was made up to a half-time worker. One of the other commitments made by the
HUNTLY PEOPLE'S INFORMATION CENTRE: DEVELOPMENT 1978-83

Student placements

- Huntly Youth project *
- Inshie Luncheon club (2 yrs) *

People's Information Centre (4.5 yrs)

- Insulation project *
- Fuel week *

Community Development

- Huntly Stroke Club *
- Elderly Day Centre *
- Outreach project *
- Community Enterprise Project *
- Fraserburgh Stroke Club *

GORDON RURAL ACTION NETWORK

- Jobs notice board *
- Huntly Luncheon Club *
- Unemployed workers' group *

Information and advice

- Single parent family group *
- Information columns in local press *

Training and Promotion

- Volunteers
- Conferences

- Project Workers
- WEA Tutor group

Women's Opportunity Course (3 yrs) *

Craft Cooperative (2 yrs) *

Crèche *

KEY TO PROJECTS: * ongoing • short-term • terminated • in obeyance.
organisation at this time was to expand the area so that it covered the whole of Gordon District. Therefore on October, 1982 Gordon Rural Action and Information Network was formed, with the idea of using the organisation as a forum for all voluntary agencies in Gordon District with participation from various District and Regional Services thereby giving an overview of the various problems faced by agencies in the Gordon District and allowing a combined effort to try to overcome them. G.R.A.I.N. is due to have its first annual general meeting in June, 1983. Meantime, various other projects have been started (see chart).

Though technically a community development agency, we still find that the Information Centre is the core and the prime initiator of new projects. Let me give two examples. In February, 1982 the Information Centre ran a special "Heat Week" to give advice on paying fuel bills and saving energy. Training and advice sessions were run involving workers from a number of different agencies. Two new projects were developed from this, the need for an elderly day centre in Huntly and the possibility of creating an energy saving scheme. A public meeting was held regarding the elderly day centre and a working party formed.

The Day Centre is now due to start in the very near future, having attracted funds from various other charities i.e., Age Concern, partial funding from Community Education and the Social Work Departments to cover the running expenses, and funding from the Manpower Services Commission under their Community Programme Scheme to pay the salaries of an organiser and two assistants. The scheme has also attracted a number of volunteers. A feasibility study funded by the Department of Energy is also being carried out regarding the energy conservation scheme.

The other example is the possible development of a sheltered housing scheme in Strathdon, arising out of the commitment of the organisation to expand its geographical area. The Information Centre started an "Out Reach Project". This entailed volunteers from the Information Centre personally circulating information sheets on various statutory benefits to post offices and health clinics in the Gordon District. The aim of the project was to allow advice and information to be circulated to the more rural communities and hopefully attract volunteers or interested people to act as advice givers in these communities. From this project came a request from the doctor in Strathdon regarding the possible provision of sheltered housing in that area. From this has developed a public meeting in Strathdon, the election of a working party and the involvement of a housing association who would be interested in the project.
As an organisation we therefore feel that the role of the Information Centre is crucial to rural development projects. The projects themselves breathe new life into rural areas, which are often deprived of all the basic services. They satisfy real needs, attract resources that would otherwise not be available and in certain instances create jobs.

G.R.A.I.N. and the future

Fortunately, the work we have been doing has been recognised as useful by a number of different statutory agencies, though is still viewed with considerable suspicion by some. Grampian Region in their Rural Plan have offered support for "unconventional bodies" in rural areas, and though receiving appreciable financial support from them, now we hope for continued help and advice in the future. The plan has also suggested a Rural Forum for Grampian, which again we feel would be a useful platform to air rural problems. G.R.A.I.N.'s main aims for the future are to open the Information Centre in Huntly five or six days per week, extend the information network throughout Gordon District and create jobs through Community Programme Schemes for the future.
GORDON RURAL ACTION AND INFORMATION NETWORK

SUPPORT GROUPS
National Regional

COMMUNITY

STATUTORY AGENCIES
Regional District

INFORMATION CENTRE
Community Development Worker

NEW GROUPS
Local

EXISTING GROUPS
Local

GORDON RURAL ACTION AND INFORMATION NETWORK

SVCING

ACTIVATING

ENQUIRIES
INFORMATION
SERVICING
SERVICING

CITIZENS' ADVICE BUREAU
Scottish Council of Social Service
Scottish Consumer Council
Age Concern
St Katherine's Centre
SHELTER
Workers' Educational Association
Etc.

Social Work Dept.
Community Education
Dept. of Health and Social Security
Local Health Council
Gordon District Council
Employment Dept.
Ombudsman
University
College of Education
Etc.
DISCUSSION POINTS

1. People in rural areas were in many respects more deprived than urban dwellers, particularly householders without their own transport. Although they often had the same sorts of problems as urban dwellers, they were at a great disadvantage in having poor access to centres and key people (in government offices, advice centres, libraries, etc) able to deal with their enquiries.

2. People in rural areas faced the paradox that as modern technology becomes more advanced and sophisticated, their own traditional networks, on which they rely for information and advice, had steadily eroded as a result of cutbacks in local services and the loss of key personnel.

3. Both the 'freefone' and 'link' schemes, described in A Call for Advice, were desirable and welcome developments in rural information and advice provision and deserved to be extended to other parts of Scotland. The 'freefone' service was especially attractive in being available at most times of the day to very scattered rural populations; but it was also desirable to supplement the service with local 'links' to offer a less impersonal service and practical assistance. The links, in turn, had to be chosen with great care to win local trust and respect.

4. New developments in information technology could be applied to bring information and advice within easier reach of rural communities and deserved to be fully explored in this respect. Information could be offered in rural libraries and schools with their own micro-computers linked to a central network, and a sharing of these facilities by community groups should be aimed for. A special advantage of using the new technology included access to information which could be rapidly updated.

5. Advice and information providers should develop links with the local press and radio to reach rural populations. They could arrange their own "problem pages", or readers' enquiry services or deal with referrals from phone-in programmes (although problems of local reception might interfere with the latter).

6. As more and more people came to rely on welfare benefits, there was an urgent need to rationalise the location of social security and employment benefit offices. For people living in rural areas, they were frequently difficult to reach and posed additional problems when the two offices were in towns miles apart from each other.
7. Official leaflets and forms needed to be written in plainer language, be kept more up-to-date, and be made more easily available. Even local social security offices had difficulty in ensuring that their own supply of leaflets was comprehensive and up-to-date.

8. Advice services were arguably just as essential as education, library and other services and public authorities should be compelled to provide them by law.

9. The present system of funding advice and information services was highly unsatisfactory, with no one central or local government department responsible and advice centres facing uncertainty each year as they compete for public funds. A more secure and co-ordinated system of financing should be worked out.