



CARES CASE STUDY

STRATHNAIRN COMMUNITY BENEFIT FUND

BACKGROUND

Strathnairn lies to the south of Inverness, bordering the Monadhliath Mountains. There are 659 households in the Strath, which follows the River Nairn from Dunmaglass to the Culloden Battlefield and Clava Cairns, and includes the settlements of Farr, Inverarnie and Daviot.

Strathnairn is a rural community which relies heavily on Inverness for facilities and services. Despite being geographically close to Inverness, public transport links, broadband infrastructure and mobile phone signals are poor. The community faces issues like isolation for those without a car, fuel poverty and poor access to online services, which are common problems in rural areas.



- Fund Name: Strathnairn Community Benefit Fund (SCBF)
- Fund Donors: Vention Energy, SSE, ENECO, Forestry Commission Scotland
- Related Renewable Energy Schemes: Farr Windfarm, Dunmaglass Windfarm, Moy Windfarm, Farr Hydro
- Technology: Onshore wind and hydro
- Annual Fund Value (total): £238,383 in 2018
- Year of Fund commencement: 2004
- Fund Area of Benefit: Strathnairn Community Council area, Highland
- Fund Administrator: Strathnairn Community Benefit Fund (SCBF), supported by Foundation Scotland

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Strathnairn Community Benefit Fund supports Strathnairn through a range of grants. Individuals can benefit from:

- Energy grants to help with fuel costs
- Supplementary home heating grants for the most vulnerable households
- Energy efficiency improvement grants
- Renewable energy technology grants, to help households install renewable energy systems
- Respite and hardship grants, to support households facing severe financial difficulties or requiring respite care.

Community organisations can also receive general grants for activities which benefit the community.

A key recommendation from this review was for SCBF's company structure to be changed so residents could become members of the company. This change was made in 2018, and within a few months 115 local people had registered to become members.

The new articles of association also allowed directors to be elected by members, rather than new directors being appointed by current ones. Six new directors joined the AGM in December 2018, bringing fresh perspectives and skills. The new Board has kept a degree of continuity, as three of the previous directors have continued in their role. The open election process increased the diversity of board members particularly in terms of age, with two young people under 21 joining.

FUND ARRANGEMENTS

SCBF is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. It was set up to distribute funds from the Farr windfarm (now owned by Vention Energy), then reached agreement with Dunmaglass (SSE), Moy (ENECO) and Farr Hydro (Forestry Commission Scotland) to also distribute community benefit funds from those developments.

Initially, SCBF worked with various freelancers to support fund administration. In 2017, SCBF decided it needed more independent professional support with administration and secretary functions, so commissioned Foundation Scotland to provide this. Foundation Scotland was also commissioned to review SCBF's governance arrangements and consult with the wider community, as SCBF was originally set up with Strathnairn Community Council as the single member.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

For several years the Fund awarded regular grants to fund things like community transport, extra-curricular activities for primary school children, running costs for community halls, a community website, a newsletter, and a handyperson service. Many individual households in the area also received grants towards fuel bills, energy efficiency improvements and renewable technology.

SCBF has successfully distributed funding in a way that reaches a high proportion of the community, creating a high awareness of SCBF and the funding opportunities in the area.

In 2018, SCBF committed to making a number of large capital grants from accumulated reserves, to address strategic priorities that had been identified through community surveys and conversations.

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These priorities include supporting a community broadband initiative and major refurbishments of community halls. Further consultation on the proposed large grants was carried out before the awards were made. This should increase the impact of the funding and make sure it provides a long-term legacy.

The changes to SCBF's governance structure in 2018 increased the transparency of the Fund's operations and allowed all local residents to engage with the Fund by becoming members. The fact so many people became members in the first few months after the change of structure shows there is a lot of interest in this, and the Board is keen to see this continue.

The increased diversity of the Board, particularly in terms of age, will be very helpful in shaping future Fund priorities to meet needs of the whole community. SCBF is very keen to address the gap in support for young people.

Alongside these changes, a Development Trust is being established for Strathnairn and SCBF is likely to be an important source of funding for initiatives developed by the Trust. This may increase demand for funds at first, but the Trust will be looking to set up activities which are economically sustainable and not dependent on grants in the long term.

The SCBF Board is supportive of this strategic initiative as it will create more opportunities to develop sustainable, community-led activity in the area and help create a legacy from the various community benefit funds.

LESSONS LEARNED

The recent changes to the structure of SCBF are now paying off in terms of increased engagement from, and accountability to, the local community. This can help SCBF achieve a bigger impact in the community, as well as improving its operation and reputation.

Having independent experts Foundation Scotland on board to coordinate and conduct the review process was crucial. Foundation Scotland were instrumental in consulting with key stakeholders and receiving recommendations based on expert legal advice, especially in terms of changes to SCBF's constitution.

SBCF took forward the recommendations and made major governance changes which have increased the transparency and accountability of the organisation. Those responsible for community benefit funds should regularly review their governance arrangements and funding priorities, and make changes where required.

The Fund's new Board continues to review the priorities of the Fund and the grants offered, with a broader range of perspectives feeding into that process.

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Ian Hunt, Chair of SCBF commented, "Following decisions taken at the AGM, the change from a restrictive single 'member' organisation to a membership open to all residents had to be completed within twelve months. This also involved the re-writing of the Articles of Association under which the Board operated. The then single member and community as a whole were consulted throughout the process resulting in the agreement of all concerned to the changes at the following AGM."

The newly appointed Directors were a mix of old and new including two under 21 year olds, substantially changing the demographics of the Board.

Having been through a period of making significant changes to the way we work, which has been challenging at times for a Board of volunteers, we have emerged as a stronger organisation which is more accountable to our local community."

Rachel Searle-Mbullu, Head of Communities at Foundation Scotland said, "It was a big decision for SCBF to open its doors to FS. Whilst they understood we had a track record in working with communities and developers to design and deliver community benefit funds, SCBF had proudly forged its own path and operated pretty much autonomously – and capably - for over ten years. Ultimately it was a real testament to the Board's commitment to improve the Fund for the benefit of Strathnairn that enabled them to consider different ideas and approaches and the flourishing membership numbers now being realised is a real testament to the community's appetite for that change".

Website: www.strathnairncbf.com

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