

Doing it for Themselves

There's a wealth of information available online for Interpret Scotland readers looking for help with community interpretation projects. Sue Walker highlights some of the best.

Many of Interpret Scotland's readers are professional interpreters. A number work for government organisations, NGOs and local authorities. For them, 'interpretation and communities' will probably mean ways in which they can engage and enthuse local people to co-operate with a project they, or their organisation, has initiated. However, there is an encouraging new trend emerging – communities are doing it for themselves. As some of the case studies in this issue demonstrate, groups of people from diverse backgrounds – urban, rural, radical or traditional – are getting together to initiate interpretation-focussed projects, and approaching the 'professionals' to help them.

Much of this empowerment has come from changes in the way funders are distributing their grants. Communities can now access a wide range of funds not available direct to other organisations. This has put them in the driving seat – and it is important that 'professionals' know how best to work with these communities within the new parameters.

There are a number of excellent websites that offer advice on working with communities in this way. The Forestry Commission's 'Forests and People', and 'Community Partnerships on the National Forest Estate' reports are very helpful – find them at: www.forestry.gov.uk

Other sites include:

Sharing Good Practice

www.snh.org.uk/sgp

Opening Doors: Learning in the Historic Environment

www.openingdoorsreport.org.uk

Local Interpretation

Plans Toolkit for Communities

www.herian.org/1098.did

Community Webnet

www.communitywebnet.org.uk

Partnerships Online

www.partnerships.org.uk

Renewal

www.renewal.net/toolkits/BuildPartnership/

These sites also provide useful information for communities who want to begin their own projects. Research indicates that there are big benefits to communities in taking this path. Projects can bring a sense of social cohesion, giving people a real feeling of control, and the sense that it is possible to make things happen, if people work together.

Interestingly, and perhaps obviously, a number of communities that have successfully initiated interpretive projects count 'professional' interpreters among their number. They can provide the first impetus to start a project, offering 'insider knowledge' of funding opportunities and expertise. For groups looking for that kind of information, the following websites give details of funding for communities who want to improve their environment – including the use of interpretation to do so:

Scottish Natural Heritage
www.snh.gov.uk

Greenspace Scotland
www.greenspacescotland.org.uk

Big Lottery Fund – Investing in Communities
www.biglotteryfund.org.uk

Forward Scotland – Transforming Your Space
www.forward-scotland.org.uk

For communities who really want to do it for themselves, there is guidance available on the web to help them through the process of producing their own interpretation. Scottish Natural Heritage has a best practice interpretation toolkit on its website that is considered by many to be the 'industry standard':
www.snh.org.uk/www/Interpretation/default.html

Interpretation can help a community to find itself if it's carried out appropriately, and with the full participation of the group. Take inspiration from the case studies in this issue, and information from the resources above, and see if your communities could benefit from doing it for themselves.

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'No army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time has come'
Victor Hugo