



Collaborative
Scotland

Better Conversations Bus Tour

October 2017

"You're the first group of people who have come here that I've spoken to in 40-50 years to talk about matters based purely and simply on conversation"

March 2018

Our Partners



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Collaborative Scotland (www.collaborativescotland.org) is a not for profit, non-partisan, wholly unaligned joint venture of Core Solutions, led by its founder and senior mediator, John Sturrock QC. It works on projects with partner organisations and others in Scotland who would like to see **effective, thoughtful and constructive consideration of issues which matter to people in Scotland.**

Collaborative Scotland was launched in 2013 in the run up to the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. It held a number of events before and after the referendum, with a focus on respectful dialogue and cooperation, while seeking to transcend a binary, adversarial approach to the issues. After a period in abeyance, there have been a number of events in 2017 to encourage open discussion of the implications of Brexit and the prospect of a second independence referendum. In particular, Collaborative Scotland has promoted the **Commitment to Respectful Dialogue** (see next page) to which a number of MSP's, leaders of civic society and many

other people, have subscribed.

The Better Conversations Bus Tour (**BCBT**) took place from 23-28 October 2017 and is a further Collaborative Scotland initiative.

The BCBT was supported by the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), the North Highlands Initiative (NHI), North Coast 500 (NC 500), Crown Estate Scotland (CES), Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Core Solutions (Core). The bus was provided by Rabbie's Tours.

Without their substantial financial and other contributions, the BCBT would not have been possible. We extend our thanks to all those from these bodies who helped.

This report produced by Collaborative Scotland discusses some of the insights gained from the BCBT, both relating to the challenges communities face and to the process of carrying out this kind of public engagement in rural areas.

In the Appendix starting at page 25 we include evaluation and feedback compiled on behalf of UHI.

Commitment to Respectful Dialogue

We believe that it is a privilege to be able to engage in discussions about our future. How we engage with each other may be just as important as any outcome. We believe that it is in the interests of a flourishing Scotland and our own community that our discussions are conducted with civility and dignity. Therefore, we undertake to do our best and encourage others to do their best to:

- **Show respect and courtesy** towards all those who are engaged in these discussions, whatever views they hold;
- Acknowledge that there are many **differing, deeply held and valid points of view**;
- **Use language carefully** and avoid personal or other remarks which might cause unnecessary offence;
- **Listen carefully** to all points of view and seek fully to understand what concerns and motivates those with differing views from our own;
- **Ask questions** for clarification when we may not understand what others are saying or proposing;
- Express our own views **clearly and honestly with transparency** about our motives and our interests;
- Respond to questions asked of us with clarity and openness and, whenever we can, with **credible information**;
- **Look for common ground and shared interests at all times.**

What a privilege it was to engage in this initiative. From town hall meetings with flip charts and group brainstorming about common goals for the future, to one-to-ones with imaginative innovators and battle-weary local politicians, to full-blown discussions about neuroscience and cognitive bias, to persuading an older resident that coming to our meeting might just be different to all the others. So it turned out: “You’re the first group of people who have come here that I’ve spoken to in 40-50 years to talk about matters based purely and simply on conversation”, he concluded.

“Funny how it takes an outside facilitator to get us talking about these things but I am glad you came” was the feedback in another meeting. The response was almost universally positive. People want to be listened to, without an agenda being imposed on them. They welcome a structure, a bit of guidance on process and the freedom to take some risks in a safe space.

What struck me most though was how important it is to return power to local communities, enabling them to take responsibility for their own futures. Declining

public funding means that it is imperative to release local energies and creativity. More local creative bangs and less public bucks. However, it is more than that. Returning autonomy and self-belief to communities which already have much of what it takes to thrive is essential. The future of our whole economy depends on it. And our work as mediators and facilitators has much to offer to this worthy goal.

So, we propose to take this forward. Specifically, we need to find ways for the sponsors and others to build on this venture with more local initiatives like this. This may include training local facilitators and offering a bespoke mediation service to rural economies. It may need more transparent and genuine engagement by local and other authorities. And the idea of Better Conversations and the Commitment to Respectful Dialogue can be extended to other areas in Scotland.

John Sturrock

Collaborative Scotland

Better Conversations Bus Tour 2017

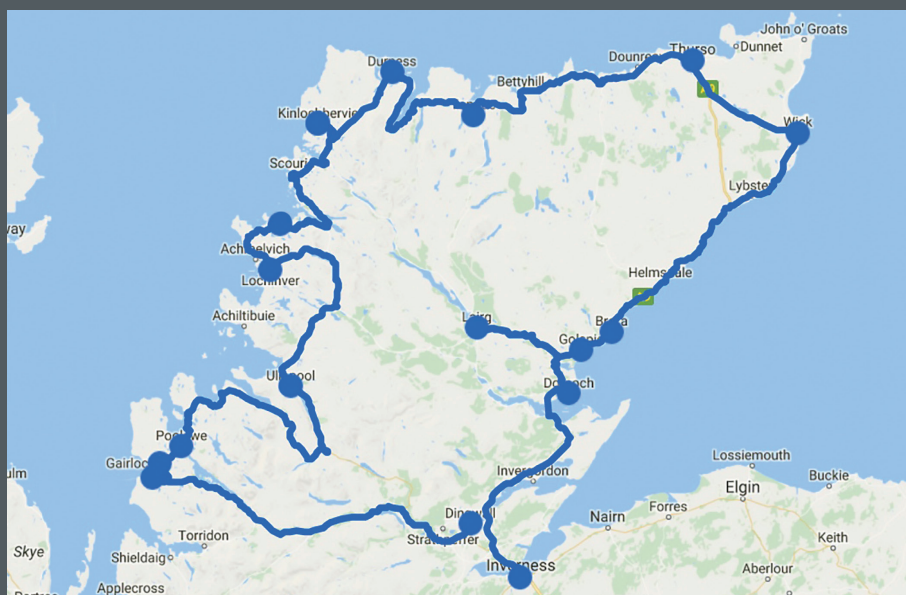
The BCBT sought to encourage respectful conversations in rural communities in the north and west Highlands of Scotland and to demonstrate what might be achieved thereby, in considering different ways of resolving difficult issues through respectful dialogue and constructive problem-solving.

Various meetings and discussions offered communities a chance to

reflect on questions such as “what kind of community would you like to be?”, encouraging people to focus not only on difficulties they face, but to share ideas, hopes and aspirations for the future. **For Scotland to thrive, blossoming rural communities are important.** Indeed, they can be an exemplar for others.

A team consisting of John Sturrock (Core), Tom Campbell (NC 500), Julie Marker (researcher from UHI), and Susan Lassesen (researcher from the University of Edinburgh) visited sixteen communities, following a significant part of the route of NC 500. They were joined for part of the journey by Graham Boyack of Scottish Mediation and Douglas Gibson of NC500. All provided their time for free. The team was also joined by our bus driver, Helen Sim of Rabbie's Tours (see Helen's Blog on page 30).





*The route of the Better Conversations Bus Tour from **Inverness** to **Dingwall***

The Tour commenced in Inverness on Monday 23 October and made its first stop in **Dornoch**. It moved on from there to **Lairg**, **Golspie**, **Brora**, **Wick**, **Thurso**, **Tongue**, **Durness**, **Kinlochbervie**, **Drumbeg**, **Lochinver**, **Ullapool**, **Poolewe**, **Badachro**, **Gairloch** and **Dingwall** (see Tour Itinerary on page 29). This schedule presented various logistical and other challenges which this report considers. The team encountered a diversity of places, people, and perspectives and, while many common themes emerged, there were different emphases and messages in each place. The team met inspiring people who live and work in their communities and who had ideas, hopes and aspirations for their communities. We extend a warm thanks to all who took part.

The Tour included business breakfasts, individual meetings and “surgeries”, and lunch meetings, all with the opportunity to discuss specific issues in confidence. Public meetings were held in

the evenings, at which local people were invited to talk about issues and challenges in their community. Each of these included reflections on *how* we engage in discussion about difficult issues, with a short presentation.

The events set out to achieve at least **two objectives**:

- **to offer participants time to reflect on how they carried out conversations and to introduce the Commitment to Respectful Dialogue as a model for better conversations**
- **to talk about current challenges and issues in their community and encourage consideration of ways to tackle them**

A number of participants undertook to take forward the discussions and proposals which emerged.

The unique landscape of the north and west Highlands is what makes it attractive, but it also presents challenges to the communities.

Some of the issues identified by participants included: **digital and physical infrastructure, connectivity, education, housing, employment, public service delivery and an awareness of distance from decision-making and decision-makers.**

These are all issues that impact on a future in which these communities can flourish and thrive. None of these are new but we record them along with some specific examples to contextualise how these challenges impact on communities today.

We note that a recent study by the **Federation of Small Businesses** reports similar concerns on the islands.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

Road transport is key. The roads are critical to the survival of these communities. However, road travel is challenging because of the landscape and distances. The lack of a regular and frequent public transport service is a serious issue for many, including students making their way to the few educational centres in the area, school children travelling to activities and shopping expeditions which involve any distance.

The **NC 500** has been an extraordinary success in terms

of bringing revenue and people to the area. This success was almost universally acknowledged by the people we met. Inevitably perhaps, the NC 500 has also presented some challenges in terms of pressure on roads and their maintenance and on other infrastructure, including waste disposal.

While tourism is a main source of revenue, communities are also concerned about how to make local economies sustainable with other types of revenue generation.

The roll-out of **broadband** is a key part of the Infrastructure Action Plan by the Scottish Government (and we note the recent budgetary proposal to invest more in the roll-out of a fibre network) but it remains an issue. In many communities, the internet connection is not reliable or consistent enough to support online businesses, making it hard from a business perspective to compete with businesses located elsewhere. **Consistency rather than speed was a key message.**

Where infrastructure falls short – be it physical or digital – it poses challenges *within* communities and businesses. However, perhaps as important, it presents challenges to achieving connectivity *between* places and people in the north and west Highlands, which seems critical for collaborative working across communities in the future.

Education, Housing and Jobs

A key question was how to **retain and attract younger people**. Barriers were most often seen as limited access to educational facilities, especially after secondary education, lack of affordable housing and lack of job opportunities.

Initiatives such as those developed by UHI have brought higher and further education closer to the north and west Highlands, but questions about how to make use of **skilled graduates** remain.

One participant commented: “we don’t know what most future jobs will be like”, so there is a sense of risk for smaller communities in investing in new ventures. **Brexit** was perceived to have a potential impact on availability of workers from abroad, especially in the hospitality industry.

Hospitality businesses often reported that they were short-staffed. Some said that working in hospitality was not for everyone and that few saw it as a career path. If locals do not wish to work in hospitality, this leads to a new set of challenges for future development in the tourism

industry.

If these jobs are to be filled, attracting people from elsewhere is a key issue, but this also puts more pressure on **availability of accommodation**: whole year and seasonal.

Presently, the **seasonality** of most jobs related to tourism makes it difficult for employers to find accommodation for their staff. This also affects communities, because the **price of housing** means that purchasers tend to be people who are older and not first-time buyers, impacting on the demography of the communities.

Combined with infrastructure challenges, all of this means that communities can find it particularly hard to attract certain skills that may be needed to expand and develop businesses or to offer local services.

“

We don’t know what most future jobs will be like.

”

Reduction in Public and Other Services

Recent years of **reduced public spending** have also impacted on life in the communities in the Highlands. As one participant said *"We are the first to see services cut and the last to see services added"*.

Communities see the few remaining public services they have disappear – in some places this manifests itself in proposals to reduce hospital beds or to close a local primary school, in others the poor state of road signs or uncut grass.

Like other rural communities, communities in the Highlands may also face **reduction in professional services** such as GPs, dentists, opticians, etc., and also experience a loss of tradespeople.

Examples referred to by participants include the closure of VisitScotland information centres, which are seen as beneficial resources, and the withdrawal of banks, something which has become an even more

significant issue since our tour. In a particularly telling example, a malfunctioning ATM, intended to function as a substitute for a local branch, meant that the only way local people and tourists could take out cash was at the local shop or garage, making people dependent on opening hours as well as putting pressure on local cash reserves.

Services run by communities that have historically been supported through external funding also face challenges, since the application process for funds has become increasingly competitive. Less funding can make it hard to maintain and develop local services, making it harder for communities to be able to fill in the gaps in service provision.

When public funding does remain available, devolving decision-making to more local levels seems desirable.



Local Participation in Groups and Organisations

We also encountered a sense of ‘**volunteer fatigue**’. In many communities it was the same few people who seemed to be part of many of the community groups – drawing on the same small pool of resources and feeling tired and stretched as a result.

In some communities there seemed to be an abundance of different groups (perhaps too many) but, in the light of fatigue, some wondered whether these activities could become less resource intensive and more efficient moving forward.

In some, a lack of a single business association or integrated community group was seen as a disadvantage.

Collaboration in small rural communities is especially crucial: as one participant expressed it: “Everybody knows everybody else. We have a strong appreciation for each other. It’s not easy to go somewhere else, but it’s not easy to stay here either”.

There is a **strong sense of interdependence** between people.

However, communities do not always agree on issues and, for those people who take it upon themselves to engage with outside investors/organisations on behalf of the community, it can prove difficult to find a way to represent the views of the community.

There was felt to be a lot of scope for cooperation, inclusivity and efficiencies in local activities. Indeed, at one public meeting, participants focused much more on finding ways to make the community more collaborative and socially sustainable. In another area, three local community councils are getting together to foster better collaboration on a regular basis.

The gains from learning from and working in collaboration with other communities seem potentially large.



The North West and 'The Rest'

While infrastructure issues and the reduction in services are challenges in and of themselves, many people felt that these were merely manifestations of an underlying issue – **a feeling of isolation and alienation.**

To people in these communities, while this showed in different ways, a central concern seemed to be a **perceived lack of information or communication** from public agencies and a lack of real understanding by providers of services of the circumstances in which people live who make use of the services.

A feeling of lack of transparency and authenticity as to why services were being reduced or what this meant to communities caused distrust in the effectiveness of representative democracy and in communities' abilities to influence decision-making.

Communities felt like they were being done *to* rather than worked *with*.

At a time when the rhetoric of public engagement is gaining momentum in Scotland, many communities felt that they had yet to experience its benefits.

Previous engagements had left some communities in apparent '**consultation apathy**' and feeling that engagements were mere tick box exercises rather than genuine opportunities for local communities to voice their concerns or come up with real input. Indeed, we had to overcome a suspicion that the Bus Tour was another such exercise.

All of this is happening when rural economies in the Highlands are facing fundamental changes with a reduction in manual labour, other jobs being hard to find, rural poverty still looming in the background and the continued existence of health problems like alcoholism.

“

Everybody knows everybody else. We have a strong appreciation for each other. It's not easy to go somewhere else, but it's not easy to stay here either.

”

Some Questions for the Future

Notwithstanding the many challenges, we encountered people with real hopes and aspirations for their community. Everywhere we met people with ideas on how to make the best of new opportunities and who were excited to share them. Some questions which seem central to moving forward are:

- How to make better and more efficient use of existing resources in the communities?
- How to encourage and enhance collaboration within and across communities?
- How to attract and accommodate people, especially younger people, through new job opportunities and affordable housing?
- How to make the best of tourism, while building a sustainable economy?
- How to attract necessary funding for community projects?
- How to support local autonomy, decision-making and problem-solving?
- How to ensure long-term planning rather than merely short-term gain?

“

We all need each other... developing clear objectives and a special sense of our own location is a must.

”



Contribution of the BCBT

The BCBT offered communities a **safe and impartial space in which to meet and explore common ground**.

By engaging in conversations like these, people from communities appeared to feel listened to and this in turn provoked some interesting and creative ideas. Furthermore, stimulated by reflecting on how people can discuss difficult matters constructively, participants often recognised that they themselves needed to listen to others more. It was good to acknowledge the importance of **listening, being listened to and feeling being taken seriously**.

Even if people felt like there was a long list of challenges that they need to overcome, many seemed to leave the events affirmed in the belief that something could be done – and some took on the responsibility to take initial steps.

Conversations created a space in which people could articulate the potential they saw in their community along with others from their area. This in some ways seemed to empower people and reignite the sense of hope that they could take ownership of what could be done. This seems vital in the future.

Engaging with sixteen communities in six days was an ambitious task. During the tour we pondered whether we should just have stayed in one location or focused solely on the east or west coast, each of which has its own issues. However, going from one community to another also offered opportunities to link like-minded people we encountered.

Instead of in-depth engagement in each of the communities, the BCBT may have created points of contact across the different communities from which people with similar interests could collaborate moving forward.

Collaboration across communities may come from this kind of engagement. They are facing many of the same challenges – but often in different ways. Connection might inspire innovative solutions.

“

It was a brave and truly altruistic thing that you and your co-participants did to organise and undertake the tour... It left me no doubt that Scotland and the Highlands in particular will, in due course, benefit from such personal commitment and generosity.

”



Next Steps

The **positive responses** we got from participants suggests that there is an **interest in bringing in this kind of facilitation** to help structure local conversations and that there is a **real need for community-wide conversations in Scotland** as we move forward.

Engaging with local businesses presented a good opportunity to come together and provided many good insights. With an **emphasis on better conversations and respectful dialogue**, we did not focus in these meetings on the more narrow topics of dispute resolution and use of mediation as we had originally conceived. These are topics which probably require a separate approach.

Furthermore, facilitating community-wide conversations in their broadest sense means paying more attention to what groups are engaged with and also

thinking about how to reach out beyond that.

Reaching out to the 'hard to reach' is a key challenge in any public engagement and will also require a different approach for engagement design – it might take longer to make people comfortable participating and necessitate a greater focus on **mitigating barriers to engagement** (eg transport, childcare, etc.).

Communities have histories and the accumulated memory of people living there will have a profound effect on the willingness and interest in participating in these sorts of projects. In our experience, the present challenges communities face, combined with past public engagement, have made some people in local communities suspicious of their purpose and doubtful of their effectiveness.

Challenges and Opportunities

At a time when public services are reducing, more responsibility is being passed on to communities themselves. Even though this presents possibilities in empowering communities and developing more localised services, available resources, e.g. funding and personnel, are limited.

The ‘**volunteer fatigue**’ some communities experience and the increased competition for funding makes it hard for communities to see how they could take on more responsibility.

At some of the events, participants were asked to come up with action points together to address some of the challenges they had discussed. A person from each event was invited to **collate the action points and follow up** with fellow participants. The idea of a local “champion” emerged.

It was agreed that these would be forwarded to Collaborative Scotland. However, these have not yet been forthcoming. We wonder if follow through is inevitably an issue.

There was **interest in hosting further conversations** of the type organised on the BCBT, and some of the communities (Brora, Wick, Lochinver, Tongue and Durness for example) expressed interest in **similar events in the future**, potentially facilitated by Collaborative Scotland, to offer a safe, credible space and a gathering point for people to come together and discuss issues with and within the wider community.



The reality is that the reduction in public funding is likely to continue and this means that it seems imperative to **encourage greater local creativity**.

Our recommendations focus more on **process** than substance.

- **Enhanced and better communication** from public servants and politicians to communities (and vice versa) about decision making, policy generation and budget allocation, to reduce the sense of isolation and distance from decision-making, and of being “done to”
- **Better physical and technological contact and connectivity** between and within communities, enabling them to learn from and with each other, drawing on each other’s resources, experience and knowledge, and standing stronger together to advocate and negotiate on common issues
- Further initiatives like the BCBT with better and more thoughtful **advance stakeholder mapping and engagement** to ensure that groups and people are contacted and invited and with a clear message and a purpose that is meaningful to local areas
- Involvement of local and regional groups including Community Planning Groups in further initiatives of this kind, and considering how these align with the Scottish Government’s Community Empowerment legislation
- Linking to other initiatives such as the Scottish Rural Parliament and the review of local governance
- Establishment of a **group of trained independent facilitators** and mediators who might assist local communities with specific issues
- Consideration of the establishment of a **Collaboration Forum** to engage communities further
- Development of opportunities for rural communities to **learn practical skills** for participation and constructive engagement on difficult issues
- **Consideration of funding** options for further initiatives of this type
- Dissemination of the findings of this Report
- Early discussion among BCBT partners about taking these recommendations forward
- **Specific and well supported follow up with the communities visited** on the BCBT, to build on the initial energy and enthusiasm and specifically exploring with participants whether further action has resulted from participation in the Tour

We hope that implementation of these recommendations will **inspire better conversations and collaboration** within and across communities, as well as with other sectors.



Overview

Here we offer a short description of the planning, promotion and delivery of the Tour. This will provide an insight into some of the lessons learned and reflections on what worked and what did not work, and what could be done differently if such an initiative is undertaken again.

Communication and Promotion

The BCBT sought to engage with two different types of groups: businesses and the 'wider community'. A detailed stakeholder mapping or analysis of local groups/organisations/businesses in the communities was not undertaken in advance of the Tour but we had local contacts through the sponsors. A fuller stakeholder analysis might have helped to better determine

who could and should initially be invited and how local networks could be deployed to encourage other people to come along. It also became evident that business issues are intimately connected with local challenges – both because of the geographic location and the fact that business owners are locals too.

Advance promotion included emailed invitations to more than 500 local businesses and others, sent by NC500 and other sponsors, advertisement and coverage in local newspapers, BBC Good Morning Scotland and Highland radio appearances, and posters circulated to communities. The Collaborative Scotland website featured daily blogs from the Tour.



During the Tour we learned that local advertisement had not always been effective. Almost all participants indicated in a survey that information came from 'other' sources rather than 'newspaper', 'radio', or 'social media.' Our poster was said to be unclear about when and where events were to be held and who the events were aimed at. Furthermore, even though the poster was distributed by email to all the communities, it seemed only to be printed and distributed in a few. More needed to be done to target interested individuals in advance.

A **social media** strategy was mostly centred around Twitter – @coresolutions and @collabscotland. This was a good way to engage with stakeholders and people outside the communities, but not necessarily with the local communities. During the Tour, we became aware that using Facebook from the outset

might have been useful.

Prior to the Tour, the event title: "Brexit and other challenges: what community do we want to be?" had seemed straightforward and easy to understand. The message that better conversations could lead to better collaboration and outcomes, as well as the distinction between business meetings and public meetings, seemed clear. However, this strategy seemed not always to have worked. The message seemed mixed and confusing to some of our participants. Most were unsure what the conversations were going to be about - and to some communities Brexit seemed far removed from local concerns. Message, audience and purpose need to be clear.

Credibility

Sometimes, the BCBT team was perceived as outsiders from 'down south' who would not fully understand and might not really care much about a local community. There was some concern about the real purpose of the Tour. The message that it was primarily and simply designed to encourage and facilitate better conversations was met with some scepticism and suspicion. Some thought that it was a Scottish Government "tick-box" exercise. In other words, for some the Tour may initially have lacked credibility and legitimacy. This was regularly overcome by the **authenticity and content** of the meetings but will have resulted in lower attendances at some events. In spite of the advertisement and communication challenges, when surveyed, participants at events indicated that they appreciated the fact that Collaborative Scotland acted as an impartial facilitator of meetings and structured conversations.

Important elements in building credibility included:

- The ability to convey a genuine interest in communities and helping them to thrive;
- Honesty and openness about what Collaborative Scotland could and could not do;

- Competent facilitation of the events;
- Indicating that there would be would follow up with communities and a report

Where we had some contact in advance with an individual or individuals in a local community who could advertise and mobilise people to turnout at the events, there was a significant difference. In those cases, people who turned up also seemed to be better informed and prepared for what an event was about. Local contacts helped to make the general theme of the Tour relevant to the local community. That prior engagement with trusted local figures is crucial. Of course, even this approach can be limiting and lead to the inclusion of some and not others. Nothing is perfect.

We note that having more local contacts who would extend initial invitations in collaboration with Collaborative Scotland and the more local sponsors might make a difference in turning such events into 'community projects' rather than an apparent imposition.

When all is said and done, for those who participated, the BCBT was **universally warmly received** (see page 26).

“

You and your team left a lasting impact, and it is already having an effect as we all try to be more focused and collaborative... Thanks for the inspiration.

”

Venues and Timing

Location and size of venues varied considerably. Some venues were located in the centre of the village/town, while others were on the periphery. It is also important to note that not all locations had a clearly defined centre. It is hard to say how much of an impact on participation this had, but having each event in more central, accessible and visible venues is likely to be preferable for the future.

As noted, even small communities can have a large number of local organisations. This held true for several of the communities the BCBT visited. As an 'outsider', it can be difficult to know what is taking place and when, which meant that some of our events may have conflicted with local ones. Evening public meetings seemed to work well if the

promotion was good. When engaging with businesses, timing is important: breakfast meetings were easier than lunchtime. An explanation is likely to be that most businesses in the communities we visited were smaller ones and that taking time off during opening hours might mean closing the business for a few hours. We found that going to businesses themselves, engaging in informal talks, turned out to be a good way to make contact. That said, the business breakfasts also offered local businesses a chance to get together and explore common ground – possibly opening up **opportunities for future collaboration**.



Event Design

As previously mentioned, **the aim of the BCBT was twofold: to offer a space for consideration of how to engage in conversation and collaboration as well as reflection and discussion about current challenges and issues in a community.** Because of the diversity of communities and differences in turnout, some meetings were less structured, but generally a session consisted of:

- 40-45 minutes of presentation and exercises on communication, cognitive biases and collaboration, led by John Sturrock
- 60 minutes of facilitated conversation amongst participants
- Drawing up action points, using flip charts.

Evaluations completed by participants suggested that both parts were relevant and interesting. Suggestions as to how meetings could be developed in the future included: **inviting people with decision-making power, more time for discussion and more topical/focused events.**

The way the events were set up did allow people to share their frustrations, and also to talk about possible solutions. Not all challenges faced by communities in the north and west Highlands can be solved by the communities alone, but there are many things that they can do.

By focusing on what communities themselves can take responsibility for, the atmosphere often changed and constructive ideas flowed.

“

Great discussions - could have done it all day long. Funny how we have to have an outside facilitator to make it happen, but glad we did!

”

Pre-Tour Organisation

A significant amount of organisation was required to ensure that the Tour ran smoothly. Substantial time was spent in designing and editing graphics and the website, and arranging for delivery of posters, event invitations and newspaper adverts. In the weeks prior to the Tour, the team in the Core office became more involved with additional aspects such as communication with participants (registrations, email and phone enquiries), changes to website and marketing materials, organising logistics for the week and preparing materials for the events.

During the week on the road, phone, twitter, and email enquiries continued to come to the office and required action and response. There was, perhaps understandably for a new project, some lack of clarity about responsibility and roles across the organising and sponsoring bodies, which had some impact on effectiveness. This can be rectified in any future project.



Evaluation and Feedback

Evaluation summary

(Collated from events where feedback sheets were distributed)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The session was informative	30 (71 %)	10 (24%)	2 (5%)	0	0
I found the session a good use of my time	28 (67%)	12 (28%)	2 (5%)	0	0
Adequate time was provided for questions and discussion	27 (64%)	6 (14%)	9 (21%)	0	0
My expectations were met	27 (64 %)	9 (21%)	2 (14%)	0	0

What areas would you like to see covered in future meetings?

- Several themes relating to collaboration – “More of ‘how to engage a whole community’”. “Action planning for community”, “more group discussion”, “collaborative techniques.” Several responses added, “more of what was done today”, “more content on mediation”, “strengthening liaison, collaboration, and support between major land-owners, Highland Council, and residents”.
- Several respondents wish to discuss housing affordability, energy, transportation and the challenges of planning for the long term.
- One respondent said, “target areas for resolution e.g. Flow County, wind farm community benefits, coupling of educational aspects”. Another wrote “Everybody seems to know what the issues are, focus more on solutions and commitment.”

What areas should not be included in future meetings?

- One participant suggested “less psychology/quotes and more action”, another said “Brexit not highly relevant to me or most locals”

Any other comment?

"Very positive experience"

"Inspiring"

"Good step forward"

"Well done, a great session"

"Thank you"

"Excellent"

"Great discussions – could have done it all day long. Funny how we have to have an outside facilitator to make it happen, but glad we did!"

"Good clear presentation – food for thought"

"Very good presentation"

"Ensure links are made with Community Planning Partnerships"

"Great initiative, much needed"

Questions and comments arising during meetings at each venue

Dornoch

- How to retain people in the workforce
- How to maximise opportunities
- We can compete better with faster broadband
- Speak directly to young people to ascertain their views
- Investment - How do you get funding?
- Developing a sense of what people can do
- Problems highlighted with travelling to college. Transport links and timings
- Infrastructure, accommodation for staff
- How can communities benefit NC500 and vice-versa
- Business and skills matching
- Facilitating school engagement opportunities with businesses
- People feel disconnected from Highland Council – poor communication
- Understanding creative ways of enabling communities to participate, including budget allocations
- Improving 'Dornoch Experience'
- No venues for local music. Interested to hold a music festival

Lairg

- No attendees at meeting so we took the opportunity to visit local business owners
- Optimistic about the future, mainly due to a few graduates returning to the area to start own businesses. Good relationships among local businesses. New website just launched which will enable better collaboration – visitlairgandrogart.co.uk
- Main concerns are recruitment problems. One business owner, who is expanding her business premises to keep up with demand, had seven posts that she is still unable to fill

Golspie

- Speaking with local businesses, staffing issues also raised as the main problem here

Brora

- Small turnout – but good discussion. Highlighted signage problems and how local communities can make best use of NC500

Wick

- Decisions made in Inverness do not reflect local needs

Thurso

- Small turnout, discussion focusing on local opportunities in terms of land reform, world heritage site, national health provision

Tongue

- Transport issues forcing young people to reconsider UHI in favour of other universities
- Would prefer decisions over local amenities to be taken locally, decisions made in Inverness do not reflect local needs
- Communication is a significant problem locally
- Broadband connectivity also a problem
- Would like organisations to talk 'to us'
- No collective voice for tourism
- How is it that GDP is growing but local services are being cut?

Durness

- No success in achieving community ownership of Smoo Cave. Really important to keep visitor centre
- Building on the John Lennon family connection
- Things to do when the weather is particularly bad
- What can be done to help young people stay in the area? Activities for kids
- A pier could make a real difference
- Islands and Inverness have huge investment, not seen here

Kinlochbervie

- Central government way off
- Strong suggestions for an east and west council
- We are first to see services cut and last to see services introduced
- Not seriously regarded by Inverness
- There is a bias towards east coast
- Tired of being HIE's idea, promises never delivered
- We have no control
- Communities Empowerment Act is only there to transfer responsibilities to volunteers
- Highland Council hold the power, we have none
- This is the first time in 40-50 years I have heard a group of people talk about open communication
- We welcome better communications between communities

Lochinver

- Poor communication
- Too many committees – suggestion of one group with sub-committees reporting back
- We have wonderful food, better coordination required between businesses, so they operate to complement each other's opening times for instance
- Welcome more collaboration and cooperation
- Voiced a desire to be cohesive, happy, attractive, supportive, prosperous, lively, sustainable, connected, welcoming, thriving and forward-thinking

Ullapool

- Community Broadband – live
- Ullapool Community Trust
- Commitment to sustainability
- Collaboration very important in this community, lots of innovation

Gairloch

- Main issue facing businesses is recruiting and retaining staff. UHI could do more to join skills and jobs i.e training in tourism and hospitality alongside businesses

Dingwall

- Community could develop a mechanism to help communities engage
- Turn rhetoric into reality
- Lots of chat, no action
- Very positive about NC500 and the opportunities it brings

Tour Itinerary

Monday 23 October

- 09:00 Dornoch Business Breakfast
- 10:30 Dornoch Private Surgeries for Local Businesses
- 13:00 Lairg Lunchtime Meetings
- 15:00 Golspie Meetings with Local Businesses
- 18:00 Brora Public Meeting

Tuesday 24 October

- 08:00 Wick Business Breakfast
- 10:00 Wick Private Surgeries for Local Businesses
- 18:30 Thurso Public Meeting

Wednesday 25 October

- 08:30 Tongue Business Breakfast
- 12:00 Durness Lunchtime Meeting
- 17:30 Kinlochbervie Public Meeting

Thursday 26 October

- 10:30 Drumbeg Public Meeting
- 12:00 Various private meetings with local business and other interests
- 19:30 Lochinver Public Meeting

Friday 27 October

- 08:30 Ullapool Business Breakfast
- 10:00 Ullapool Private Surgeries for Local Businesses
- 13:00 Poolewe Private Surgery for Local Business
- 14:30 Badachro Private Surgery for Local Business
- 17:30 Gairloch Public Meeting

Saturday 28 October

- 09:30 Dingwall Breakfast and Public Meeting

Helen's Blog

"I don't think I really expected to gain anything from the Better Conversations Bus Tour. I am very familiar with the North Coast 500 route, and have been to all of the towns and villages several times. As a tour guide I know their histories, I know the local landscape and geology, and I know the locations of every free toilet and good café. Whilst on the Better Conversations Bus Tour, however, I very quickly realised that my knowledge of these communities was based on tourism. By visiting these communities as a tour guide, and by experiencing these villages and towns with a tour in tow, I was only really experiencing them on a superficial level. I was very much of the belief that if a town had good cafes, good toilets, and a couple of souvenir shops thrown in, then it was doing well. What more would you need?

The first thing that struck me was just how many problems these communities faced. It wasn't just one or two grumbles about the roads or the lack of broadband - there was a real multitude of problems, some of which were incredibly serious and these communities were facing them on a daily basis. Alcoholism, aging populations, lack of affordable housing, hospital and school closures, deteriorating facilities, unemployment etc. The list seemed endless. The meetings we had with these communities lasted anywhere between 45 minutes to over two hours, and yet it felt like we were only scraping the surface. And while it would be

easy to see this whole tour as all doom and gloom, the thing which struck me most, and which, for me, will be the overriding aspect to take away from this tour, is the abundance of truly inspiring people committed to doing something about it. People of incredible intelligence, optimism, determination, and innovation.

The Better Conversations Bus Tour was able to give these people a voice, and perhaps instill in them the feeling that they're not alone or forgotten. While the problems raised will not simply go away, or be easily solved, the commitment to addressing these issues and coming together as a community to solve them, was evident at every meeting. And on a personal level, this tour allowed me to come into contact with people I otherwise would have never met. And most importantly, through meeting these individuals, it has given me hope that the future of these communities will be a positive one."

- Helen Sim, Rabbie's Tours and BCBT Bus Driver



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"Great initiative, much needed."



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