

Seminar focuses on village halls

Of the 16 village halls in north-west Sutherland stretching from Lochinver to Melvich, 13 were represented at a seminar on village halls and community buildings held in Durness last Saturday.

In March this year a national event was held in Aviemore regarding the value and uses of village halls in Scotland. It was apparent from this gathering that the differing standards and scale of halls throughout Scotland were vast. As there was only a very small representation from the north-west, CVS North contacted and visited all the halls in the area and estimated from the response that there was support for a local seminar.

The day started with an opening and welcome from the chairwoman of CVS North, Kirsteen Mackay, and was facilitated throughout the day by development officers Frances Gunn and Ronnie Lansley. After a general introduction on the responsibilities of hall committees to fulfil the criteria required by legislation, each hall was discussed in turn with their recent achievements, aspirations and concerns.

David Inglis gave a talk on his new post as licensing officer for Sutherland and Caithness with specific reference to the guidance for voluntary organisations in the Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005.

Licensing law in Scotland is currently changing. The process will be rigorous and applicants are encouraged to submit applications as early as possible, especially for premises not recently licensed or



Delegates at the village hall seminar for north-west Sutherland held in Durness last Saturday. Picture: Ronnie Lansley.

where there might be public safety issues. David clarified many of the concerns and misunderstandings that have been created regarding the new Act. Guidance notes for completion of the application forms will shortly appear on Highland Council's website.

After lunch Mark Brennan from the Crofters Commission explained the work of the Rural Direct scheme, which offers advice, support and technical expertise to help rural communities access funding including the new Rural Priorities programme. If communities want to refurbish village halls, develop new local services or come up with a long-term plan for community development, then this new service run by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Crofters Commission can help make the most of the funding programmes that are available.

Jon Priddy explained the purpose of the new company, Community Energy Scotland. This agency is setting out to build con-

fidence, resilience and wealth at community level through sustainable energy development. Its vision is of a self-financing community energy sector in Scotland underpinned by an extensive network of revenue-generating renewable energy projects. Jon explained in a concise presentation the assistance that can be obtained with funding for projects of all sizes.

Highland Council was represented by Lawrence Jamieson, community learning and development officer for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, and Andy Mackay ward manger for North, West and Central Sutherland. Lawrence outlined the main source of Highland Council funding and "who's who" in his department, and where help can be obtained for village halls. An informative summary of a comprehensive publication entitled Capital Funding for Village Halls gave an informative insight into the process and requirements, with sources of help for those seeking funds.

Andy gave a synop-

sis of the ward discretionary budget held by local councillors George Farlow and Linda Munro, both of whom were present, and Robbie Rowantree who had sent his apologies. He described the areas where help has been given and the priorities for future funding decisions.

Kirsty Bateson from K Bateson Consulting gave a presentation on effective fundraising, covering how to present an idea to potential funders, writing a proposal and proper evaluation.

The day was concluded with a demonstration of Funder Finder, an electronic software package that allows searching through grant-giving trusts and organisations to match project proposals. This service is offered by CVS North.

Christine Ross from Voluntary Groups - East Sutherland gave an outline of the Community Toolkit, a resource developed for and with the help of community groups, to help improve skills and knowledge and bring benefits to

local communities. There are guidelines on a range of topics, including setting up and running a community group, legal requirements and good practice, planning and fundraising for a particular project and where to obtain useful statistical data.

Trina Hastings, development officer from Voluntary Action Highland, assisted CVS North by taking notes and information which will be used to further evaluate the day.

It is planned to present the outcomes and findings in an information package that will be distributed to all those who attended and be incorporated on to the CVS North website.

The seminar was attended by 40 people and was seen as very positive and gave opportunities to hear about everyone's plans and activities. Despite the problems being encountered by the majority of halls, such as funding and committee recruitment, there was a very positive feel about the whole day and a willingness to work together, share information and good practice.

The types of building and the condition they are in vary widely, but it was clear that village halls in the area are all important assets to the communities and villages that they serve. Although their uses have changed in recent years, they were necessary for the ongoing stability of communities.

Many committees were now identifying new uses and finding out how their facilities can be maintained and reorganised to meet the new demands.