

CROSS-PARTY GROUP on CROFTING
Meeting 24 of Parliamentary Session 4
Scottish Parliament, room Q.1.03
Wednesday 08 October 2014 at 17.30

MINUTES

Present:

Jamie McGrigor MSP¹ (Chair)
Patrick Krause SCF (Sec)
Lucy Sumsion NFUS
William Neilson NFUS
Karen MacRae crofter
Pam Rodway SAS
Fiona Mackenzie UHI
Derek Flyn SCF
Ishbel Crawford LANTRA
Robin Haig observer
Norman MacAskill SCVO / SRA
Phil Burns SG
Jean Balfour SLE
Uisdean Robertson CnES
Tom Edwards SPICe
Douglas Pattullo office of Jamie McGrigor MSP
Angus MacDonald MSP
Jean Urquhart MSP

1. Welcome and Apologies.

Jamie McGrigor welcomed everyone and invited introductions. Apologies were received from:

Fiona Mandeville SCF; Russell Smith SCF; Dave Thompson MSP; Rob Gibson MSP; Rhoda Grant MSP; Neil Ross HIE; Susan Walker CC; Catriona MacLean CC; Colin Kennedy CC; David Campbell CC; Gordon Jackson SG; John Brownlee SG; Richard Frew SG; Billy McKenzie SG; Brian Inkster CLG; Sandy Murray NFUS; Nigel Miller NFUS; Murdo MacKay CnES; Andrew Midgley SLE; Ross McLaren SCRG; George Farlow HC.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

Minutes of 20 August 2014 agreed.

¹ **Acronyms:** CAB Citizens Advice Bureau; CC Crofting Commission; CFS Care Farming Scotland; CLG Crofting Law Group; CnES Comhairle nan Eilean Siar; EFNCP European Forum for Nature Conservation & Pastoralism; HC Highland Council; HIE Highlands & Islands Enterprise; HSCHT Highland Small Communities Housing Trust; HWU Herriot-Watt University; JHI James Hutton Institute; LANTRA Land-based & Environmental Industries; MSP Member of the Scottish Parliament; NFUS National Farmers Union Scotland; RoS Register of Scotland; SAS Soil Association Scotland (Crofting Connections); SCF Scottish Crofting Federation; SCRG Scottish Churches Rural Group; SCVO Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations; SG Scottish Government; SLE Scottish Land & Estates; SNH Scottish Natural Heritage; SPICe Scottish Parliament Information Centre; SRA Scottish Rural Action; SRUC Scottish Rural (University) College; RSPB Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; UHI University of Highlands and Islands; WCP Woodland Crofts Partnership.

3. Matters arising

All Actions completed.

4. Scottish Rural Parliament

Norman MacAskill, a member of the board of SRA, the incorporated body organising the Scottish Rural Parliament (SRP), gave a presentation outlining the progress made towards the first national meeting of the SRP.

The name Parliament is ancient and refers to a place to talk. It is not representative, but participatory. Anyone can attend and raise topics for discussion.

Preliminary events have been held all over Scotland and the main national event will be held in Oban from 6th to 8th November. It is anticipated that the national event will take place bi-annually so there will be one, somewhere, in 2016.

The Cabinet Minister for Rural Affairs, Richard Lochhead, is very supportive and the idea of a Scottish Rural Parliament was in the SNP manifesto. There is £200,000 of Scottish Government funding. Whilst being supportive the Scottish Government have not been interfering in any way; this initiative is independent of the Scottish Government but is useful to them. Scottish Rural Action (SRA) was formed to manage the preparation of the SRP.

Headline topics that have been identified through online consultation, twitter and the preliminary events are: local business; transport; broadband provision; environment and natural resources; land-use and planning; health and social care; and community leadership. The consideration of young people will cut across all of these topics.

Until recently Norman managed the Scottish Rural Network through SCVO.

Rural always seems to be a subset, rarely the main, but it does have a collective identity; it has been referred to as a "dis-aggregated city". "Rural proofing" has been resisted as rural should be seen as mainstream - though it isn't as yet.

The idea of Rural Parliament has proven success in 22 European countries.

Discussion:

Even though it has a high percentage of land mass being rural, Scotland is more urban than other UK nations in that a higher percentage of its population lives in cities.

Young people were not put forward as a topic in their own right by participants. Transport was put forward as the number one issue, as always.

'Rural proofing' seems to be quite difficult to implement practically. There needs to be more structured rural proofing. This could perhaps be an outcome of the SRP that there should be ingrained, informal implementation rather than official 'box ticking'. The SRP will raise awareness. And not just about remote areas and islands; rural communities exist 10 miles from a major city.

There has been a mixed reception to the concept of SRP. The West Highland Free Press for example dubbed the board as "self appointed blowhards" (*sec: this caused amusement*).

Originally the chair was John Watt but he had to step down when appointed to the Land Reform Review Group. The board then appointed John Hutchison, for whom there has been total support. He has proved to be an excellent chair and has produced great results. He gave an excellent briefing to the Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs committee, along with SRA staff member Emma Cooper. The committee have asked for feedback from the national event in November. They considered going to Oban en masse but decided not to in case it would be perceived to be interfering.

What other routes are there to the Scottish Government? There has been close contact with Scottish Government civil servants who will participate in November and it is very important to maintain this relationship. Richard Lochhead is very interested, influenced by the Swedish model (*sec: this caused amusement*).

Housing is a very important rural issue, why is it not one of the headline topics? Housing is included in Land-use and Planning.

It is intended for there to be 400 participants in Oban in November, at least 300 of whom will be from rural community groups. It is important to not just have the "usual suspects" attend. There is an online registration process. There have been over 400 registrations so far and there will need to be some intervention to ensure a fair geographic spread and sectorial representation.

Does rural poverty figure on the agenda? Yes, SRUC produced a report which was presented to the cross party group on rural policy. It noted that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation doesn't work well in the rural situation. It was an excellent report and undoubtedly will be referred to in the SRP. It's not an agenda item as such but will inevitably be discussed.

Crofting Connections (*Sec: an SAS / SCF project*) needs to be included but it is difficult to fill in the registration. Yes Crofting Connections will be included; the registration process necessitates individuals filling in the registration, not the group. There may be some funding support for transport and subsistence.

In the Health and Social topic area the difficulty in procuring local GPs will be discussed. It is difficult to understand why this has gone so wrong. Perhaps it comes from medical schools, the lack of encouragement to become a rural GP.

5. Croft House Grant Scheme

The SCF have written to the Minister, Paul Wheelhouse, on the Croft House Grant Scheme (circulated before the meeting). In the letter SCF suggested that there needs to be an increase in funding of the scheme. A response from Scottish government has been that there is a review of the scheme going on currently and, without anticipating the result of the review, there seems no reason to not support a "reasonable increase".

Has the scheme kept up with inflation? No. There has been no revaluation of the scheme since its inception in 2004. The rates set at the time (£22,000, £17,000 and £11,500, geographically targeted) were based on the old Crofter Building Grant and Loan Scheme (CBGLS) which itself had not been uprated since 1986. At that time, according to research carried out by Professor Mark Shucksmith for the Scottish Crofters Union, it covered 82% of average total building costs. A study by the SCF in 2008 showed that it covered 14% of average costs (based on an average cost of building a small house in the Highlands and Islands of £125,000). Since 2008 the cost of building has of course risen.

The Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs and Environment Committee carried out an Inquiry into Rural Housing in 2008. In their 5th Report dated May 2009, they stated:

"The Committee calls for the reinstatement of the loan element in croft house assistance, recognising that the pre-existing method appeared to be cost-effective and that alternative sources of credit may no longer be readily available. We also call for the grant element to be increased to reflect inflation within the building industry over recent years."

Scottish Government has as yet not responded to this. Do they intend to?

Scottish Government will respond to the committee after it has completed its review and consultation. The consultation should come out at the end of the year and will be for the usual 12 weeks.

Comment: crofters seem to have to wait for a lot of things, this being another. Response: legislative process takes time. Q: So when is the earliest we will see change? A: The consultation will go out at the end of the year and will take three months, after which perhaps another three months for process, so summer 2015 before it goes to Scottish Parliament (if negative, it just goes to committee).

Self-build has always been away of cost-effective building of Croft houses but now banks won't give loans on self-build. The Crofting Commission were looking at bank mortgages for self-build. They should be asked to report on progress. **Agreed.**

6. Crofting Development

The leaflet has been produced by HIE explaining crofting community development.

Comment: there still is a lack of clarity about who does crofting development.

Response: HIE has responsibility for crofting community development and Scottish Government have a part to play; refer to Gordon Jackson's list from a few meetings ago. This has been elaborated in the leaflet. Scottish Government Crofting Stakeholder Forum (SGCSHF) will be monitoring crofting development.

Crofting development needs to be a standing item on the Cross Party Group on Crofting (CPGoC) agenda. Someone from SGCSHF needs to report to CPGoC, including the budget and accounts. **Agreed.**

7. CAP and Crofting

There was no update available at this time, as such. However, Scottish Government will be writing to all farmers and crofters in November regarding the payment regions. Farmers and crofters will have 60 days to object.

There will be a Scottish Government Roadshow, covering pillar 1 in November and December and pillar 2 in January and February.

Discussion:

How will region three be defined? Region 3 (LFASS category A) will be based on aerial photographs. Quite a lot of common grazing has no category and this will be automatically classed as Region 3. Crofters and farmers are urged to read the letter very carefully and to respond to Scottish Government if they object. For example PGRS could be classed as Region 3 so it will be for the crofter to prove it is Region 2.

Q: Is there any update on the coupled payments for sheep? A: Only Region 3 can claim it. Latest thoughts are that it will be based on one hogg Per 4 ha. It is classed as a UK wide scheme but is only available in Scotland.

Region 3 is to be paid €10 per hectare. Q: €10 was never mentioned in the consultation, why? A: NFUS pointed out that the large rough grazing areas could dig into the budget and lobbied strongly for having a Region 3.

Sporting estates have been added to the negative list. It will be their responsibility to prove agricultural activity.

Q: What is the definition of minimum activity? A: This is a work in progress.

Comment: farmers and crofters were told to diversify but now they are told if you have no livestock you get no money. Response: diversification is in pillar 2.

8. Progress regarding crofting law

Derek Flyn gave an update on the crofting law group 'sump'. The first paper, the collected sump, had over 100 contributions. The commented sump was then distributed to stakeholders. Responses are needed by 15 October to prepare a draft final report for the CLG conference on 29 October in North Uist. The aim is to present the final report to the Minister by end November.

Comment: it should be noted how much work Derek Flyn and Keith Graham have put in to the preparation of the report. It is a huge contribution to crofting. The meeting agreed that Derek and Keith should be commended.

9. AOB

1. Sea Eagles

NFU Scotland has produced a Sea Eagle Action Plan and is working with SNH to deliver that. NFUS anticipate signing a memorandum of agreement with SNH in the next few weeks. One of the first actions will be to set up Local Sea Eagle Groups in the areas currently most severely affected.

2. Crofting Connections project workshop

Pam Rodway informed the group that pupils from crofting connections schools would be gathering in Assent soon to discuss crofting. This will be filmed by Robin Haig.

Action: Film of the Crofting Connections workshop to be shown at next CPGoC meeting.

9. DONM

26 November 2014