

CROSS-PARTY GROUP on CROFTING
Meeting 28 of Parliamentary Session 4
Scottish Parliament, room Q.1.03
Wednesday 22 April 2015 at 17.30

MINUTES

Present:

Jean Urquhart MSPⁱ (Chair)
Patrick Krause SCF (Sec)
Colin Campbell ASC
Lucy Sumsion NFUS
Sandy Murray NFUS
David Campbell CC
Neil Ross HIE
Maria Scholten SCF
Rob Humphrey SCFYC
Maddy Norval SCFYC
Alex Munro SCFYC
Megan Rowland SCFYC
Douglas Pattullo office of Jamie McGrigor
Ian MacKenzie AC
Ross McLaren SCRG
Charlie Hanks NS
Robin Haig observer
Angus MacDonald MSP
Fiona Mackenzie UHI

1. Welcome and Apologies.

Jean Urquhart MSP welcomed everyone and invited introductions. Apologies were received from:

Jamie McGrigor MSP; Dave Thompson MSP; Fiona Mandeville SCF¹; Derek Flyn SCF; Russell Smith SCF; Rhoda Grant MSP; Rob Gibson MSP; Brian Inkster CLG; Susan Walker CC; Catriona MacLean CC; Colin Kennedy CC; Andrew Hamilton SLE; Andrew Midgley SLE; Janette Sutherland SAC; Murdo MacKay CnES; Uisdean Robertson CnES; Gordon Jackson SG; John Brownlee SG; Billy McKenzie SG; Phil Burns SG; George Farlow HC; Claire Slipper NFUS; William Neilson NFUS; Iain MacKinnon Coventry Uni; Joette Thomas AC; James Shewan SCFYC; Viv Montgomery SCFYC; Grant MacKinnon SCFYC; Olga Bloeman NS; Pam Rodway SAS; Eleanor Garty WTS; Tom Edwards SPICe.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

Minutes of the last meeting held on 11 March 2015 were approved.

3. Matters arising

Item 7. Registering Common Grazings; if a clerk has registered their own croft they cannot register the common grazings. This doesn't make sense. Sandy Murray to raise with RPID.

Item 9. Seasonal Lets. RPID and CC were to meet to discuss - "a meeting will be arranged". Follow up with RPID / CC at next meeting.

¹ Many giving apologies had asked to join the meeting by VC but this is not possible in SP – see AOB.

4. Young Crofters 20:20

Four Young Crofters, Maddy Norval, Rob Humphrey, Alex Munro and Megan Rowland gave a presentation on their concerns for crofting following the Gathering: Young Crofters 20:20 in Assynt in March.

The main points they concentrated on were access to: grant support; homes; land and jobs.

CAGS grants are not accessible to young crofters as the applicant has to find the capital first and has to spend it in order to then be able to get the grant. It is a cash-flow problem. This doesn't make any sense as young folk can't get hold of capital like that. It is an inverse means-testing – testing against those that need the grant. If they had access to that sort of money, to build an agricultural shed for example, do they need a grant?

It is the same with the CHGS, the applicant has to find so much money to start with it puts it out of reach of young folk.

There needs to be a way to ease cash-flow. Could SG pay the grant directly to the contractor carrying out CCAGS work, like it used to? Could SG provide a loan for GHGS like it used to?

The reason given for not is that EC says no. Does it? This needs to be tested.

CHGS is inaccessible without a loan. All available capital goes into buying land, paying legal fees, applying for planning etc so there is nothing left to go towards the very small grant to build a house (the grant is helpful, but it won't build a house). Banks won't lend. So how can young folk borrow to build? There needs to be a reinstatement of the SG loan element. There has never been given an explanation as to why SG took the loan away. Defaulting on the loan was negligible apparently. The return on the loan was high (7%) so there was a profit being made even. The loan element was 60% and 40% grant. Crofters were happy with this.

This forces people to decroft and sell bits of croft land for building in order to raise money, crofts get smaller and smaller.

Access to land is a very big issue. There is plenty of land but none available for young folk to croft. It is either not for sale, or it is over-priced. Many crofts are not being used but young folk can't get them. These crofts need to be freed up. The CC is trying to do this but it will take a very long time at this rate. The census shows 600-700 unused crofts but the CC cannot tackle this number. They need more resources to make a bigger impact. It could make a huge difference.

Another example is in South Uist where 120 people are waiting for a croft and there are 160 empty crofts (absentees), but the CC cannot deal with it.

Bare-land crofts are used as a commodity – they go up in value massively as soon as they have planning consent.

There is an economic argument for getting the crofts occupied – it brings young families to these remote areas which stimulates work, services, produce etc an improved economic situation. It can also help solve the housing problem.

Neglect is very difficult to define so CC concentrate on tackling absenteeism.

SG is the biggest land-owner in Scotland; how much land is SG putting over to crofts? Very little. There are community buy-outs but most community-owned states already have crofts and are not creating more.

Older crofters don't know how to pass their croft on, they need help and guidance from the CC. There was some guidance on-line but this doesn't help if you can't get broadband or don't use a computer anyway as many old folk can't and don't.

The Crofting Census is encouraging people to assign their crofts – it is quite hopeful.

Some crofters have multiple tenancies; surely this is depriving young folk of a croft?

Jobs depend on good communication; broadband and mobile coverage is still frustratingly poor in remote areas. SG and HIE are investing in broadband (£154 M) but compared to many / most other countries our coverage and speeds are pitiful. The primary croft diversification is tourism but the tourists are 'out there', we need to be able to contact them and they us. We need good broadband. Much of the investment seems to be to get super-fast in populated areas; crofting areas just need reliable broadband. And mobile coverage is equally important. They say 10 – 15% of Scotland may never be covered – this will inevitably be crofting areas.

These things are all related; how can we improve the economic situation in remote areas when land cannot be accessed, much of it is under the control of people who are not there, houses cannot be built and potential work cannot be generated as there is no decent communication with the outside world.

The Land Reform Bill will be laid before Scottish Parliament before summer recess. There is a good opportunity for crofting to contribute to this. RACCE will be taking evidence; SCF Young Crofters can be invited. Angus MacDonald MSP will take this on. SCFYC should also write to Rob Gibson MSP, convenor of the RACCE, offering to give evidence.

There are many issues here (including the 'hidden asset' of common grazings). Jean Urquhart asked if a crofting conference might be a good idea to air these issues and take a good look at crofting again as the Shucksmith Report was about 7 years ago. Discussion followed on this and concluded that a conference in the Autumn of this year would be a very good idea.

Agreed.

Action: Angus MacDonald MSP to talk to the minister for crofting and Jean Urquhart MSP to look for a possible host.

5. Crofting Development

HIE distributed a table showing how much money was being spent on crofting community development (this to be circulated with the minutes).

SG also distributed figures. It would help if SG figures were laid out relating to past, current and future spend like the HIE table.

6. CAP and Crofting

Registration date has been extended to 15 June. CAP stakeholder group had been against this due to the risk of payment date also being extended. No official explanation has been given for the extension, but it is widely understood to be to do with the IT system.

SG is asking EC for flexibility on inspections in order to keep to the payment schedule.

It is widely felt that active cattle producers will be disadvantaged by the 3 region system, especially those on marginal land with bits of improved.

7. Progress Regarding Crofting Law

In abeyance.

8. AOB

Several people in the apologies list wanted to attend the meeting but live far away so cannot afford the time and the expense. This happens every meeting. They have asked for a VC link but apparently SP cannot provide this. It is being looked into. To be followed up.

9. DONM

03 June 2015

ⁱ **Acronyms:** AC Animate Consulting; ASC Assist Social Capital; CAB Citizens Advice Bureau; CC Crofting Commission; CAGS Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme; CCx Crofting Connections; CFS Care Farming Scotland; CHGS Croft House Grant Scheme; CLG Crofting Law Group; CnES Comhairle nan Eilean Siar; CRSF Crofting Register Stakeholder Forum; DEFRA UK Gov Dept for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; EC European Commission; EFNCP European Forum for Nature Conservation & Pastoralism; FCS Forestry Commission Scotland; HC Highland Council; HIE Highlands & Islands Enterprise; HSCHT Highland Small Communities Housing Trust; HWU Herriot-Watt University; JHI James Hutton Institute; JMT John Muir Trust; LANTRA Land-based & Environmental Industries Training; MSP Member of the Scottish Parliament; NFUS National Farmers Union Scotland; NS Nourish Scotland; NTS National Trust for Scotland; RACCE Scottish Parliamentary Committee on Rural Affairs Climate Change and Environment; RoS Register of Scotland; SAC consulting arm of SRUC; SAS Soil Association Scotland; SCF Scottish Crofting Federation; SCFYC SCF Young Crofters; SCRG Scottish Churches Rural Group; SCVO Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations; SG Scottish Government; SGCLSG SG Crofting Legislation Stakeholders Group; SGCSF Scottish Government Crofting Stakeholder Forum; SGRPID (RPID) Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate; 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; WTS Woodland Trust Scotland.