



MEETING WITH HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS ENTERPRISE (HIE) AT COWAN HOUSE, INVERNESS

WEDNESDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2007

Present

HIE

Sandy Cumming, Chief Executive
Sandy Brady, Director of Strategy
John Watt, Director of Strengthening Communities

Col on Crofting

Mark Shucksmith (Inquiry Chair)
Fiona Spencer (Secretary to Inquiry)

Points discussed

1. HIE are keen to facilitate the work of the Committee of Inquiry and wanted to discuss what would be useful. MS wanted to discuss the best way for the Inquiry to engage with HIE; the range and quality of the information relevant to the Inquiry that is held by HIE; what the Inquiry could learn from HIE's experience of engaging with rural communities.
2. MS emphasised that the Committee would engage widely with people in the crofting counties so that local expertise could be drawn on in developing a vision for the future of crofting. That vision would be developed on the basis of an assessment of the evidence about the significance of crofting for rural Scotland and would not be constrained by current arrangements. The Inquiry would examine what would be needed to enable the vision for crofting to be realised.
3. HIE welcomed the aim of creating a vision for the future of crofting. They noted the need to understand:
 - the significance of community ownership – most of the land in the Western Isles is now in community ownership – for development and economic change in the future;
 - what had mobilised crofters around the formation of the Crofters' Union;
 - crofting's role in population retention. There is also potential for crofting to be a driver of population growth, and that is essential for many communities if they are to be sustainable in the long term. There are examples of areas where there has been population growth – Skye, Arran, Wester Ross – but what has fuelled the transformation in these areas is unclear. If this were better understood then there might be potential to apply the experience from these localities to areas such as South Uist which had a major population loss in the 1990s.
 - the role of economic diversification in Skye, particularly along the Broadford – Portree corridor. Community confidence was seen as an important and there was a need to understand what part crofting played.
 - What is driving Community Development Trusts. It was noted that Initiative at the edge has made a difference but has not fundamentally changed the communities in which it is operating.

Information

4. HIE hold a range of information of interest to the Inquiry and they are happy to copy the Inquiry into anything which they believe is relevant, as well as to provide anything requested by the Inquiry. This includes a policy paper on a new deal for island communities which HIE are taking forward over the summer. The paper advocates the idea of 'equivalence' in service development for islands. HIE agreed to provide a copy of the paper.
5. HIE outlined their perspective on:
 - community buy outs, which are not necessarily crofting related, although some of the perspectives associated with crofting can feature amongst those involved. Where these perspectives are exclusionary they can cause tensions locally.
 - Renewable energy which can be divisive if turbines are on crofting land and land holders are able to earn royalties. This is an example of the impact on crofters in a community being markedly different to the impact on the wider community in crofting areas.
 - The slow food movement with its emphasis on local food has helped to revive agricultural production and to develop horticultural activities rather than sheep farming. This is patchy and tends to involve younger crofters. HIE sees 'local' branding as more realistic than 'crofting' branding of products.
 - The age structure of the Highlands and Islands population – there is a significant gap in the 16 -34 age group. This has prompted questions about how to enable young people to get housing and other opportunities locally so that you can grow the population in areas where people are indicating that they want to be, there are jobs, but housing remains a problem. The Shetland experience was noted. The council there was seen as having policies (and the Trust mechanism) which enabled development at the point of economic opportunity with the oil boom.
 - In relation to the Orbst Estate in Skye, HIE were frustrated by the Scottish Executive's interpretation of rules for the transfer of public assets. It was unclear how far the idea of 'community' embedded in the policy reflected the idea of 'community' held by others.
 - HIE see potential for some small holdings to be turned into crofts, particularly in Arran.
 - Agencies are now pulling together but there is a lack of a shared vision.

Experience of Consultation

6. There was a discussion of the importance of getting the views of young people; of personal meetings and adjusting approaches to the preferences of different communities. Some thought needs to be given to how to access the group of young people who may have left local areas at the time of leaving school and have not yet returned as many young people return to their local area in their late 20's.

7. HIE had found it particularly valuable to have a representative sample professionally drawn by a survey company as a basis for a recent consultation. The results of the consultation have been used to develop policy and local strategies on population and economic diversification. HIE offered to share the details of this survey, and how it was commissioned.
8. It was agreed that the Inquiry will ensure that others in HIE will be given the opportunity to offer their views to the Inquiry when the Committee is visiting different localities during the course of its work.