

**COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY ON CROFTING (COIOC):
STAKHOLDER MEETING GLENUIG**

4th July 2007

Present

Liz Paul (Lantra regional partnership)

Joyce Ormiston

COIOC

Mark Shucksmith (Inquiry Chair)

Fiona Spencer (Secretary to Inquiry)

Jane Brown

Becky Shaw

Susan Lamont

Points discussed

- People recognise that crofting does not solely involve agriculture; it includes activities such as tourism. Keeping the population up is regarded as key.
- Land management is seen as important to encourage bio-diversity. It was seen as better to have a larger number of small land managers so that it was possible to have a range of approaches to crofting. This means ‘making places special’ and that requires ‘a mosaic of land management approaches’ but to do that there needs to be a change in the basis on which grants are paid.
- Schemes give low grants and are expensive to administer. Agriculture skills need to be reinvented as...bio-diversity skills’. The current schemes are based on valuations but generally these are not generous. The exception to this was seen as Islay which was described as the bio-diversity hot-spot of Argyle. However participants noted that crofters don’t benefit from these schemes.

Community

There was a discussion of what binds a community. Participants thought that Lismore is a good example of a well integrated community. It has a heritage society led by a crofter which links the past to the future of the Island. It is about attracting people to the Island. It was noted that agricultural activities can sometimes provide cohesion. In Argyll there are no common grazings so that communal working does not bind the community in this area. There remains an issue of how best to integrate incomers with the existing community.

Population

Crofting helps to bring in people as, for example, in Colonsay. There was discussion of why participants thought that crofting does that. Participants thought that land gives people a base to build a house and work on their own or to work or build their business. Diversification was seen as important.

It was noted that new crofts were being created on Colonsay on an area of land that has been bought out by the community. It was thought that there was a huge demand for crofting but that when the Crofters Commission advertises crofts they don't ask what the interest is, rather they ask what the objections are. However it was noted that the Land Court wanted to know what the interest is.

New Entrants Register

There was a discussion of people's experience of the New Entrants Register. Participants said there is lots of interest in crofting but the arrangements for access put people off. The link between people who want to croft and available crofts is not being made effectively. Participants thought that it was not appropriate that a tenancy should become a commodity for sale, rather a tenancy should be linked to the use of the land.

There was discussion of what people would feel about removing the Right to Buy and the Right to Assign. Participants said they wouldn't want the Right to Assign

removed. However there was also a view that the Right to Assign should be removed for assignments beyond the family. Nevertheless it was noted that there should be no assumption that individual family members may not be interested in crofting. Family assignments were seen as different in fragile communities, as participants thought that the best way to sustain a community is to have people with long-term roots and the best way to do that is through the family. They nevertheless recognised the contradiction that one of the biggest reasons for absenteeism is the assignment of crofts to family members who live elsewhere, and who may want to come back at some unspecified point. Participants thought that while family members are away it weakens the community.

Ideally there should be some crofts which anyone can buy and somewhere that who can buy is regulated. Participants noted that the issue is how to get the best balance and that both a free market and traditional assignments can result in both good and poor crofters.

Young People

There was a discussion of what young people who want to stay should do and whether opportunities for these people to stay can be created. For example, 'starter crofts' would give people a chance to show they can croft properly and then they could become eligible for a full croft. It was noted that it was possible for a croft to be assigned without assigning the croft house. Participants felt strongly that there should be no vacant crofts and no absenteeism. If people want to leave crofts then the croft should not be retained by them for twenty or thirty years in case they want to come back. It was felt that if there was a healthy rotation there would be a croft available when someone returns – it just might not be the particular croft that was in that person's family.

There is a risk that such change might put undue pressure on young people not to leave at all. Some though thought that this would not become a problem as most people would not be thinking about assigning a croft to their family at the stage at which most young people leave (that is 18-21). Assigning crofts tends to be later.

Assessors

The Crofters Commission doesn't seem to be sure what to do with Assessors. Their role has been reduced but it is not clear what their future role is. The Assessors' role is there because they have local knowledge and they are meant to inform the Crofters Commission of local experience.

There was discussion of whether it would help or harm some Crofters Commission decisions if they were to be made at a more local level. Participants noted that in the previous four years decisions about de-crofting and assignations have been made by one person centrally and that is changing because it is not ideal. Participants were upset that if planning permission has been given then de-crofting follows. It was noted that assignation and how it is done can be important in how communities get strengthened.

Participants were asked about the knowledge that was used in decisions.

It was felt that the best decisions were made when there is a hearing because people who are local have a say in a particular case. Hearings are public, anyone can go. But only people with a direct interest can speak.

End of tape.