

## COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY ON CROFTING (COIOC) STAKEHOLDER MEETING KIRKWALL

17<sup>TH</sup> July 2007

### Present

Mark Shucksmith (Inquiry Chair)

Jim Foubister

Chair of Transportation and Infrastructure

Jackie Thomson

Orkney Islands Council Development Policy Officer

Sally Inkster

Chief Executive Orkney Housing Association

Neil Matheson

Orkney Mussels Ltd

Mr Hugh Halcro-Johnston

SRPBA

Participants were invited to indicate what they see as the key issues.

- Difference between Orkney and other crofting areas was noted; agricultural interests; large farms; ageing population; value of land rising and therefore value of houses, taking them beyond the means of younger people. Small crofts are no longer a 'stepladder' as the "Bottom 3 or 4 rungs have been eradicated". New crofts would provide an opportunity to take young people into the countryside.
- The fundamentals of crofting need to be looked at – economic, social and cultural sustainability. Participants doubt that crofting as traditionally practised is sustainable. Other systems might better deliver "the public good". People and community are more important than the land or relationship to the land.
- Hoy and North Ronaldsay are the only areas in Orkney with common grazings. North Ronaldsay is in decline but that is not believed to be to do with land tenure: rather it is thought to be because of poor links to economic development.
- Status of crofter important. Crofts in Orkney are small farms and tend to be owner occupied.
- Participants were asked why the way of thinking about crofts seems different in Orkney compared to other areas. Some said that there have never been huge estates in Orkney as there have been elsewhere: others said there had been big estates but they were farmed by crofters. Common grazings were apportioned around 1840 and people described the story of agriculture in Orkney as being about continuous improvement.
- A balance of men and women was seen as important in sustaining population. Contrast between Stronsay and Westray: Stronsay has good farming but is in decline, Westray much more positive and has jobs for women so young men stay. On Stronsay there are no jobs for women, so they leave, and so the young men leave too.

- Participants thought that communities are more economically sustainable if they have right to own, buy, and sell their house. But a consequence of that is that a house may not be affordable.
- There were different views about whether working the land is important. One view expressed was that money is made by other things than “working the land”. Crofting is seen as offering a life in a safe environment good for bringing up children. But agencies need to work together to do something positive for rural development. “Imaginative ways need to be found of working together”. Potential mechanisms for this might be e.g. rural development contract. However, local plans are needed to enable that to happen and new jobs are needed to keep people in the islands
- Historic Scotland, Scottish National Heritage and EU regulations were seen by some participants as constraining development. Scottish Water’s infrastructure was an issue because participants saw Scottish Water as not fully signing up to community planning.
- People saw the potential for shared equipment arrangements to help, and the issue of affordable rural housing was noted. Orkney has a high take up of rural home ownership grant and no applications for croft house grant. S75 is not implemented in some areas so that wouldn’t help. Council housing was seen as a possible solution to affordable rural housing rather than crofting: however, social housing was not seen as a viable solution to housing problems in the Islands.
- Participants noted that modern agricultural practice doesn’t apply to crofting and crofting here is about agriculture.
- Jobs and other economic activity need to accompany housing to have viable communities. Public services in some areas can’t get staff because there is not affordable housing for them e.g. care workers.
- Sale of croft tenancies is not an issue in Orkney
- There was a discussion of who should come together in governance of an area.
- Participants said that agencies in Orkney work well together. Problems arise when outside agencies try to impose external solutions on Orkney. People here want self-determination and more funding. Orkney doesn’t feel that they get as much per head of population as other areas.
- On crofting – people said that the distribution of support could be linked to productivity of land. The single farm payment is problem as it pays for historical productivity and people gain more from the subsidy than from agricultural industry.