

COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY ON CROFTING (COIOC) STAKEHOLDER MEETING STORNOWAY

6th June 2007

Participants were invited to talk about what they saw as the key issues.

Points discussed

- Crofters appear to want more regulation to protect what crofting has been but individuals want access to free market to sell croft – can this circle be squared? Participants noted that this dilemma impacts across all regulations not just the free market.
- Problem with application of absentee regulations – people feel Crofters Commission have applied regulations differentially; Crofters Commission decisions to target particular areas mean that people feel application isn't consistent.
- Participants said they feel that the Crofters Commission lacks the will to enforce regulation.

There was a discussion of whether absenteeism or neglect is the bigger problem. Participants said that

- Sometimes absentee crofts are well tended if subtle; neglect of crofts can be linked to elderly or infirm crofters; in some areas regulating absenteeism would not make a significant impact; often absentees have acquired a croft through accession when they've already moved away to seek employment. A consequence of this situation is that community doesn't benefit from crofts where there is absenteeism.
- Sometimes older crofters who are unable to maintain their croft refuse to assign to younger people because they want to retain the croft in case their family return.
- It is possible to bring new people in if absentee action is taken and the new person who wants to work the land can get the croft for the value of the improvement [i.e. less than the value of the land]. The Crofters Commission don't have power to direct assignation and that is a problem. There would need to be strong criteria for directing assignations BUT strong criteria would impact on the market. Participants noted that assessors were originally to take on that role but this has now been diluted.
- Participants said there is potential for people in a township to block development - and people who do that are not necessarily contributing to the community, but may be protected by statute. An absentee tenant has protection but an absentee owner doesn't.
- "Crofting's biggest threat is the crofter – if a crofter looks after the land then they are protected. If they don't then they open the door to collapse in crofting."
- Participants said that crofting without crofting agriculture may as well not exist. Initially crofting was about subsistence agriculture. Then it became about hill farming – these assumptions embedded in the framework of support and regulation. "In 1886 crofters needed land. In 2007 the land needs crofters."

- Participants said that working the land brings the community together and stabilises the community. People buying in to houses are not necessarily staying. The important thing is the type of person and what they do and how they contribute to the village or township unit.

Participants were asked “Given the state of crofting and EU changes – how can this Inquiry make a difference?”

- Participants said there need to be more incentives for people to be involved in agriculture – but were pessimistic about the potential to achieve this. They said we have legislation overload and policy vacuum. There is a need to strengthen rural development policy.
- It was noted that going into crofting is daunting for young people – they need to invest in land and house and equipment but don’t get anything back for a long time. Sometimes people put money and resources into crofting but get less return and therefore it is loss-making. Participants said that if you were doing it on a profit and loss basis you wouldn’t do it, and that the reason for doing it is – “a way of life”.
- Participants said that policy responses might be to subsidise agriculture more OR stimulate other developments so that people have more incomes / resources to spend on crofting. Modulation – if crofting sympathetic. There is a need for long-term investment, and a need to move from regulation to enabling.
- People want sustainable economic development – e.g. employment
- What crofting gives people – enjoy activity; feel good about contact with the land; keeps people active, healthier and the activity gives people a focus – including older people who might in other areas be in ‘care homes’. Keep people active in community for longer.

Sustaining Communities

- Demand for housing/ demand for croft land for homes

Key Housing issues were seen to be: the level of grants available under Crofting Housing Grant Scheme is too low now relative to the cost of building a house; the potential to use land management contracts to promote working the land and link to croft housing grants, which would avoid de-crofting in order to get a loan.

- The rural housing pilot has potential to inform policy development better. However, participants noted that people don’t like the Rural Housing Grant because it is too restrictive in terms of space allocation, and the design doesn’t fit with practical needs e.g. room for wet clothes. There is potential for agencies to work together to agree on more systematic approach to planning housing development/ crofting activity in a locality.
- A key issue is to ensure that ownership of services so that houses can access.

- Planning authority decisions are key: it only takes one person to object to a development and then it doesn't happen. There is potential to develop a mix of social housing and private plots.
- If resumption is applied for that addresses this issue – BUT the mechanisms are in place but there is reluctance to use them – because you are using powers against people you know.
- There is a need for a planned approach; development given to stay in community; something to overcome the fact that everyone must agree, and to address points that make people reluctant to use difficult and burdensome processes.
- Lack of footfall has a ripple effect on businesses and services and economic development, BUT nevertheless people want to come in live in these areas.
- Break the link between croft and house and inbye and outbye.
- Schemes based on environment not people.
- Animal Health & Welfare Regulations – anyone who allows someone else to use their land is not [since Jan] liable for Health & Welfare of animals as well as the person who owns the animals.
- Crofts not rewarded for stewardship of land.
- What is the ongoing impact of environmental designations on croft land?