

Committee of Inquiry on Crofting

NOTE OF THIRD MEETING

19th – 20th June 2007, Edinburgh

Present

Mark Shucksmith (Chair)
Jane Brown
Fred Edwards
Susan Lamont
Norman MacDonald
Donald MacRae
Agnes Rennie
Becky Shaw

In Attendance

Fiona Spencer, Secretary
Rory Dutton, Business Manager
Phoebe Cochrane, Information Officer

1. WELCOME

- 1.1. Mark Shucksmith welcomed Committee members to their third meeting, extending the welcome to Phoebe Cochrane who had recently joined the Inquiry staff as Information Officer.
- 1.2. Professor Shucksmith then informed the Committee of his extensive schedule of meetings arranged for the week around the Committee of Inquiry meeting and the Royal Highland Show. These included meetings with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment and the Minister for the Environment, Professor McCrone of the RSE Islands and Hill Areas Inquiry, the RSPB, Scottish Natural Heritage, NFU Scotland, Forestry Commission and the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association.

2. PROGRAMME OF VISITS (Paper 3/ 1)

- 2.1. The Committee reviewed how the previous week's Western Isles visits had gone. Some Committee Members noted there had been very positive feedback from crofter participants. The independence and open-mindedness of the Inquiry had been recognised and welcomed.
- 2.2. The visits had highlighted the variation in crofting within the Western Isles; there appeared to be an appetite for more effective and even increased regulation. The population characteristics and trends described by participants at the meetings were noted. What was emerging from what people told the Inquiry at the meetings was that for a sustainable future jobs, housing and public goods in terms of the environment and culture are important for crofting communities'.
- 2.3. The Inquiry witnessed a clear dissatisfaction with the Crofters Commission's implementation of regulation. There was some discussion regarding the nature of crofting absenteeism in the islands, and recognition of the complexity of the issues raised. ***Land abandonment, wilderness and land management was suggested as a topic for a future meeting.***
- 2.4. It was noted that regulation would be considered at the July Committee Meeting, and the ***Crofters Commission would be asked to provide some information for that discussion.*** Reports of a review of the Absentee Initiative, and a review of the community decision-making pilot should be obtained. A ***paper is required on the Crofters Commission's use of regulatory powers.***

- 2.5. It was confirmed that the flipcharts and facilitator notes from the Western Isles meetings will be typed up. The secretariat now has additional administrative support.
- 2.6. The meeting then discussed paper 3/1, which outlined a draft schedule of further local meetings. Members were invited to comment on the schedule and to ***indicate to secretariat staff later in the day which of the meetings they would be able to participate in.*** It was commented that some Members had not appreciated at the time of agreeing to serve on the Committee the major workload that was associated with this phase of the Inquiry and that they were struggling to organise other matters in order to make time available for Inquiry business.

3. CROFT LAND AND RURAL HOUSING

- 3.1. Derek Logie of the Rural Housing Service joined the meeting to outline to the Committee the draft findings of a study he is currently completing for the Scottish Crofting Foundation and funding partners including several Local Authorities, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Crofters Commission. A summary note was circulated to support his presentation and the subsequent discussion.
- 3.2. Mr Logie described the background to the study. This included the pressing need for affordable housing in crofting areas and the tensions arising from the loss of the best in-bye land to housing. He set out the methods used in his study, the case study of Plockton, and his preliminary findings and recommendations. There then followed a wide-ranging discussion of the issues impacting on housing in crofting communities.
- 3.3. Issues touched on during that discussion included: measures to increase the supply of housing in crofting communities; possible measures for regulating the market in houses, plots and crofts/tenancies. Of particular interest to the Committee were mechanisms to increase the release of common grazing land for housing, community-based planning for housing provision, the role and limitations of housing grant schemes, planning issues and the use of rural housing burdens.
- 3.4. It was agreed to be ***important that the Committee hears directly from Di Alexander of the Highland Small Communities Trust*** about experience of developing new and affordable housing in crofting communities.

INTRODUCTION TO SECOND DAY

The second half of the meeting started with a discussion of the relationship between crofting and the environment, and the effectiveness of schemes seeking to support the enhancement of the environmental contribution of crofting.

4. DRAFT NOTE OF THE SECOND MEETING & MATTERS ARISING

- 4.1. It was agreed that the detailed discussion of papers 2/2 and 2/3 **would be posted as working documents to the SharePoint extranet.**
- 4.2. There was a brief review of the action points from the previous meeting, Many of the points had been actioned, but the papers from the first meeting had not yet been posted to the website. Members were **reminded to notify secretariat of any significant local events at which the Inquiry should have a presence.**
- 4.3 Business item

5. COMMUNICATIONS PLAN UPDATE (Paper 3/ 2) [Business item]

6. YOUNG PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS (Paper 3/ 3)

- 6.1. Mark Shucksmith spoke to his paper 3/3, which summarised issues from recent literature on young people in rural areas.
- 6.2. It was noted that young people leaving rural areas was not necessarily a problem, however there needed to be adequate opportunities and incentives for young people to come back; and those that chose to remain in their original community should also be provided for;
- 6.3. Young people should be able to retain contact with their original community while away; It was noted that most young peoples' aspirations could not be fully met by their local area and, initiatives such as the air discount scheme were very important.
- 6.4. The committee agreed that the basics required for retaining or attracting young people back to live within crofting communities were competitive job/business opportunities; the availability of affordable housing. It was noted that local social/recreational opportunities or transport to these elsewhere were very important.
- 6.5. The Committee then moved on to discuss education and training. The need to attend education institutions elsewhere meant that young people choose between their home community/croft and opportunities to further their education. It is now possible to pursue higher education while remaining in crofting communities. It was agreed that **full details on the UHI learning options would be obtained** for the Committee. Other matters discussed included a need for better recognition/accreditation for rural skills
- 6.6. The Committee also discussed the wider community and family/welfare/health benefits of having younger people within crofting communities, and the cultural significance of families continuing their connections with the land through successive generations.
- 6.7. It was suggested that there were interesting schemes operating elsewhere in Europe to support young people in their rural home communities, and **it was agreed that a note on this would be prepared.** The secretariat also agreed to review at the National School-leavers Survey for useful information.

7. CROFT ENTRANTS SCHEME (Paper 3/ 4)

- 7.1. The 2006 review of the Highlands and Islands Croft Entrants Scheme commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise was issued. The report indicated that the scheme had

been successful in bringing forward the timing of transfer of crofts to younger people (age limit 40), and had brought about more ambitious development plans for the crofts. It also suggested that the availability of the croft was a key influence in the crofters' decision to stay in the area i.e. tying people to the land ties them to the community.

7.2 The following points were made in discussion

- The Crofters Commission list of those seeking crofts was very long;
- it was not clear what the scheme offered for those with no prior connections with a potentially assignable croft;
- the majority of transfers were within families;
- the Single Farm Payment, seemed sometimes to be used effectively as a pension, and this was a disincentive for assigning crofts;
- new entrants required a house, and Croft House Grants Scheme would not be available if the previous tenant had built a house in the previous 15 years.

The Committee was interested knowing more about:

- the 40% of the crofts in the study that were assigned out with the family;
- what happened with unsuccessful applicants / those on the Commission's "waiting list".

The Secretariat agreed to **establish whether further information might be obtained**. It was also agreed to seek information on the impact of the Scheme on the population profile of the local areas; whether there was evidence of any difference between family and non-family assignments in terms of the development and use of the croft, and how long the entrants stayed.

7.3 In conclusion, the Committee noted that the design of the evaluation was not robust as, for example, it did not consider unsuccessful applicants to the scheme. Its findings were therefore suggestive rather than conclusive. There was a brief discussion of what data the Crofters Commission hold that could be of use to strengthen the evaluation. It was agreed that a note about the Crofters Commission data would be circulated. It was also agreed that the issues associated with new entrants and the scheme could be explored further by the Committee through its programme of visits and meetings.

8. COMMISSIONING EVIDENCE

- 8.1. There was a brief summary of the methods that were being deployed to obtain evidence for the Inquiry.
- 8.2. It was noted that the Call for Evidence and programme of visits/meetings are likely to garner the views of those directly engaged with crofting. It was agreed that the Website's discussion function should not be enabled until the conclusion of the Call for Evidence in order not to confuse or dilute that exercise. **The Committee will discuss how it wants to manage the discussion forum at a future meeting.**
- 8.3. To ensure that the Inquiry has good evidence about the views of people in areas with crofting and areas that would like to have crofting, a public attitude survey will be commissioned. The sample for the survey will be structured to include households not involved in crofting as well as those directly involved in crofting. The results of the survey are likely to be available in early September
- 8.4. **If possible Committee Members will be emailed draft questions in advance of the Lerwick Committee Meeting. If required there could be a video conference with the successful contractors.**

- 8.5. A range of evidence about crofting is required by the Committee, and the secretariat is investigating information sources, and will soon **prepare a paper setting out what is available, and what further is required**. Paper (3/6) on the Scottish Household Survey was discussed. It was noted that the sample size for crofting areas was likely to be small.
- 8.6. In discussion it was agreed that **the Secretariat will contact Local Authorities** to check what relevant information about their areas had already been analysed. The staff there will already have analysed much of the available information at various levels.

9. AOCB

- 9.1. There was no other business.

10. Next Meeting

- 10.1. The next Committee Meeting will be held in Lerwick on 19th July.