



MEETING WITH CROFTERS COMMISSION (CC) AT CASTLE WYND, INVERNESS

WEDNESDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2007

Present:

Crofters Commission

Nick Reiter, Chief Executive
Donald Smith
Hugh MacKintosh
Gordon Macdonald
David Balharry

Col on Crofting

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

Key Points discussed

1. MS wanted to discuss the range and quality of the information relevant to the Inquiry that is held by the CC; CC's views on the impact of crofting on rural development; what the Inquiry could learn from the CC's experience of engaging with rural communities; the best way for the Inquiry to engage with the CC.
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.

Information

3. The CC would welcome an identifier being placed in the June Agricultural Census as this would be a good cross check on the quality of other data held, particularly demographic data.
4. The register of crofts has been held in digital form since the early 1990s. It includes factual information such as landlord's name; tenant's name; rent; descriptor for the croft. It also contains additional information such as whether or not the tenant is absent from the croft. Reliability of this information is variable as crofters do not always update the Commission when their circumstances change. Maps from various sources held by the Commission are being digitised progressively. Using the CC's Geographic Information System a variety of information held on the Register or from other sources can be analysed by area and presented in map form. It can also be linked to other data sets and there is now access to the Integrated Administration And Control System (IACS) which has a unique identifier for individual fields, though the compatibility of IACS information and the register is still to be tested. CC offered to meet with the Inquiry's information officer, once appointed, to discuss what information is available and the Committee's more detailed requirements.
5. There is a database of grazings, clerks and assessors (66) which could be used to make contact in local areas if required. CC have reviewed their method of appointing assessors and the process is now more democratic. New assessors have recently been appointed and CC are about to offer guidance on the role.

6. The Scottish Crofting Foundation have area branches though some of these are more active than others. The CC employs staff to administer the Croft Entrants Scheme (CES). Community Councils might also be useful ways of making contact with people in different localities.
7. About 2 years ago there was a report on absentee crofters. CC will send the report to the Inquiry. A new study is in progress which is looking at the CC's 'grass roots' programme and its effectiveness. Results are expected in May. Baseline statistical information about crofting areas was carried out in the late 1990's. CC are planning to update this work. Work has also been carried out on de-crofting and the right to buy. There was a 1995 evaluation of crofting policy and the welfare of populations in marginal areas by Gordon MacMillan (the Inquiry already has this paper). *(Action Point – CC to send summaries or papers to the Inquiry secretariat)*
8. Data on the Crofting Counties Agricultural Grants Scheme (which is being reviewed in 2007) can be analysed. CC will put information together for the Inquiry. Information may also be available on the Crofting and Township Development Scheme and the cattle improvement scheme. *(Action Point - CC to send information to the Inquiry secretariat)*
9. CC agreed to provide a short descriptive paper indicating data that are available from them and what is known about trends in different areas. *(Action Point - CC to send paper to the Inquiry secretariat)*
10. It was noted that other organisations such as SNH (e.g. on Natural Heritage Zones), Forestry Commission as well as SEERAD would also hold data relevant to the Inquiry, for example, on changes in biodiversity; re-seeding; environmental impact assessments done by SEERAD whenever there is a change of land use.

Experience of Consultation

11. CC explained that half of their Board meetings are held outside of Inverness and these include events in which there are meetings with the public which are advertised in the local press and have 'café' style set ups so that people can discuss matters in small groups. CC offered to identify key local events in the calendar to help the Committee of Inquiry to judge the timing and location of its meetings and visits appropriately. *(Action Point - CC to send information to the Inquiry secretariat)*

Engaging with the Crofters Commission

12. It was recognised by everyone that there was a need to maintain a clear distance between the CC and the Inquiry which is independent. CC said they were committed to providing whatever help would be appropriate and useful for the Inquiry. This was welcomed by MS. It was noted that members of CC would want to be involved as consultees. It was agreed that CC would send their agendas to the Inquiry secretariat so that the secretariat could ask for any papers that would be useful to the Inquiry. *(Action Point - CC to send information to the Inquiry secretariat)*

At the end of the meeting MS and FS joined the Board of the Commission for lunch and a presentation on the Crofters Commission present roles.