

Scottish Government Crofting Stakeholder Engagement Sessions - preliminary findings

Aim

The purpose of this overview is to provide a short summary of the perceptions of crofting stakeholders that were raised in various stakeholder engagement sessions undertaken in late 2016 and in the first part of 2017.

Background

The Scottish Government Crofting Bill team and social researchers from Scottish Government's Rural and Environmental Sciences Analytical Services have been speaking to diverse stakeholders throughout the crofting areas. The purpose of these engagements has been to establish the opinions, perspectives and experiences of those involved in crofting to help inform the design of the new Crofting Bill that is planned to be introduced in the 2016-21 Parliamentary Session.

Nine engagement sessions were completed in total with an average of ten participants in each. Stakeholders from across the crofting industry with varying interests were invited to participate in two hour long sessions which involved structured workshops and group discussions, framed around three main questions:

- What are the aims and purpose of crofting, and what should it hope to achieve?
- What are the current assets and future opportunities that will allow those involved in crofting to achieve these aims?
- What are some of the barriers that prevent or hinder the gaining of these aims?

The remainder of this report will provide an outline summary of some of the responses from the stakeholders to the above questions. Please note that the views and opinions outlined in this documents are those expressed by some of the stakeholders during the engagement sessions and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government.

1) What are the aims and purpose of crofting, and what should it hope to achieve?

The aim of crofting:

This section of the discussion was targeting opinions about what stakeholders want crofting to deliver. Responses so far may be summarised as:

- Sustainable and flourishing local communities that actively engage and co-operate with one another
- Thriving and resilient rural economies that link to local / national / international market places and consumers
- Maintained and balanced land-use between agriculture, biodiversity and tourism
- Fair and equitable relations between all crofting stakeholders

What are we trying to achieve through crofting:

This question is seeking information on what must be in place or what is needed to deliver beneficial outcomes for crofting. The majority of responses related to the following:

- Increasing the number of young people and new entrants to crofting
- Sustainable local direct / indirect employment and places to live
- Producing high-quality, sought-after, locally sourced livestock, crops and produce
- Good management of sustainable habitat and species
- Multiple, diverse and innovative land uses
- Sharing knowledge and good practices
- Profitability and a fair standard of living
- Access to appropriate financial support and incentives
- Tourism

2) What are the current assets and future opportunities that will allow crofting to achieve these aims?

The current assets of crofting:

This section of the discussion asked for respondents to outline what the current assets that they had which could be used to achieve the aims of crofting. These included:

- Skilled, hard-working people with intimate and historic knowledge of the land and a passion for crofting
- Young persons and new entrants to crofting
- Unique produce and brands
- Collective action in stock clubs, common grazing and grazing committees
- Support from grants and subsidies

The future opportunities:

Stakeholders were also asked what they perceived as being the possibilities that could be exploited in the future that could help achieve the aims of crofting. The key themes identified were the following:

- Encouraging young people and new to entrants to crofting
- Further diversification of land uses and outputs
- Encourage and support co-operation between crofters (e.g. common grazings, sheep stock clubs, dissemination of knowledge and skills, resolution of local disputes)
- Expand use of renewable energies and environmentally beneficial processes (e.g. wind and carbon capture)
- Simplify and clarify current legislation and devolve power
- Encourage Crofting Commission to be more open and responsive

3) What are some of the barriers that prevent or hinder the gaining of these aims?

The challenges and barriers:

The last section from the engagement sessions identified the perceived barriers that stand in the way, or potentially hinder, those involved in crofting in achieving the desired aims and outcomes for crofting. These barriers were grouped into four overlapping sub-sections: rural and island, agricultural, cultural and legal.

Rural and Island:

- Access to land
- Restricted technological infrastructure, in particular broadband internet, mobile reception
- Distance to markets and additional costs of production
- Higher cost of living
- Out-migration
- Lack of skills and knowledge sharing
- Cost of croft tenancies or owner occupied crofts
- Lack of local employment opportunities
- Lack of affordable housing
- No lead body with clear crofting development role

Agricultural:

- Poor quality land
- Absenteeism, Misuse and Neglect
- Reducing levels of financial support
- Uncertainty caused by leaving the European Union
- Reducing returns from historical forms of agriculture (e.g. beef and sheep sectors)
- Climate change
- Common Grazings underutilised due to lack of economic returns

Cultural:

- Lack of incentives for young people and new entrants to crofting
- Regional variations in in styles of crofting and priorities
- Absenteeism and inactive landlords
- Clashes and disputes between personalities
- No clear Scottish Government policy or narrative on crofting

Legal:

- Piecemeal nature of legislation is overly complex and restrictive
- Lack of security of tenure in certain instances
- Definitions of 'owner-occupier' is unhelpful and lacks clarity
- Crofting Law SUMP benefits lawyers not crofters
- New and/or young crofters being blocked by lack of support from banks and succession / inheritance laws
- Crofting Commission too bureaucratic, distant and opaque
- Common Grazings legislation is complicated, restrictive and outdated
- Deemed Crofts introduce legal complexities
- Intestate succession process onerous and potentially unfair
- Expense and onerous process for croft registration
- Inability to raise standard securities on tenanted crofts
- Need for comprehensive and clear guidance on legislation