



**CROFTING COMMISSION
COIMISEAN NA CROITEARACHD**

ASSESSORS SEMINAR 2014 REPORT



INTRODUCTION

ASSESSOR SEMINAR 2014

The Crofting Commission held their second Assessors Seminar on 19 – 20 November at the Kingsmills Hotel in Inverness. Over 120 delegates, including 61 Assessors gathered to hear a range of speakers and to engage in lively discussion.

The Assessor Network now comprises 90 Area Assessors, representing crofting communities which stretch from the far north of Shetland, south to Argyll. Local meetings are held with Assessors last year but the seminar is the only chance for all panel members to come together, to debate and discuss issues as a group and with Crofting Commission staff and Commissioners.



SUMMARY

The Assessors Seminar was well attended by both Assessors and key stakeholder organisations and it provided a good opportunity for Assessors to join together and meet Commissioners and staff to discuss a range of topical issues.

Attendance totalled **108** on Day One and **116** on Day Two. As well as Assessors, Commissioners and Crofting Commission staff, delegates to the seminar included staff from Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Division local offices and the Sponsor Division from Edinburgh, representatives of the SCF and key personnel from the Strengthening Communities section of Highlands & Islands Enterprise.

For the first time this year there was a marketplace which featured key organisations for Assessors to see what support is available for crofting communities, this included:

- Crofting Connections
- Highlands & Islands Enterprise
- SAC Consulting
- Cantraybridge College
- SGRPID / Registers of Scotland / Forestry Commission
- SCVO
- NFUS

This report provides a summary of the proceedings and notes taken over the two days of the seminar. A copy of the Programme can be viewed at **Appendix A**.

The main theme of this year's seminar looked at how Assessors and the Commission can work together to help secure the future of crofting. This was combined with a focus on key issues affecting crofting and providing Assessors with the knowledge and ability to guide and support crofters in their area.

Following feedback from the 2012 Assessors Seminar, and the results of the pre-conference survey (see **Appendix B**), the format of this year's seminar was a lot more interactive and participative based around workshops and discussion groups to encourage dialogue.

Presentations and workshops covered:

- What the Crofting Commission has achieved
- Legal sump update
- Common grazings mapping, registration and setting up Grazings Committees
- Crofting Register
- Crofting Census
- New applications / policies
- Practical skills for crofters
- Sheep stock club
- The role of the Assessor.

This year's programme was designed to allow plenty of discussion and the results of the various discussion sessions illustrated a high level of engagement, with many useful suggestions coming forward for consideration by the Commission.

Practical skills workshops were held on Day 1 to take Assessors through various processes to provide hands on experience so Assessors feel confident to provide guidance and advice to crofters. Discussion groups were held on Day 2 looking at the role of Assessors in relation to various topical issues.

DISCUSSION SESSION FINDINGS

The seminar included four separate discussion sessions:

- 1 Promoting common grazing regulations / setting up grazing committees**
- 2 Crofting Census**
- 3 Helping people with applications**
- 4 Mentoring new crofters / practical skills for new crofters.**

Commissioners and staff were on hand to facilitate discussions but the aim was to hear the views of the Assessors. Each group nominated an Assessor to feedback their discussions on the topics to the rest of the delegates.

1 Promoting common grazing regulations / setting up grazing committees

The following discussion points were suggested by the group's facilitator:

- Setting up of Committees and the purpose of regulations
- How are common grazings utilised in your area?
- Why do you think common grazings are not fully utilised?
- How do you think common grazings should be used other than for grazing?
- How would you encourage more active use?

Below is a summary of the key points raised:

- Attend grazing committee's AGMs
- Commission to support Assessors to engage new committees
- Assessors function as a resource for committees to draw on
- Commission needs to be able to investigate breaches of regulations
- Clarification on how shares can be redistributed (and souming clarification)
- Aid registering of common grazings and signposting to available funding
- Clarity over how to 'police' regulations
- Better reallocation of unused shares
- Simplify the process for setting up a grazings committee
- Amalgamate small township grazings committees where people are low in numbers
- Highlight advantages of forming a grazings committee

- Regulate grazings
- Access grants
- Development opportunities
- Committees only have to advertise when out of office
- New SRDP grant of £500 to set up new committees
- Charitable status of landlords – issue?
- Review regulations to encourage new entrants to crofting
- Encourage use of grazings
- Common grazings are an asset and they are undervalued at present
- Encourage cooperation with landlords and others to develop grazings
- If committees are in place they can encourage investment.

2 Crofting Census

The following discussion points were suggested by the group's facilitator:

- Why the Census is needed and what it will be used for
- When to seek advice from the Crofting Commission
- Feedback from the Census
- Is any further information required about the Census?

Below is a summary of the key points raised:

- Send a list of non-returners of Census forms to Assessors to help in establishing contact details for lost crofters
- Assessors contact details could be included on the Census form
- The Assessors information pack was sent to Assessors too late and needs to be issued in advance of the Census being issued
- General support for the Crofting Census
- Need to understand more about the legal status of who receives a Census form
- Positive feedback received from crofters, they understand that it is important and they are happy to complete and return it
- The form is well set out and easy to complete
- There needs to be more clarification around the definition of 'purposeful use'
- The Census leaflet is good and informative
- Enables Commission to address issues through the return of the completed Census forms
- Publicity was good, the Commission should increase their use of social media
- Role to advise those in breach of duty of the options available to them – clear guidelines required.

3 Helping people with applications

The following discussion points were suggested by the group's facilitator:

- Main problems with applications

- Alerting Crofting Commission to problems in parishes
- Understanding of the new application forms
- Ability to assist crofters with completing the new application forms
- Additional information that would assist Assessors.

Below is a summary of the key points raised:

- Several requests for help with RoS crofting registration forms
- Crofters like to keep information private
- Not had much contact to ask for help with forms
- Add on the Crofting Commission website that Assessors can help crofters with applications
- Assessors happy to take on the role but need to be careful that the blame for an unsuccessful application does not lie with the Assessor
- Potential to provide more information about Assessors on the application forms e.g. contact details
- Provide a support pack to Assessors
- Concern over the loss of local knowledge
- Assessors want feedback on the outcome of cases
- Revised form asks for more details at the outset
- Phone the Commission for advice
- Provide an example on the Commission's website of a completed form
- Provide training for Assessors when the new forms are issued
- Identify individuals within the Commission who may be able to help
- Assessors details on the website and social media.

4 Mentoring new crofters / practical skills for new crofters

The following discussion points were suggested by the group's facilitator:

- Do new entrants have adequate knowledge and skills to work their croft tenancies to an acceptable standard
- How the Assessors role can be developed to provide assistance to new entrants
- Awareness of support organisations such as the SCF, SAC, LANTRA etc
- Role of mentors.

Below is a summary of the key points raised:

- Use social media to educate and inform
- Assessors to be available for advice
- Crofting courses can be expensive
- Assessors to be advised of all decisions including new tenants so they can reach out and make contact
- Add a sentence onto decision letters with Assessors contact details

- Happy to point/direct applicants/crofters to other organisations to work in partnership with the Commission
- Development function to be returned to the Commission
- Promotion of courses available through SCF
- Increase visibility of Assessors with details of the skills/knowledge they have
- Large demand for training/support – SCF can provide this
- Lack of formal organisation, not joined up
- Need more provision
- Commission need to be more involved in signposting.

General comments

- Define the role of an Assessor on the website
- Continued involvement in regulatory applications
- Strengthen link to SGRPID
- Provide an advisory role with strengthened support from Commissioners
- Information provision, facilitating support and signposting
- Follow up on commitments stated in applications
- Adequate recognition/reimbursement for work done
- Educate new entrants on the realities of crofting e.g. legislation, community aspect etc
- Interview applicants to gauge intentions
- If not on croft in 5 years - automatically remove
- Requirement for croft development plan alongside planning applications
- Provide clarity on Assessors role with both the Assessors and Commissioner's needs
- Clear communications – not just annual, have 3-6 monthly meetings with the area Commissioner
- Meetings with Assessors and crofters in each area
- Incentives for outgoing and incoming Assessors.

CONCLUSION

At the end of Day 2, Convener Susan Walker summed up what she saw as the key messages to come out of the seminar:

1. There is an increased understanding of the work that the Crofting Commission has undertaken in developing its role as the regulator of crofting and in turn modernising processes. There is a lot more work to do, but there appears to be recognition that the Commission are going in the right direction.
2. The Crofting Commission will be improving the way it communicates to all stakeholders to make sure that there is a clear understanding of what it is the organisation does and how it operates, including more effective communication and support to Assessors.
3. The Crofting Commission value the role of Assessors and will now use the ideas gathered at the seminar to look at the best way of refocusing the role of Assessors to

effectively utilise this valuable resource. The Commission are encouraged by the motivation and enthusiasm displayed by the Assessors and will work to promote the Assessors network so that it is fully utilised and crofters know that there is support or guidance available at a grassroots level.

Finally, the Convener thanked everyone for attending over the two days and commended the degree of enthusiasm for crofting from delegates, noting that it is this which will help to secure the future of crofting “We will continue to work together to guarantee that Assessors make the most effective contribution to the role of the Commission and the future of crofting.”

Appendix A

ASSESSORS SEMINAR

19 & 20 NOVEMBER 2014,
KINGSMILLS HOTEL, INVERNESS

PROGRAMME

12:00 Registration

12:00 Buffet lunch

DAY 1

14:00 Welcome – Alex Graham, Provost

14:10 Introduction – Susan Walker, Convener

14:15 What we have achieved – Catriona MacLean, Chief Executive

14:30 Legal Sump update – Joseph Kerr, Head of Regulations

14:45 Introduction to workshops – Colin Kennedy, Vice Convener

14:50 Refreshment break

15:15 **WORKSHOPS** Practical skills to help crofters

- Common grazing mapping and registration
- Crofting Census (Annual Notice and Duty to Report)
- Crofting Register
- New applications/policies

16:45 Close – William Swann, Commissioner

17:00 – 18:00 Surgeries for one to one discussions/questions on Regulation, Crofting Census and Common Grazing Registration.

19:30 – Dinner with after dinner speaker

DAY 2

09:00 Welcome, Murdo MacLennan, Commissioner

09:05 Role of assessors – Catriona MacLean, Chief Executive

09:20 Introduction to discussion groups – IG MacDonald, Commissioner

DISCUSSION GROUPS Role of Assessors

- Promoting common grazing regulations/setting up grazing committees
- Advising and reassuring about the crofting census
- Helping people with applications
- Mentoring new crofters/practical skills for new crofters

10:45 Refreshment break

11:15 Discussion groups summarise

11:45 Feedback from discussion groups

12:30 Lunch

13:45 Report on a successful sheep stock club – Barney MacAskill, crofter from Glenelg

14:00 Making common grazings work – Siobhan MacDonald, SRUC

14:45 Refreshment break

15:15 Panel Q&A, Chaired by David Campbell, Commissioner

15:50 Close – Susan Walker, Convener

Appendix B

Assessors Preconference Survey Results

A survey with 5 questions was sent out to all assessors, prior to the Assessors meeting to see how they view their role, and also how Assessors see the role in the future developing.

Total Response Rate – 34 Responses out of 90 = 38%.

Questions & Response Summary

1.) Do you feel you understand the role of an Assessor?

Response - 90% of respondents stated that they understood their current role.

2.) What do you find most rewarding about your role as an area Assessor? Please tick all that apply?

Response – The results show that Assessors find the role of working with and assisting local crofters the most rewarding. Least rewarding was working with various government bodies.

Comments summary:

- There would appear to be a desire for the role of the Assessor to become more developed in the future.
- The role of Assessor to be promoted/advertised more within their locality as a relevant point of contact.

3.) Do you receive regular contact from local people to discuss crofting matters?

Response – the predominant answer from respondents (68%) is that assessors are only contacted occasionally.

Comments summary:

A large number of comments received for this particular question showing the very wide breadth of topics assessors deal with.

- Assistance with paperwork.
- Providing information/advice on regulation.
- The recent Census & Registration process
- Receiving feedback about the Commission itself – Both positive and negative.
- The general state of crofting.

- Also subjects unrelated to Commission work i.e CAP reform, SGRPID inspections. Geese problems.

4.) How could the role of Assessors contribute to the future of crofting?

Response – 88% of respondents provided feedback on this subject.

Comments summary:

- Provide information and comment both to the Commission and also back to the crofting fraternity by being an independent and impartial representative who is local.
- Act as a local signpost, for crofters to obtaining assistance, training or potential funding
- Identify croft availability and try to align supply with potential new entrants/suitable persons.
- Provide assistance to crofters on how to developing or to diversify their crofts.
- Being able to provide information and practical expertise to assist in policy decisions from a local and practical stand point and representing crofting at various levels.

There would appear to be a demand from assessors for more contact and involvement with the Commission/Commissioners

There would also appear a demand for the Assessors role to be overhauled and developed into a more developed and defined role

There is the feeling that Assessors have ideas experience and ability to contribute and that these talents are not currently appreciated or are being used to their full potential.

5.) Please list what you think are the top 5 most important contributions Assessors could make to the Commission?

Top five

- 1.) Provision of independent, local knowledge to the Commission.
- 2.) Being a local representative acting on behalf of the local crofters
- 3.) Provide advice and assistance to individual crofters/new entrants
- 4.) Promotion & protection of the Crofting System/Way of Life
- 5.) Assisting at a Grazing/township level when situations arise.

Appendix C

ASSESSORS SEMINAR 2014

Feedback Summary

Response Rate - 50% of all attendees.

Summary of results taken from respondents only.

1.) Attendance:

- Both days – 96%
- One Day – 4%
- Dinner – 95%

2.) Overall Rating of Seminar:

- Not good at all – 0%
- Mildly Good – 1%
- Fairly Good – 13%
- Very Good – 60%
- Excellent – 26%

3.) Seminar Ratings as a percentage:

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
Registration Process	nil	2	15	59	24
Materials Used	nil	nil	37	48	15
The Speakers	nil	nil	26	53	21
Session Content	nil	5	34	41	20
Session Length	nil	5	40	38	17
The Venue	nil	2	10	27	61
Catering Facilities	nil	nil	10	27	63

4.) What did you like most about the Seminar?

62 comments made and listed in order of popularity.

- Meeting with other Assessors, Commissioners and staff.
- Being provided with current and relevant information.
- Content and time of sessions.
- Workshops.
- Sheep stock club.
- After dinner speaker.
- Venue.

5.) What did you dislike about the seminar?

13 comments made and listed in order of popularity.

- Sessions & Workshops required being longer.
- A mic should have been used on the floor.
- P. A. system poor.
- Discussion groups needed to be all in separate rooms.
- Discussion groups going of tangent & being dominated by individuals.

6.) How useful was the information presented?

Not useful at all - 0%
Slightly useful - 0%
Somewhat useful - 19%
Very useful - 71%
Extremely useful - 10%

7.) Comments summary (15 Comments received):

- Good to see youngsters involved.
- Coloured badges worked well (use for dinner as well).
- It would be good to meet up with local assessors and the local Commissioner in local settings within year (Open to all crofters).
- Very well organised.
- All speakers should make a point of introducing themselves.
- All the matters raised at the Seminar must be actioned.
- There was no time to raise individual queries.
- A wider agenda maybe should be required, more parochial subjects to be discussed.
- Owner occupied crofts should be deregulated and become freeholds.
- Good to see a positive trend presented.
- Well organised but still feel unsure of assessor's role.

- Need to provide written information on all subjects.
- C.C staff very friendly and helpful.
- There is a need to facilitate discussion groups more. Groups still dominated by strong characters and even some Commissioners.
- Better communication required between all parties Commission, Assessors & RPID to deal with issues.