

CROFTING COMMISSION

MINUTE OF THE COMMISSION MEETING HELD AT THE ROYAL HOTEL, ULLAPOOL ON 25 MARCH 2015

Present:	Susan Walker	Convener
	Colin Kennedy	Vice-Convener
	William Swann	Commissioner
	Kathleen Sinclair	Commissioner
	Murdo MacLennan	Commissioner
	David Campbell	Commissioner
	IG Macdonald	Commissioner
	Catriona Maclean	Chief Executive
	Ian Bryce	Business Manager
	Donna Smith	Head of IS
	David Findlay	Commission Solicitor
	John Toal	Head of Policy & Duties
	Joseph Kerr	Head of Regulation
	Posy MacRae	Communications Manager
	Morag Menzies	PA to Convener, Minute-taker
	Ronnie MacRae	Highland Small Communities Housing Trust
	Stewart Wilson	Tighean Innse Gall (from 09:45 hrs)
	Brian Whittington	Tighean Innse Gall (from 09:45 hrs)
	Eddie Meyer	Assessor

1 APOLOGIES AND WELCOME

Apologies were received as follows:

Marina Dennis, Commissioner
Arnie Pirie, Commissioner
Jane Thomas, Head of Corporate & Customer Services
Gordon MacDonald, Head of Finance
Neil Macdonald, Interim Head of Finance

The Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially Ronnie MacRae, Stewart Wilson and Brian Whittington.

The Convener explained that the Commission Board visit different parts of the crofting counties once or twice a year and this year they are delighted to be in Ullapool. The purpose for this is to give members of the public the opportunity to attend the Commission Board Meetings and Public Meetings and for the Commissioners to see the different manifestations of the crofting system throughout the crofting counties.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None

3 APPROVAL OF DRAFT BOARD MINUTE OF 11 FEBRUARY 2015

The Minute of the Meeting of 11 February 2015 was approved subject to the following amendments:

Page	Item	Paragraph	Amended/Additional text should read
5	8	Second bullet point	Amend 'However, it does become an issue' to 'However, it could become an issue'.
8	12		Add 'Commissioner MacLennan – Chaired two Register of Scotland meetings and attended a Local Authority Joint Consulting Committee of Crofting Meeting.'

4 MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

The Action Points from the previous meeting on 11 February 2015 were reviewed:

- Page 2, Item 4, second bullet point, the Chief Executive advised that it is hoped to make a film about William Mowatt, a recently retired Assessor from South Ronaldsay with 40 years of experience, to be used as a publicity campaign and to raise awareness for other Assessors. Posy MacRae, the Communications Manager is arranging a date to go and see Mr Mowatt.
- Page 2, Item 4, fourth bullet point, Commissioner MacLennan advised that he had had a discussion with the Chief Executive about the migration of staff posts out of Inverness but it was not a full discussion.
- Page 5, Item 8, Commissioner MacLennan wanted it noted that the Audit & Finance Committee is the only statutory committee that the Commission has and it was following the import of Parliament that the members are 2/3 elected and 1/3 appointed.
- The Financial Budget is on track for this financial year.

5 CENSUS UPDATE

The Head of IS gave an update about the Crofting Census returns. Just under 17,000 forms were issued and so far about 12,500 forms have been returned, which equates to 76%. The closing date for returns was 16 January 2015.

Last week 4,000 reminder letters were issued to the people who didn't return their forms and this has generated a very large number of telephone calls to the office by people asking for duplicate forms to be re-issued to them.

Stewart Wilson and Brian Whittington from Tighean Innse Gall arrived at 09:45 hrs.

So far the lowest amount of returns are from Orkney and Argyll, with 67% returns and the highest are from Shetland with 80% returns.

A final return date has been set for 24 April 2015 and after that a full analysis will be carried out of all the data received.

The Commission wish to thank staff for all the extra work they have had to undertake with regards to the Crofting Census and they felt that the media campaign led by the Communications Manager had really made a big difference to the number of forms returned.

6 SHORT TERM WORKING GROUP UPDATES

Delegated Decision Making STWG – Vice-Convener Kennedy advised that the group had met recently and are testing cases and developing a framework for the delegation of decision making. The most important issue will be parameters and clear policy statements cascaded from the Board to the staff. It was a very positive meeting.

Key Performance Indicators STWG – The Chief Executive advised that the Commission's KPIs have been passed to the Scottish Government and a review is required to look at what has been achieved in the last year and to look forward to Year 2.

Technical Reports STWG – Commissioner Campbell reported that they had a good meeting and it was felt that RPID reports need to be more focused on information that the Commission require rather than agricultural status reports. The group are looking at making major efficiencies by requesting RPID reports during the 28 day objection period instead of waiting until after the 28 day objection period to request a report, and the Head of Regulation is taking this forward.

Grazings Regulations STWG – Commissioner Macdonald advised that the group is working on simplifying the template and making the guidance more extensive. The group will report back to the May Board Meeting.

The Chief Executive had recently asked Commissioners to volunteer to help with a Duties Process STWG and she had received a good response. The first meeting will take place on 23 April 2015 and will consist of Commissioner MacLennan, Commissioner Campbell and Commissioner Macdonald.

The Convener advised that some Commissioners and members of senior staff had recently attended Media Training which was very current and relevant.

7 SHORT REPORT ON EVENTS ATTENDED BY COMMISSIONERS

The Commissioners gave an update of meetings they had attended since the last Board Meeting:

Commissioner Sinclair – An SRDP Roadshow in Shetland. The deadline for registration, which must be done online, is 29 May and only 50% of claimants have registered so far. It is important that grazings committees register as well or they won't be able to claim the SRDP.

Commissioner MacLennan – Chaired a SRDP meeting in Barvas, attended the interviews for the tenant of a vacant tenancy in North Uist and attended The Changing Role of Regulation & Scrutiny in Scotland Conference in Edinburgh.

Commissioner Campbell – Attended a SRDP launch meeting in Inverness and spent a day at the SCF Gathering of Young Crofters in Assynt, which was very stimulating. It is hoped that the SCF will be able to keep up the momentum of enthusiasm amongst the young people, who have arranged a follow up meeting in May and have set up a Facebook page already.

Commissioner Macdonald – Attended the interviews in North Uist for the tenancy of a vacant croft which was a very positive experience. There were five applicants but only one tenancy. While in North Uist he also attended a good meeting with North Uist Estates about trying to let more vacant crofts. Attended two meetings with SGRPID in Portree, one of which was to discuss errors in the calculation of hectareage for grazing shares, which had occurred where shareholders had shares in more than one common grazing.

Convener – Attended the interviews in North Uist for the vacant tenancy, was asked to appear as a Witness on the subject of Land Reform at the Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs & Climate Change & Environment Committee Meeting in Edinburgh and a Training Session for local authority planners in Fort William, also attended by Finlay Beaton. The Planning Training Session highlighted the need for the Commission to find a more efficient way of working with the Planning Authorities and a Paper on this subject will come to the Board for discussion. Attended Media Training, the SCF Gathering of Young Crofters and the Cross Party Group Meeting in Edinburgh.

8 UPDATE ON NEW APPLICATION FORMS

The Chief Executive advised that the five most common application forms have been revised and will be issued, with guidance notes, around 20 April 2015. It is hoped that the more detailed application forms will lessen the processing time and reduce the need for RPID reports.

There will be a Media Campaign to advertise the launch of the new forms and factsheets have been circulated to Commissioners for their approval and any comments by 1 April 2015. Factsheets will be available digitally and new leaflets will be produced which will be available to the public in Area Offices, as well as from the Commission.

9 PRESENTATION BY RONNIE MACRAE, HIGHLAND SMALL COMMUNITIES HOUSING TRUST

Ronnie MacRae gave a presentation about the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust, its aim to help rural communities and information about The Rural Housing Burden and their Rent to Buy Scheme.

The Rent to Buy Scheme resulted from the HSCHT's successful application to the Scottish Government's call for innovative new projects to deliver housing in rural areas. HSCHT recognised that it was becoming increasingly difficult to secure mortgages due to the large deposits required. The Rent to Buy Scheme aims to help people who wish to become home owners by allowing them to rent a new home for 5 years whilst saving up for a deposit. The Rent to Buy Scheme aims to help people who are on modest incomes to become home owners in rural communities by returning a cash-back 'loyalty' sum to the tenant at the end of their 5 year rental period if they purchase the property. This sum is used for the deposit required to secure a traditional mortgage. The tenant becomes the owner. Another benefit is that the house price is set. This means that if house prices increase over the 5 years, they will not have to pay any more.

Priority will be given to people living in social housing, private rent or with relatives, or if there has been a significant change in circumstances. Those who own or part-own a home can apply, although they need to sell their interest in that property.

The building of these new houses also provides much needed work in rural communities.

There are huge issues for self-builds and the HSCHT is hopeful of an announcement next week about a Self-Build Fund that the Scottish Government is creating. It is only going to be for 2 years but it is a revolving fund where people can get a self-build mortgage for the full amount from the government right at the start of the project to help them to do their self-build, and then they transfer onto the standard mortgage.

If that can be set up and demonstrated to work, the Scottish Government have suggested that, funds permitting, they will extend the scheme.

The Convener thanked Mr MacRae for his very interesting presentation.

10 PRESENTATION BY STEWART WILSON AND BRIAN WHITINGTON, TIGHEAN INNSE GALL

Stewart Wilson and Brian Whittington gave a presentation about the work of Tighean Innse Gall.

Throughout the Western Isles there are about 800 derelict croft houses lying empty and there is an urgent need for jobs for young people. Many leave to go to University and don't return. TIG wants to purchase properties, do them up to a very high energy efficient standard so that the running costs are dramatically reduced and have young people working on the houses to rebuild their communities. They are very keen to preserve the landscape by taking off the roofs of the houses and dropping in new insulation, therefore maintaining the traditional look of the houses.

TIG have approached the Carnegie Trust who have been in touch with the William Grant Foundation for potential financial backing and they are keen to support the project. HIE and Historic Scotland, among others, are also supportive of the concept.

TIG are keen that croft land is not decrofted and they are interested to know if the Commission think their plans are possible.

Discussion took place about how TIG would access houses for their project and provide enough of a financial incentive to crofters to sell their properties. TIG are keen for the Commission to engage with crofters and try to encourage them to get involved.

Mr Wilson asked if the Commission thought it would be possible for TIG to buy a whole croft and what would be the implications of that, and the Chief Executive said she would be happy to discuss the issue with Mr Wilson to try to find solutions.

The Convener agreed it was a very interesting concept and thanked Mr Wilson and Mr Whittington for their interesting presentation.

11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

13 May 2015 – Great Glen House

12 ANY URGENT BUSINESS

None

13 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The meeting ended at 11:17 hrs.