

CROFTING COMMISSION

MINUTE OF THE COMMISSION MEETING HELD AT THE KINGSMILLS HOTEL AT 09:00 ON 21 MARCH 2019

Present:	Cyril Annal	Commissioner
	Andy Holt	Commissioner
	Mairi Mackenzie	Commissioner
	Malcolm Mathieson	Commissioner
	James Scott	Commissioner
	David Campbell	Commissioner
	Billy Neilson	Commissioner
	Rod Mackenzie	Convener
	Iain Maciver	Commissioner
	Bill Barron	Chief Executive
	Donna Smith	Deputy CEO
	David Findlay	Commission Solicitor
	John Toal	Head of Policy
	Joseph Kerr	Head of Regulatory Support
	Jane Thomas	Head of Compliance & Minute-taker
	Fiona MacDonald	Event Helper
	Betty Mackenzie	Event Organiser/ Communications Manager
	John Gillies	Assessor
	BBC Alba reporter and cameraman	

1 APOLOGIES AND WELCOME

There were no apologies and the Convener welcomed everyone to the meeting, in Gaelic and English, welcoming the BBC and Mr Gillies to observe proceedings.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were made.

3 BOARD MINUTE OF 7 FEBRUARY 2019

The Minute of the Meeting of 7 February 2019 had been approved by e-mail and published on the website. It was brought to the meeting for information only.

4 MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

Commissioners requested a formal update on Phase One of the Crofting Bill at the next Board meeting in May. It was confirmed that this would be placed on the Agenda.

It was noted that the recently published Guidance for Grazings Committees was being well received and proving useful.

The Convener and Commissioners wished to record a vote of thanks to Donna Smith, Deputy CEO, as this would be her last Board meeting before leaving the Commission at the end of the month. Donna was thanked for the significant contribution she has made to the work of the Commission over the last 8 years and Commissioners wished her well in her new venture.

5 ROUND TABLE UPDATES FROM COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Scott had attended a meeting of the Moorland Forum and Commissioners discussed the relative merits of remaining on this group, concluding that continuing engagement was hopefully beneficial.

Commissioner Campbell had attended a useful reception with the CEO on 19 March, with the SRUC in the Scottish Parliament, reflecting that it is important for the Commission to be visible at such events in order to promote the interests of crofting. It would benefit the Commission to share out attendance, to extend the experience of the Board and ensure maximum coverage of events.

Commissioner Campbell has recently joined a new housing forum, which is focused on reversing population decline in the Highlands. He will attend the first meeting, with the option that this can be shared in the future.

Commissioner Mackenzie was congratulated on being selected for and completing a Rural Leadership Programme, which she has found very beneficial. It was felt that the experience would bring benefits to the Board as a whole.

Commissioner Nielson explained that he is giving evidence to the 'Climate Change and Land Reform' committee, in his role as a land manager. He had given a presentation to Commission staff the day before, which was very well received. It was hoped the same could be repeated with other Commissioners later in the year.

Commissioner Annal raised a question concerning funding for crofting and the distribution of funding support by HIE. It was noted that officers from HIE will be attending the Board meeting in May and that the Highlands & Islands Croft Entrant Scheme had been a good example of collaborative working between organisations.

Commissioner Maciver wished to record his thanks to staff for organising a recent visit to the Uists to meet crofters and others. The meetings had been very positive, and this was a worthwhile initiative, helping communities to resolve issues.

Commissioner Holt had attended a meeting of the Agricultural Support Group in Shetland, where topics such as Brexit and LFASS had been discussed and where it was evident that there is still a lot of misunderstanding of the current Commission's remit. He would continue to attend, to listen and to try to raise awareness of what the Commission can and cannot do.

The Convener reflected that the updates show that Commissioners are attending a lot of meetings and events and would benefit from greater awareness of these by sharing notes. It was agreed that the best method of sharing and communicating would be investigated by officers and tuition provided to Commissioners on request.

The Convener had recently given a presentation at a training event run by the SCF in Portree, which was attended by 18 people, from those aspiring to become crofters, to new entrants and established crofters. He highlighted that it was easy to access misleading information on crofting, by visiting websites whose information on crofting and the Commission is out of date. It was agreed that the Commission would try to identify these and send them a link to our own website, to ensure information stayed up-to-date.

This led to a general discussion on the continuing challenge of getting clear messages out to the crofting public, which would be re-visited at the May Board meeting.

6 CEO MEETINGS

The Chief Executive reported that, along with colleagues from the management team and Commissioner Campbell, he had attended a useful meeting with internal Auditors, Scott-Moncrieff regarding the new Assurance Framework, being drawn up to take a broader look at good governance in the organisation.

He had also had a wash-up meeting with Matt Goddard, whose work on organisational development had now been completed. A copy of the resulting report would be circulated to Commissioners.

As a result of a meeting with the Sponsor Division, Commissioners were asked if they wished to engage with SG on the question of constituency boundaries, ahead of new Crofting Commission elections. This would be prior to a broader consultation exercise. It was agreed that this should go ahead, with information circulated to Commissioners for future discussion.

7 DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2019-2020

Deputy Chief Executive introduced the paper, explaining that the draft would come back to the Board for formal approval in May. Some changes had been made to Milestones and targets, with further information on performance targets to be added after the year end, in early April. Commissioners considered each draft Outcome in turn.

For Outcome One, it was felt that a little more narrative, in the form perhaps of an Explanatory Note, is needed where it is not clear why a particular target is pertinent. While it was accepted that targets must be productive and measurable, it was felt that they would convey a better message if the language was positive rather than negative. For instance, 'increasing occupation' is more positive language as a target than 'reducing the number of vacant crofts'.

Commissioners discussed how action is prioritised, for instance in relation to Crofting Census Returns, with current priority given to following up those returns reporting a possible breach of duty; Commissioners noting that action would be taken in other cases if potential breaches are reported by members of crofting communities.

Outcome Two concerns grazings and it was agreed that the Commission has to focus on management structures because market driven elements are not under the Commission's control. It was felt that there would be benefits in using the Assessor Network to engage with townships and grazings committees.

Outcome Three mainly related to process improvements in Regulatory work, with new performance measures being developed. Head of Regulatory Support explained that the triage system previously approved by the Board is being taken forward, with a pilot to test its effectiveness.

For Outcome Four, the Chief Executive explained that there are no measures, but Milestones have been identified. It was agreed that land reform should be given greater prominence and a meeting arranged with the Land Commission and that a further discussion was needed on 'Support for Crofting' ahead of any meeting on this with partners or SG. It was further agreed that a facilitator should be identified to lead this discussion at a future Board meeting.

For Outcome Five, Commissioners were reminded that the previous Outcome Six on the environment was now included in this Outcome. It was suggested that where positive action was measurable on environmental improvements, such as switching to more paperless meetings, this could be tagged with a 'green flag'. The desire to shift the balance from issuing documents and communicating by letter to more use of e-mail was discussed and will be investigated further.

8 ORGANISATION OF GENERAL EXTERNAL VISITS

The Chief Executive introduced a brief paper outlining the current approach to external visits, with information on costs and the aims behind the various types of visit to crofting communities, undertaken by Commissioners and staff.

The Convener explained that, with increased pressure on budgets, the Commission needs to use resources carefully and decide which approach provides the best value for money.

Commissioners discussed the relative merits of the different types of visit currently undertaken, agreeing that the Commission must be a customer-facing organisation and that it is important to consider value as well as cost. Questions were raised as to whether it is necessary, for instance, for all Commissioners and several members of staff to be present at some external meetings, where the same outcome might be achieved by fewer people. It was suggested that this needs to be balanced by the symbolic nature of certain visits, especially as there is currently no live streaming of Commission meetings. It was pointed out that HIE broadcast a live forum debate each week and that advances in digital technology offer an opportunity to reach more people, for instance via podcasts.

The Deputy CEO suggested that completing a cost/benefit analysis could provide useful information and the Convener favoured a more structured and targeted approach, which would assist in planning and budgeting.

It was agreed to bring the item back for further discussion at the next Board meeting in May.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on 9 May 2019 in Great Glen House.

10 AOB

There was no urgent business and the Convener thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting at 12:20pm.