

Community Land Scotland Chairman's Conference Report 2014

It is hard to believe that this is only the 4th year of operation of Community Land Scotland. A great deal has happened in those 4 years and I hope what I set out in this brief report demonstrates that we are maturing as an organisation and having an influence on thinking and policy toward community land ownership and land reform more generally within the relatively small resources we have at our disposal.

Overall, I think I can say with confidence that the debates about land ownership and public awareness on community ownership and the issues surrounding it have never been more prominent than they have been in the last year. More column inches have been written, more Parliament time has been spent, and more TV and radio coverage of the issues has occurred than any of us can remember. I know Community Land Scotland has been at the heart of helping create that renewed interest in a whole host of ways.

The Board

The Board has met on four occasions during the year where we have considered a range of issues concerning the management and administration of the organisation, funding, policy and strategy. I am grateful to all the Board members for their dedication to the work of Community Land Scotland. All Minutes of the Board meetings are circulated to our members and are available on request.

Finance

This has been an important year in the financing of Community Land Scotland as we moved through a transition between initial funding from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and to a new core funding source. We are extremely pleased to have the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation as a core funder for a three year period from February of this year, and I formally thank them for their support.

Securing that funding will allow us sufficient funds to undertake our policy and other work and as will be understood, a great deal of effort was required to make the case for funding and prepare the necessary applications.

We remain a small organisation and there was a period during the year where money became very tight indeed, although I am pleased to say we continued to deliver our core work and strategy targets.

In addition to our core funding now from the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, HIE continue to support particular activities and have supported research work, knowledge exchange work and our one full-time member of staff (Ruth Cape) during the year, and the international seminar we held at Bunchrew. We are grateful for all that support.

In addition the Carnegie UK Trust has awarded us a £10,000 discretionary grant for us to use on non-core issues we believe to be important. Carnegie offer this with minimal strings attached and we are extremely grateful for the flexibility this fund offers us in tackling value adding projects. This year that fund has been used, for example, to provide resources for research, for our Bunchrew

international seminar, for our photographic competition, and to have a presence at all the major political party conferences.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar also provide financial support toward our Graduate Placement and Highland Council are contributing toward work with local communities on community ownership. The Highland Council are also supporting this conference. I record our grateful thanks for this support.

Government, Parliament and Policy

The year has once again been characterised by a lot of activity to influence public policy.

During the year we developed a number of policy papers on issues around the land reform debate and developing more detail about earlier evidence given to the Land Reform Review Group. We submitted written evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee inquiry into land reform, and gave oral evidence to the Committee. We submitted evidence in response to the Scottish Government consultation on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. We have liaised closely and as appropriate with the civil servants working on key policy areas, and I would like to record our thanks for their willingness to receive representations from us and hear our perspectives on the various issues.

We took the decision in this important year for land reform in Parliament to be represented at the SNP, Labour Party, Lib Dem and Conservative Party Conferences. This allowed us contact with a great many parliamentarians and their staff and was a very positive experience. We were invited to speak on land reform at a session of the Labour Party Conference, having done the same at the SNP Conference the previous year. We have been represented at discussions with MSPs on aspects of policy development they are undertaking.

We have been regularly represented at meetings of the cross party group on rural affairs. One issue on which we have been active in making appropriate representations has been the issue of the negative impact of the interpretation of State Aid regulations. We have seen clear signs and had confirmation Ministers see this as a real issue and there are some signs that it may prove possible, following a review of some State Aid matters, that interpretation of the regulations can be more risk based as assessed on a case by case basis. We shall continue to monitor this with great care and will keep making representations as appropriate.

We have been pleased to note that the Land Fund which we lobbied for is being put to good use with a number of important awards being made during the year.

We stepped back from activity with the Crown Estate as a judgement about the amount of priority we could make on the issues relative to other priorities and a consideration about the amount of progress we could make. We have, none the less, taken every opportunity to continue to assert our position on the Crown Estate needing to be managed in a significantly different way in Scotland.

We submitted evidence on the question of wild land to SNH.

International land reform and human rights

Following liaison with the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the helpful insights into how human rights obligations and thinking can assist the debate about land reform in Scotland that we obtained from Prof. Alan Miller at last year's conference, the Scottish Human Rights Commission in its Scottish National Action Plan has identified land reform as one strand of work that it will participate in and support actions in.

During the year we held a small seminar at Bunchrew House near Inverness which had an international and human rights theme. We were very grateful to have input from a number of international delegates, including the International Land Coalition (ILC). The seminar brought together people involved in land policy within Scotland in the third sector and government, international delegates and academics. The Conference received input from Prof. James Hunter on where Scotland sits in land reform internationally, and from Prof. Alan Miller, and from Michael Taylor of the ILC.

This proved to be an extremely interesting and valuable event which is informing our work in all sorts of interesting ways. Indeed, it has already influenced in important ways some of the findings of the Land Reform Review Group.

Finally in this section of the report I can record that the Land Reform Review Group has just reported and while we are still assessing their findings and recommendations, the signs are very positive of their report being not just a driver for further change, but sets out an agenda for that change. A number of issues emerging from representations we have made have been supported in their findings.

Wider Liaison and Promotion Activities

We continue to value our relationship with a range of stakeholders.

During the year we have worked closely with HIE, with DTAS, the CWA, the Community Alliance and with SCVO, as well as with a range of housing organisations, funders, crofting interests and local authorities. We have participated at The Gathering - the major third sector annual festival in Glasgow - where we had a prominent staffed information stall, thanks to the efforts of Ruth Cape in winning the competition for that free stall!

We have run a number of day events with community groups who have a potential interest in community ownership, and we have been represented at open meetings considering community ownership in a number of communities around the Highlands and Islands and in South Lanarkshire and Perthshire.

In addition we have contributed articles to various electronic publications and journals, and have issued a number of media releases on topical issues of the day in land. A number of speeches have been delivered at national conferences on the question of land reform and community ownership.

Our website has been used ever more extensively and contains a rich array of information, policy papers, and articles, with appropriate links to other information and sites. Fiona Mackenzie undertook some very helpful research during the year and compiled an extensive bibliography of research work into community and land ownership.

During the year we have taken to 'tweeting' (or at least Ruth has on our behalf!). This has proved a very useful extra communications means and we now have over 1,100 followers. We have also developed an e-bulletin giving a wide base of contacts (many of these gathered during the aforementioned conferences) updates on our work.

Our members

In April this year we published economic indicators data of community land ownership in a report which received wide media coverage. The study collated and analysed a range of financial and output data provided by 12 of our members who have been in community ownership for more than 5 years. We thank these members for taking part in the study and hope they also benefited from

the experience and outcomes. We will hear more from Amanda Bryan on this study on Day1 of the conference.

We have represented our member on the matter of broadband; contributing to the debate to get more of the areas where our members are onto the system. We have also worked with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) on behalf of those members who are interested in the possibility of having a National Nature Reserve in their area

Whenever asked we have sought to help individual members with information or requests for help in a variety of ways.

Growth in membership

During the year our membership has continued to grow and now stands at 47 member community groups. You can see the spread of our membership in the map included in your delegate packs.

Associate Members and 'Supporters'

Over the year our associate membership has also increased – including businesses, non-trading organisations and individuals who have joined to show their support for the work that we do and the principle of community land ownership. We are extremely grateful to all of these members for their support.

Over the year, Ruth has begun to develop a new 'Supporters Network' which will build this support from individuals towards our work. In this time of building awareness of community land and land issues in Scotland generally, we feel there are many out there who would appreciate the opportunity to understand the value of community land ownership and would wish to express their support for a fairer distribution of land in Scotland. We have very recently recruited a new Graduate Placement who will act as our 'Supporters Network Development Officer' – building this new network in the coming year. We are pleased to be able to welcome our new Graduate, Rhona Middler, to this conference prior to her start-date mid-June.

This leaves me only to wish you an enjoyable and thought-provoking conference and I look forward to keeping in touch in over year to come.

David Cameron
Chair, Community Land Scotland