

Introduction

Thank you Lorne (MacLeod) for your warm introduction and for inviting me to talk to your spring Conference.

I'm delighted to be in Inverness today to take part in your conference on empowerment through community land ownership.

I want to start by saying how vital your work is – both Community Land Scotland as an organisation – and all of the communities that are taking on assets. You are path-finding for a new era of community ownership and empowerment, and I know other communities will reap the benefits of your experience and learn from your vision and ambition.

In my speech, I'm going to explain why I am personally committed to land reform, say something about rebalancing rights and responsibilities and make some observations about how communities can get the most from land they live on.

Land reform

It is my ambition to ensure that the full benefit of Scotland's land is recognised and the needs of communities are supported by those who own land in Scotland. The aim of land reform is to ensure that, for those who depend on land, their situation is made better, not worse.

The First Minister announced the Government's intention to bring forward a land reform bill in this parliamentary session. That Bill will be introduced before summer recess – so in the next few weeks. Many of you will have responded to the consultation and I am grateful for your consideration on this important issue.

We published the results of the consultation analysis last week. These showed that there is strong public support for the principle of a land reform bill. People right across Scotland took time to provide detailed comments on specific aspects of the proposals.

You would be forgiven for thinking that land reform is just about land ownership. In fact I'd argue that it's far from it. Land reform is about modernising the legal framework of rights and responsibilities around land governance – its use, access, development, and yes, ownership – to ensure that it delivers benefits across society. Land reform is about securing benefits from our land for everyone in Scotland.

Land is a fundamentally important resource and a productive asset in Scotland. Land in Scotland must contribute to addressing the big challenges our communities face – including tackling poverty, addressing housing shortages, securing employment. It must also play a large part in how we address climate change, energy and food security and biodiversity loss.

All countries are, in essence, defined by their land, and therefore have a duty of care to ensure that the governance of land meets societal needs both today and for future generations.

Scotland is no different. The way we think about governance of land, and any land reform, needs to correspond to the values we hold in society - those of social justice and equality - and reflect human rights and public interest.

Social justice is about fairness. It's also about ensuring that people can access the resources they need to provide their families with secure places to live, to engage in meaningful work and to contribute to society.

Land underpins all of these – land is a key resource for employment in Scotland, it provides many jobs and we believe could support many more. It provides the places people live – including land for housing. And it's where people meet, recreate and develop their communities.

But we live in a very unequal society. Access to ownership and use of land is not evenly spread across society and there's good evidence that this inequality does not serve us well.

The distribution of household wealth in Scotland, and of land assets as significant part of that wealth, is of great concern for a country seeking to address inequality.

Figures published recently by the Scottish Government show that the wealthiest 10 per cent of households owned 44 per cent of all wealth in 2010/12. In contrast, the least wealthy half of households in Scotland owned nine per cent of total wealth in 2010/12.

Is that right for modern Scotland? Will it will serve our communities into the future?

In my view, it doesn't reflect the kind of society we want to work towards.

So land reform is not necessarily about ending large land ownerships, as has been the tone of recent press. But land reform does sit in the context of how we tackle the causes and consequences of inequality in our society.

While I am on this theme, I want also to address human rights. Those of you who have been privileged to hear Professor Alan Miller speak on the subject of land reform may have been struck by the tone and the balance he has consistently struck.

Human rights dimensions of land reform are growing in intensity across the world and the work we are doing in Scotland is seen as progressive and important steps in modernising our approach to how land is owned, governed and used.

While the European Convention on Human Rights provides part of our legal framework in Scotland, other international approaches, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights places a duty on ministers to use the maximum available resources to ensure the progressive realisation of rights like the right to housing, food and employment.

Community empowerment

So, land reform sits within a wider programme of democratic renewal and community empowerment. It is about firmly placing people and their communities at the heart of decision-making, empowering communities to make decisions that are right for them and being supported appropriately and effectively by government and the wider public sector.

We are taking forward a range of measures which I think, and hope you will agree, adds up to a strong package for empowering communities.

The First Minister announced in the Programme for Government a new Empowering Communities Fund which will encompass our existing People and Communities Fund and has an additional 10 million pounds to allocate in financial year 2015-16 – more than doubling the existing resource.

We are also supporting around 80 community-led organisations to build their capacity and become more sustainable through the 3 million pound Strengthening Communities Programme.

The Community Empowerment Bill, of course, will give community bodies the chance to take ownership of land and buildings, and will strengthen the voice of communities in the decisions that matter to them.

The forthcoming Land Reform Bill will build further on this. It may not go so far as some commentators have called for, and too far for others. But I am convinced that it will provide further tools that communities need to be able to address the balance of power that land ownership affords.

Community land ownership

Land ownership by communities has been going from strength to strength, and Community Land Scotland has played a huge role in making this happen.

Since coming into this Ministerial role, I've been privileged to meet many of those involved in community land ownership. I have been struck by just how energetic, positive, creative and passionate you all are!

While some are still finding their feet, and learning as they go, many communities are proving successful land owners.

Each community has its own story and the routes to ownership will vary. Each community will also have its own set of reasons for wanting to take on landownership. The important thing is that communities are able to make the right choice for them to meet local needs and further sustainable development.

The target of achieving 1 million acres of land in community ownership by 2020 frames a commitment from the Scottish government to ensure that those communities who have an ambition to take on ownership of their land can access the support they need to do so.

With this will come challenges, but also huge benefits to communities across Scotland as people are empowered to take control of their own destiny in ways they are only just beginning to imagine.

We have now set up a short life working group to develop a strategy for achieving the one million acre target by 2020. The group has a number of workstreams being led by well-respected individuals from outside the Scottish Government, one of which is Community Land Scotland's Peter Peacock.

The working group is due to report at the end of this summer and its findings will be considered when forming the future

functions of a dedicated community ownership support resource within the Scottish Government.

There are some great examples of community buyouts throughout the country – and not only in the Highlands and Islands. Community ownership is for the whole of Scotland, urban as well as rural, and we need to spread the word about that!

What is important is that all of us – including Community Land Scotland and all its members - need to harness and use the passion of the communities that have bought land and are developing their inspirational projects to inspire other communities.

All of us in this room today have a role in inspiring communities to take on ownership and to support that process, with all its ups and downs, frustrations and celebrations.

I'd like to urge Community Land Scotland - as a representative organisation - to nurture its new members and to stretch their ambitions, so that community ownership can really become truly transformational.

The conference is hearing about the experiences of some of the long-established community buyouts. The sharing of that experience is important. So too is the sharing of the experiences of the new members, and hearing the voices of these new members. As the new generation, it will be their turn to be the innovators and inspirers!

Community ownership lets communities start out on a very important journey that lets them develop projects that they may have once thought unimaginable.

Look at the Galson buyout, which is now has its community investment programme and community share offer. And Storras Uibhist is undertaking massively important

infrastructure projects that will have a transformational impact on South Uist.

Evanton has an exciting programme of educational and outreach activities. Neilston is another success story, from its community buyout of the former bank buildings to re-energising the Town Charter and to build a positive view of the future landscape of Neilston.

Another great example is the West Harris community buyout of the Scottish Government crofting estate. This community has gone from strength to strength since taking on ownership in 2010.

When the community purchased the estate there were no community facilities or business spaces to support local economic development. The Trust have developed a number of projects to improve the local area.

I note that work has recently begun on a new community enterprise centre project which will provide the community with new business, tourism, social and housing opportunities. I wish them well with this exciting project.

Government Croft Land (ANNOUNCEMENT)

At this conference last year Paul Wheelhouse outlined aspirations for crofting communities on government estates to consider the merits of owning and managing their own estates. Whilst the Scottish government first and foremost remains a willing landlord, if a crofting community expresses a desire to take control of its own future we will support those ambitions and be an agreeable seller.

I can announce today that to facilitate this we have asked Highland and Islands Enterprise to work with Community Land Scotland to assist crofting communities on the Scottish Government Estate, where those communities want to understand better the ownership options and opportunities they have open to them.

The package available includes support for:

- startup costs;
- short-term revenue support;
- visits to community-owned crofting estates;
- feasibility and business planning;
- Scottish government support with mapping.
- dedicated HIE case officer support; and
- mentoring support from Community Land Scotland.

If this is something your community think they could be interested in I encourage you to contact the Community Assets Team in Highlands and Islands Enterprise. This is an opportunity for communities on Scottish Government crofting estates to explore the possibility of owning their own land. There is no obligation for these communities to continue with a buyout should they decide not to proceed.

Scottish Land Fund

Since the Scottish Land Fund opened for business back in June 2012 over 45,000 people in 32 communities across Scotland have started to benefit from land bought with help from the Fund.

Aigas, Kirkton, Morvern and the Carloway Estate have taken ownership in recent weeks. Kilfinnan and South West Mull may complete their purchases before the end of the month. I wish all of these communities well in developing their aspirations, and I look forward to watching them develop and grow and to act as an inspiration for other communities.

We have another year of this current Scottish Land Fund and some exciting projects that are coming forward for consideration. But, as you know, we have plans for a much larger fund from 2016 to 2020, of 10 million pounds per year. We are currently considering how this will be taken forward, and how it can fit into our developing agendas of community empowerment and land ownership.

Sustainable funding packages

Part of community empowerment is about communities taking control of their own destinies. And land is one of the key assets that will help them do that.

Looking into the future, we want to see our communities becoming more self-sustaining and secure; this is the underlying aspiration of community empowerment. There are already several established community land owners that are well on the way with robust business plans which identify and provide long-term sources of income, and sustained plans for investment and growth.

Government has a role in supporting this journey.

There are a number of support and funding opportunities that communities can take advantage of, and not just within the public sector. A growing number of communities, such as Fintry, Comrie and Storas Uibhist have taken steps, including taking commercial loans and working with private developers, to invest in their land assets.

There are risks associated with new ventures and using innovative funding models, and we want to help communities feel secure and brave enough to be ambitious.

Working with land owners

One final point I want to make is that land ownership isn't the only way communities can influence land use and the benefits that they get from land.

Some communities are just not ready and others may not want the responsibility of land ownership. I think we have to recognise this and look at how we can support and encourage communities and land owners to work closely together.

There is a growing recognition within the land ownership community that there are considerable benefits from working with their communities, and there are some really productive partnerships springing up around Scotland. They may not yet be the norm, but I think, and hope, that is starting to change.

I spoke at Scottish Land and Estates' conference on Tuesday. They have started to develop a programme to encourage and support land owners to collaborate and engage with communities for mutual benefit. This has to be a positive step forward.

But there is a key principle here. All land owners – big, small, public, private - have to recognise that they have a responsibility to the community that lives and works in and around their land. And there is a strong argument that the larger a land holding, the greater that responsibility.

Ownership of land does not bring with it absolute rights to its use and the benefits flowing from it, and I would like to see us move to a position where collaboration between land owners and communities was much more common.

Community land ownership may be one of the outcomes of such collaborations.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, I want to congratulate Community Land Scotland and all of you working to support and develop communities to realise their aspirations.

Communities are demonstrating that by taking the journey of community land ownership, they are growing and innovating through that experience.

The work is not always easy and the path not always smooth, but we can see real change happening and that is definitely something to celebrate.

I wish you well with the rest of the conference. I think I can stay for a little while to answer a few questions and perhaps we can have this as a conversation and hear your thoughts.