

Case Study: Common Grazings at work



Ollaberry Collafirth and Crooksetter Common Grazings

This carefully managed Common grazings has taken advantage of environmental schemes and CAGS, and along with willing shareholders, has benefitted the workings of the grazings, the landscape and the local community.

The common grazing rises from sea level to the top of Ronas Hill—which is the highest point in Shetland at 450m. Although this does not sound very high the wind speeds and exposure in Shetland are extreme and the vegetation in the upper areas of Ronas Hill are described as sub-alpine vegetation similar to vegetation at much higher altitudes elsewhere in Scotland.

The common grazing has 26 shareholders who have a total of 74 shares between them. Only 11 shareholders are grazing sheep plus there are sheep belonging to 2 crofters who have the use of shares from inactive shareholders. There generally is not an absentee problem in the area.

The original souming was 3937 ewes which has been reduced to 2941 after apportionments that have been taken in. Since the early 1980s there has been an agreement among the shareholders that no shareholder will apportion more than 25% of their hill rights.

There has been a grazing committee in post

continuously for over 60 years. There are 11 shareholders on the committee including the chairperson. Jane Brown the grazing clerk has been in post since 2005. The grazing clerk is not a shareholder and is not a committee member.

The CG has made use of CAGS funding and agri-environment schemes with a current AECS in place over Ronas Hill .



Lang Ayre beach west of Ronas Hill

“Without an active common grazing committee, the local crofting community could potentially have missed out on very significant funding from the schemes that we have successfully applied to over the years. That would have been a massive loss to any crofting community”

Administration

There is always an AGM shareholders meeting plus at least one other committee meeting each year. Meetings are held as and when there is something to discuss or a decision to make. The current regulations being used are from 2000 but the committee intend to look at new regulations.

Communication with committee members is generally by phone, or when it needs to be more formal it is by letter, eg, meetings. Both mobile and internet connectivity is very poor in some parts of the district; only half of the committee are online.

Minutes are kept for each meeting and an accountant is paid to audit the financial records annually.

Livestock Management

There is one main annual count of livestock on the common grazing at what is called "dipping time". Although Shetland has been free from sheep scab for well over 20 years, Ollaberry etc. CG continued dipping sheep for several years. However as confidence grew in the precautions and treatments applied to sheep imported into Shetland and its ability to keep sheep scab out of these islands, and as the cost of a licence to dispose of spent dip increased significantly, it was decided to let the licence lapse.

Shareholders agree that the grazing committee purchases sufficient pour on product to treat all the sheep on the grazing and recharge the cost of this to those running the sheep on the hills. This proves to be much more effective than leaving each shareholder to treat his own sheep and ensures that all sheep are treated effectively at the same time. Making every effort to ensure a clean gather of the hill minimising the number of any sheep left or missed also helps ensure that the potential for re-infection is minimised.

Paperwork

The clerk maintains an AECS diary to comply with the environmental scheme conditions.

A SAF is submitted annually but no land is

claimed as it is all claimed by the individual shareholders on their own SAF and each shareholder declares their own sheep. The SAF is submitted solely to allow the common grazing to claim the AECS payments.

Under the grazing regulation the committee can give permission to graze excess sheep i.e. on unused shares, but the share can only be claimed on a SAF with the formal agreement of the shareholder who is not making use of their share.

Improvements

Prior to the ADP in 1987 the grazing could be described as being on a care and maintenance basis. It was with the ADP that the common



grazing undertook its first major improvements. A large part of the common grazing must be accessed by boat across Ronas Voe. Under the ADP scheme grant aid was obtained to improve the landing facilities on the Ronas Hill side of the Voe. Rock filled gabions were used to build a breakwater pier. Although this was grant aided by the ADP it was necessary for the shareholders who had sheep in this part of the hill to lend money to the grazing committee to help cover the costs after grant. These loans were eventually fully repaid using money generated by the environmental schemes that were entered into subsequently.

Using funding from the Crofting Township Development Scheme allowed Ollaberry to invest in a new aluminium boat that at the time cost £10,500 and a 50HP outboard that cost around £5-6000. This greatly improved the safety and efficiency of the sheep boat operation.

In 1996 they also built substantial new sheep

handling pens at a central location which can be accessed from all parts of the Common Grazings. A £5,000 loan from the Shetland Trust covered the cost of the project before the grant was received. The Shetland Trust no longer exists but at the time the loan proved to be very helpful bridging towards funding the cost of the project.

The sheep handling facility includes individual pens with an adjacent shedding race, a foot-bath, dosing race, dipper, and loading gates. The facility greatly improved the efficiency with which sheep could be handled. This investment was assisted by the CAGS scheme with the balance paid for by all shareholders according to their souming (even if they were not currently grazing sheep on the hill). Shareholders agreed in advance to this approach which avoided the need for the grazing to invoice shareholders for their share in the investment.

Ollaberry also won the 1999 "Township of the Future" which gave them a £1,000 award and this was also put towards funding the costs of the developments after grant.

When Scrapie was an issue prior to its ultimate eradication, the grazing committee paid for all rams on the hill to be genotyped and recharged the cost to the individual shareholders. It ensured that all rams were tested.

One of the major changes that happened as a result of an ESA scheme was a significant reduction in the number of sheep being grazed on the hills. 500 ewes were also removed from Ronas Hill under a management agreement with SNH that lasted for 20 years.

The moorland management payments amount to around £7,000 per annum. This payment covers all common grazing expenses including repairs to the boat, outboard and sheep pens.

Excess funds are distributed to the shareholders as and when required. At present there is a balance in the bank account that will need to be dispersed in the near future or used for further investment with the agreement of the shareholders.

Apart from repairs and maintenance the other significant annual expense covered by the environmental payments are clerk's wages, boat insurance £480 p.a. and public liability insurance £400 p.a. Because of the significant cost it has been debated at committee meeting whether or not public liability insurance is essential. Ronas Hill is a very popular place with both locals and tourist day-trippers. While there would not be much that the grazing committee could be held liable for on the hill itself there is always the risk that a someone could be inadvertently injured at the sheep pens. However, the committee has felt less exposed by continuing to pay for public liability insurance.

VAT Registration

Ollaberry & District Common Grazing is registered for VAT which allows it to claim back VAT on expenses and improvements. Their registration was challenged at one point because you must be invoicing for VAT rated services. It was decided by customs and excise that charging for excess souming even though Zero rated did make them eligible for registration.

Resumption income

There are two significant retransmission masts on Collafirth Hill which was part of the land occupied by the grazing. These sites were originally sold by the landlord (Shetland Islands



Council) without resumption for very modest sums without the shareholders receiving any compensation. It was later realised that these sites should be resumed, they were valued at the date of resumption and the shareholders were paid in proportion to remaining souming.

Benefits of being a constituted CG

Had this not been a properly regulated CG then it would not have been possible to have applied for all the various schemes over the years. Between ADP, Township Development Programme, RSS, RP, AECS and CAGS a lot of money has come into the community that



would not have been available otherwise. The active grazing and committee helped generate a sense of community and a desire among shareholders to continue to be active in the hill. It is absolutely critical, given likely changes in how land payments are made, that the grazings committee continues as a well-managed body into the future. Current office bearers and clerk are confident that the present state of affairs will be maintained, as younger graziers start to take an active role in the committee.

There can be no effective route for communications and agreements involving a common grazings, quite a separate entity from the crofts with rights in it, other than through a properly constituted grazings committee. This case study shows the huge historical benefits which have accrued, both to shareholders and the public, though SG and environmental agencies. This has to be a significant element in the generation of public goods.

What are the CG's future plans?

Consideration is being given to re-instating some of the older pens across the hill to help reduce the distances some sheep must be driven. It is also to allow the hill to be gathered by fewer people as there are fewer active shareholders these days. CAGS grant will be applied for and used along with income from environmental schemes to fund such projects.

As well as management for biodiversity the intention would also be likely to focus on the following:

- Climate change
- Biodiversity
- Local food production
- Peatland restoration
- The Shetland Breed of Sheep – possibly managed by a Sheep Stock Club

Something that the committee have been aware of for some time is the possibility that a viable form of virtual fencing might become a real possibility. There are current systems for cattle and goats, but they come with very significant costs.

The fleece on sheep appears to present a problem that has yet to be overcome but if a system does ever become workable for sheep then it will offer lots of possibilities.

Different parts of the hill could be protected from grazing sheep at certain times of year such as margins around nesting or potential nesting sites for Merlins and around the lochans used by Red Throated Divers.

Relict trees could also be given new opportunities by excluding sheep from some sections using the virtual fencing and new planting in gullies in the hill would be much more of a possibility if they did not need to be fenced.

Virtual fencing could also potentially be used to gather sheep in to the pens without the need for manpower to do the hard work and reducing the need to put people at risk gathering sheep in some of the more dangerous sections of the hill of which there are several.

What are the biggest challenges for Common Grazings?

The active shareholders are of a considerable and increasing average age and the nature of the hill means that a certain minimum number of young fit people are required to gather the hill and for the past two years the grazing committee has been relying on contractors with dogs to come and assist with the hill gatherings on a commercial basis.

There are a small number of younger shareholders, but they are generally much less dependent on agriculture for their income and have much more significant incomes outwith crofting. This makes them less likely to commit to working with sheep in the common grazing, though it should be stressed they are actively involved in the grazings committee and currently do graze sheep in the CG.

Summary

This regulated grazing with a formal grazings committee and very active clerk have always been able to take advantage of any opportunity or scheme that has come along, and maximised the income generated for the local crofting community - and will hopefully be able to continue to do so into the future.

Without a properly constituted grazing committee there would be no body that the landlord, Scottish Government (RPID & SNH etc.) could communicate or negotiate with re the management of the land. Without a grazing committee how would compensation from resumptions etc. be dealt with?



The Ollaberry Collafirth and Crooksetter Common Grazings is located in North-mainland which is in the north mainland of Shetland and extends to a total area of 3430ha, with a net area of 2977ha of forage for SAF purposes after deducting for lochs, rocky areas etc.



For further information about Common Grazings including information on administration, insurance, muirburn and sheep stock clubs, head to www.fas.scot or contact us on 0300 323 0161.