

Case Study: Common Grazings at work



Airds, Kirkton and Balindeor Common Grazing—Taynuilt, Argyll

Autumn 2020

The Airds, Kirkton and Balindeor Common Grazing is a great example of a common grazing that works together and supports its shareholders, while also actively raising funds to improve the CG land through innovative thinking.

This common grazing is supporting the three townships Airds, Kirkton and Balindeor and consists of 290 ha grazing ground. The 81 shares are currently held by 33 shareholders, of which 11 are actively using the common grazing. Some of the shareholders have multiple shareholdings depending on the size of their croft or the number of crofts in their possession. Each share allows the grazing for one cow and a follower (heifer).

Governance

Good governance and the constitution of a common grazing committee is the recipe for success for this common grazing. The management of the common grazing is overseen by the clerk, Mr Donald Harrison. He oversees all statutory, financial and day-to-day management and organises the committee meetings, which are held at least three times per year. The common grazing committee is made up of those who are active users of the common grazing, in this case 11 shareholders. Every three years the committee is re-elected and a chairman appointed from those re-elected, which is a statutory requirement. The clerk is an appointee, who carries out the



objectives that have been identified by the committee.

While the Airds, Kirkton and Balindeor common grazing abides by statutory common grazing regulations as dictated by the Crofting Commission, each grazing has also its own local rules. In this case the crofters are not allowed to graze sheep on the common, only cattle. The cattle can go onto the common only after 1st May and must be removed by 31st October. The winter period is let out to a neighbouring farmer for sheep grazing, which is raising income for the common and is only one of the many achievements of this common grazing.

Successes

Another positive outcome of this common grazing is the annual redistribution of seasonal common grazing shares, which allows active shareholders to maximise the farm support payments they receive. This process is also overseen by the clerk, Mr Harrison.



Due to there being a constituted and active committee, the common grazing is able to improve their land and infrastructure through applying for grant schemes, such as Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme (CAGS). In the past years, the common grazing has been able to erect fencing, maintain and improve handling systems, tackle weed control (rushes) and made ground improvements through lime and phosphate application.

The main source of income for the common grazing is the shared rent for a telecommunications mast that was erected on the common some 20 years ago. Crofting law dictates that this rent is shared equally between the grazing committee and the landlord. Amounting to £2750 annually, this generated income also goes towards common grazing maintenance and improvements.



Another role of this committee is the annual selection of a bull. Each year the common grazing hires a bull from the Crofting Commission. Although the selection of the breed of bull can sometimes spark heated debates, the clerk mediates, and the committee is always able to come to agreement. The cost of the hire of the bull is funded from the committee's reserves.

Challenges

To resolve arising arguments during committee meetings, Mr Harrison says that good governance is important, but it can be useful that the Clerk is not a crofter themselves.

"If the clerk is not a crofter, him/herself does not have an axe to grind and cannot influence decisions in his/her favour."

However, the main challenges in managing a common grazing is Crofting Law. The complexities of this law are often not even unravelled by many lawyers. One example for Airds, Kirkton and Balindeor Common Grazing is that there are seven crofters, who think that they would be entitled for shares, but are legally not. The main issue being that whoever has passed the croft to them, did not pass on the CG shares as they are a separate legal and conveyancing entity, leaving these shares in limbo for an uncertain time.

Another big challenge is the age of the crofters, says Mr Harrison. While this common grazing is lucky to have so many "young" participants (5 shareholders between 40 & 50), most shareholders are between 60 & 70 and 75+. This has in the past lead to difficulties as older crofters have retired, selling their cattle and not been able to identify successors for the common grazing.

Outlook for the future

The main objective is to at least maintain but preferably to improve the age range of the shareholders by attracting younger crofters. This however is hampered if the aged crofters do not pass on their crofts or indeed as the case in many instances, there are no younger family members wishing to continue the family tradition.

Another imperative is to maintain the stock levels of the common to avoid deterioration of the land.

The next great plan of the committee is to purchase the common grazing, which will allow a greater degree of latitude in the management of grazing.

**Louisa Habermann, Agricultural Consultant,
SAC Consulting Oban**

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.

