

One-to-Many Delivery Croft and Small Farm Subscriber Survey



**Farm
Advisory
Service**

Report produced by SAC Consulting



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1. Introduction

The Croft and Small Farm subscription is a product that includes two hours of advice in the local SAC office or by phone or written communication; a magazine with technical updates four times per year; and notifications of deadlines or information through text.

The subscription is an annually renewed product that is similar to the SAC Basic Subscription product for farmers; except that the C&SF Subscription is limited to office/phone communication (i.e. it does not provide on-farm or on-croft advice).

The subscription delivers item 11.1 in the FAS one-to-many invitation to tender:

“11.1 Under the contract, small farmers and crofters should be able to obtain a yearly fixed price subscription to receive advice and information by telephone and office visit when required.”

2. Background to survey

Scottish Government has recently questioned the value of the subscription, as the time recorded on SAC Consulting's system showed that in 2018-2019 year, out of the 2,252 subscriptions, the average time recorded against each was just under one hour.

This average is caused by two factors: 1) some crofters and smallholders may not want to or need to always fully use the available time; and 2) it is impractical to record all of the time spent servicing subscribers. For example, if a subscriber calls a consultant and briefly receives some advice, it is unlikely that that time will be recorded due to its brief duration. Likewise, if a consultant is advising multiple clients with one query (e.g. advice about a common grazings), it is unlikely that time will have been recorded as until recently there was no ready mechanism to apportion time against multiple subscriptions.

In August 2019, SAC (at its own cost) undertook a survey of all the croft and small farm subscribers. The purpose was to:

- Determine what crofters and smallholders felt about the service
- Inform SAC Consulting's efforts to improve the service
- Provide feedback to Scottish Government on the value of the service.



3. Methodology and repondee demographics

A postal questionnaire was sent to all current subscribers, accompanied by reply-paid envelope. Some subscribers are elderly and it was felt many of them would be unlikely to respond to an online survey, therefore a postal survey with a reply-paid envelope was seen as the best way to secure the highest possible response rate.

247 responses were received, which equates to an 11 percent response rate – average for such types of surveys. The locations of the 200 respondees who provided a postcode are shown on the map below.

63 percent of respondees were male, 21 percent of respondees did not indicate which gender they are, 15 percent were female, and one percent were joint male and female responses.



Figure 1 - Location of respondees

The age breakdown of respondees was as follows:

Age category	Percentage of respondees (total 247 responses)
21-30	2%
31-40	8%
41-50	17%
51-60	19%
61-70	30%
70+	23%
No response	1%

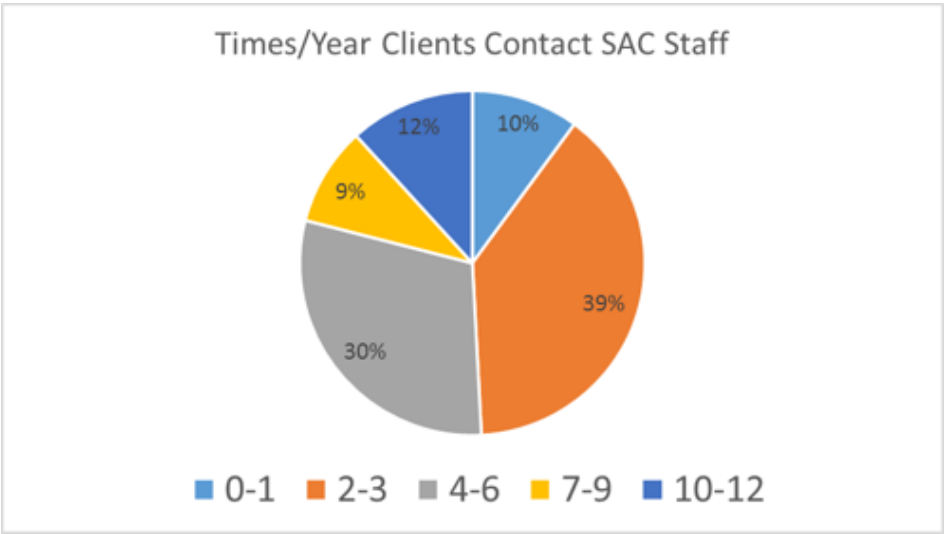


4. Survey results

Subscriber/SAC Consulting contact

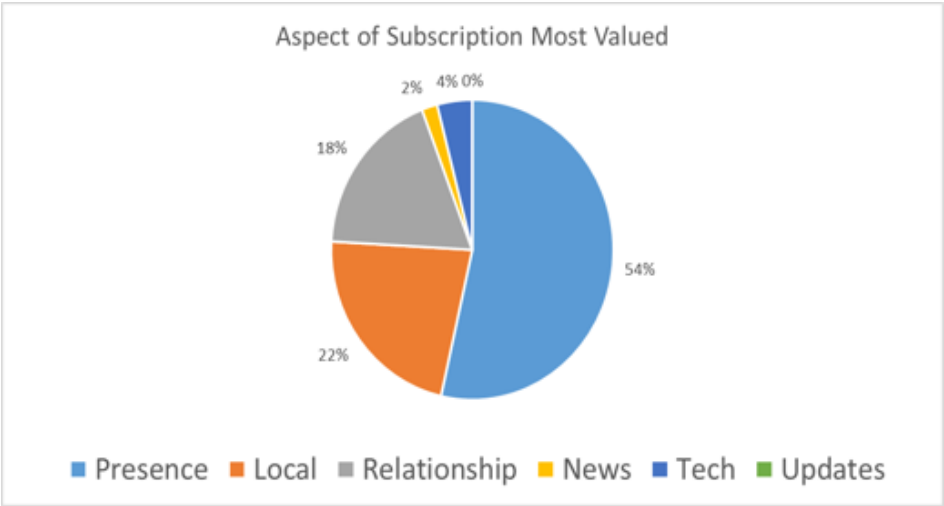
Subscribers were first asked how many times each year they are in contact with their local SAC staff. The graph below summarises the responses this question.

12 percent are in contact as much 10-12 times a year, 51 percent are contact more than four times per year, and 39 percent are in contact two or three times a year. Only 12 percent are in contact once or not at all. The responses to this question would indicate a high level of contact between subscribers and local SAC Consulting staff.



Value in subscription

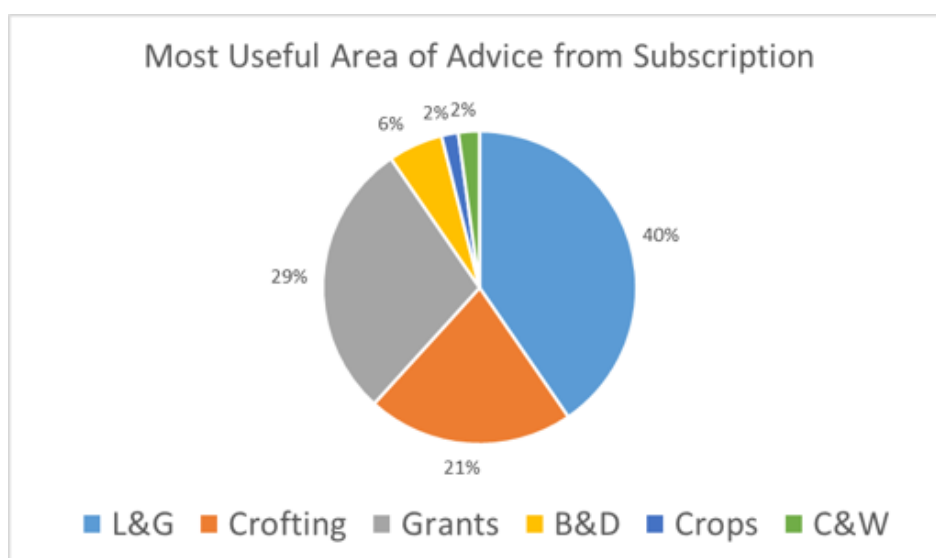
Choosing from a pre-determined list, subscribers were asked to rank in order of preference the three elements of the subscription they valued the most. The items they could choose from were: presence of a local office; local knowledge of adviser; relationship with local adviser; quarterly newsletters; impartial technical advice; updates (e.g. text messages and emails). The graph below summarises the responses.



The most valued element of the subscription was the 'Presence of a local office', with 54 percent of respondees giving this as their top choice. The second most valued element was the 'Local knowledge of adviser' (22 percent) and third was the 'Relationship with local adviser' (18 percent). These responses highlight that the local element to the service is what is most valued by subscribers.

Areas of advice

Again choosing from a predetermined list, subscribers were asked to rank in order of preference the three areas of advice that they derived most use from the subscription. The items they could choose from were: livestock and grassland; crofting regulations; grant information; business and diversification; crops; and conservation and woodlands. The graph below summarises the responses.

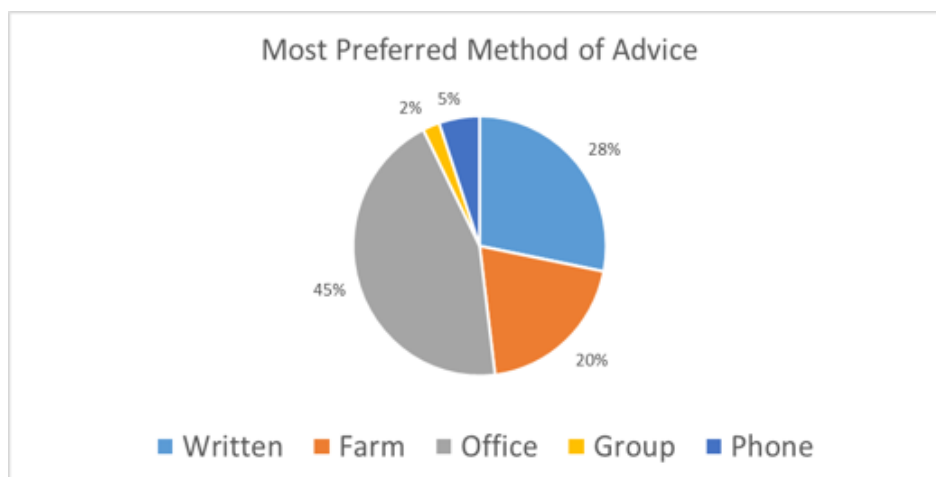


Respondees clearly value livestock and grass (40 percent), grants (29 percent), and crofting regulations (21 percent) as the areas they derive most use from. Business and diversification (six percent), crops (two percent) and conservation and woodlands (two percent) were less highly valued, but the question asked for the top three most valued and it should not be assumed that respondent do not value advice on these subjects – they simply tend to value it less than advice on others areas.

Routes to advice

On a scale of one (most favourite) to five (least favourite), subscribers were asked to rank the different ways (electronic or written communication, face-to-face on farm/croft, face-to-face at the local SAC Consulting office, group meetings, or by phone) by which they could receive advice. The graph below summarises the responses.





Looking at the most preferred options, face-to-face at the local SAC Consulting office (45 percent), electronic or written communication (28 percent), face-to-face on farm/croft (20 percent) came considerably higher than by phone (five percent) or group meetings (two percent). The low preference for group meetings may reflect the fact that crofters might typically have to travel further to group meetings and fit them in alongside other employment.

Impact

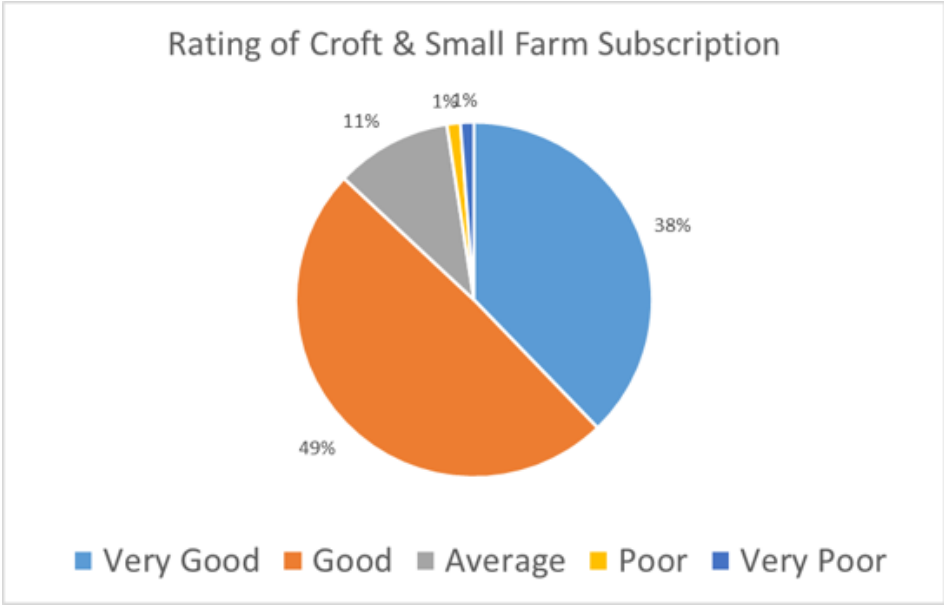
Subscribers were asked to give examples of how their business had been helped by them having a subscription. 73 percent of respondents answered this question (in free text form) – an indication that at least 73 percent felt they had benefitted. Examples of some of the responses can be found below:

- “Its helped me to rethink some of the things I was doing and changed my plans. As a result saving me money.”
- “Lots of small ways but improving silage yields the most obvious”
- “Being helped as new entrant crofter, albeit some years ago. Being kept up to date with changing regulations”
- “Available course in Boat of Garten for tree management. Now going to start tree nursery.”
- “Our township is in a much stronger position, from both a financial angle, and also in relation to grazings and livestock management as a result of ongoing dialogue.”
- “Graham & Jocelynn [SAC Consulting staff in Shetland] are both so helpful and knowledgeable and have helped us a great lot of times on all different aspects of crofting.”
- “Can make decisions with more confidence.”
- “Update me on the new cattle EID tagging.”
- “By technical advice about weed control, by soil sampling, by advice on grant funding, by farm planning.”



Overall value

Subscribers were asked how they rated the subscription overall. The results can be found in the graph below.



87 percent of respondees rated the subscription as ‘Very Good’ or ‘Good’, 11 percent rated it ‘Average’, and two percent (six respondents out of 247) rated it ‘Poor’ or ‘Very Poor’. Those who rated it badly all cited the cost but only one of them also said their business had not benefitted from the subscription.

5. Conclusion

SAC Consulting believes that the results of this survey indicate that the subscription is a hugely valued resource for the most remote and/or small-scale agricultural businesses in Scotland. SAC Consulting believes that the subscription is a unique product that significantly addresses the barriers to getting advice (e.g. remoteness, other (work or personal) commitments, cost, and scale of business) that crofters and smallholders often face.

The subscription is not perfect. The results indicate that SAC Consulting needs to improve the speed of service in some areas, whilst the cost of the subscription is a problem for some of the very smallest crofters and smallholders. SAC Consulting also recognises – and has already taken steps to address – shortcomings in the time recording of subscriber contact.

However, respondees to this survey have clearly stated that the availability of a local office, with approachable and knowledgeable staff that understand local conditions, is at the core of what they value and need. The subscription is currently the only mechanism that makes this model sustainable. SAC Consulting therefore believes there is a very strong case for it to remain in place – albeit with necessary improvements and a constant vigilance to ensure value for money.

