

Community Land Scotland Conference, Sabhal Mor Ostaig. 2nd & 3rd June 2023

I attended this last week on behalf of Fernaig Community Trust. It was a great couple of days filled with positivity, ideas and information and it was encouraging to speak to so many interesting and helpful new people as well as meeting up with a few old friends.

Community Land groups across Scotland (and beyond) have a lot in common and seem to be pursuing very similar routes and aspirations. This means that there is a lot of help and knowledge out there. Whatever we want to do, somebody's done it already.

There were several subjects covered in the talks and workshops, most of which have potential relevance to us. Here's a few notes:

Hydro or other renewables. There are now a lot of successful community renewable projects up and running across Scotland, mostly wind turbines and hydro schemes. The end of government incentives, particularly the Feed in Tariff (FIT) has made it more difficult to get started now but people are finding ways to make these projects happen. Essentially communities can sell power to the grid for around 13p a unit, but have to buy electricity at 24p. One way round this is to use the power directly, not going through the grid. It is also possible using smart metres to use our own electricity via the grid, and hopefully this will be possible under Local Energy (no 2) bill currently going through Westminster. I will keep in touch with Raasay Community Renewables who have two hydro installations themselves and are also working with two hydro projects on Skye to find ways to make them viable.

Biodiversity. On the day of the talk the chair noted that a new figure of 64% loss of insect numbers over the last 18 years had been reported on the news that morning. Communities across Scotland are taking action for biodiversity, and we heard from several community trusts including Carloway Estate Trust where they have a large peatland restoration project on the common grazings. There was no financial benefit, they had just decided it was the right thing to do.

Housing and repopulation. This is a big issue for most communities and in a recent survey for the Ullapool Community Trust by far the most important issue raised was affordable housing. Many communities are doing something about it and we were told about Achiltibuie, where they have just purchased the old hydroponicum with a view to building some affordable housing, and the Rum Community Trust reported on some new rental houses recently built on the Island.

Land reform. The Land Reform bills of 2003 and 2016 were pivotal for a lot of communities and the process continues with the current bill. Hopefully benefit to communities will increase as well as more involvement in decision-making concerning the land.

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