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Government must listen - Crofters Overwhelmingly Reject key Elements of Shucksmith Report in Survey

The voice of crofters must be listened to, says Peter Peacock, Labour MSP for the Highlands and Islands following publication of survey results into crofters views on key aspects of the Shucksmith Report into the future of Crofting.

The comprehensive survey was conducted by Labour's three Highlands and Islands MSPs, Peter Peacock, Rhoda Grant and David Stewart, and with the backing of Labour's Shadow Rural Affairs spokesperson, Sarah Boyack MSP.

Every Grazings Committee Clerk on the Crofters Commission data base was sent a questionnaire and to date 130 have replied, following consultation with or meetings of Grazings Committees.

The survey shows crofters are overwhelmingly opposed to a number of Shucksmith's key recommendations - to have Local Boards take regulatory decisions, and to impose 'real burdens' of residency on croft houses.

Only 8% of crofters wanted Local Boards involved in regulatory decisions, with 86% preferring the Crofters Commission continuing to take such decisions.

80% of crofters did not wish 'real burdens', as envisaged by Shucksmith, to be imposed on crofts.

Among other interesting results -

75% of crofters wanted the Crofters Commission to retain its development functions, with only 9% wanting to see these transferred to HIE.

Crofting Assessors are seen as useful and popular, with 85% wanting to see the network of Assessors continue.

Only 3% of crofters wanted to see the Shucksmith recommendations accepted in full. The majority wanting only those recommendations where there was a consensus among crofters to be accepted by government.

Commenting on the survey findings, Peter Peacock MSP, said:

"It has been clear from public meetings and comments throughout the press that crofters have real concerns about some key aspects of the Shucksmith report.

"This survey confirms that absolutely.

"There is real doubt about the workability and acceptability of the proposed 'real burdens' on crofts.

"Crofters are also clearly concerned about Local Boards taking regulatory decisions and, when faced with the choice, overwhelmingly prefer the Crofters Commission performing that role.

"The Government need to listen to crofters views on these key issues."

Peter Peacock went on to express concern that genuine opposition to these key proposals should not risk progress on many good recommendations in Shucksmith.

He said:

"The Shucksmith recommendations on reforming agricultural payments to favour crofters, to improve housing grant and loans, and for keeping the register of crofts, for example, all seem to be sensible and workable and would advance the interests of crofting.

"The government should get on with backing crofting and implement these recommendations quickly as none of them require legislation."

Sarah Boyack MSP, Labour's Rural Affairs spokesperson and the Chair of the Parliament Committee which rejected key parts of the last crofting bill, said:

"This survey is very helpful in cataloguing the concerns crofters have.

"It was only half way through consideration of the last Crofting Bill in Parliament that the full concerns of crofters about key clauses became abundantly clear.

"Parliament was not prepared to force through legislation about crofting where there was such uncertainty within the crofting community about key issues.

"That is why we recommended the then government drop some parts of the Bill and consult crofters on their future.

"Given Parliament's desire to listen to crofters views and to seek a broad consensus on the way forward for crofting, the government would be foolish to try and push through provisions which clearly do not have the support of the vast bulk of crofters."

And she pledged Labour would keep listening to crofters and be active in representing their interests in Parliament.

Peter Peacock and his colleagues have written to Crofting Minister, Mike Russell with the survey results and urging him to take them fully into account in deciding his response to Shucksmith.

However, in that letter, Peter Peacock also alludes to work he and his colleagues are undertaking to look at alternative proposals to meet the challenges Shucksmith identifies and that would arise from the free market in crofts developing unregulated.

In his letter to the Minister he states:

"It remains the case that some of the more controversial recommendations in the Shucksmith report were designed to address the questions arising from the developing free market in crofts which is real and also causing widespread concern in the crofting community.

"If the particular prescription Shucksmith offered is seen to be unworkable, there is a need to develop alternative proposals.

"I do not believe that to be impossible and in part the answer will relate to the way in which the Commission is appointed, directed to operate, and what its priorities should be.

"The Commission is supported by a body of law which is extensive and can have real impacts, if used consistently and effectively.

"My colleagues and I will be considering the issues here and so that we can play a full part in ensuring the challenges facing crofting are met and its future secured, but doing so in a way that seeks to work with the crofting communities and gains their active support for improvement measures."

Background information :

The main findings, to date, are as follows:-

Question 1 - about the potential for developing the role of the Grazings Committees

- There is a broad split in view, but with a small majority of Grazings Committees not wishing a role in wider decisions on community development issues. [Yes to wider role 48%, No 52%]

O A large majority of Grazing Committees, however, would not welcome new members, who are not crofters, for carrying out this purpose, were it to be furthered as a suggestion. [Yes to new members 18%, No 82%]

- Well over half of respondents did not believe that the Grazings Committees have the resources currently to fulfil the functions envisaged. [Yes, sufficient resource 37%, No 63%]
- An overwhelming majority wanted the Assessors Network to continue to exist. [Yes 85%, No 15%]

Question 2 - about governance arrangements, local boards, etc

- There was very little support for regulatory decisions being taken by new Local Boards, with an overwhelming majority wishing the Crofters Commission to continue with that responsibility. [New local boards 8%, new federation of local boards 6%, Crofters Commission 86%]

Question 3 - about the issues surrounding real burdens

- There was strong opposition to the imposition of "real burdens" on crofts and houses on crofting land. [Yes 20%, No 80%]

Question 4 - about the development functions and development budget of the Commission

- There was substantial support for the Crofters Commission retaining development functions and its budget, rather than have this function transferred to HIE. [HIE 9%, local boards 3%, federation of boards 13%, Crofters Commission 75%]

Question 5 - about how the report should be handled

- There was very little support for the Shucksmith recommendations being implemented in full [3%] and only marginally more support for it being accepted partially [6%]. Most respondents [51%] believed that the government, after consultation with crofters, should implement the recommendations where there is a consensus amongst crofters. A slightly smaller number felt that the recommendations should be rejected in full [40%].

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