

Cross-Party Group on Crofting

16th December 2025, 6:30pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Rhoda Grant (Convener)
Alasdair Allan
Beatrice Wishart

Invited guests

Bill Barron (Scottish Government)
Andrew Thin (Crofting Commission)

Non-MSP Group Members

Donna Smith (Secretariat)

Andrew Holt

Alan Balfour

Aileen Rore

Alan Wyper

Alexander Murray

Allison MacLean

Anne Campbell

Arthur Macdonald

David Cameron

David Findlay

David Muir

David Skene

Duncan Gray

Eilidh Ross

Heather Mack

Iain Kennedy

Jackie McCreery

James McPherson

Janette Sutherland

Jonathan Hedges

Lucy Sumsion

Lynne Hendry

Maria de la Torre

Niall Evans

Richard Frew
Russell Smith
Sandra Holmes
Siobhan Macdonald
Stephen Webster

Apologies

Edward Mountain MSP
Ariane Burgess MSP
Michael Nugent
Jake Sayles
Rosemary Campion
Jamie McIntyre
Iain Maciver
Gail Foster

Agenda item 1

The convener welcomed attendees and confirmed the meeting would be recorded for minute-taking purposes only. The minute of the previous meeting (26 September 2025) was approved with one outstanding action for Michael Nugent to provide information on CAGS turnaround times, which will be carried forward.

Agenda item 2

The Annual General Meeting was conducted. Given the forthcoming parliamentary elections, the current co-conveners (Rhoda Grant, Alasdair Allan, and Beatrice Wishart) agreed to continue in post until the elections to allow for potential meetings between January and March 2026. The Scottish Crofting Federation was reappointed as Secretariat. Following the election, the CPG will need to be reconstituted within two to three months.

Agenda item 3

Bill Barron provided an update on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. The bill remains on track with Stage 1 planned for January 2026, Stage 2 in February, and Stage 3 in March. The Scottish Government is working on a significant number of amendments for Stage 2.

Three provisions from the consultation that were not included in the introduced bill are being brought forward by amendment: requiring crofts to be registered before most application types; giving the Commission power to reissue directions and orders if errors are made; and tightening requirements for notification when title to croft land changes hands, with implications for non-compliance.

Additional amendments have been identified from Stage 1 evidence, written submissions to the committee, and ongoing scrutiny by the bill team in consultation with the Crofting Commission, Registers of Scotland, the SCF, and other members of the Crofting Bill Group. The Rural Affairs and Islands Committee was due to consider the Stage 1 report on 17 December with the aim of finalising it before the Christmas recess.

Agenda item 4

Andrew Thin reported on the Crofting Commission's three priorities. Firstly, regulatory application turnaround times have improved significantly: assignations reduced from 20 weeks to 7 weeks, decrofting for house site and garden from 23 weeks to 9 weeks, and part croft decrofting from 27 weeks to 14 weeks.

Secondly, the Commission has shifted focus to duties enforcement. The annual notice return rate must reach well above 90% for the system to function effectively. Letters were sent to all non-respondents, accompanied by a communications programme and public meetings. The Commission is currently re-letting approximately one croft per week but recognises more strategic approaches are needed given the scale of the issue. October 2025 saw a record 47 crofts assigned to new tenants, indicating the pressure is beginning to influence behaviour. The annual notice will be issued on 6 January 2026 with a three-month return period, after which prioritised enforcement action will follow for non-respondents and those declaring non-compliance.

Thirdly, the Commission is modernising policy that has not been updated for over a decade. An interim policy guidance on consent to be absent and sub-let/short-term let policy is due for board approval. A full policy plan is scheduled for 2027, with interim guidance statements to be issued over the next two years. New IT systems with AI functionality are being developed to improve trend analysis and targeting, with gradual improvements expected over 12-24 months.

Agenda item 5

David Muir, representing the SCF on the Uist Local Goose Management Group, presented concerns about grey lag geese impact on the machair biodiversity and traditional agriculture. The unique winter fodder crops (small black oats, bere barley, and rye) cultivated on Uist's sandy soils are under threat from escalating goose numbers. Crofters must be self-reliant for seed as these varieties are not commercially available and are intermingled with wildflowers and machair plants.

The goose population on Uist has increased from approximately 7,000 in 2008 to around 29,000-37,000 currently. This growth threatens the sustainability of traditional farming practices and the machair ecosystem. Previous management attempts including egg oiling proved ineffective as geese relocated to untreated areas. Minister Jim Fairley was informed in March 2025 that approximately £30,000 per year for a sustained period would be required to reduce and manage populations in Uist and Barra.

Discussion followed regarding resource constraints at NatureScot, the National Goose Forum meeting scheduled for late January 2026, and the urgency of the situation given seed crop losses. The group agreed to write to the Minister and NatureScot expressing concern and requesting urgent action, with Maria de la Torre from NatureScot confirming the Goose Policy Delivery Plan would be shared with local groups ahead of the forum meeting.

Agenda item 6

An open discussion on the future of crofting, challenges, and opportunities took place. Topics raised included: the need to define what crofting should be for; balancing food production with diversification activities; concerns about young couples being unable to afford crofts due to market prices and inability to obtain mortgages, leading to communities becoming depopulated and filled with holiday homes; absentee crofters living far from their crofts; frustration with enforcement timescales; the relationship between crofting regulation and public interest; climate change presenting potential opportunities for Highland and Island food production as weather patterns shift; and the need for the post-election CPG to consider wider reform and clarify the purpose of crofting before seeking legislative changes.

It was agreed the current bill addresses specific issues but is not comprehensive reform. Any future legislation would require clear consensus on objectives before approaching government. The group agreed to schedule a meeting to discuss public interest and human rights aspects of crofting regulation, with this discussion being particularly relevant given the balance between individual property rights and public interest in crofting legislation.

Agenda item 7

Lucy Sumsion raised CAGS (Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme) cash flow issues. The main concern is crofters being unable to afford upfront costs while waiting for received invoices to be reimbursed by ARPID. An example from Tiree Development Trust was cited where they provide advisor services for CAGS applications and offer bridging loans to address cash flow problems. Lucy noted that the Future Farming Investment Scheme had set a precedent by offering 100% upfront funding which many crofters found more accessible. Lucy requested CAGS be added to the next meeting agenda to discuss potential loan scheme solutions. James McPherson suggested a self-certification approach similar to tax self-assessment.

Date of next meeting: To be confirmed in early 2026 (proposed Friday online meeting). Agenda to include CAGS discussion and the wider discussion on public interest/human rights aspects of crofting.