

The response Of the Scottish Churches Rural Group to the RSE inquiry into the Future of Scotland's Hills and Islands

The Scottish Churches Rural Group read with interest of the study which the RSE is currently conducting into the future of Scotland's hills and islands. As a group we felt it important to avail our selves of the opportunity to contribute to the study. We were interested to note that many of the areas which the study covers are areas which are either of current interest to our selves e.g. Crofting or are areas on which we have recently reported, such as Fairtrade. We note that the current framing of the enquiry is predominantly economic and environmental. We feel that such an emphasis provides only a limited view of the ways ahead for the areas under study and so we comment as an organisation able to redress what we see as an imbalance.

The RSE document asks for comments on six suggested subject areas. These are predominantly economic in their framing and so we preface our comments on the questions asked with some general comments in which we draw attention to some of the unique features of the hill and island areas of Scotland and to issues which we feel are beyond either economic or environmental criteria. Of the questions for discussion we have only responded to questions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 which we feel to be within our specific competence to address.

General Issues

- 1) This response is made on behalf of the Scottish Churches Rural Group (SCRG). This is an ecumenical group working within Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) as their rural group. The current active membership of the Group includes representation from the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Congregational Federation, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church. The Salvation Army and the Society of Friends are corresponding members of the group. Other churches are involved on a more informal basis. SCRG is currently or has recently been involved in or contributed to studies of Crofting, rural post offices, migrant

workers in Scotland and fair trade in food. The group publicises the results of its work through making representations to Government, through reports to the governing bodies of its member churches, e.g. the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church, through its presence in the Scottish Churches Pavilion at the Royal Highland Show and through its input into the production of formal reports such as the recent Church of Scotland report on Fair Trade in Food. It organises an annual training event for those lay and ordained church members working actively in rural orientated ministries.

- 2) The Scottish Churches have a significant presence in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and thus are a major presence in the area on which your study focuses. The Church of Scotland, as the National church, is represented in every part of Scotland. The other churches also have a significant presence in these areas. The Scottish Episcopal Church's Dioceses of Argyll and the Isles, Aberdeen and Orkney and Moray, Ross and Caithness have together 63 congregations located in the Highland and Islands including one or more congregations on the islands of Orkney, Shetland, Cumbrae, Arran, Bute, Coll, Eigg, Harris, Iona, Islay, Lewis, Mull, Skye and Tiree. The Methodist Church has a substantial presence on Shetland. The Scottish Churches thus believe that being in regular and close contact with many of those who live and work in the Highlands and Islands that they are well placed to comment on the issues which currently affect these areas and are likely to influence them in the future.
- 3) The remit for the study has a focus on things which might be changed in the Highlands and Islands so as to stimulate new activity and to protect the environment. The questions asked do not imply interest in what current activities or structures need to be sustained or enhanced as a way of preserving features which are valued by residents. These we feel to be as important as things which might be changed. Further it is important that these features are not damaged by proposed changes. In this context we would identify among other things the place and role of the churches. The churches in rural areas

provide key communication and networking structures. They allow people to come together to share ideas and provide support in times of difficulty. They have buildings where people meet and which are commonly multifunctional in their use; churches have been active as post offices, shops, hotels, sports facilities, social centres. We believe that the role of the church as a meeting place in rural areas should not be underestimated. As such it can be a significant agent for change. In addition the church has traditionally acted as an advocate for the issues of people in such areas. The churches are a major element in the glue which holds rural communities together. This matters in a situation where working together and multifunctional working are key elements within the social structures. Used as a resource the Churches can be an important agent both for change and for sustaining and supporting communities as they cope with change.

- 4) The Scottish Churches Rural Group was disappointed by the very limited range subjects upon which views were sought. These seemed to us to be much more limited than the issues identified in the remit for the enquiry or alluded to in the Chairs introduction and the identified challenges and opportunities which the study wished to address. Most of the questions raised for comment were fundamentally of an economic nature. Many seemed to imply the application of a traditional economic model which while relatively successful when applied to urban situations has been less helpful in a rural context. Indeed the churches have often found it necessary to provide help in situations which the application of predominantly economic reasoning has resulted in significant problems for those living in rural areas. The Government response to 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak and the need for the churches, and others, to support rural communities and individuals affected was an example of this.
- 5) The background to the enquiry does not question whether there are differences between the interests and values of those who live in the hill and island areas of Scotland and the rest of

the country. We think that are significant differences between those who elect to live in such areas and the urban population. It is no coincidence that the inhabitants of these areas were among those most consistently associated with civil unrest over the past several hundred years. For us this means that the activities which will be successful in these areas and the ways in which such changes need to be introduced if they are to be successful will differ from the approach most commonly adopted by development agencies

- 6) Much employment and much economic activity in the Highlands and Islands are of a very different type to that elsewhere. A much higher proportion of the population are pluriactive combining a range of activities, especially land based activities, as the solution to farming in areas of inherently restricted productivity and where there is commonly a significant seasonality in other enterprises. Physical infrastructure is more limited and communities and community action are a more critical aspect of both business and social life. Economics are a less important factor in decision making than in other areas. Community factors are a more important factor in decision making. Economic factors are a relatively unimportant factor for people being resident in these areas; although income generation remains important. As a result to focus an assessment of the future of this type of area on economic factors whether linked to business or to the environment would be inappropriate.
- 7) The environment has long been an area of significant concern for the churches. This concern is based on our continuing regard for God's creation rather than concern for the impact of the environment on humanity or changes in biodiversity. Over the last several years the churches have sought to aid environmental awareness and care by both individuals and communities through the Eco-congregation Scheme. A number of churches and communities in the Highlands and Islands have used the Eco-congregation scheme as the basis for planning their environmental management strategies. We would commend this as an appropriate model for involving

communities in issues related to climate change and the specification of community carbon foot prints.

8) Q 1) *What would you perceive to be the main drivers of change and sources of income generation in upland and island areas of Scotland.*

As sparsely populated areas with a relatively small income base from business rates and from industry and business the Highlands and Islands have, like other areas where farming is a significant industry, benefited disproportionately from sources of public finance such as that from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and specific support for less favoured areas. The possibility of such funding sources being significantly reduced in 2013 is thus of serious concern. The case for maintaining public funding for the Highlands and Islands is set out in our answer to Q2). The importance of the continuation of agriculture in these areas should not be underestimated.

The systems of agriculture practiced in the Highlands and Islands lend themselves relatively easily to Organic and other low input production methods. Food from such systems is now in demand and represents one of the more rapidly expanding food sectors at the current time. Those farming in such ways were in the first wave of those who joined the Organic Aid Scheme. When funding from this source ended many moved from Organic production although in many cases the alteration in their farming practices were small and related mainly to aspects of animal care. Developing the Organic farming sector and concern for the management of the fragile soils of the Highlands and Islands and the avoidance of the storage of synthetic chemicals such as pesticides and pharmaceuticals in these soils would seem wise. Production of this type can contribute to the development of Scottish Cuisine and so to the development of a distinctive food tourism. In the Church of Scotland report on Fair Trade in Food, to which we made a significant contribution, call was made for a fair trade brand for Scottish food which would parallel the FAIRTRADE mark used to identify fairly traded food from developing countries. While such a brand would not exclusively relate to food products from the

hills and islands the existence of such a brand would help those farming in these areas to be appropriately recompensed for their costs of production. We repeat the suggestion here as one which your group might wish to also recommend. The ability of those engaged in agriculture to meet and exchange information is important if this is to be realised. In addition the above Fair Trade report called for government support for electronic bazaars, electronic net works to facilitate communication between those who wish to sell quality food and those who would wish to buy it. This could be established only with government support. The churches with their existing networks and infrastructure currently provide facilities for rural networking. Many churches have electronic communication facilities which are used on a community basis and such a facility we now suggest should be explicitly built on as a part of the future development of these areas.

- 9) Tourism has long been a significant element in the economy and in the working of the meta-communities of the Highlands and islands. We see this as a major area for future development. Housing and accommodation are key elements in this sector. It is important not to see tourism only in the context of short term visits. Those who buy holiday homes in the hill and island areas are also tourists but can also be sources of sustainable long term investment. The example of parallel developments in Norway (see also Para. 16) show the positive impact that encouraging holiday homes can have. Flexible planning has turned what could have been a means of excluding local people from home ownership into something which have brought in additional sources of dependable income. Never the less provision of affordable housing, for local people, is important if there are to be people to work in labour intensive industries such as tourism.

The ability to get to the Highlands and Islands and to move easily within them using varied forms of transport is critical to future development of the tourist industry. Not all potential visitors will be able only to walk or bicycle. Bus services are of great value if developed in a flexible manner. As a part of tourist activity visiting churches is a significant activity both because of the

inherent interest in church buildings and their history and because of the role of the churches in providing facilities, interpretation and information for visitors. Part of tourist activity is the wish of people to experience history and the desire to remain connected to the past. A significant component of this is manifest in people wishing to visit churches, graves and returning to ancient sites. Iona and Eileach an Naoimh are key attractions drawing visitors to the islands. The churches play a significant role in providing a connection with the past through the provision of facilities interpretation and information for visitors on an increasing scale. They are increasingly seen as a key resource for those who wish to trace family roots and records. They maintain many early historical sites. This is an area which can be developed further without diminishing the role of the church in the society of today.

10) Forestry is a significant activity and one which is traditional for these areas. Forestry however employs few people, may make easy movement around the areas difficult and can obscure the views which attract visitors. Similarly energy generation through the use of wind , wave and water can provide additional jobs and contribute to national energy resources but like forestry can have an adverse impact on views and so on tourism which for the foreseeable future is likely to be the predominant industry.

11) Q 2) *What are the attributes of social cultural and economic value in Scotland's hill and island areas*

At a time of major financial change it is always important to ask why particular types of activity should benefit from public support. For the Highlands and Islands we would suggest that such support can be justified for four categories of reasons, the environment, biodiversity, heritage and social options.

12) The Highlands and Islands hold a significant proportion of the UK's stored carbon in its soils and peat lands. Attempts to mitigate the impact of climate change require that this carbon should remain in storage and that future activities should be planned on the basis of increasing soil carbon storage. This is a potential area for future public investment and a reason for continuing at a substantial level current funding streams.

- 13) The Highlands and Islands hold significant elements of the UK's total biodiversity. While we would see the need for biodiversity to be maintained as part of the maintenance of our creators design a more limited rational would argue for its maintenance as part of a carbon management strategy and so as to protect options for the future. We believe that this represents an increasingly important future option for public financial investment.
- 14) The communities of the Highlands and Islands have played a significant role in the heritage of Scotland. They feature disproportionately in the history of our country and in the development of its distinctive social structures, spirituality, legal processes, language, music, dance, its story telling, literature, arts etc... Heritage is however a living developing thing. It must be maintained as much as other aspects of life.
- 15) The communities of the Highlands and Islands have spawned models of distinct community development. Crofting is perhaps the most distinct. It provides options for development at a time when the traditional business model of employment by a single employer for most of a working life is being changed more than it has for perhaps a century. Crofting needs to expand and to change both in respect of its relationship with landowners and the purpose of crofts.
- 16) Q 3) *How will changes in agriculture, forestry and tourism affect the economies of these areas and what scope is there for alternative sources of income and employment.*
Any changes to agriculture, forestry or tourism will inevitably have a major impact on the Highlands and Islands. These together with fishing and more latterly aquaculture represent the industries which have always been important. They represent the most obvious land uses; something which would be common to similar areas in other parts of Europe and the world. Communication difficulties and remoteness preclude the exploitation of options available to those rural areas closer to major pockets of population. Developments in electronic communication do open a wider range of options. Social factors such as the need to be in contact with other humans have often limited such possibilities. Here again is an area where the

churches are currently doing much and where, they could, on a planned basis, do more in the future.

In the Church of Scotland study of Fair Trade in Food, into which we had a significant input, attention was drawn to the problems being created by a restrictive interpretation of planning guidelines. These we were advised were preventing the development of many new land and farm based developments. Our attention was drawn to the situation in Norway where the development of rural housing for people not resident in such areas had been responsible for allowing the maintenance of many rural businesses and the preservation of many facilities currently under threat in the UK such as postal and communication facilities. Much rural regeneration was a function of the ability of outsiders to buy land and build vacation accommodation. This has not occurred in Scotland. It is a real opportunity. While the issue is complex the inability of local people engaged in agriculture or forestry to own homes in the areas in which they work is at least in part due to the shortage of houses in such areas, an issue of supply and demand. It would thus be aided by a greater availability of housing.

- 17) Q5) *What are the implications of climate change on agricultural/communities in Scotland's hill and island areas.* Climate change is a market failure and a consequence of our failure to steward our planet in accordance with Gods gift of creation. A number of projections have suggested that the hill and island areas may benefit from warmer conditions in the future and that this would be to their relative benefit. However warmer conditions would make more important how the massive carbon reserves held in the soils of these areas are managed. This could easily lead to increased restrictions on existing and new activity lest change resulted in the net release of carbon from soil reserves. This would argue for the importance of maintaining current industries and adding value through the types of novel trading, a fair trade mark and the other activities we have suggested above. As we suggest in Para 8 above a properly developed agriculture will be able to

enhance the role of farming in these areas in relation to carbon storage. As a national resource agriculture's contribution to the nation has varied across the years. It has in the past been the basis of health, through the food it provided, of transport, through the provision of transport animal feeds, of landscape and biodiversity. It may now function through production designed to maximise carbon storage using similar mechanisms to those in place to recompense farmers for the maintenance of the environment and biodiversity.

18) Q6) *What are the regional variations in opportunities and disadvantage and how can these be accounted for in policies and support structures at the Scottish Level*

Current Scottish policy recognises regional differences and the distinctive needs of island communities. Precedents therefore exist which can be developed. It would seem to us important that differential funding should exist for both the hill and the island areas of Scotland. Some of the major needs of these areas are in respect of transport, especially public transport, which as a whole is very poorly developed, compared to similar areas in England and Wales, in Scotland outwith the central belt. Transport options which have been developed and are in use in the remoter areas of Switzerland, Austria and Italy should be explored as means of making the Highlands and Islands more accessible. However beyond transport, exploring just how education, beyond the primary level, can be provided within these communities using electronic means of communication must be investigated. A move from a mind set which sees solution in leaving a rural community to access a service to one which seeks novel means of providing services in community would have a major impact on the total viability of these areas. The reasoning given in answer to Q2 gives the justification for investment in these areas. This also allows for there to be differential funding within the areas depending upon the basis of the case for public funding.

19) If the Scottish churches Group can provide you with any additional information or if you would like us to come and

Speak with your group then we would be happy to do so. We can be contacted either via the convenor at atkinson390@btinternet.com or via the secretary at shonapaterson@acts-scotland.org

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