



The State of Crofting in Coigach & Assynt (2022)

A report from the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership

This report was prepared on behalf of the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership, largely based on evidence collected and collated by Abigail Anne Campbell, Project Coordinator.



**The authors would like to express their appreciation to all the crofters in Coigach and Assynt who took time to contribute to this survey and to Sue Walker, Siobhan MacDonald and Jo Baughan for their input.**

*Gaelic Proverb*

*Cha bhi fios aire math an tobair gus an tràigh e.*  
The value of the well is not known until it goes dry.

The report was delivered on 31/03/2022  
by Dr Kate Lamont, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC).

Abigail Anne Campbell, Crofting & Rural Projects Coordinator, Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership Scheme,  
Website: [coigach-assynt.org](http://coigach-assynt.org)

Dr Kate Lamont, Epidemiology & Planetary Health Division, Dept of Veterinary and Animal Science, SRUC North Faculty,  
An Lòchran, Inverness Campus, Inverness IV2 5NA. E: [kate.lamont@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:kate.lamont@sruc.ac.uk)

## Executive Summary

The State of Crofting in Coigach & Assynt was initiated as one of the outputs of the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership Scheme (CALLP) Crofting Project. In the final year of the project a survey was undertaken and all crofters from the area were invited to take part.

The aim of the survey was to provide a description of crofting activity in the townships and to identify the needs, opportunities and constraints for crofters both now and the future of crofting in the area. There were 42 respondents from both Coigach and Assynt most of whom were experienced crofters who had either grown up on family croft and/or inherited a family croft.

A range of crofting activity was reported, with the rearing of various breeds of livestock and poultry being the most popular, followed by horticulture. A small number of crofters are engaged with activities on their croft which aim to benefit the natural environment such as woodland planting and using seaweed as a fertiliser. Some crofters also had tourism businesses including bed and breakfast and/or self-catering units.

The key challenges to crofting were reported as being a lack of funding support and having insufficient resources/ability to make a crofting business viable due to its small-scale nature. It was evident that there is a low uptake of potential funding and only a few respondents received financial support through the Scottish Rural Development Programme.

Crofters' duties are set out by the Crofting Commission and whilst many crofters fulfil these duties there are concerns of some non-compliance by other crofters in the area. Other challenges included herbivore (deer and rabbit) damage to crops.

The lack of people, specifically young people, was identified as a key challenge which impacted activity on individual crofts and the co-operative nature of crofting which involves shared labour and shared machinery.

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Figure 1: Map of the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership area



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## Introduction

### Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership Scheme

# Coigach & Assynt

## LIVING LANDSCAPE

The Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership Scheme (CALLP) was a five-year National Lottery Heritage Funded project (2016–2021) comprising 14 Partner organisations, of which the Scottish Wildlife Trust was the lead partner. CALLP was a mechanism for delivering outputs of the CALL 40-year vision.

Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape (CALL) is one of the larger landscape-scale restoration projects in Europe, covering 635 square kilometres, included within a 40-year vision. The project area is blessed with some of the most dramatic and instantly recognisable landscapes in the British Isles, and within these some of the rarest and most endangered habitats.

The Partnership comprised community landowners, community interest groups, charitable landowners, private landowners and charitable membership organisations. The eclectic group of organisations involved represent and reflect the unique heritage and structure of land ownership and management present in this part of the Highlands.



A full list of partners is available at: <https://www.coigach-assynt.org/funders/>

## Crofting Project

In the project area there are four main areas under crofting tenure: the Coigach Peninsula, Inverkirkaig to Lochinver, the Assynt Coast from Lochinver north to Stoer and then east to Kylesku, and the townships of Elphin and Knockan on the eastern edge of the project area.

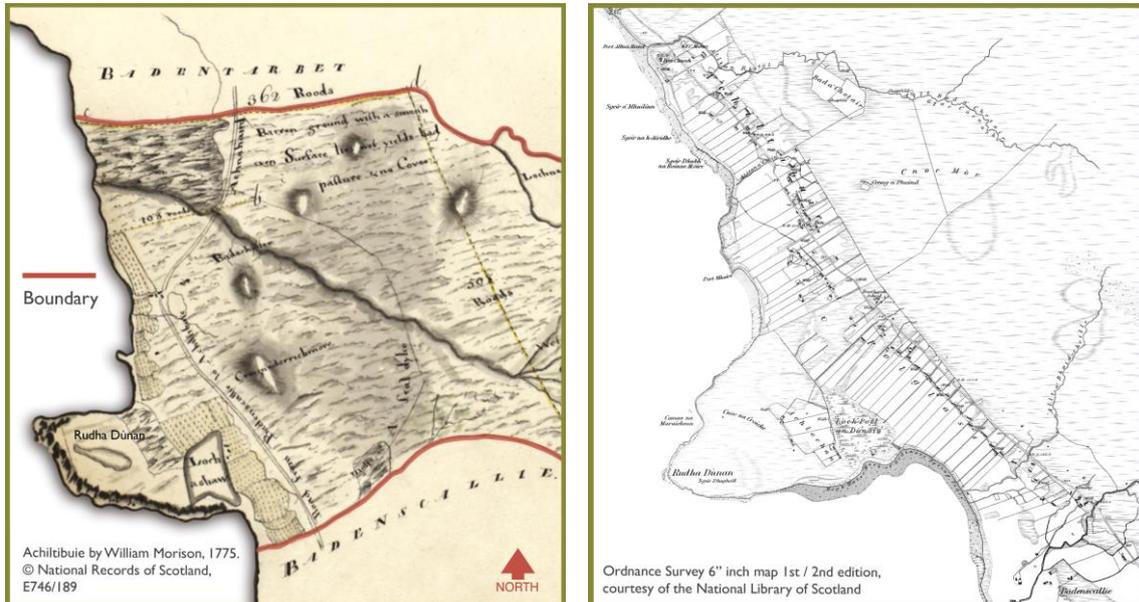
The Crofting Project, completed in 2021, was co-ordinated by AbigailAnne Campbell. More information and outputs from the Crofting Project are available at: <https://www.coigach-assynt.org/project/crofting-project/>.

*Figure 2: In bye with native woodland, Culnacraig*



Crofting is a unique social system which stems from the Highland Clearances of the nineteenth century and has played a crucial role in shaping the landscape, natural environment, cultural heritage and social economy of all the crofting counties (Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape, 2020).

Figure 3: Maps illustrating pre- and post- Highland Clearances



Crofting is the primary form of small-scale land tenure in the project area and a key part of the social and economic fabric.

## Background

### Crofting in Scotland

The Scottish Government reports that as of 2020, there were 21,186 crofts recorded on the Crofting Commission's Register of Crofts; 15,137 of the crofts were tenanted and 6,049 were owned. Land under crofting tenure in Scotland extends to approximately 770,000 hectares, of which, more than 550,000 is common grazing land. There are approximately 33,000 people living in crofting households.

It is a priority of the Scottish Government to increase the active use of croft land. This is likely to involve greater occupancy of crofts, attraction of new entrants, and the formation of new common grazings committees.

As a form of land management, crofting is considered to have considerable environmental benefits, and provides a vital link between the local community and the land ([Scottish Government's National Development Plan for Crofting, 2021](#)).

## Changing Landownership of Coigach & Assynt

### Assynt

According to the Assynt Crofters Trust [online], the sale of the North Lochinver Estate (21,300 acres / 9,000 Ha) to a Swedish land speculator in 1989, which subsequently went into liquidation in 1992, acted as a catalyst for one of the first community purchases of crofting land in Scotland.

The Assynt Crofters' Trust is now the owner of the North Assynt Estate which includes thirteen townships: Torbreck, part of Achmelvich, Clachtoll, Stoer, Balchladich, Clashmore, Raffin, Culkein Stoer, Achnacharnin, Clashnessie, Culkein Drumbeg, Drumbeg and Nedd. It is administered by a Board of Directors, members of which are elected from each of the thirteen townships.

### Coigach

The area of Coigach was known as the "Barony of Coigach" (Farrell, 2020, p.8). The name is made up of two Gaelic words; 'coig' meaning five and 'ach' meaning field. Some historians suggest that Coigach was "the former fifth part of Assynt", which "became an estate in its own right in the fifteenth century" (Farrell, 2020, p.9).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Coigach was administered from the east coast settlement of Tarbat, "by absentee landowners" (Farrell, 2020, p.13), as part of the Cromartie Estate.

The two largest estates in Coigach are currently; the Ben Mor Coigach Reserve (owned by the Scottish Wildlife Trust) and the Badentarbet Estate (private owner).

Detailed current information about individual crofts in Coigach and Assynt is available on The Crofting Register (Available at: <https://www.crofts.ros.gov.uk/register/search>).

Figure 4: Croftland, Stoer Peninsula



## Survey of Crofting in Coigach & Assynt in 2021

In the final year of the CALLP Crofting Project, a survey of crofting in Coigach and Assynt was undertaken. The purpose of the survey was to provide evidence about the state of crofting in the area and to give an indication of the future for crofting in the area.

A questionnaire was distributed throughout the area and the study was advertised through the local press and social media in the spring of 2021.

The term 'respondent' is used for the crofters who completed the questionnaire.

For the purposes of the survey, a crofter was defined as anyone with a holding.

It should be noted that it is likely that, for some holdings, where spouses, partners and other family members may have completed the questionnaire there may be more than one respondent. Similarly, where a crofter has multiple holdings, it is likely that only one response was submitted.

Individuals responded to the survey at different dates over the survey period, during which there are likely to have been some animal movements. It should be noted, therefore, that the animal numbers reported are indicative.

### Responses to the Questionnaire

There were 42 responses to the questionnaire, 41 of which were fully, or almost fully completed. An address was not supplied in one of these responses.

Figure 5: Spotlight on Una Macgregor

*Una Macgregor has been crofting for 15 years. She has planted a small area with native trees and fruit trees and maintains the croft through control of rush and drainage. She has her neighbour's sheep and cattle grazing it on an informal basis. Una is embarking on tree planting and conservation activities on one of the more inaccessible crofts. She plans to borrow some Hebridean sheep when needed for conservation grazing and create attractive environments for corncrakes and other ground nesting birds as well as insects and bees. Una combines all this with a bed & breakfast and self-catering business.*

A further questionnaire was incomplete except for the question about the whether or not giving up some common grazing land may be a potential solution to the shortage of available and affordable housing. The respondent selected the answer “no”. The results represented in this report reflect the answers that were provided in the questionnaire; missing data for individual questions may be deduced.

Figure 6: Grazing Achiltibuie



Participants were asked to select from the following list, their main reasons for becoming a crofter:

- brought up in a crofting family
- to live amongst a small community
- availability of family croft
- to live with family / friends / spouse /partner
- to provide a source of income.

Figure 13 provides a breakdown of the answers provided.

There were 20 respondents from across the Coigach area including Achiltibuie; north to Altandhu, Blairbuie, Reiff, Polbain; south to Polglass, Achiniver, Badenscallie, Culanraig, and inland crofts at Achnahaird. A further 20 respondents were from Assynt, including Inverkirkaig, south of Lochinver; north of Lochinver through Clachtoll and Stoer, to Balchladich, Clashmore, Acnhacarnin, Clachnessie; further north to Culkein, Drumbeg and Nedd; as well as from inland crofts at Elphin & Aulnachy.

### **Demographic Detail of Respondents and their Households**

Of the 41 respondents, 22 were female and 19 were male. Most respondents were in the 45–65 age group (n=30). No-one under 25 completed the questionnaire, but four in the 25–40 age group and seven in the over 65 age group responded. The majority of respondents lived in a household of two people (n=21). There were eight single person households, and seven of those were females between the

ages of 41–65. The male in the single person household was over 65 years. Data about the breakdown of ages and gender within households is presented in Appendix VI.

Figure 7: Gender

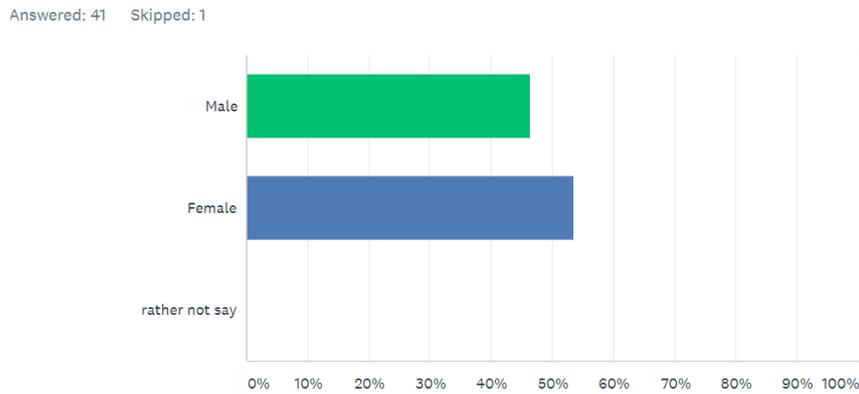
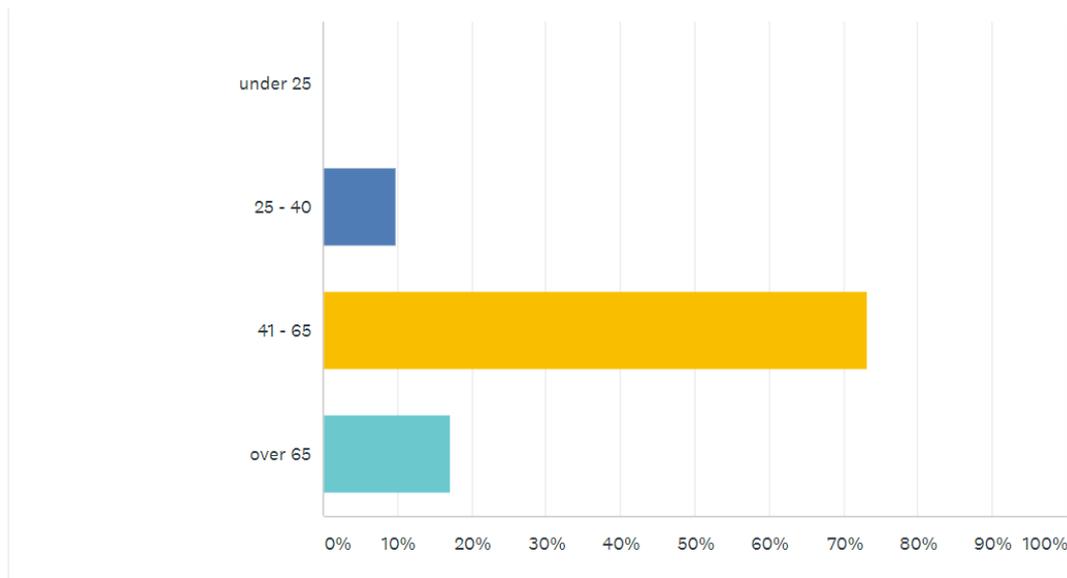
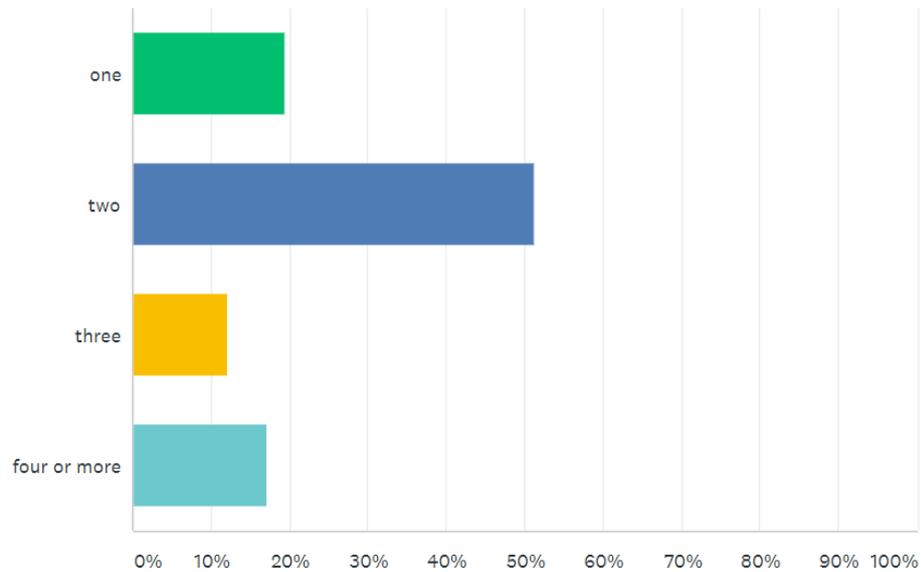


Figure 8: Age



Eight respondents reported having children under the age of 16 living in their household. On the assumption that these respondents were from different households, this would represent two families with three children, three with two children, and three with one child under 16 living in their home.

Figure 9: Size of household



Nine respondents reported having children under the age of 16 living elsewhere. Again, on the assumption that the respondents were from different households, this would indicate that there were 21 children associated with these respondents.

Responses indicate there are eight children currently active in crofting, at least five of whom live in local households. Answers indicate that there is perceived interest in crofting in children who do not currently live in the crofting households of respondents, some of whom are currently active in crofting.

Figure 10: Packing the wool bag



The number of children that respondents believe to be interested in crofting is 19, not all of whom currently live with the respondents, and three of whom appear to be over 16. At least seven children associated with respondents who do not currently live within the household are believed to be interested in crofting. Not all of the children currently active in crofting were

reported to be interested in crofting, whilst some children who were not currently active were believed to be interested in crofting.

These numbers should be treated with caution as they reflect the perceptions of the respondents, which may or may not reflect the actual interests of the children or suggests that respondents did not feel confident in reporting the level of interest of their children which may be difficult to gauge.

### **Crofting Connections and Reasons for Being a Crofter**

Having been brought up in a crofting family' was selected by 12 respondents as the reason for becoming a crofter, two of whom also specified the availability of a family croft. Of the eight respondents who selected the reason for becoming a crofter was to live in a small community, only one added that a family croft became available. For six respondents, the single reason selected was that a family croft became available.

When asked for the main reasons for becoming a crofter, the additional information provided by some participants fell into the following categories;

- connection to the area / land, e.g. "ancestors were Assynt Crofters"
- food production, e.g. "to grow my own food"
- biodiversity, e.g. "marsh for wildlife"
- lifestyle choice, e.g. "to live a simpler and better life"

Figure 11: Spotlight on Angus MacLeod

**Angus Macleod** (Achnahaird) has been crofting for 30 years. He has had both cattle and hens in the past and now has Hebridean and Shetland sheep which he finds more manageable. He feels that cattle are time consuming, and that feed and equipment are expensive. Angus also has a self-catering business.

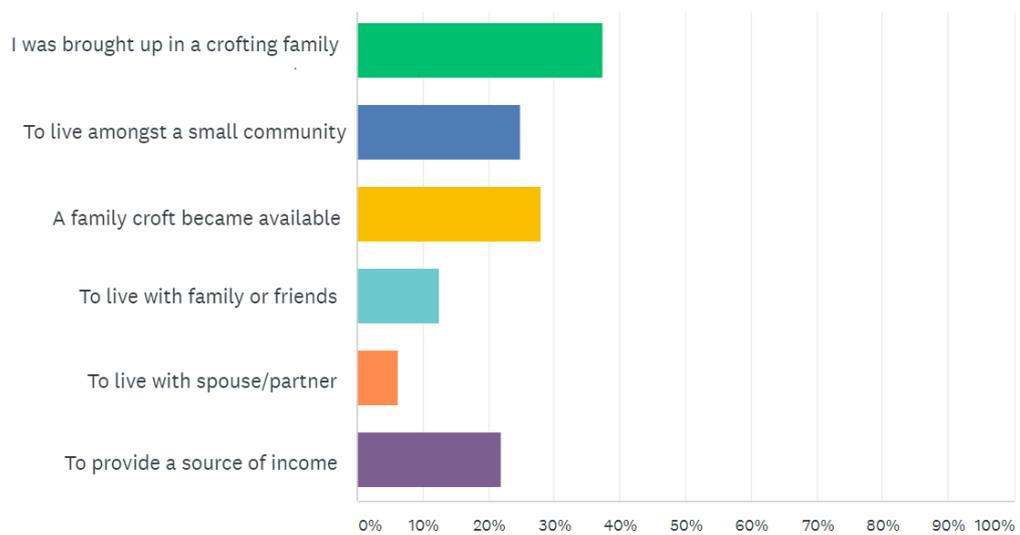
Angus thinks there should still be continued support for livestock as it is low impact on the environment with minimal use of chemicals. He is doubtful about continuing to have livestock if the financial support goes. He feels there could be more support for cattle as they are helpful to the environment and useful against the spread of bracken. He would like to grow some arable crops so as not to buy in feed.

Angus's sons are both keen on crofting, although both live away, so he is hopeful for the future of crofting.

Figure 12: Grazing on the beach at Achnahaird



Figure 13: Reasons for being a crofter



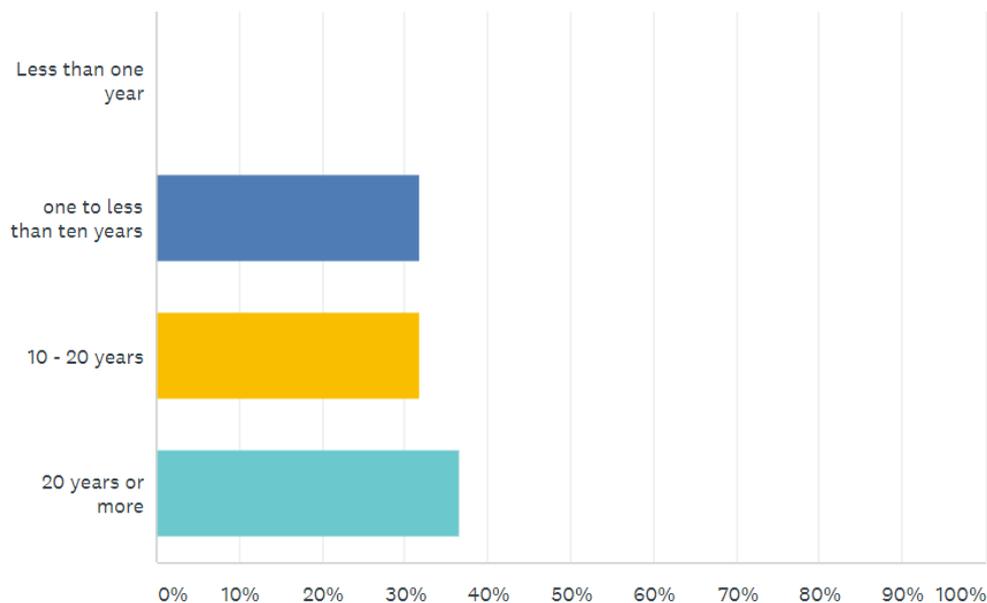
## Duration and Nature of Crofting Activity

At the time of completing the questionnaire, more than half of the respondents had been crofting for over 10 years (n = 28). Of this group, 15 had been crofting for over 20 years. Of the 13 crofters who selected 'under 10 years', none had been crofting for less than one year.

One of the respondents was a smallholder and did not have a crofting tenancy.

The majority of crofters reported working only one croft (n=26) whilst 12 others had between two and five. One respondent reported not renting or occupying crofting land, whilst another had a tenancy which was not formally croft land.

Figure 14: Duration of crofting activity



A range of crofting activity was reported by the respondents to the survey. The majority of respondents reported having livestock on their croft land (n=36). Not all respondents gave details about the number or breed of livestock. Of those who did, for some there were only a handful of animals (n=3) whilst others reported having larger numbers (n=11), such as over 50 cows or 800 sheep. For crofters who kept cattle (n=14), as well as the cross breeds which were kept, the pedigree breeds of cattle mentioned were Shorthorn, Highland, Belted Galloway, and Kerry Cow. More than three quarters of the respondents reported keeping sheep (n=27).

Figure 15: Spotlight on Iain Campbell

*DJ (Iain) Campbell has been crofting for 60 + years, family assigantion. Iain has reared sheep, mostly Cheviots all his crofting life and now has 130.*

*His son-in-law and granddaughter now do most of the hard slog. Iain has also been involved in extensive tree planting and regeneration of native woodland requiring extensive deer fencing. He expects to be able to mix woodland and grazing.*

*Iain feels a clearer explanation of biodiversity and climate change mitigation would be helpful and finding a way for mixed crofting to continue and that this should be supported by government.*

The breeds of sheep which respondents reported keeping included the following: Shetland, Soay, Beltex, North Country Cheviots, and Hebridean. The range of other production animals kept on the croft land included goats, pigs, hens, ducks, geese and quail. In addition, there was one pony. Some respondents used the space on the questionnaire to explain that they had “sold sheep because of ill health”, referring to their own health.

Next to the keeping of livestock, horticulture was the most common crofting activity reported (n=17) and seven respondents reported producing crops. Others were expecting crops of soft fruit in future.

Activities that benefitted the environment were reported by 14

respondents. Six reported being involved with wood processing, and renewable energy production was reported by three.

Figure 16: Sheep in a pen



Some crofters reported running holiday lets or bed & breakfast accommodation (n=9). The alternative activities mentioned included having a craft shop, studying local history, exploring the possibility of bee keeping. One respondent used this opportunity to say they were “retired”.

## Financial Support

Only 17 of the respondents reported receiving financial support through the Scottish Rural Development Programme. The various funding streams mentioned by respondents included the following: BPS, SUSSS, FGS, LFASS, CAGS, AECS, SAF (Table 1)

*Table 1: Support Schemes*

Monies received through Scottish Government financial support schemes were used for tree planting and installing stock fencing to protect trees, a lamb weigh crate, a polycrub, a polytunnel, an agricultural store, track developments and road improvements.

One respondent reported lack of success in applying for AECS, another mentioned an old farm woodland scheme from 20 years ago, and another reported having previously received grant support but that this had stopped as a result of their own ill health.

<b>AECS</b> Agri-Environment Climate Scheme
<b>BPS</b> Basic Payment Scheme
<b>CAGS</b> Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme
<b>CHGS</b> Croft House Grant Scheme
<b>FGS</b> Forestry Grant Scheme
<b>LFASS</b> Less Favoured Areas Support Scheme
<b>FWAG</b> Forestry & Wildlife Advisory
<b>SFGS</b> Small Farm Grant Scheme
<b>SFPS</b> Single Farm Payment Scheme
<b>SUSSS</b> Scottish Upland Sheep Support Scheme
<b>SBCS</b> Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme
<b>IACS SAF</b> Single application form – for BPS, LFASS, SUSSS & SBCS

Only five respondents reported receiving support from Agricultural Environmental Schemes, when specifically asked. A FWAG scheme was mentioned from the past. Some respondents suggested that it was “not worth it financially”, that they believed it was “not really set up for small units”, or that the effort involved “was not worth the bother”. Some respondents commented that they had been part of community group applications, unsuccessfully.

In addition to the financial benefit of these schemes, one respondent mentioned impact from the information days they had attended and advice they had received (through the Farm Advisory Service), i.e. they had limed an area of ground and topped rushes.

### Common Grazings

The questionnaire asked if crofters were a tenant of grazings share. 34 of the respondents replied that they were, 20 of whom were on the Grazings Committee. 7 respondents replied that they were not part of a grazings share.

As well as general committee membership, the roles held by respondents on common grazings committees included being Clerk and Treasurer. When asked if their grazings had managed woodland, renewable energy, or environmental schemes, 16 reported that they had, 21 had not.

Figure 17: Spotlight on Murray Anderson

**Murray Anderson** and friends bought the 3.5-hectare croft near Stoer, 5 years ago and have been busy setting up a varied line of businesses in that time. The group have undertaken woodland planting, sown wildflower meadow and have set up a Polycrub using the principles of permaculture. This will supply vegetables for themselves, locals and local businesses during the growing months.

*'This will be the second summer with the Polycrub and settling in to working out planning of sowing and crop types for more abundance and longer through the season.'*

*As a result of woodland planting 'I have seen the increase in bird activity, raptors looking for voles and mice and a corncrake last year.'*

The range of activities that respondents reported participating in through their grazings (Common Grazings Committee) included the following: woodland planting; interpretation boards; dyke restoration; car park installation; and a hydro scheme. Interestingly, some respondents reported that they were unaware of the schemes, of the meetings to discuss involvement, or of the involvement of their grazings, whilst others had been involved in the applications.

Figure 18: Use of a polycrub in Assynt



Figure 19: Spotlight on Ben Walton

**Ben Walton** has been crofting for 15 years and acquired the croft through a family friend. Ben has built a family home and has a successful haulage and plant business but still finds time to spend with his cattle.

Ben has 17 Highland & Shorthorn cross cows and a bull. He mostly grazes on the croft and has been working at improving the grazing by dealing with drainage, controlling rushes and spreading lime. Summer grazing is a problem.

Ben has hill shares but it is not fenced and he worries that his stock would be on the road and cause traffic problems. Deer are a real problem as well and eat the pasture he has carefully maintained for this cattle.

Ben is unsure of actions to take to increase biodiversity or against climate change.

He sees the future of crofting as bleak. There is a need for access for younger people. "Crofts are held onto and seen as real estate. Maintenance is ignored and crofts are left to go to ruin. There are examples throughout the township."

## Crofting Responsibilities

The questionnaire asked if crofters were aware of their duties as a crofter as set out by the Crofting Commission and if they currently fulfilled these duties. The table below provides an interesting overview of the perceptions of crofters; respondents consistently report high levels of adherence to the requirements, despite lower levels of awareness of the requirements.

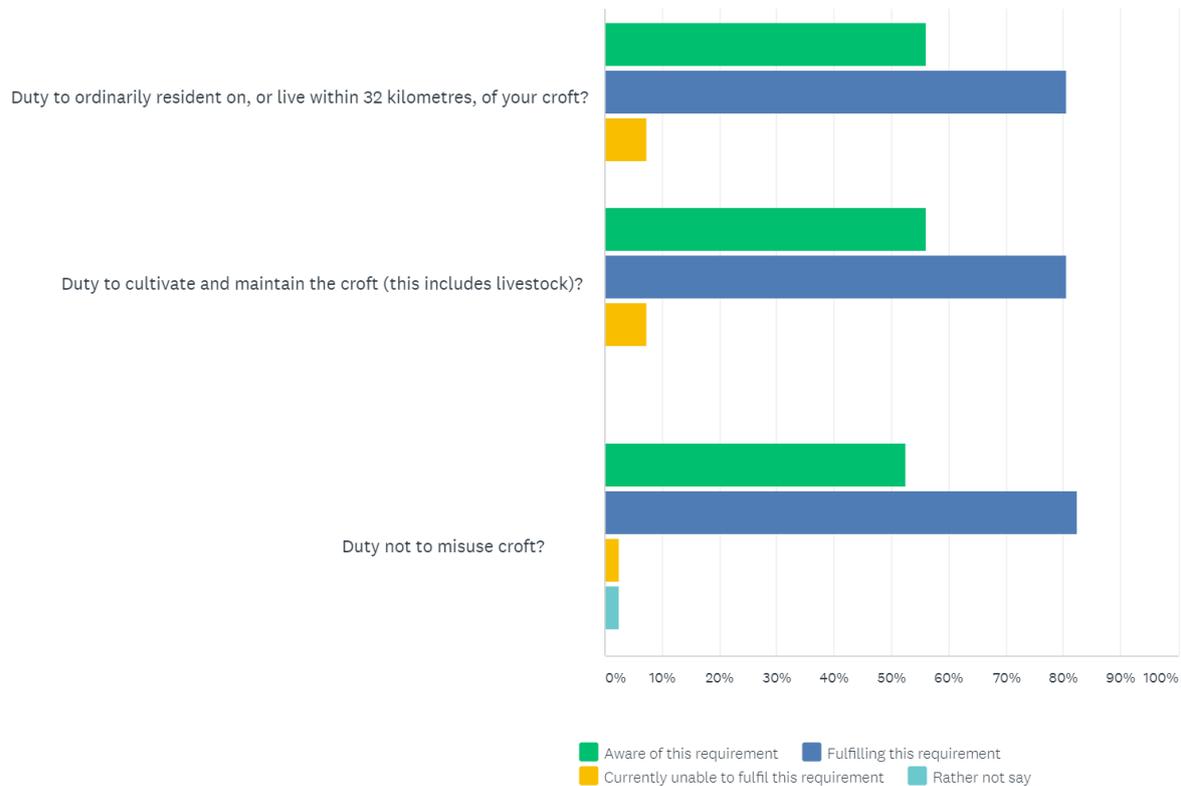
Individual respondents mentioned illness, hospital treatments, and Covid-19 restrictions (limited access to the mart and access to croft land during lockdown) as factors in their ability to fulfil requirements.

However, the comments section at the end of this question was used by some respondents to express some opinions about levels of adherence in the area.

Some felt that they were "One of the few crofters fulfilling these requirements" and highlighted examples of what appeared to be poor compliance in the area. One respondent stated, "There are many crofts that do not appear to fulfil any of these criteria. They are left to become overgrown with rushes and bracken. It would be great to see a minimum standard of care applied".

Others used the opportunity to outline what actions they planned or currently undertook to meet the requirements, such as managing bracken, mending fences and subletting arrangements.

Figure 20: Crofting responsibilities



Almost a quarter of the respondents (n=15) identified themselves “as a crofter first” whilst 23 respondents identified as another occupation first. Some respondents used the opportunity to mention their previous career or current volunteer roles. Seven respondents mentioned that they were retired or semi-retired; interestingly, three of these identified as a crofter first.

Respondents reported receiving income from part-time and ad hoc paid employment such as tourism, catering, retail or office work, and self-employment.

### Challenges to Crofting Activities

The most common challenge reported by participants was financial; lack of money in general, lack of financial support from government, or lack of ability to make a crofting business viable due to its small scale. The financial challenges were linked

by some with other challenges such as lack of time and lack of human resource or community support. For example, some respondents reported that the need for income from employment leads to a lack of time to undertake crofting activities. Others highlighted the lack of availability of people to help on the croft because “everybody’s busy doing other work”. Lack of clarity about future government support was felt to be “a worry”.

Challenges around the environment were also highlighted by respondents (n=11). Some of these challenges related to the quality of the ground in relation to lack of fertility and wetness or crofts with rocky and steep ground. This challenge is increased when crofters then have to travel some distance for hay and feed for livestock.

*Figure 21: Topping rushes*



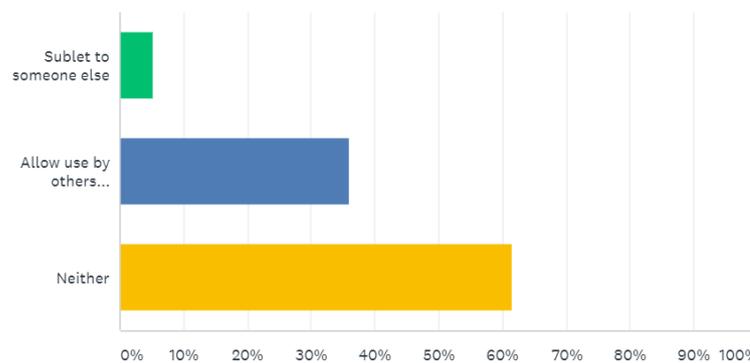
In areas where bracken and rushes “run rampant” there is a lack of grazing. The job of managing these areas was made more challenging during lockdown and where sheep numbers have reduced. Where bracken had overtaken common grazing, one participant thought that using the land for horticulture “would be very helpful to make the croft more viable”.

Others highlighted the role of deer, geese and rabbits as adding to the challenge of crofting; the maintenance of deer fencing was also mentioned. Maintenance of

drainage, clearing of rushes and bracken, along with many of the environmental challenges are connected to challenges around lack of finance (for machinery) and people. A related issue identified was absentee crofters.

One respondent felt that the tradition of crofting which relied on people helping each other was lacking, having changed to a more individualistic approach. One respondent who described themselves as new crofters, explained how difficult it is to access support “or training to help learn skills” in livestock and horticulture.

Figure 22: Subletting



The challenge of finding crofting land to sublet was highlighted by one respondent. When asked in the questionnaire, “Do you sublet your croft to someone else or let others use it on an informal basis?”, only two respondents reported subletting to someone else. However, 14 said that they had an informal arrangement to allow others to use their land. The majority (n=24) neither sublet nor allowed others to use their land.

Despite the comment above about the lack of helping and community spirit in crofting, respondents gave many examples of informal, mutually beneficial arrangements and of being “always happy to help my fellow crofters with more space if needed for sheep”. These arrangements extended to use of shares of common grazing or parts of the croft “for leisure”.

Crofters were asked about their participation in crofting activities such as cutting peat and use of seaweed as fertiliser. Only three respondents reported cutting peat. Some respondents reported having cut peats in the past but are no longer doing so for lack of time, people to help, or physical ability.

Some questioned whether it was appropriate to cut peat for climate reasons or “stopped for environmental reasons”. Two respondents expressed an interest in cutting peat / learning how to cut peat in future.

Figure 23: Steve ploughing prior to potato planting



Figure 24: Spotlight on Steve Husband

**Steve Husband** has two crofts in Acheninver & Achiltibuie with different challenges. Between the two he grows potatoes for sale and brassicas for winter fodder for his Soay sheep. He has undertaken a large woodland planting, is a wood turner and holds wood turning courses in his workshop and undertakes engineering repairs.

Steve would like to see deer fencing or massively engaged deer control. This would enable some windbreak planting, certainly to enable a diversity of crops. Deer fencing on a larger scale would enable shelter belts on a communal level, much less visually intrusive and more effective.

He sees the future of crofting as pretty bleak unless deer levels are effectively controlled. The croft could be much more productive without the deer, leading to more produce available locally, less food miles for winter stockfeed.

'In Acheninver, shelter is vastly improved. In a summer gale, swallows patrol up and down the sheltered track, picking off the flies. Later in the day they are joined by mayflies, patrolling up and down. Both these are replaced by bats in the evening, all the while the gale is blowing above the trees.'

Figure 25: Barley at Reiff



Almost 40% of respondents reported using seaweed as fertiliser on their croft. As a free resource for those who lived close to the coast, seaweed was used for crops, vegetable beds / patches, and as a general garden fertiliser. Access to seaweed was seen as a barrier by those who “don’t live near the sea” or being threatened by residential development.

A question about residential development was posed in the questionnaire, specifically in relation to consideration of the use of common grazing land for this purpose. Although 50% of respondents agreed with this as a potential solution to the shortage of available and affordable housing in the area, respondents indicated that “it would need very careful consideration”.

Figure 26: Spotlight on Ish and Alan Pendred

**Ish & Alan Pendred, Reiff.** *Ish inherited her crofts from her uncle 20 years ago. They have been growing potatoes, beans, blueberries and have just built a polycrub with which they are setting up as a commercial horticulture business.*

*Ish and Alan have had sheep and pigs in the past and now just have some wethers for their own use. They are also investigating composting sheep wool and bracken.*

*They have been experimenting with growing heritage and commercial barley the last two seasons.*

*Ish & Alan could use more ground for planting and would like to go organic. They also need to rabbit and geese proof (they already have deer fencing). They think rush control and tree planting would improve biodiversity and are providing coastal grassland round the margins of the crop fields.*

*Ish has got really into the bees and is looking to expand her bee colony. They also have quail which help control slugs and snails.*

Figure 27: Local food production



Figure 28: Spotlight on Lewis MacAskill

**Lewis MacAskill's** croft is in Inverkirkaig, a family assignation. Lewis and young family have some livestock pigs and sheep and allow their neighbour's sheep to graze on an informal basis.

They have planted over a thousand native trees and shrubs. The ground takes a lot of looking after to control rushes bracken etc. 'It would be good to see more diversity including tourism in the mix of activities'.

Where some identified previous use of common grazings land for housing and believed it to be "a very viable solution", a number of caveats were added. Many specified the need to ensure that "the land has absolutely no agricultural use" whilst others suggested that proximity to services should be considered.

Some respondents felt strongly that the use of common grazings land for housing was neither acceptable nor desirable and that there were many other options, such as freeing up vacant crofts. The need for local townships and landlords to have a say in this was highlighted and for discussions at Grazings Committees for a view to be taken.

One respondent felt that the longer-term future of crofting was a consideration; "If we want crofters in the future then we need more children in the area and to help keep schools open so that families wanting to move here have a school to go to".

Another reiterated this point by commenting; "unless we can give younger people access to land and housing there will be no community in the future".

One respondent expressed "hope for a day of new crofts being produced or existing crofts being handed over with a

promotion to younger people particularly, to allow them to build a home and produce their own food."

## Environmental Challenges

The questionnaire included a specific question about how environmental challenges were perceived to affect crofting activity.

Six respondents commented that changes to weather as a result of climate change would cause challenges. Unpredictable weather which involved higher wind speeds make it harder to grow crops and could cause fencing issues.

*Figure 29: Shelter at a gable end*



Wet pasture and boggy crofts as a result of heavier rainfall would cause difficulties for grazing animals and would mean more feed would have to be bought in. Droughts and wildfires could be associated with drier periods in spring and summertime.

Biodiversity was referred to by seven respondents. The potential for an increase in pests and invasive species as a result of climate change was highlighted. Increased cover of heath and bracken as a result of fewer sheep and lack of management of grazing areas was felt to create higher levels of reliance on bought in feed. The impact of over grazing, including by the number of deer on the hillside, was considered by some to be an issue which required action to resolve.

*Figure 30: Close up of barley*



Three respondents referred to the challenge of reducing dependency on fossil fuel. This was perceived to be problematic as diesel vehicles were relied on for haulage and to travel long distances. One respondent felt that, currently, electric vehicles were not a realistic alternative.

The use of fossil fuel for heating was not specifically mentioned but one respondent thought that NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) attitudes to “well thought out” local renewable energy schemes was problematic.

Four respondents referred to tourism as a challenge indirectly related to the environment. The lack of infrastructure was perceived to create challenges locally as well as the use of local housing by businesses for holiday accommodation.

Many respondents highlighted positive aspects of crofting in relation to the environment, for example, the potential to improve create diverse habitats and for local food production. Crofting was considered in essence, to be sustainable and resilient and many were already adapting or had plans to adapt their crofting activity to be more environmentally friendly. The potential for sensitive grazing

Figure 31: Diana's geese



and for the planting of trees and bushes to improve biodiversity and to create shelter for nesting birds and to meet government targets were opportunities highlighted.

Respondents expressed confidence in the ability of crofting to adapt to climate challenges but the majority specified that government support and sufficient funding would be required for crofters to adopt mitigation actions. One respondent (in the 41–65 age group) considered themselves too old to change and therefore did not plan any environment related changes to their crofting plans.

Only three respondents were not interested in being involved in an environmental scheme, 36 said that they were interested or would consider involvement. There was slightly more interest in involvement in a collective scheme (such as moorland management or through common grazings) rather than as an individual.

Figure 32: Spotlight on Diana Wilding

**Diana Wilding** has been crofting for around 38 years and was assigned the croft from friends. Diana combines horticulture with livestock. She has cows, goats, geese, ducks, hens, and bees. She is managing all of this and the constant battle with rush and deer which periodically invade her orchard.

Diana has a road side stall where people can stop and buy eggs, bags of salad and all sorts of vegetables. There are also preserves and honey. Although not registered organic her practises are based on those principles and she feels the way she lives she does her bit to mitigate climate change and increase biodiversity.

Diana would like to see more younger people being given the opportunity to croft and she feels they are more aware about climate change and the environment in general.

When asked about challenges to future productivity on crofts, the lack of people, and specifically young people was highlighted. This impacted activity on individual crofts and also the co-operative nature of crofting which involved shared labour and shared machinery. One respondent highlighted the risk of assuming that the future of crofting relied on people having children and that crofts with single person households have been common in the past across the Highlands and Islands.

Figure 33: Locally made sausages



The cost of machinery, limitations in the transport infrastructure and in broadband connectivity were highlighted by individual respondents.

The need for access to an abattoir, a butcher and a local market were identified as critical to future viability for local meat production.

Improved levels of subsidy for livestock, and failing that, clarity about and support for alternatives were felt to be critical for future profitability. Government support in future, especially in the context of Brexit, was highlighted as essential for crofts to be profitable.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the findings of the survey that respondents in the Coigach and Assynt areas take their responsibilities as crofters seriously. However, there are range of issues which cause concern in relation to their negative impact on crofting activity;

- the scale of neglect and absenteeism
- the aging and declining population
- the inaccessibility to new entrants, particularly younger people
- environmental issues
- lack of government support.

The issue of most concern is crofting land that is neglected.

Figure 34: New lambs at Elphin



There is low uptake of funding and support with the respondents saying they don't take advantage of all available funding, one declaring "it was not worth the bother". There is a perception that funding is not suitable for crofting and this north-west corner is disconnected from help and advice.

There is a desire for crofting communities to work together and "do their bit" for the environment. There is perhaps a certain amount of nostalgia about the past; "crofters don't work together the way they used to".

Whilst some the respondents are optimistic as to the future of crofting others have painted a gloomier picture. One local crofter believes that the future is "pretty bleak, unless we can effectively control deer levels". He feels that "a landscape of each productive croft surrounded by a 2-metre-high deer fence is not a pretty one", however "without deer control, we can't effectively shelter growing areas, so we can't grow crops, and the sheep have to compete with the deer for the grass."

One respondent when asked about the future of crofting put it like this: "I hope for a day of new crofts being produced or existing crofts being handed over with a promotion to younger people particularly, to allow them to build a home and produce their own food."

Another respondent believed there are three perspectives for the future of crofting, the first perspective is pessimistic, the last two outline a brighter picture of the state of crofting in the future;

- 1) Preservation of an archaic system of land tenure, a museum piece. This future is not bright.
- 2) A simple framework on which to hang a multitude of commercial alternatives, from tourism, innovative crops (teas, for instance), crafts, seaweed: this future is bright, and is a reality in many places

3) A largely self-sufficient mode of living: again, this future is bright, as work-from-home is now acceptable in many places. Not sure of the long-term implications for young, local, crofters.”

*Figure 35: A bright future for crofting?*



## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: Questionnaire distributed to crofters in Coigach and Assynt

These questions have been extracted or adapted from the questionnaire.

#### Section 1. About your household

Q1.1 What is your gender?

Q1.2 What is your age?

Q1.3 How many people live in your household (including yourself)?

Q1.4 How many in your household belong to these gender/age bands? (*bands provided*)

Q1.5 How many children (under 16) do you have living at home and elsewhere?

Q1.6 How many of your children under 16 years practise crofting or have expressed an interest in crofting?

#### Section 2: About your crofting background

Q2.1 What were the main reasons for becoming a crofter?

Q2.2 For how long have you been crofting?

Q2.3 How many crofts do you currently operate as a tenant and/or as an owner-occupier crofter?

Q2.4 Which of the following crofting activities are performed at your croft and approximately what proportion in % does each account for? (*list of options provided*)

Q2.5 How many livestock do you have? (*list of options provided*)

Q2.6 Do you claim any grants or payments under the Scottish Rural Development Programme?

Please say which schemes you have been involved with and what you have done.

Q2.7 Have you taken part in any Agricultural Environmental Schemes?

Please say which scheme you have been involved with and what you have done.

Q2.8 Grazings shares

Are you a tenant of grazings share?

Are you on the Grazings Committee?

Please specify your role in the Grazings Committee (if any).

Q2.7 Has your grazings been involved in any management like woodland, renewable energy or environmental schemes?

### **Section 3: Identity and challenges**

Q.3.1 Are you aware of your duties as a crofter as set out by the Crofting Commission? Do you fulfil your duties?

Q.3.2 Do you identify as a crofter first or as of your other occupation(s) ie as postman/nurse first? Please state your other occupation(s); If retired please state your previous occupation(s).

Q.3.3 What do you see as the major challenges to activities on your croft?

Q.3.3 Do you sublet your croft to someone else or let others use it on an informal basis?

Q.3.4 Do you cut peat?

Q.3.4 Do you use seaweed as fertiliser on your croft?

### **Section 4 Wider community**

Q.4.1 A shortage of available and affordable housing has become a problem in the area – would a solution be to give up some common grazing land where suitable to build?

Q.4.2 What do you see as the environmental challenges in the future and how will it affect your crofting practises?

Q.4.3 Would you be interested in being involved in an environmental scheme either as an individual or collectively?

## APPENDIX II: 'Spotlight' Questions

The list below was used to prompt responses from a selection of local crofters in order to create a 'spotlight' feature in this report.

- Name
- Address/Township
- How many years crofting?
- How did you acquire croft?
- Activities on croft
- Livestock – what kind/how many?
- Tourism
- Agriculture
- Environment
- What are your biggest needs?
- What help would you need to increase biodiversity?
- Help to mitigate against climate change?
- How do you see the future of crofting?
- Anything else?

## APPENDIX III: Crofting Context in Scotland

The contents of this appendix are included with kind permission from the Scottish Crofting Federation.

*Crofting is a land tenure system of small-scale food producers unique to the Scottish Highlands and Islands. It provides tenants with security provided they pay their rent, live on or near their croft and work the land.*

*Designed to protect the indigenous people from exploitation by landlords in the 19th Century, crofting has a proven track record of maintaining population and economic activity in remote rural areas.*

*Crofting supports local food production while protecting the cultural heritage and the natural environment in the north and west of Scotland. It has proved instrumental in preserving the Gaelic language.*

*Through its mix of arable and common grazing land, it encourages both communal working and individual entrepreneurship.*

*A crofter is the person who occupies and works a small landholding known as a croft. A crofter is normally the tenant of the croft, paying rent to the landlord of the croft. But many others have purchased their crofts and are owner-occupiers of their crofts.*

*A croft is a small agricultural unit, most of which are situated in the crofting counties in the north of Scotland being the former counties of Argyll, Caithness, Inverness, Ross & Cromarty, Sutherland, Orkney and Shetland, and held subject to the provisions of the Crofting Acts.*

*Many crofts are on estates. A landlord may have many crofts on his estate. The rent paid by the tenant crofter, except in fairly rare circumstances, is only for the bare land of the croft, for the house and agricultural buildings, roads and fences are provided by the crofter himself. Since 1976 it has become more common for a crofter to acquire title to his croft, thus becoming an owner-occupier. Should he fail to reside on or near the croft, he can himself be required to take a tenant.*

*This is a series of Acts passed since 1886 providing security to crofters, protecting them from being unfairly removed from their land, guaranteeing fair rents and allowing them to claim compensation for improvements should their tenancy come to an end. The law of crofting was codified as the Crofters (Scotland) Act of 1993, but there have been substantial reforms, notably in 2007 and 2010 as part of the Scottish Government's Land Reform Programme. Crofts are regulated by the Crofting Commission, who have their head offices in Inverness.*

<https://www.crofting.org/about-scf/about-crofting/>

## APPENDIX IV: Crofting Context in Coigach and Assynt

The tables included in this appendix provide data about the numbers of crofting holdings in the past in Coigach and Assynt. The first table has been extracted from A West Highland Survey, edited by Fraser Darling, published in 1955. The second is extracted from the Crofters Commission Register, published in 1964.

Extract Table 54., West Highland Survey: An essay in human ecology. Edited by F. Fraser Darling. Oxford University Press 1955

Township	Number of Holdings	Number of Occupied Holdings
Achiltibuie	24	17
Badenscallie	16	9
Achlochan	4	2
Polglass	20	10
Culnacraig	4	3
Achduart	3	1
Achvraie	2	1
Polbain	18	16
Achnahaird	7	5
Altandu	13	9
Reiff	13	6
Dornie	4	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>82</b>

### Report of the Survey of the Parishes of Assynt and Eddrachillis, by A.W.Adam, M.A. & I. Rankin, B.Sc.

According to the Crofters Commission Register in 1964, there were 359 crofts in Assynt. All are small, none being over 16 acres arable and the average being c. 4 acres. These crofts were now organised as follows:-

	Assynt
Occupied and worked	101
Amalgamated with others	90
Unworked, or not sub-let	73
Vacant	95
<b>Totals</b>	<b>359</b>

Extract Table 2A. Report of the Survey of the Parishes of Assynt and Eddrachillis, by A.W.Adam, M.A. & I. Rankin, B.Sc.

Township	No. of Crofts	No. of Units	No. of Working Units	Cows	Calves	Other Cattle	Breeding Ewes	Total Sheep
Achmelvich	28	16	5	9	5	1	116	390
Achnacarnin	16	10	6	20	13		122	332
Ardroe	4	3	1				60	165
Baddidarach	10	9	5				243	526
Badnaban	9	7	5	2		1	104	262
Balchladich	10	6	3	6	6	5	103	264
Brachloch	2	2	2	4	2		110	266
Clachtoll	32	20	9	14	1		157	362
Clashmore	36	16	12	18	13	13	306	852
Clashnessie	21	9	7	15	8	4	261	630
Culkein								
Achnacarnin	20	11			34			595
Culkein Drumbeg	18	11	6	3	1	1	224	565
Drumbeg	20	16	7				297	638
Elphin	18	11	4		20			1136
Inverkirkaig	19	11	3	5	1	1	145	345
Knockan	18	11	5	5	2	2	365	872
Nedd	16	12	4	2		1	154	371
Raffin	7	4	2	1			55	130
Stoer	24	12	7	14	6	4	156	360
Strathan	14	13	12	5	1	2	152	364
Torbreck	7	5	4	7	3	2	136	331
Unnapool	10	7	3	5	2	5	311	681
<b>Total</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>112</b>				<b>3577</b>	<b>10437</b>

## APPENDIX V: Stakeholders in CALLP

### Public bodies:

Assynt Development Trust  
Coigach Community Development Company

### Private Landowners:

Eisg Brachaid  
Kylesku Estate  
Tanera Mor

### Public and Community Landowners:

John Muir Trust  
Scottish Wildlife Trust  
Culag Community Woodland Trust  
Isle Martin Trust

## APPENDIX VI: Breakdown of Gender and Age within Households

	Respondents with 1 household member in the age range			Respondents with 2 household members in the age range		
	Male	Female	combined	Male	Female	combined
under 16	5	6	11	0	2	2
16-24	3	3	6	1	0	1
25-34	0	0	0	0	0	0
35-44	2	3	5	0	0	0
45-54	7	11	18	0	0	0
55-64	15	14	29	1	0	1
65-74	6	7	13	0	0	0
75-84	2	1	3	0	0	0
85+	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	40	45	85	2	2	4

<i>Totals in each age range for all households surveyed</i>			
	Male	Female	combined
under 16	5	10	15
16-24	5	3	8
25-34	0	0	0
35-44	2	3	5
45-54	7	11	18
55-64	17	14	31
65-74	6	7	13
75-84	2	1	3
85+	0	0	0
Total	44	49	93

## APPENDIX VII: Bibliography & Sources

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