



Crofters and their advisory services

An analysis of crofters and their advisory services on Skye, Harris and Lewis: Dominic Duckett, Rachel Creaney, Lee-Ann Sutherland

Introduction

This report concerns crofting: a form of small-scale farming system common in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Our study forms one component of a wider European study investigating Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems (AKIS(see www.proakis.eu for more details)). This perspective analyses the network interactions of various actors, either from within the agricultural sector or along an agricultural value chain, in order to understand innovations and the prospects for farmers' support through advisory services. This particular study is one of four case studies specifically addressing the knowledge access and information needs of new entrants to small-scale farming. The work was carried out by researchers from The James Hutton Institute.

Key findings

Distances between crofters and sources of advice represent logistical challenges

- Crofting areas are remote, in many cases connected only by sea or air routes to the UK mainland, creating logistical barriers.
- Crofts are extensive and distributed across a large area of land (~750,000 ha).

The small-scale, diversified and often part-time nature of crofts represents logistical and financial challenges

- Small-scale typically equates to part time employment for many crofters for whom croft revenues form only part of the household income. Scottish Government provides a block grant to SAC Consulting to subsidise advice to crofters, but this is not well-known.
- The major advisory service providers are primarily fee-for-service. Small croft revenues create a mismatch between crofters and some advisory services with formal advice perceived as expensive.
- Many crofters produce a range of different commodities at small scales and diversify into croft-based businesses such as tourist accommodation. They therefore have multiple knowledge needs, which are challenging for advisors to address.

The complexity of subsidies create barriers to accessing advice

- Navigating complex subsidy arrangements without specialised advice can be a deterrent to applying.

Crofting regulations designed to penalise absentee ownership can deter some crofters from consulting institutional advisors through fear (perhaps unjustified) of official sanctions. Crofters access different types of advice and advisors for different kinds of information

- Formal advisors, like SAC Consulting are most commonly drawn on for administrative support, particularly with grant applications.
- Local knowledge from friends, neighbours and family is accessed in relation to day-to-day crofting activities, such as livestock production and building maintenance. However, this can lead to the spread of inaccurate information. One example of this was livestock movement recording, where local efforts to 'simplify' the requirements led to incorrect practices.

Crofters in the study would like to increase their access to new information in multiple ways:

- Given the importance of local knowledge, participants proposed local mentoring schemes for new entrants.
- Advice provision is nested within complicated networks that are not always clear to new entrants. Participants identified a need to generally raise awareness of the range of advisory services available.
- Participants appreciated the new entrant training courses available, but identified that 'refresher' courses would also be beneficial.
- Better broadband and more interactive resources could usefully address some of the access issues related to remote areas.

Background to the research

The research focused on new entrant crofters and their advisors, in order to evaluate the performance of AKIS in crofting areas and to explore knowledge creation from both sides of the fence. The objective was to build up a rich picture of the interactions between new end-users and service providers. Use of information technologies was also identified as a key area given the clear links between rural innovation and new technology.

This study provides a detailed picture of the services from the perspective of both the crofters and their key advisors, on the islands of Skye, Harris and Lewis. Using a case study approach, we indicate areas where existing approaches might be reviewed or adapted to deliver better outcomes to the small scale farmers in the system, and we highlight good practices that might be considered for adoption within other European contexts. The study focused particularly on the experiences of new entrants to crofting including successors and their advisors.

We targeted new entrants (those who took over a croft in the last 10 to 12 years) because it is in the early years that innovation (e.g. trying out different practices and novel approaches before deciding what works best) is often most evident. Starting-up and getting businesses through the early years generates particular challenges for both users and providers of advisory systems and offers a rich insight into knowledge flows as the new entrants navigate complex structures, and establish new relationships. We considered a broad range of information sources accessed by new entrants, including formal and informal advice, training courses, previous education, work experience, tacit knowledge and the role of ICT. A qualitative research design was adopted to capture a rich picture of crofters' knowledge systems. Thirty interviews with both crofters and their key informants were carried out between April and June 2014. In addition, participant observation was used at a training course held for new entrants to crofting in June 2014. The combination of these methods produced detailed narratives which were later analysed by the researchers. For clarification we refer to 'institutional advisors' (from the Crofting Commission or Scottish Government's Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (SGRPID) and 'formal advisors' (in terms of consultants from SAC, independent advisors, advisors from the Scottish Crofting Federation), throughout this report.



Case study

Two contrasting locations where crofting is widely practiced were selected: the Isle of Skye and the Island of Lewis and Harris. Crofting is a key social and economic asset for both of these areas; however the two locations are quite different in terms of their crofting systems. Skye is connected to mainland Scotland by a road bridge (opened in 1995) and is much more diversified than the 'traditional' extensive sheep and cattle systems prevalent on Lewis and Harris.

Qualitative interview methods were deployed in order to capture rich data about social interactions in the study locations. Researchers carried out 30 semi-structured interviews from April to June 2014 with crofters from Skye, Lewis and Harris and with key informants (e.g. formal advisors, some of whom were also crofters themselves). Interviewees ranged in ages from 16 to 70. A disproportionate number (in relation to the general population) are educated to university level. The majority are tenants of their crofts rather than owners and crofting experience ranged from one prospective crofter to those who have been crofting for 15 years.

The sizes of the interviewees' crofts are generally less than 10ha, with a few between 10ha-20ha and one owning a number of crofts totalling 300ha. In terms of the croft activities more than half of the crofters either have or are aiming to produce livestock. More than half of the interviewees (16) are diversifying into holiday homes and local food and just one has a single livestock enterprise.



Source: www.lonelyplanet.com

Historical note

The crofting system has an important and checkered history in remote rural Scotland and shapes the socio-economic landscape of today. Crofting emerged in the 19th Century after the defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden when the Highland Clearances swept away the traditional clan system and made way for estates with former clan chiefs becoming estate owners. Financial opportunities created by the industrial revolution were seized upon by these newly empowered estate owners who began forcibly clearing settlements from better agricultural areas in order to establish sheep ranches, and later, sporting estates. 'Crofts' were established by landowners on the poorest agricultural plots of estates to provide tenancies for the often forcibly resettled population. Estate owners deliberately engineered crofts as small-scale

subsistence-oriented units in order to provide a source of labour for the estates. Land owners could profit from labourers in a variety of enterprises including kelping. The surplus population was disenfranchised and dispersed, many coerced onto ships bound for Canada. Nova Scotia (New Scotland) in particular welcomed many Highland migrants. The subsequent history of crofting reveals a land rights struggle by the indigenous population that has profoundly influenced the institutional and regulatory framework in existence today. Crofts continue to be founded upon poor quality land with extensive grazing systems and crofting remains primarily a supplementary activity for most of its practitioners who on average obtain less than 20% of their income from this source.



New entrants and their advisors

In the last decade there has been a significant focus by Scottish Government and its agencies on promoting higher numbers of new entrants and successors, as a remedy for longstanding and ongoing outmigration. Thriving crofting communities deliver a range of socio-economic and environmental benefits including rural resilience and community wellbeing in remote areas.

Our sample suggests that new entrants tend to have fewer crops and livestock compared with more traditional crofters:

"The older guys around here will tell you these fields 50 years ago would have been covered in oats and barley"
(Interview excerpt, May 2014)

"I would say sheep numbers have declined enormously ..." (Interview excerpt, June 2014).

We also know that the privatisation of some advisory services has led to service providers competing with one another in areas where responsibilities overlap. This institutional diversity can be confusing to end-users and requires effective coordination.

Part time crofters

Historically, crofting was engineered to provide only a partial source of income to tenant farmers; the capacity to support households being limited by their small scale and the quality of the land.

"Oh! I would do it full-time tomorrow if I could yeah, yeah, yeah. I suppose the size ..."
(Interview excerpt, April 2014)

"The geography here doesn't lend itself to arable, crop production, there are probably I would say 3 to 4 full-time crofters in North Harris but it's always been a kind of subsistence occupation" (Interview excerpt, June 2014)

The research highlights that many new entrants focus on self-sufficiency rather than profit in terms of livestock or horticulture, with the majority of participant new entrants regarding crofting as an expense or at best a break even enterprise:

"We can't make a living from crofting we have to be realistic about that" (Interview excerpt, May 2014).

A few others reported 10-20% of their total household income came from crofting and just one was receiving a significant amount of income (50%) from one of the larger crofts in our sample. Almost all the crofters we spoke to had other sources of household income from employment including filmmaking, teaching and building. In some cases the new entrants aspired to increasing the proportion of income derived from the croft over time.

“I’d like to supplement my income that’s mainly one of the reasons of crofting “ (Interview excerpt, May 2014)

Participants identified a scale ranging from hobby crofters including subsistence and ‘The Good-lifers’ through semi-commercial to fully-commercial enterprises. According to one interviewee:

“The way forward if you really want to regenerate crofting is going to be on the semi-commercial so that there is an income from it but its sustained from off croft activities” (Interview excerpt, May 2014).

Many crofters also continue to produce traditional commodities, leading to a diverse variety of approaches to crofting:

“Traditional sort of livestock crofters who may just have a monoculture of sheep, or then you might get mixed livestock crofters so sheep, cattle, poultry, then we’ve got horticultural crofters too, and also crofters just say have a couple of sheep...but then they might use those sheep very intensively for something like spinning” (Interview excerpt, May 2014).

At the other end of the spectrum examples include wind turbines and tourism focused businesses.



Two groups of new entrant crofters

Certain challenges are universal to many new entrants to crofting, for example sourcing investment capital; however it was possible to distinguish two particular groups: complete new entrants (or fresh-starters) who had no prior association with crofting, including many undertaking profound career changes; and successors to crofting enterprises who were inheriting family holdings and who had varying levels of experience on and around crofts.

Fresh starters

In our sample, fresh-starters were generally older than the ‘new entrant successors’ tending to have been employed in other sectors and having saved or accumulated the capital funds to enter into crofting. This group often brought transferable skills from other careers with them sometimes resulting in innovations that inspired or encouraged others such as construction skills or business and administrative expertise. However there is a concern that fresh-starters often lack experience. One key informant reported witnessing:

“Some of them getting just completely intimidated by it because they’ve not had any history of land management” (Interview excerpt, June 2014).

Successors

According to the Crofting Commission, between 200 and 300 crofts are assigned from one person to another (permanently transferred), and in over half of these the outgoing crofter passes the croft to a member of their family with most of the remaining tenancies transferred to acquaintances.

Strong social norms within crofting communities, reinforced through communal labour, promote information sharing. Successors are therefore able to draw on local knowledge. Successors often inherit the information networks of their parents and are able to draw on considerable informal local knowledge making them less dependent on certain types of formal advice. While participants in both groups were very positive about targeted ‘new entrant’ training courses provided by the SCF, several successors suggested that ‘refresher’ courses, addressing recent changes to regulations and technological advances, could be more relevant to them.

Changes and challenges



Despite the many difficulties this unique lifestyle presents, there is a waiting list of aspiring croft owners; the first challenge to the prospective new entrant is to obtain a croft. Our interviewees, who had surmounted this initial obstacle, were encouraged to talk about the first changes they made on their croft after assignment. A number of them highlighted drainage, fencing and improving the land through reseeding as their first challenges. Some spoke about building a house so they could then stay on the croft. Others had gone straight into diversification by employing an architect to design their B&B, renovating existing croft buildings for self-catering accommodation, or purchasing rare breed sheep for weaving enterprises. Finally some of the participants talked about more bureaucratic first steps

such as applying for grants or submitting an IACS (Integrated Administration and Control System) form. New entrants may lack experience with the administrative complexities. We heard many accounts of how navigating legislative and bureaucratic procedures is the biggest challenge.

Formal advisory services such as the SAC and SCF are becoming more important as more and more people use their services and training to assist with grant applications and other necessary paperwork such as ScotEID and BCMS (British Cattle Movement System). One SAC key informant reported that *“crofters are increasingly utilising the services offered by agencies such as SAC “* (Interview excerpt, May 2014). Encouragingly, according to one SAC interviewee, most of the new entrants on Lewis who applied for the single farm payment (approximately 60) obtained the subsidy for 2013. However, everyone was not satisfied. Advisory services were viewed by some as diverted away from providing practical agricultural advice by this need for administrative support. One participant identified the potential of grazing committees to be innovative:

“but no one is there giving them this advice and so it’s just not happening” (Interview excerpt, June 2014)

Another fear was that in seeking out professional advice from regulators like Scottish Government’s Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (SGRID) or the Crofting Commission may inadvertently alert the authorities to failures in compliance and expose themselves to sanctions. In the worst case participants feared losing their croft. Others saw the regulatory system as too highly focused on livestock croft activities:

“if you want to get some sheep or something like that then absolutely no problem with the SGRID office because that’s fine! But as soon as you want to deviate slightly from livestock then...” (Interview excerpt, April 2014)

Agri-environment

Crofting has an important role to play in environmental management and wildlife conservation due to its relatively low intensity practices. While generally environmentally engaged, several participants argued that location and size- specific factors should be given greater consideration when agri-environmental measures are devised. In one case, new entrants anxious to plant trees on a tiny croft on Skye had been given advice by the Woodland Trust but their plan was on too small a scale to qualify for Forestry Commission support. Another forestry scheme was said to promote the increase of particular tree species unsuitable for Lewis and Harris according to one informant who thought that there was insufficient flexibility to local conditions. There are noteworthy initiatives to improve the environmental advice provided within projects such as the Skye Crofting and Corncrake partnership which is run by SAC, SCF and RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds).



One visible change has seen many crofters cutting for silage significantly later as an agri-environmental measure to encourage more wildlife. According to the key informants, SAC and SCF advisors are continuously undergoing training on the increasing range of environmental advice that they are expected to provide. In addition RSPB and the Woodland Trust work closely with the SAC and SCF delivering training courses, creating environmental plans and conducting croft visits. However there are tensions between agricultural production and environmental protection. Particular wildlife conservation practices, such as protecting sea eagles, are viewed by some as unneighbourly (because eagles are associated with livestock predation). Where renewable projects are shared investments, in some instances on common grazings, this tension may be more pronounced.



A sheep foraging by the shore at Hushinish, Isle of Harris

Another popular concern we encountered was that the available schemes often require substantial initial investment in items such as tree guards or specific types of stakes; home-made alternatives are non-compliant. Other difficulties seemed to stem from the lack of coordination between subsidy schemes, for example, wildlife agri-environmental schemes are sometimes seen as mutually exclusive to investments in renewables, a case in point being wind-turbines which were thought to be incompatible with the corncrake habitat scheme. Furthermore, the wildlife schemes were said to be financially uncompetitive with the renewable schemes. Participants also negatively viewed the uncertainty of payments from some schemes complaining that investing in an agri-environmental venture can fail to generate returns, with one participant lamenting that *“it’s a shame that money goes down the drain especially when it doesn’t work!”* (Interview excerpt, April 2014).

In terms of what could be improved, a number of interviewees were frustrated with the lack of advance warning in terms of the (ever-changing) entrance criteria to the various schemes. Some key informants highlighted the need for more holistic advice, in terms of looking at the different aspects of a particular habitat. For instance:

“Where the value is greatest and where people are taking most away from it is if you look at one particular aspect and you look at it from the agri-chemical side, the sort of seed side, the machinery side, the wildlife side, and you put all of these together and look at it in the whole in terms of you know how a particular habitat type, or field type, or crop is managed and the implications of that and doing different things.” (Interview excerpt, June 2014).

Diversification

Many new entrants are diversifying whilst also maintaining the ‘traditional’ crofting elements. New ventures included bee-keeping for heather honey and for observation hives, micro-brewing, gourmet salt-making, setting up weaving enterprises, various forms of tourist accommodation from glamping to boutique and renewable energy projects. More unusual ideas included following ‘Fujiyama No Plough Techniques’ (to no avail), keeping native cattle with a couple of neighbours and splitting the grant scheme money, establishing a writing retreat and using a satellite system for spreading fertiliser with the innovator remarking:

“I would be surprised if we’re not the first people on Skye [doing this]” (Interview excerpt, June 2014)

Another new development used by a number of crofters is the ‘Scottish Croft Producers Mark’. This is an accreditation facilitated through the SCF website on which producers can advertise croft produce, including meat, fruit and vegetables and even tourist accommodation.

Both fresh-starters and successors in this study are oriented towards revitalising crofting, often taking on crofts which had been underutilised in the past, and seeking to make them more productive. Both also seek to innovate, through new business diversification, most commonly into tourist accommodation, vegetable production (using polytunnels), and renewable energy production.

Others hope to focus more on the potential of crofting to improve the wider environment and plant and animal numbers, through creating small nature reserves and woodlands, undertaking renewable energy projects and using low-impact farming techniques on their land.



Greenhouse near Romesdal, Isle of Skye

Crofters and their advisors

Effectively providing advice in remote and difficult to access locations, along with the part-time nature of crofting, is clearly a logistical challenge. This is especially a concern when regarding cross-compliance expectations, which may be equally demanding or even identical with those faced by larger-scale commercial enterprises, for example, when completing IACS forms for livestock movement recording. SAC Consulting and SCF key informants described outreach initiatives to groups of crofters in the areas which, for example, save the crofters on Lewis long trips to Stornoway. These initiatives include surgeries in the local communities and events during the evenings and weekends. However there appears to be a lack of awareness of some of these initiatives, with some crofters being unaware of any (or many) such events in their areas. Furthermore there is some inconsistent knowledge held by some crofters regarding the costs of the provision of advice from SAC and SCF. Some crofters assessed the costs of advice provision as not always appropriate or affordable, citing the £750 cost of the 2 year 'all inclusive' start up package by SAC as an example, when in fact both the SAC and SCF offer ad-hoc advice to subscribers and members (respectively) at a more affordable £67 and £59 per year.



As sources of revenue from payment for advice, crofts are a less viable market than larger commercial holdings. However, one scheme operates specifically for crofts, namely the Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme- CCAGS. SAC Consulting and private consultants assist applicants with the relevant paperwork.

According to the research, new crofters seek advice on all aspects of crofting through a variety of channels. Information on legislative processes such as form-filling and information on grant schemes is often obtained through internet sources as well as through SAC and the SCF. Scientific information such as soil analysis and veterinary treatments are offered by professional veterinarians and advisory organisations including SAC Consulting. Procedural knowledge (information on specific processes) on the other hand includes subject specific skills and techniques such as animal husbandry, business advice or environmental skills and knowledge is transferred through various formal and informal advisory services (e.g. SCF training courses, specific organisations such as RSPB, other crofters and internet sources).

The importance of crofters themselves as knowledge brokers both between each other and in their interactions with the various institutions is hard to over emphasise. All the crofters interviewed stressed the importance of speaking with their neighbours and of learning from established practices. Innovative practices often derived from seeing other crofters already implementing new ideas (i.e. learning by example). Specific examples include erecting polytunnels which were sufficiently durable for the challenging environmental conditions. Neighbours were able to advise regarding brands and siting considerations. Where new entrants were successors there was more likely to be a generational dimension to the knowledge flow. Younger crofters benefited from experienced crofters and conversely shared new ideas acquired through college education (including SRUC and UHI- University of Highlands and Islands).

Although the formal advisory services like SAC Consulting were trusted for assistance with grant applications and subsidy access, some of the participants questioned the practical knowledge of these advisors. Even in cases where the advisors were crofters themselves, their experiences may not be relevant to the specific situation of the crofter. The interviewees also highlighted a number of other important formal advisory services/advisors to which new entrants looked to for advice, including private/ freelance consultants, environmental organisations such as The Woodland Trust and RSPB, community trusts such as The North Harris Trust and other organisations including Business Gateway. These were often looked to for more administrative and grant related information. Other important, but more informal, sources included group meetings of livestock breed societies, interactions with grazing clerks and informal grazing and business improvement groups.

Livestock movement recording



There has been increased legislation around livestock traceability in recent years for example mandatory electronic tagging of sheep (EID) throughout Europe since 2010.

More than half the new entrants interviewed either produce or are aiming to produce livestock. In some cases, the perceived complexity of livestock movement recording is given as a reason not to keep livestock, especially sheep, on crofts, arguably contributing to what has been a major reduction in sheep production on small-scale farms in the highlands and islands in recent years. According to one interviewee *“let’s say 30-40 years ago practically every house had a cow for example and that doesn’t happen nowadays”* (Interview excerpt, June 2014).

Increased legislation has brought with it a level of complexity. Organisations like SAC Consulting face the challenge of correcting the considerable misinformation circulating through crofting communities, *“there’s so much false information, and it’s nobody’s fault it’s because it’s so complicated you know”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014).

According to one key informant: *“we’ve run sheep record courses the last couple of years and I’ve not met one person at any of the courses that I ran that was completely correct in their sheep records”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014). The problem appears to stem from efforts by tag providers and experienced local farmers to ‘simplify’ regulations into easy to follow steps, which introduce inaccuracies.

The perceived complex nature of the sheep system is a worry to many crofters because mistakes with their records can result in fines, leading some crofters to pay SAC to complete the records. However other interviewees believed that it is not the online sheep system that is complicated, rather it is the tagging itself with respondents confused about double tagging, complaining about the size of tags (too small) and highlighting that they received a lot of conflicting information from many sources.

Numerous interviewees seemed to agree with the point that *“It’s not the writing down what’s died, and what’s born, and whatever, it’s the tagging, its knowing what to tag and remembering to record every time you tag and remembering to record everything that comes on”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014). There also seems to be uncertainty and confusion over what the compulsory sheep EID system is for, with some crofters not understanding the point of the tagging:

“One of the arguments was [for introduction of EID], when foot and mouth broke out, was that if foot and mouth was to come to the island at all every animal from one end of Lewis to the bottom end of Harris would be wiped out because technically it’s only one holding. So you know it seems a bit daft that you have to record every single movement that you’re doing” (Interview excerpt, June 2014).

Others were more positive towards to sheep EID, with one interviewee commenting that although there is a lot to trawl through on the online ScotEID programme he quite likes it *“because you know where your lambs have gone to and all that kind of thing so it’s very good!”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014).

Another considered ScotEID *“as sort of a knowledge tool”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014). Others highlighted the role of fellow crofters in helping them with the sheep tagging stating that *“Well the tagging I mean again there’s plenty of people around doing it and show us how to do it it’s not hard to do”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014).

With Europe formulating a new cattle EID system there is growing interest in comparing the operation of the current, non EID cattle scheme (BCMS) and the relatively new sheep EID traceability. In this study most interviewees tended to view the BCMS cattle system as easier to use and understand than the sheep system (ScotEID): *“Oh the beef tagging is fantastic compared the sheep records I would do cattle records any day over sheep records!”* (Interview excerpt, June 2014).

Greater ease-of-use was attributed to various factors, for example, *“it’s probably the nature of sheep because sheep you know people have so many hundreds of sheep. You know with cows, when you go onto the BCMS you’ve got a nice drop down menu and it tells you if you’ve made a mistake”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014). Also the interviewees indicated that recording the movements of cattle is much easier than sheep and cattle move less often than sheep. Many crofters appear to recognise the importance of the cattle system, for both themselves and the wider population in terms of food traceability and potential disease outbreak. Some interviewees also highlighted other farm-level management benefits such as being able to print out the ages, dates of birth and the cattle numbers for the vet when he comes to do disease testing.



Livestock electronic identification (EID) tags

Interestingly one set of newcomers with sheep perceived things differently, believing that: *“We’ve got no cattle - cattle involves a lot more paperwork and stuff, so with the sheep we’ve got its been actually quite easy and straightforward”* (Interview excerpt, May 2014). Another positive view came from representatives of SAC and SCF who reported good levels of cross compliance of livestock reporting to ScotEID and BCMS despite the many concerns over complexity.

Socio-technical networks

ICT systems are used by the advisory services and official bodies to both facilitate the flow of knowledge and information to crofters and to capture information from them, such as census and livestock movements. The lack of broadband coverage in many remote rural areas clearly affected uptake of such provision.

Encouragingly, the majority of new entrants enter crofting with IT skills from previous formal education or careers. These skills enable them to participate in information networks in a number of ways, both by and for new crofters. For crofters, and particularly new crofters, ICT is used as an administrative tool (e.g. record keeping and budgeting) and is also used as both a platform for knowledge transfer, for, amongst other things, advertising croft accommodation and croft produce on websites, via social media sites, YouTube videos and blogs (such as the Air an Lot crofting blog).

ICT is also used by both the crofters and advisors for production innovation, including soil analysis, through the use of digital readers and GPS satellite imaging for precision farming.

The internet and ICT will no doubt play a bigger and bigger role in crofting advice, if improvements are made to the rural broadband speeds. Advisory organisations including SCF and SAC are increasingly making use of virtual platforms and as one key informant highlighted:

“We want to look at things like Facebook sites, and things like that as well. I think more social media, we’re going to have to think of a way of really getting that working for us, tweeting or whatever it is that we don’t do but I think it’s maybe something we’ll have to look at because I think we’ve got the audience for it” (Interview excerpt, May 2014).



Improving advice to new entrants

A number of options for improving advice became evident through the research.

- A road-map for advice: Many interviewees thought that they would have benefitted from a general overview on the remit of the different advisory bodies when they first entered into crofting.
- Mentoring- traditional knowledge to run alongside technical advice during the provision of training advice. Where this is already happening, for example at Scottish Crofting Federation training events, there was clear approval.
- Refresher courses, especially for successors, some of whom thought that existing provision was too basic.
- Free advice clinics for new entrants as *“people don't always know what they are entitled to claim for”* (Interview excerpt, April 2014). This already happens in some places (for example on Lewis), but organisations could develop greater capacity.
- Address a perceived bias by the main advisory organisations towards providing livestock advice, and the corresponding perception that it is difficult to obtain advice on diverse croft activities (e.g. horticulture or tourism).
- Extend eligibility to new entrants for schemes and grants from year 1 rather than having to wait for the next grant applicable scheme or SRDP programme.
- Simplify grant schemes and livestock reporting programme such as ScotEID so that new entrants (and crofters in general) will have a better idea of what they are entitled to and what legislation they are required to complete.
- Increase use of social media to publicise crofting and support a range of crofting activities.
- Establish a listening and support service phone line through which crofters (and farmers) could speak to someone confidentially about any worries or concerns they were having in terms of complying with regulations.
- Tackle the issue of neglected crofts, as a basis for improving the availability of crofts for new entrants.
- Expand provision of *“multidisciplinary events which are ticking the crofters boxes rather than ticking our boxes”* (Interview excerpt, June 2014) through which new entrants can obtain advice on a range of topics, rather than having to attend numerous different single-topic events.
- Better advertise and extend out reach activities whereby organisations such as SAC and Business Gateway travel to the local villages to provide advice to communities. This then has a dual purpose of acting as an advisory clinic as well as a building community networks.
- Provide training to locally recognised experts on emergent issues, such as livestock tagging, to improve the accuracy of local production knowledge.
- Specifically target communities (such as The North Harris Trust or grazing committees), where there is an often ill-founded perception amongst some crofters that they are ineligible for many agri-environmental and other grant schemes on account of their size or set-up.



Comparison to other European Studies

The crofting research was one of four case studies across Europe that looked at the new knowledge networks of small-scale farmers. The others were new-entrants and semi-subsistence farmers in Plovdiv region, Bulgaria; small-scale farms diversifying into agritourism in the Carpathian Mountains of Poland; and newly established small-scale blueberry producers in the central-north region of Portugal. In each case study, 15 to 25 semi-structured interviews were taken with small-scale farmers who were establishing new knowledge networks, as well as 4 to 8 key informants within the agricultural knowledge system (primarily advisors). The Scottish study demonstrated a number of similar findings to the other cases:

The study participants as a whole were considerably better educated than the other farmers in the study sites: most of the Bulgarian, Portuguese and Scottish small-scale farmers involved in the research have university-level qualifications. In Poland, the achievement was typically to secondary school level. To a degree, this distinction reflects the selection criteria – the Bulgarian and Portuguese cases focused on new entrants who were accessing ‘new entrant’ supports, which are limited to farmers under 40. Younger people generally tend to be better educated.

Study participants identified a range of knowledge sources including: public and private ‘agricultural advisory services’, up and downstream suppliers, NGOs, charities, professional specialists (e.g. agronomists, accountants, vets), farmer-based organisations (FBOs) and locals (including neighbours and family members).

Facilitating grant and subsidy access was the primary use of state agricultural advisory services according to study participants. State funded advisors in Bulgaria, Poland and the UK reported spending the majority of their time on these tasks. In Portugal their role was minimal, owing to a very limited availability of state advisory services in general. In each of the countries, private advisors also offer these services, utilising different fee-for-service models. In Bulgaria and Portugal, fees for services are based on the success of the grant application – payment is proportionate to the amount of funding received, whereas in Scotland, there is a one-off fee for the application. This creates an incentive to write a fundable application, rather than one which particularly suits the farm set up or farmers’ skills; there is also a tendency not to innovate, as evaluators are more likely to fund established approaches.

By far the most common sources of production knowledge in the Bulgarian and Scottish sites were friends and neighbours. Portugal was an exception because blueberry production was new to the region – there was therefore not an established set of local knowledge on which to draw. However, a network of producers and organisations from southern Portugal was organised to fill this gap.

In all three sites, provision of production advice was a secondary activity for state advisory services, which were primarily involved in providing managerial information. However, often the friends and neighbours accessed were experts in their own right, such as veterinarians and agronomists.

Private consultancy companies are not often used by small farmers because the cost of the consultations. Instead, input suppliers, such as agro-pharmacy stores, accounting companies and import trade organisations which offer ‘free’ advice are used by small farmers.

In all four cases, the demand for marketing knowledge was identified as highly important, but not sufficiently addressed through advisory services.

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