

Scotland's Rural College

Common grazing in the age of 'conditionality' - Policy Spotlight

Sutherland, Janette

DOI:

[10.58073/SRUC.22109840.v1](https://doi.org/10.58073/SRUC.22109840.v1)

Print publication: 01/02/2023

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sutherland, J. (2023). Common grazing in the age of 'conditionality' - Policy Spotlight. (Policy Spotlight; No. 11). SRUC's Rural Policy Centre. <https://doi.org/10.58073/SRUC.22109840.v1>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Common grazing in the age of 'conditionality'

[Janette Sutherland](#)

Senior Consultant and Area Manager,
SAC Consulting

This Policy Spotlight explains how common grazings are managed and highlights the unique benefits they offer. It asks that policy makers consider both these factors during the early stages of subsidy reforms.

Key Takeaways

- Common grazings are areas of land used by crofters. There are more than 1,000 common grazings, accounting for around 6% of Scotland's land mass.
- Common grazings are often overlooked for the unique contribution they make in, for example, increasing biodiversity and in the carbon management of peatlands.
- It is encouraged that common grazings be managed and maintained via a Grazings Committee, registered with the Crofting Commission.
- Working with the collaborative Grazings Committee system is an additional admin and legal burden for crofters that farmers do not face.
- The concept of conditionality laid out in [The Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture](#) requires planning and testing at an early stage or it could become damaging to common graziers.
- Recommendations for 'conditional' options, specific to common grazings, are proposed in this document. These aim to encourage discussion to ensure that common grazings are considered by policy makers at an early stage of the current subsidy reform.



© Ollaberry & District CG

Crofting: an overview

A croft is a relatively small agricultural land holding (around five hectares, on average) held in tenancy or owner-occupied and which may or may not have buildings on it. According to the [Crofting Commission](#), there are around 20,000 crofts in Scotland with approximately 33,000 people living in crofting households. Many crofts have shares in a common grazing, so that the area utilised by a crofter can extend to several hundred hectares.

Crofting is uniquely Scottish and an integral part of life in rural and island communities. It is regulated by the Crofting Commission and has had its own legislation since 1886 – The Crofters Holding Act. This law ensures security of tenure [a landlord cannot evict a crofter], fair rents and compensation for permanent improvements. Crofters have a legal duty to be resident or within 32km of their croft, they must not neglect their croft and they must cultivate or maintain their croft.

What are common grazings?

Common grazings are areas of land used by crofters and others who hold a right to graze stock on that land. According to the [Crofting Commission](#), there are over 1,000 common grazings covering over 500,000 hectares of land across Scotland, accounting for almost 6% of Scotland's land mass.

The benefits of common grazings

According to the [European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism](#), common grazings offer a huge opportunity in dealing with the key challenges we face in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss.

While they cover around 6% of Scotland's land area and 9% of land in active agriculture, common grazings account for 13% of the Special Protection Areas designated under the BIRDS Directive and more than 15% of High Nature Value farmland. Common grazings also account for 30% of Scotland's area with peat of over 2 metres in depth.



© Maureen Bracewell via Flickr

Grazings Committees

Crofters sharing in a common grazing can appoint a [Grazings Committee](#) at a public meeting to maintain, manage and improve the grazing. The Committee is then registered with the Crofting Commission for an initial period of three years.

The Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 created a legal requirement for Grazings Committee to report every five years on the condition of their common grazing, as well as the condition of the crofts of those sharing in the grazings.

According to the [Crofting Commission's Annual Report of 2021-22](#), there were 497 Grazings Committees registered [also known as 'in office'], although a further 10 registrations had been delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Properly constituted Grazing Committees with an appointed Chairperson and Clerk are the best way to safeguard the future of common grazing land. They can also provide a valuable information source about crofting in the area and encourage communal working.

As such, there is a widespread aspiration to have more common grazings 'in office'. Yet the current support system means that crofters go largely unrewarded for their efforts under agricultural budgets and are excluded from other community-based schemes.

The admin burden (e.g. repaying monies for works) usually falls on Grazing Clerks – commonly unpaid volunteers often acting without liability insurance. At an NFUS meeting, which took place in Skye in May 2022, a number of clerks expressed concern that Grazings Committees could be used to bank future 'conditional' support payments.

Effective common grazings offer an abundance of unique benefits

While much diversity exists across grazings in terms of location and size, well managed sites offer environmental benefits.

These include: healthy livestock systems (cattle and/or sheep); traditional crops and their associated biodiversity benefits; grassland meadows producing wildflowers; managing fuel load/wildfire risk in upland habitats; protection of carbon resources in peatlands.

Common grazings – particularly those 'in office' – generate many community benefits, some of which are outlined below.

Grazings with well-maintained fences and safe communal handling equipment can help encourage new and young entrants into crofting. There is also much to be gained from different generations working together, sharing knowledge of the land and building social trust. This fosters co-operative action like storage and marketing.

Policy context

[The Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture](#) has committed to integrate 'enhanced conditionality' of at least half of all funding for farming and crofting by 2025. [The new common agricultural policy: 2023-27](#) defines enhanced conditionality as "payments linked to a stronger set of mandatory requirements".

Under this conditionality policy, recipients of support will be expected to deliver on targeted outcomes for biodiversity gain and emissions reduction.

The premise of conditionality is good. It is important that the public can see what they are getting for the support they provide. However, without adequate planning and testing at an early phase of policy development poorly implemented conditionality could be damaging to common graziers.

This is because common graziers could either be excluded from conditional options – as no one grazier has full management control of all the land – or individual crofters could only be able to access conditional options through a Grazing Committee, which brings its own set of challenges.

We need policies that support and incentivise good practice in common grazings in order to increase the resilience of the crofting community and enhance the unique benefits common grazings offer.

It is clear that we also need to pay for the higher transaction costs that common graziers face. These include time spent attending meetings, the costs of advertising meetings, and time involved in complying with crofting legislation. These are costs and burdens that do not apply to farmers.

Recommendations:

These policy suggestions rely on co-operative effort but leave the claiming responsibility with the individual shareholder through their Single Application Form (SAF).

- **Benefits to being 'in office':** If a common grazing is 'in office, each shareholder is paid a top-up.
- **Reward regular committee meetings:** Graziers are paid when their Grazings Committee meets at least once a year.
- **Bank account benefits:** Each grazier is paid a top-up if their grazings bank account is registered on Rural Payments and Services (RP&S).
- **Grazings fund maintenance top-up:** Each grazier gets a top-up if they upload the annual (redacted) grazing fund table, setting out the financial management of the grazing.

- **Regulations up to date:** Graziers are paid for uploading documentation on common grazings regulations to RP&S (or similar).
- **Grazed by cattle and/or sheep:** Each cattle and/or sheep grazier gets a top-up if they follow specific regulations.
- **Inbye parks top-ups:** To incentivise increased biodiversity, graziers are paid a top-up for uploading the common grazing lime and fertiliser plan for associated inbye parks.
- **Safe communal handling equipment:** Each sheep/cattle keeper who uses an approved handling set up is given a top-up.
- **Co-operative storage in township sheds:** Top-up for each grazier who stores materials and equipment co-operatively.
- **Co-operative marketing of stock:** Top-up for townships selling calves under a township name or Sheep Stock Club.