ResULTS project: case study Ca, interview 212

Face to face interview with crofter, conducted 13/3/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I Can you tell me a bit about what it is you do?

R We have a number of crofts, my husband and I, we work six crofts and we have beef cattle, [inaudible] beef cattle, we also have a small flock of sheep, they’re my son’s, he’s 13 but he’s [inaudible] sheep since he was 8, and that’s his passion. We didn’t have sheep before, my son was given some, sheep are just a small element but he’s passionate about the sheep so we’ve kept them and probably when he’s of an age, I’ve said when he’s 16 he can get as many as he wants but until that stage when he’s able to look after them completely by himself we’ve just got a small number.

So our main thing is beef cattle. We’ve got 35 breeding cows, Simmental crosses and this year we have alternated, when we’re looking for replacements we’re putting in a Simmental bull to get replacement heifers, but then this year we’ve got quite a lot of replacements now so we’re going back to the Limousin and it will be cross Limousin calves for store market. The bull depending on whether we’re needing more replacements, the last few years we’ve been investing more in bringing young cattle in and breeding our own heifers.

I So all of your own bred heifers?

R Yes, but we’ve used the Simmental just to get those. But this year we’ve got a Limousin bull to get more, because we’ll sell more this year because we’ve got our replacements now.

I And they’re all Continental breeds?

R Yes, mainly Continental. They do really well. We have always had Simmental crosses, we’ve gone more down the pure Limousin route but that backfired, they’re so highly-strung and it just didn’t work well so we’ve gone back to having Simmental crosses because they’re quieter and easier to handle. We bought some pedigree Limousins and it was a disaster, just their temperament. So the herd predominantly now is Simmental crosses.

We’ve got that crofting business. We also have tourism, so we’ve diversified into tourism. We have a campsite, catering business, and my husband’s also an agricultural contractor, so we do lots. Up until the campsite opens, we close in the winter and open on 30th March, and that’s us through until October and it’s really busy. We opened the campsite in 2012 and it’s just grown, and we’re expanding 50% this year, because it’s just grown every year, and that’s our seventh season coming up. We got in at the right time, tourism, campervans, camping, because people are coming to the islands for that environmental, we’re on the [area 25] nature reserve, so we have a lot of our customers on the campsite coming for birdwatching, wildlife, peace and quiet, that whole environment for getting away from it all.

I Do they stay there for more than a few days?

R Yes, a mixture of one-nighters who tend to be people who are doing from [area 26] to [area 27] in a week, and just doing a night here and there, up to the most we’ve had a guy for six weeks. We’ve got a couple coming this year for two months, people come every year and keep coming for longer and longer, they’re kite surfers and they’ve sussed the place out and they say there’s nowhere better, they’ve been all over the world and coming to [area Ca], they can surf [inaudible], with regards to the weather they know now whether they can kitesurf every day if they want to. There’s not so many of those long-stayers, probably the average is two-three nights.

I Is there a link between your beef production and the campsite or are they really very separate?

R Yes and no in that the campsite is on the croft so at this time of the year people are seeing cattle are just over the fence, so we kind of tell the story in our social media about the fact that we’re a campsite but we’re also crofting and these are our cattle, and these are our calves. So using it partly as marketing as well, this is part of our business and this is what we do, and people engage with that.

I And you’re quite active on social media?

R Yes, Facebook and Instagram, not Twitter. We focus on Facebook and do a bit more Instagram now, but definitely we have quite a following and it’s keeping engaged. I think it’s key for our business, certainly for the campsite business, having that social media, being on social media is vital as far as I’m concerned for the business. We also have on-line booking for the campsite, which I was reluctant to go down that route, I don’t know why, we introduced it last year and it’s just transformed my life. The business has grown year on year and I was spending so much time responding to email enquiries for bookings, whereas now they’re just pinging through every day. I will get some enquiries but they’re few and far between. It’s use of my time that I’m not having to, bookings are coming in without me having to have dialogue backwards and forwards before you actually get a booking, whereas now a person goes on-line any time of day or night, they get their answer and book and pay, and it’s easy.

I You must have quite a good internet connection.

R Not bad, it could be better. We’re constantly struggling with that. At the moment I’ve got two internets, I’ve got a satellite broadband system and I’ve also got wireless broadband, I pay for two systems because we need it and quite often one or other is down. Ideally we’re waiting to get BT fibre optic, and that is in our area but we can’t access it yet because they haven’t powered up to the cabinet. That will make a huge difference because now I’m spending a lot of money just to get basic internet.

I Do the people who stay on the campsite expect to get Wi-Fi as well?

R They do. We have Wi-Fi but it’s poor, every year I’m trying to think of a better way of offering Wi-Fi. It’s a capacity issue so we have HebNet system which is fine, it’s slow but then as soon as you, we can have anything from 50-60 people on our campsite and most of these people will have a gadget and they all want to get on-line, the system can’t cope with that, and it’s just too slow. We’re offering free Wi-Fi but the reality is that it’s limited to what people can do and if you go on at peak times it’s so slow that they probably don’t use it. It’s not ideal, and we really need it because 99% of people that come to the site are looking for Wi-Fi, whether it’s just for social media, some people might be working, people still want to keep in touch. But at the moment we’re still fighting to get a better system that if we got the BT broadband I think that would be much better, speaking to other people who have that on the island, and not nearly as costly, it’s costing us a lot of money, and for a system that’s not giving us what we need.

I How did you get on with Facebook and Instagram?

R It’s only been in recent years that I’ve started using Facebook. There’s been a lot of training offered through the Business Gateway locally, where they’ve been offering free tuition on various, it’s this digital boost programme where they’re offering tuition to businesses in the area on various topics. I’ve gone to quite a lot of their courses or workshops and they’ve been really useful. Because I was struggling with Facebook in that I didn’t know what to post [inaudible] nice pictures of the [inaudible] you can post. I was struggling, so those courses are really good in giving me ideas of engaging content, other things you can talk about which I hadn’t thought about because I was focusing on the campsite. So now our social media is a lot wider and I’m thinking about what do tourists ask me, and using that to create content.

That training has been invaluable because otherwise I’d be floundering about thinking you can only post the same photos every time, and doing short videos, having maybe customers doing a video clip to reflect their experience, with their feedback and that kind of thing. It’s just much wider on what I post now, so it’s always encouraging because when people start commenting and you see how many people have viewed your posts you see that reach that it’s got. I’m always amazed when I post something and within a few hours thousands of people have viewed it. I don’t see another way you could get that reach without Facebook or Instagram.

I How has that affected your business?

R It’s definitely helping it grow. I think that’s been part and parcel of it because people are sharing with their friends and they book or look at the site and see nice photos and stuff that we’re doing. I’m trying to post regularly, even when we’re closed in the winter so that you’re keeping people engaged and keeping your profile as high.

I If we’re thinking about resilience, what comes to mind, what does resilience mean to you?

R Resilience is being able to withstand whatever pressures, whether it’s from the market or your produce. Obviously that’s changing all the time so being able to cope with whatever comes our way.

I How resilient do you feel?

R I feel that overall, when you take in all the stuff we do, that we have resilience. If we were to rely solely on the croft I think our resilience would be nil, not nil but we would be struggling financially. Even although we have six crofts, we have a lot of land and a lot of stock, the economics just don’t stack up, and if it wasn’t for all the other things we’re doing, if it wasn’t for us, my husband contract, an income from that, the bulk of our income is from that, it’s not from the crofts. But we’ve always been crofting, my husband’s from a crofting background as well and I can’t imagine our lives not having livestock, so it’s probably the opposite in that I’ve got too much to do but still we’ve always done it. It’s not for the money we’re making off it, it’s just that way of life, there’s always things to do, the kids are involved, everybody’s involved in whatever it is we’re doing.

I By the sound of it with your son liking sheep and working with sheep.

R My son is in secondary but he is longing to leave school, he doesn’t like school particularly, he’s not engaged by school. I feel saddened by that, that he doesn’t, he’s got to be physically engaged in doing things, if a teacher doesn’t do it for him he’s got a practical hands-on… He is bright but he finds school totally a turn-off. He’s got another two years but as soon as he’s 16 he’ll be out of the school like a shot, he wants to just work the land and take over the family business. My daughter is interested as well, I think she’ll probably do other things but she still, she’s very good with lambing and quite involved.

I We looked at definitions of resilience from the literature, what sorts of things people were identifying. What you said is exactly right about maintaining things, but there are three ways in which capacities are being maintained, one is to absorb things, if you have a bad year you just tighten your belt. There’s about adapting, so you change a breed of bull for example. Then there’s transforming, which is taking on something new like a campsite. From what you’ve described, you recognise those three different ways.

R Yes, definitely. Going into the tourism for us, that’s a business that’s grown, it’s a successful business. My husband was a bit sceptical when we started the campsite because we had to invest hugely in that to begin with, it’s a hectare off our croft, so that’s four hectare out of 50 hectares that we have, and I think he thought [inaudible] ever be full, I think he was just a bit sceptical. Now we’ve seen that yes they’re full and we need more capacity, and for that one hectare we earn more than the croft will ever earn in the whole lifetime we work it. What we earn from the campsite is just hugely different to what the whole croft would earn us. So now he’s, we’re extending, we’re expanding, and he’s all for it because he’s seeing that actually yes, it’s working, and for that… It’s a small sacrifice, it’s good land, it’s good machair land where the campsite is, but to sacrifice a hectare out of all the rest, which actually earns us money and keeps us going the rest of the year when the croft doesn’t really.

I It sounds like it was a bit of a risk, that you had to be prepared to take a risk?

R It was, yes. We went through the Scottish Government scheme, [inaudible] for the investment we got 50% of that, and if it wasn’t for that we could never have done what we’ve done. So that support in 2012, without it we wouldn’t have been able to do what we’ve done because it was a huge investment even for services, the electricity connection was in excess of £20,000 just to bring power up to the site. We didn’t have that at that time, we just couldn’t have borrowed for that, it was even a struggle to get the borrowing for the other 50% because it’s all croft land. This is the other difficulty we have is that we haven’t decrofted anything and to borrow from the bank [inaudible] security, they just won’t entertain you. That’s a difficulty with crofting, if you were a farm and you owned the farm then you could use that as collateral but with crofting you don’t have that and we were reluctant to decroft.

I Did you have to decroft to get the capital?

R No, we got family support from my parents. It was a last resort, we didn’t want to do that, we’d approached the bank and been through the hoops but that was always the sticking point, they wouldn’t lend to us. I think things have changed because recently we’ve borrowed for this subsequent development and it’s been chalk and cheese but it’s maybe because we were new business then, they didn’t know how it was going to be, whereas now for borrowing for the next stage of the development has been actually really straightforward.

I suppose we have a track history now where we didn’t initially when we approached them, it was a new business, the campsite element was a new business. Looking at the croft figures I would say it’s touch and go, whereas this time we’ve been able to do that and we haven’t, it’s just been a bit easier. If it hadn’t been for family, we didn’t want to but we had no option because the bank wouldn’t assist us. We were fortunate to have that position in that my parents moved in and we have taken an interest free loan and we’re repaying them for that.

I How did you find learning the skills to run a campsite?

R I find it quite easy. I’ve got a degree, I’ve worked for the Council. When we started I was working for the Council, I’ve been with the Council for 12 years, so I’ve probably got skills, certainly for form filling and all that stuff. Then my parents had a bed and breakfast when I was growing up so I was always used to the hospitality side of things. I didn’t want to go down the route when my parents probably wanted me to take on their bed and breakfast but by the time I’d left home and left school I’d had enough of having people in the house all the time.

I would never go down the B&B route myself because I think I had too much of that when we were young that it was never your home, because there were always people coming and going and staying with us. For me this is much better because we don’t live on the site but you’ve still got that interaction with people which I enjoy, and you’re still in tourism but it’s not in your home. From a very young age until I left home our house was always really busy with guests and I never felt it was your home. We didn’t have a separate area, the guesthouse was the home, we were sharing the same living-room.

I We’re thinking about what is it that you want to maintain, the functions or the goals or the roles that you think are important to maintain. We’ve come up with lists of things. There are things which are related to yourself and your business and there are things which are related to more public goods and services. Is there anything in that list that particularly resonates with you, if I asked you to pick out the five most important things would you be able to think about those?

R Reasonable profit margins, definitely you want to be making money. Succession, yes, that for us, there will be a business there for my son and daughter if she chooses to take that on. Reasonable workload, yes that’s always been our goal but I think it’s just the nature of our business, there’s too much. We’ve now, with the campsite I had some assistance but up until last year we had, we’ve employed much more staff now because it just became unmanageable and I actually became ill through it. That forced last year to relook at how we were running the campsite, and the profit and everything because it’s just grown and from what could be done by a person or a person and a half now we’ve got three full-time staff and then we’ve got five casual staff as well.

We probably didn’t foresee that and not realising how things would grow so quickly, maybe it’s just our mentality is that if we can do it ourselves we’ll do it ourselves but it comes to a point where you can’t. Unfortunately I became ill and just doing too much, basically working yourself into ill-health, so we’ve had to [inaudible] take on more staff. Last season was much better because it meant that I had a bit of a life rather than just burning out, you can’t sustain that level of pressure of work and long hours. Reasonable workload, I think it’s something definitely, I’m very aware of at the moment and have been more conscious of it.

I Was it easy to find people to employ?

R Yes, we’ve been lucky, we’ve tended to approach people rather than advertising, and we’ve got family as well that are working with us. My two sisters-in-law work for me, my niece, my daughter, at school holidays and stuff, and then we’ve just approached people in the community that we knew who, we know them and their work ethic and thought they’d be good people to have on-board. We have a really good team now, and again that’s valuable because that contributes to the experience that visitors have who then go on and say we’ve had a great time, it’s really friendly. That’s how we’ve sourced people by saying if you come and work for us this is what we can offer.

I That’s great because you then don’t have the anxiety of whether the person’s going to work out or not.

R Yes, with knowing them and the sort of people they are. With my husband’s business, he’s got his own contracting business, and he really needs somebody but he’s struggled to find somebody to employ. We did have somebody we employed for a number of years and then he went off sick for a long time and I think my husband’s wary about taking somebody on because that was quite costly for us in that we were paying a member of staff for a long time but had nothing from that. For his work he really needs somebody else with him because two people can do a job faster than one person, but he’s wary about going down that road of employment because of what that entails. So he’s tended to work with people on a self-employed basis, people will come in and do a job for us, they’re self-employed and there’s no obligation but ideally he does need somebody else.

So workload I think is very important but I think it’s always going to be a struggle, especially with the crofting side of things there’s just always so many things to do and if you’re calving and lambing it’s time-consuming, you need to be there and the hours you could do are far exceed what anybody in a normal job would do [inaudible] that’s farming anyway.

[inaudible] local employment opportunities. Certainly with the campsite I’m really pleased now that we can offer employment, I think that’s important, especially where we are on {area 20] there’s not many other businesses. There’s not many employment opportunities where we are local to us, so again that’s really important and I think it’s great now that we are able to offer employment, fair enough it might be seasonal but it’s certainly, I think it’s a good thing so if we can continue to do that then that’s really good.

Respect of the community, yes again all these things are [inaudible] I think that is important to us.

I Are there things that you wouldn’t do because the community would look down badly on you if you did that.

R This Sunday thing, working on a Sunday, even though the campsite is open on a Sunday and we have a catering tourer on the site, so we do food in the summer and we open on a Sunday. There’s a certain element of the community that would not approve of us doing that but I’m of the view that people still need to eat on a Sunday and if we’re encouraging tourism we can’t say come to this wonderful place but on a Sunday you can’t get anything to eat. So we’ve just continued to open on a Sunday and it’s our busiest day.

I That’s your retail business?

R Yes, it’s on the campsite. It’s a food van, a mobile kitchen trailer, so we serve food to residents and non-residents. It’s actually a lot of locals we have at the weekend who come when they [inaudible] the beach, in the summer go to the beach and they’ll come and get ice-cream or coffee or cake or whatever else.

I Do you do cooked meals as well?

R We do, it’s 11-3 and 11-4 at weekends, and we do soups, home-made soups, fresh-filled sandwiches, everything’s just made there. I’m in the process of getting a new catering trailer for this season because the one we’ve had for the last five years has come to the end of its working life, and this is going to be a bigger trailer. So it’s something we’re going to look at doing maybe meals, even having a couple of dishes, and that’s probably more for the campsite residents because people arrive and the closest place to eat is five miles from where we are, and cyclists who want a meal that they can get locally rather than having to head back to their local pub or whatever. That’s something we’re looking at, we haven’t committed to that at the moment, it’s a lunch-time early afternoon slot that we do.

I Who does the baking and the cooking?

R Myself and my sister-in-law. My sister-in-law is full-time, she baked for me before but she had another job but now she’s full-time working for me, so [my sister-in-law] does the bulk of the baking and I just do some scones. Then we have my nieces and daughter who then serve, and in the holidays will do more, it’s just serving customers.

Respect of the community, yes, that’s something but with my husband’s contracting, he wouldn’t do work on a Sunday on [area 20], even though it’s out of respect for the community because that isn’t the done thing to be with a digger or whatever on a Sunday. Even though there are people that probably, customers who wouldn’t bother, it wouldn’t fuss them and it doesn’t particularly bother us but other people it would offend them.

I Are there things that you wouldn’t do but the local community expects you to do them? You do it because of the local community rather than because you want to do it yourself.

R I don’t think there’s anything like that. Contribution to social [inaudible] community. Yes, I think it’s very important the community we’ve got around us that you’ve got a good social network there. We’re involved in the agricultural society, events like that and things that we’ve put on through that that brings the community together and that’s really important to have that and to have that support. People are neighbours, and that can be challenging. It’s personalities and historical things, it’s all about what maybe happened, unfortunately people seem to remember, it’s stuff that may have happened a long time ago but people seem to bring it up. That’s more [inaudible] meetings, even though I’m kind of new, I’m from [inaudible] from [area 20]t, but I’m the [inaudible] and quite often if there’s disagreements it’s always [inaudible] your father and you’re thinking why are we, just these disputes are long-lasting. I find that quite frustrating.

I How about some of these environmental things or public goods?

R Flood prevention. Flooding is an issue for us but it’s more that we’re seeing where our crofts are that there is an issue with flooding in winter, and that’s more to do with poor drainage in the systems that the estate are meant to maintain and [inaudible] the lochs. So we’re aware, flooding is a bit of an issue because we’re losing agricultural land because the water levels have increased over the years. Some of that is as a result of management schemes where, SNH have management schemes in our area where the township weren’t allowed to drain, and they got paid for that, but 20 years later that’s a huge impact because these drains which had been maintained for generations by the older people, then because it was a wetland they were paid not to drain and that’s just silted up, and then that spreads out and impacts on a much bigger area and the township that were benefiting financially from it in previous years through management schemes.

I So it’s something that you’re prevented from doing that you would like to do for agricultural purposes?

R It probably has changed now but there was a time where there were so many management schemes that Scottish Natural Heritage had which township were paid not, there was a payment for not doing something, which I think they’ve done away with now. But they did for a negative, for not draining and then that knock-on effect has meant that whole area is really waterlogged and we’re losing [inaudible] land because of that. So it’s a constant issue, every winter it seems to get worse and worse, and trying to address that now it’s difficult trying to get the landowner and people to do something about it.

I So it’s not about your drainage, it’s about somebody else doing the draining?

R Yes, it’s a knock-on effect because that all links up, you’ve got the lochs and everything in everybody’s field so us as individuals, most people in the township are the same because their croft run into the loch and on the machair. So it’s an issue that the township in general, people are, it’s constantly an issue, but it’s how do we address that now because it’s been a long time in the making where that was allowed to happen. But people are saying the impact of that now, it’s a negative.

I What has SNH said about it?

R Its view if you were to try and clean all these drains, again people are still individuals, they’re still in the management schemes and if there’s wetland they are being paid to maintain that as wetland and not to drain. So it’s a difficult one because that probably [inaudible] environment schemes have been, financially have been beneficial to crofters because they get money for doing things, but I think there’s a negative side to that as well, for wetlands [inaudible] biodiversity but then from an agricultural point of view it can make that issue, the wetland extend or whatever and then it stops water flowing the other places that it should do.

I Does it impact on your tourist business at all?

R It doesn’t really. Because we’re on a nature reserve the wildlife is there, so that would continue. That’s an important part of our business is perfect where we are, our location, we’re on a nature reserve, people coming here for birdlife and they can still see, on the wetland they can see all the birds that are nesting there, so it is important. While that is important for the tourism business, but then our limitations are agricultural [inaudible] because of the wet.

I And that’s not a direct benefit to you because you’re not paid for flooding?

R That’s right, yes. [inaudible] we have been ourselves in the scheme for probably 20 years now so I would say managed in various environmental schemes, and that definitely helps support your agricultural activities. A lot of stuff that we’re doing is stuff that we’d be doing anyway so we probably cut silage maybe earlier if we weren’t in a scheme but I think people have been doing that management now for so long that it’s kind of the norm that you [inaudible] 1 August. A lot of the stuff that we’re doing is stuff that we’d be doing anyway and it just means you can continue that practice because you have the financial incentive to do that. We had, my husband when he’s ploughing, and we’ve always done this, there may be a nest, if they’re ploughing they’d get the spade and lift the nest and put it back down.

We had people on the campsite a couple of years ago who had been watching the ploughing and had seen there was an oystercatcher nest, had seen the bird sitting there and of course when they got there [inaudible] had been ploughed, oh no the nest has been ploughed, then they realised the nest was there. So this was [inaudible] journalist, she did a feature on, she spoke to my husband about [inaudible] a bit more, and he explained that’s what we’ve always done, you’d have a spade in the tractor and if you saw a nest you’d lift it, plough and then put the nest back. I think even people at SNH were a bit sceptical outwith [area Ca] that that would work, but then they had the photo and the oystercatcher was back in her nest. So there’s stuff like that that we’ve always done and would always hope that we’d continue doing that because everybody [inaudible] why on earth [inaudible] I hope they do, we certainly do.

I Do you feel that you’re being watched when you have lots of campers right next to you?

R Not really. When we’re really busy, May, June and July, the fields beside us are just on grass or they’re going to be cut for silage so there’s not much happening there. The cattle are there now until 1April but they’re just bordering the campsite, and people like watching them.

Clean water [inaudible] all these things. I used to be biodiversity officer so this is all, the greater goods, the service and all that.

I Is there anything special about [area 20] that you think absolutely has to be preserved?

R There’s something about [area 20], and it’s really hard to say what it is. When we have visitors coming and they’ve been through all the islands, and they’ve come to the campsite and they all say, or the majority of people say there’s something about [area 20] that they really like. There’s a feeling and people can’t explain what they mean but they don’t seem to, maybe that’s people that come to ours, they’ve been on [area 23] but haven’t felt the same but then when they come to [area 20], and they seem to keep coming back because there’s something about the area and the place and the people. I don’t know whether they feel more welcome or, but people just say we love coming to [area 20], there’s something about it. But trying to quantify that or to describe what that is, other than it’s just an overall feeling. It’s maybe just the geography of the island [inaudible] always seeing the sea… On [area 23], you come down to [area 23] and you’ve got a lot of moorland and it’s a darker feeling, whereas on [area 20] you’re skirting round the edge and you always see the sea, you always see the beaches and to me it’s light and bright.

I Something about the lighting as well?

R I think so. I don’t know if that’s part of it. Quite often I drive to [area 23] and it’s just because it’s more moorland and peatland, I find it dark, I find that feeling of oppression. I don’t know if that’s what people experience themselves that if it’s a bad day and if you’re driving through [area 23] it’s very heavy, if it’s a dark and a wet day people drive through and probably think [inaudible] It’s very unfair and that’s what we say to people, you need to go off-road [area 23] and explore the coastline because, whereas on [area 20], other than going through the [area 22] Road, you’re always, the road’s skirting round the edge and you’re seeing all the beaches and shoreline.

I Do you get artists coming here at all?

R Yes, there’s lots of artists. We have got a lot of artists actually based on [area 20], not necessarily full-time artists but people who do art as a hobby and they have a [inaudible] so that in summer they open up their own galleries [inaudible] that’s really popular. I don’t know the comparison to [area 23] how that equates but certainly there are a lot of artists on [area 20].

I We’ve come up with a list of challenges that other people have found in other different circumstances, some of them would be physical challenges, it could be about climate change or it can be gradual and changing, and perhaps the water level rises that you mentioned, or it could just be extreme weather events like the storm yesterday and so on. There are other sorts of regulatory and political drivers, and a whole lot of social drivers. Are there things that you see either as a big challenge coming forward or something that would provide an opportunity coming forward?

R My [inaudible] energy water availability. That’s an issue with what we’re doing at the moment, it’s more to do with energy providers, just because of where we’re at we’ve got an issue at the moment where we’ve got this new development and looking to get a new electricity connection, we’ve got that. But because we are where we are, I’ve been waiting weeks to get a meter installed, and that’s to do again with our lack of having the qualified people around to do this, to have meter installers. It’s an issue with SSE I feel, and I feel really frustrated by them, so they’re kind of holding us, at the moment they’re holding back our whole development because there’s nobody here to install a meter, and I can’t get power at the building and that’s got a knock-on effect for the builder. I’m having to wait for someone from [area 27], and even though you’re constantly chasing these people and you’ve paid all this money, they’re holding back our whole development.

That’s our resource issue probably on the island, if you were on the mainland probably it wouldn’t be a problem because there would be somebody presumably who could just drive there in a day and do whatever, whereas here we’re having to wait. I find that quite frustrating with lots of things that because we don’t have that resource, or skill or whatever on the island, that you’re having to wait and you’re at the mercy of these companies to send somebody and there doesn’t seem to be any way of, you can’t influence that, they’ll come when they… For us it’s a real knock-on effect because at the moment we’re under pressure because we need to get this building finished, we need to have it open, we need to have it earning, but at the moment they’re holding us back because we can’t get electricity to it. It’s about energy but it’s probably more of a skills issue, and if there was somebody…

I I guess there’s no penalty to them from delaying it, whereas there’s a penalty for you?

R Yes, and we’ve paid for it months ago yet we’re still waiting. I find that frustrating, that’s something that really annoys me that you’re just at the mercy of when they choose, they’ve got enough workload to justify sending somebody. For gas, I’ve seen it, there’s no Corgi Gas registered person on the island so again they’re catering to [inaudible] gas engineer so we have to pay for someone to come from [area 27]. Again they only come when they’ve got enough work to come down. Firstly you’re having to pay these people a lot more because you’re having to pay their accommodation and everything to bring them here, and then you’re at the mercy of when they’re going to come down, and they won’t come down for just one customer. It’s the same issue as we’ve got with SSE, where that resource, skill [inaudible] somebody to be Corgi registered on the island so we’re not at the mercy of somebody coming from elsewhere.

I On the one hand you’re saying there aren’t many employment opportunities but on the other hand there are things that could be done?

R Yes, I think there are opportunities there for people, whether self-employed to become a gas engineer or whatever, there are [inaudible] for whatever reason.

I So that’s a challenge?

R Yes. Things that affect, outbreaks of disease, things that we struggle with [inaudible] that’s not unique to here, it doesn’t matter where you are, but it’s something that we’re constantly trying to change what we do to try and prevent, minimise the chance of having… Because that obviously knocks your calves back and it’s time-consuming because you have to treat them. It’s one of those, it’s a costly [inaudible] to agriculture industry in general, having animals that are scouring and having to deal with that.

So this year we’ve tried to change what we do and have calves going on to other ground once the cows have calved to try and break that cycle, because obviously the organisms that are causing it are in the environment anyway and obviously if you’ve got a build-up the animals will pick it up. So trying to break that cycle, so this year we’ve tried to put them to a different machair where there weren’t cattle. So again trying to limit, change what we do to try and avoid this because it’s such a costly, it can be a huge loss if we lose calves but obviously we don’t want to do that but to avoid losing the calf you have to treat them and it’s a couple of days of treatment.

I How easy is it to get vets and things?

R The vets are good, we’ve got a very good vet service here. But some of these things you know when it’s scour you wouldn’t call a vet out because we’ve got, you know what it is and we’ve got the fluids to rehydrate them and stuff so we just do that ourselves. But if it’s something that was unusual then the vets are very good, we have got a very good service.

I Where do you bring your bulls in from?

R At the moment we’ve hired a bull from the Scottish Government Bulls Hire Scheme, from Inverness. That’s a Limousin but we have a Simmental ourselves as well. In the past we’ve bought, we’ve gone to the bull sales in Stirling and bought the bulls, so we bought a Simmental ourselves maybe three years ago, and we’ve then kept one of his bulls so we’ve got a young stock bull just now. But then because my husband wanted to put more of the cattle to the Limousin the [inaudible] was hired in [inaudible] as well, and the young Simmental will go to some of the cows that are not related to him and the Limousin will cover the others.

Normally we’ve bought, going back when we had a smaller herd we had township bulls but then it turned out that because our herd was growing we were actually paying the bulk of the cost of the hire of the bull for the township, and when we looked at the economics of it, it didn’t add up and we decided to buy our own bull, and then we’d have them for two years and then sell them on [inaudible]. That’s what we’ve done and just this year because we’ve hired the bull just to get the Limousin back in. It may be that we’ll go back to Stirling and buy a bull in another couple of years, just because the numbers that we have meant it was, you could justify buying your own bull, but then it’s more work because of wintering, whereas the [inaudible] bulls are great because you get them for when you need them and as soon as you’ve finished them they go back to Inverness for wintering, so you’re not keeping them, not feeding them obviously, but there’s a cost of you hiring it.

I Is that easier to choose what bull or do you book them in advance?

R You’ve got a choice of what breeds that they have, so the bull we have this year is the one we had last year and probably next year we’d get a different bull. They tend to be, obviously they’re buying good quality bulls and if you have got a problem with them, I’ve heard of other people who have had issues where the bull has maybe not been working as in obviously there’s something wrong and they’re very quick, they’ll send you another one and bring that one back, if they find that the cows aren’t [inaudible] calf or whatever.

It is a good system and I think for smaller crofters who are sharing it, we’re just ourselves, we’ve got that bull but smaller crofters there might be two or three and they’ve only got a few cows then that’s a good way to get a good quality bull. They split the costs between them and it works out relatively, rather than going to the expense of going to Stirling to buy a bull and getting it back on the island.

I Is there much sharing of bulls within the island?

R A little bit yes. I don’t know what the figures are for the use of the town to hire, the bull hire scheme, I think it’s quite high though, I think a lot of townships would hire, going and buying a bull is unusual, the bigger guys would do that but most people will hire them and then… I don’t have any bulls to send over, certainly, probably most townships that have cattle will have a hire bull.

I And your calves will go off for store?

R Yes. We have the choice, we can sell them locally but we tend to because we’ve got numbers [inaudible] we tend to send them to Dingwall ourselves, with the hope of getting a better price. Sometimes when they’re sold locally, again it depends on the buyers that come to [area 22], and if you haven’t got many buyers prices are, if you’ve got a bit more competition, the more buyers, then the price will go up, so we’ve tended to because we’ve got enough to justify sending a whole trailer over, we’ll send them to Dingwall to a sale there and hopefully make a bit better because you’ve got more buyers coming to Dingwall than you have coming to [area 22]. But for smaller guys that wouldn’t justify, by the time you, again it’s a numbers thing, the more you can get in a trailer, if you’ve only got a few calves it probably isn’t economical to take just a few to Dingwall.

I Is there any premium for coming from the Islands and being from high health?

R Yes. We tend to go to Dingwall, they have different district sales so we’ve gone to the Highlands, probably the Islands, [area C] and maybe part of the north of Scotland inaudible] islands and then a district sale. So we’ve taken ours there and they have a show. Last year we took our calves there and there was a show, and we got our first, calves [inaudible] from the islands, from [area Ca], we got first and second prizes in the show, and the calves did quite well. In comparison, our calves coming from [area Ca] were actually better than the calves in the same district on the mainland, from [area C] and places. But then we’re lucky because we’ve got machair and we’ve got better ground. We wouldn’t necessarily compete with somebody on the Black Isle, and they’re a different district, so obviously these calves being sold on that day would be a better quality calf because they’ve got good grazing and access to feed and stuff compared to…

I Do you buy in much feed?

R We do buy concentrate, but we’re pretty self-sufficient in fodder. We sell bales and make our own, we’ve got our own [inaudible] so we do all our own baling then sell surplus, it just depends on how much we’re going to use ourselves. In the last couple of years because the winter’s dragged on we’ve been wary about selling too much early on because we don’t want to leave ourselves short depending on when the grass is going to be… The cows are out anyway but they’re fed, but after April we tend to put them out to just graze, they stop being fed fodder and they’re just grazing, but it depends how dry the [inaudible] is, sometimes it can be delayed into May before you can put them into their summer pastures because it’s just too wet.

So we do buy concentrate in, and bought in bruised barley last year, it’s been slightly cheaper feed, and some straw. We have straw ourselves because we combine but again we maybe don’t have enough straw because we calve cows inside, and lambs inside as well, so we do need some straw. Last year we were trying using sand as bedding, in the sheds where we have the cattle in, we tried that last year. Again, a number of reasons for doing that, we have a sand quarry ourselves so we’ve got adequate access to sand, but that would be thinking of the calf scour because it’s a bit more sterile, the bugs will grow some of the sand as opposed to straw using that.

It did work, and what we were doing was just, we have a sand spreader so every week or so we’d put another big coat of sand on top of what was there, and it certainly [inaudible] The only thing is it’s not good for calving because we learned that you have to have a straw pen for calving because if the calf lands in the sand it’s covered in sand and the cow isn’t as keen to lick it. At calving we put [inaudible] pen with straw so at least when the calf is born it’s landing in the straw.

We have learned from that but it’s certainly a cheaper way of having them inside and then what came out of the shed with the sand with the manure is perfect for spreading on the ground as fertilizer, so then using everything we took out of the shed and spreading it because it’s rich manure and you’ve got the sand as well so it’s a liming effect at the same time. So there’s lots of benefits for using that, it’s cheaper than straw but we still need some straw.

I Would you do that again this year?

R Yes, we have. We’ve used more straw, we seem to have gone back, we still put sand down but then [inaudible] In theory it’s a very good system.

I You said you combine things so you obviously have some crops as well?

R Yes, we grow crops. We’ve got grass going to silage then we’ve got arable, crops going to silage and then a small proportion get reseed for selling to other people, we sell quite a lot of seed. The ability to keep seed depends very much on the weather and geese, and that’s a constant issue, geese damage to crops. We have small plant plots and probably in the beginning of what’s ploughed you’re probably [inaudible] to keep a lot more, then if the geese have started damage it, it’s a case of just taking it out because you don’t lose the whole lot. So that’s a real issue, damage from geese. Even though there’s been lots of attempts [inaudible] management [inaudible] running, but numbers are still too high, there’s just too many pressures, too great at that time when every crop is ripening and geese just home-in on these areas.

I Is that because it’s a growing crop rather than a grass crop?

R Yes. Grass still will, they’ll still come and make a mess but what you find is that the geese come into a crop [inaudible] growing, they can get a couple of hundred geese coming in at night, you have nothing left in the morning other than just stalks [inaudible] If [inaudible] can’t get enough to get a combine in to salvage what’s there, so it’s just keeping, you’re going round scaring the whole time trying to keep them out. But there’s that peak time when people start cutting and leaving almost like runways so it’s probably not so much an issue, and the whole machair is growing, the crops are growing. But then once people start, because they’ll be cutting at different times themselves, obviously start cutting bits out beside maybe a standing crop just get for seed, because the seed would be much later cut. That’s just [inaudible] a runway for the geese to land and walk into that standing crop. Because some people would be baling it earlier and it’s really the stuff for seed that’s the big issue because once they start opening up that patch, strips here and there in the machair, it’s just so much opportunity for the geese to land on, they cut bits and then they walk in to, you can imagine that’s a huge area that they have the opportunity to access.

I Do they go into the whole thing or do they just eat at the edges?

R No, they’ll just work their way through it. You’ll find you have a whole crop that’s decimated. Especially when you’ve got large flocks of geese [inaudible] flocks that are flying in and causing that damage.

I So it’s a sort of all or nothing, it’s not you’ve lost 30% of it, you’ve lost…

R You might have but a lot of the time, certainly in our experience is that if you haven’t caught them in time they could cause…

I The seeds that you’re growing, that’s local varieties for local?

R Yes, for sowing the following year. We actually, last year we had a trial where we had, a friend of ours who has a croft on [area Ca] but also farms in Aberdeenshire, so we sent seed from here to Aberdeenshire and he grew it, because we were thinking the benefit there was they didn’t have the geese problem and it was easier for them to harvest, and then they had a grain drier. So the kinds of things that causes the problem from geese getting it dry enough that they wouldn’t have the same issues where he was in Aberdeenshire. So he took crops sowed it, and had a huge bumper crop growing there and then they combined it.

The only thing they had difficulty was drying it through the grain drier, I get mixed up whether it was the rye or, but it’s got [inaudible] on it, and it wouldn’t go through their drier so we got probably about 11 tons of seed back from there but the quality wasn’t great because it wasn’t dry enough. We had thought the plan had been that they would run through the drier but it just wouldn’t go through because it would have to have some kind of adaption or different system for drying. So when we brought it back we were using air sprayers and trying to dry it here. It worked well and then the seed that came back has grown well, what was viable, but there was a bit of a loss [inaudible] because it wasn’t dried.

I Can you have the facility to dry it yourself here?

R There are some people that had, somebody that’s got a grain drier but we didn’t have access to it at the time because they were doing their own as well. It’s always been an issue I think, and having somewhere to dry it would make, because you get it dried down to an adequate moisture content, and unfortunately that year in Aberdeenshire they had, it had been quite wet and normally when they would harvest it would be at an acceptable moisture level anyway but that particular season had been wet. We still did get a good crop from it, and I think that’s a way of, if there was an issue with lack of seed, which is always a bit of concern here, local seed that you could grow and grow it elsewhere and bring it back. It’s just another option.

I Might you do that again?

R Possibly, yes. We certainly got huge quantities compared to what we’d normally get, because to get 11 tons of seed is, and that will last [inaudible] it’s kind of done a couple of years so it’s definitely something I think…

I So you might just do it every other year or something?

R Yes, that’s right. It was an experiment to see, but it grew a lot taller, again just the different environment, not as exposed. Our crop would normally be maybe this high but we went out to see the crop when it was growing and it was much taller. Again, it’s not the same exposure, not the same wind here, but we’re stunted just because of the environment [inaudible] whereas there it was much…

I Did the Aberdeenshire farmer have issues about growing it?

R No, he was quite… He has a croft here too and looking to move here anyway, so he was quite keen to see, to trial it as well because he had that land.

I Do you do oats, barley and rye?

R Yes, or a mixture depending on what…

I Would you sow them all in the same field?

R Yes, quite often. That’s a traditional practice that you’d grow a mixture of three or two or whatever so that depending on what season you always had a crop, because some of them, say oats maybe likes drier and the rye slightly damper, so depending if you had a dry season you’d get one growing better. It’s a way of assuring that you got something, whereas if you grow a single, if you just grow small oats depending on the season you might not get a very good crop but that way it just meant you always got… I think that’s why people have continued that practice that you’ve got…

I Do you do anything like rolling it to try and make it more resilient? Is there anything special you do or do you just sow it and then leave it?

R It will be ploughed, once you’ve sown it you just spread the whole, but that’s more to level it off. It will be harrowed then rolled, or [inaudible] and then once it’s sprouting they tend to roll it then just after it’s been sown because obviously you’ve got the [inaudible] then it’s level, then it’s rolled for harvesting then that you’ve got a flat surface.

I And the geese don’t worry about the seeds, it’s just the [inaudible]

R No, they don’t seem to be. It may be at that time of year they’ve got, either they’re drawn to reseeds in other places where there’s green grass coming through. So, no, it hasn’t been an issue with [inaudible] when it’s sprouting. They seem to hone in, it might be a colour thing when it’s starting to ripe you’ve got that gold colour, if they’re flying over an area they focus in on that, they seem to be drawn into where there’s ripe and golden colour.

They’re smart, they’re very intelligent birds and they recognise vehicles, people that have been scaring them find that it’s [inaudible] easy, just go and shoot them but actually it’s very difficult because they can recognise the sounds of vehicles and particular vehicles, so if there’s a gamekeeper who’s been shooting them, the geese know fine that vehicle, the noise of it and its appearance and will take off. If you drove down on the machair with a car that they haven’t seen before and they’re not threatened by it, they won’t move. So they’re very smart, they’ve learned very quickly and this is what makes it very difficult for the gamekeeper or anybody shooting them is that because they soon cotton-on, that vehicle was down yesterday, we’ve heard it so let’s get out of here quickly. So they learn and they adapt, even if we put scarers up, if they haven’t moved for a day or two they’ll go straight round them.

I Anything else in there?

R I think here we’re always paying extra for anything we bring in so the prices you pay on the mainland, because you’ve got the carriage it adds on to the cost of feed or whatever we’re bringing in. Availability of hay or straw, again that can be a problem. Just recently the local seed merchant, he couldn’t find hay anywhere in the country, and that was probably people holding on to it, nobody selling it and they really struggle. People who were still looking for hay and they struggled to track this, to get any, because it just wasn’t. But now I think because the weather has been a bit milder the farmers on the mainland are getting on with getting their fertilizer out and they’re probably not so concerned, and they’re maybe now selling stuff that they were holding on to.

So we’re at the mercy of what’s happening elsewhere in the country [inaudible] when you’ve got a poor season and the hay’s maybe in short supply obviously people bump up their prices so we’re paying, just now we’ve got small hay bales, we’re paying £8 a bale which is ridiculous when probably on the mainland you’d get them for £4. That’s double but again it’s that supply and demand, and as soon as there’s demand for it the prices go through the roof. If you have a good season on the mainland where everybody’s got loads of hay then the price would probably be £4 a bale, so you’re at the mercy of what’s going on on the mainland as well as what we’re paying for supplies, whether it’s hay or straw or concentrate.

I Are there any issues to do with the ferries being [inaudible] weather and [inaudible].

R Weather and having low capacity, yes. That’s two-fold. An example this morning, we were buying a new trailer on the mainland and my husband had planned to build on Saturday and then on Sunday pick up the trailer and come back. So I phoned this morning to make a booking and he could get out on Saturday but couldn’t get back until Tuesday because the ferry was fully booked. So there’s that frustration again, we couldn’t get here on standby but because we were a long vehicle, it’s about 12 metres, they’d take two cars but they won’t take, us being 12m long they won’t entertain you if there’s no space. Now we’re thinking that’s too long, we can’t do without the tractor from Saturday to Tuesday, so I have to try and book for the following week. And that’s only in March, we’re not even in peak…

I Is that the backwash of the fact that people have got stuck with the ferries being cancelled because of the storms?

R That’s next weekend so I don’t think… It’s possibly a different ferry on the route at the moment, different men. Last weekend they had [inaudible] too many of us and couldn’t get on the ferry because they’re fully booked, we’re only in March and people are struggling to get, so there’s that issue.

Then from the tourism point of view there’s that issue where people, ferries are so fully booked and now when people are booking with me for, coming with motor homes and saying have you booked your ferry, you really need to book your ferry. Maybe five or six years ago you didn’t have to, you could just jump on any ferry and get over, you can’t now. It’s trying to get that message across to people that are travelling here, they maybe have been here in the past and didn’t have to book, if you haven’t booked and you’re trying to go to [area 27] or to [area 26] or to [area 28] or whatever on the ferry, if you haven’t got a booking you’re really going to struggle. So it’s restricting people’s, the lack of ferry capacity to the mainland, people can’t travel as they want, tourists, and locals can’t either. If you want to go away on the spur of the moment to Inverness or you’ve got a funeral or whatever reason you might want to make a short notice plan to travel it’s really difficult to get a booking on a ferry.

I Do you think that restricts the tourist numbers as well?

R It does. There’s two ways of looking at it, it’s obviously a limiting factor having the ferry, and that could have been one way in that people coming here have to plan and you’re not going to have the situation on [area C] where you’ve got masses of people coming and you can’t cope with that. That’s the positive way of looking at it, but then the negative is that people can’t travel when they want or to change their plans when they want, if people want to stay longer that flexibility isn’t there because there isn’t the capacity on the boat.

We feel strongly that they need to have a dedicated ferry route from [area C] to [area 20], and then a separate one for [area 28], because at the moment we’re sharing a ferry that goes to [area 28] and if you had that capacity just backwards and forwards then that would have a better chance of coping with the demand. The numbers coming to the island, and the amount of travel has grown compared to when that route was probably initially set up, that triangular route. They’re talking about giving us a bigger ferry but I don’t think it’s going to make that much difference.

I What does [ferry organisation] say?

R There’s a new ferry being built but from what we’re hearing there’s lots of issues between the fabricators and [the ferry organisation], whoever they’re paying for it. I think it’s just not adequate what they’re providing. [ferry organisation] say we’re providing a service what more do you want, we do want more and we need more so that you can actually allow free movement of people without having to be waiting days at a time. That’s the same probably for the hauliers, if you spoke to hauliers as well that they’re having the same difficulty trying to get bookings on ferries. So I do think, even though it’s good having a ferry, it has that limiting factor, but then it’s still you want to be able to…

I We’re thinking about what mitigation and adaptation strategies, how do people respond to some of these challenges. You’ve obviously diversified so that’s a big thing, but here’s another list of things that we’ve found from the literature, types of things that people are doing. Are there any thoughts related to these things?

R We’re fortunate because we’ve got the machair, so we can outwinter the cattle. If we didn’t have the machair then, yes, we would have to be looking at taking stock or putting them into the mainland for wintering. I suppose being on the west side of [area Ca] and having machair is great because it’s free draining and it’s really good. So it’s not an issue for us but if you were speaking to a crofter on the east side of the island then they would have their cattle in all winter. I have an uncle in [area C], he has his cattle in [inaudible] he can’t put them out in the winter because they would be up to their bellies in mud, the croft isn’t really suited to cattle, so for us that’s not such an issue.

I suppose improving [inaudible] that’s something I’m conscious of probably from the tourism side of things is trying to make if we can make things easier, for example the on-line booking, using technology to make things easier for me and for our staff so that you’re conscious of things that you need time, speaking to people or whatever is important but if there’s other things that can be automated or made less labour-intensive then I’m all for that.

I The booking scheme, was that something that was you could just buy in a system?

R The first system we had took a bit of time to get it set up, because you have to populate the system. This year we’ve gone to a customised system that’s for campsites, we’ve paid for that system but I think it will benefit us in the long run, you’re paying a greater outlay but it’s more geared and tailored to what we require. Because we’ve got different members of staff now it’s all an on-line system so I can access it on my phone or wherever I am, even if I’m not on the campsite I can ask any other member of staff and it’s all recorded so your record of how much people have paid and when they paid, it’s all there. That system is good because we can access it.

I And you have phone connectivity?

R Yes. My phone, I’m with EE so I’ve got a decent phone signal and I’ve got 4G on my phone so I can use my phone to get on-line if the broadband is down. Utilise technology innovation, yes I suppose that comes in with technology again using that. [inaudible] systems, we haven’t gone down that route but I’d be tempted to do it for croft or cattle management system that you can get an app on your phone, you have to buy the software but when you can record everything on your phone rather than having a paper diary or whatever that you can record maybe if you’ve been treating [inaudible] giving them medicines or whatever, you can record all that on an app on your phone. I’m quite tempted with that, my husband probably isn’t, but when I see how it benefits the campsite something like that would be really handy because you’ve got access to that information as long as you have Wi-Fi. [inaudible] can make things easier, there’s Moocall where you can put a thing on cow’s tail so that when she’s calving. There’s all these things that I think are really great and can make your life…

I You would consider doing something like Moocall?

R Yes I think so. We’ve looked at that and can’t figure out, it’s having a signal to make sure where the cow was so you could actually… I don’t know quite how it works but the idea is certainly something we would be open to. Already we have a camera in our shed, so the calving shed, and that’s linked to my phone or any phone, any gadget, so you can be anywhere again and check. So that’s something we’ve done this year, before we had it, it was linked to a TV in the house which you had to be there whereas now I could just go on my phone and see what’s going on in the shed. Again, we’re trying to use things like that, that you can be working somewhere else but still keep an eye on it, rather than going backwards and forwards to the shed watching and waiting for this cow to calve.

I’m all for making things simpler, easier, more efficient, then that’s the way to go, I don’t think there’s any point in making things harder for any of us. That’s the same with, for our accounting because we’ve got a few different businesses, and looking at, we used to have an accounting package but looking at trying to link-in so that all our bank account, everything’s linked-in so that instead of manually inputting all this data, if you can just take in your bank statement into the system. Anything like that I’m more thinking along those lines, if we can just make it as easy as possible, and less time-consuming, then you can spend time on doing other things that you need to spend your time on.

[inaudible] We’re doing that, and that’s definitely really important for us. [inaudible] outputs, market channels. I think again we’re open to looking at, if we can get a better price somewhere, maybe outwith the traditional markets, if we’re able to go somewhere else to sell. We’ve also in the past sold directly to abattoirs, so when we had [inaudible] cows, rather than selling them here at the market and you get a minimum price, actually selling them straight to the abattoir in Perth and you’re cutting out the middleman so the return comes directly to us rather than the mart.

I Would you consider direct marketing?

R As in selling the meat? We are not finishing [inaudible] the cost of finishing, so we’re selling them as store. We do supply our own meat, if we haven’t got a bullock we’ll maybe at the sale buy a fattened bullock from somebody else and kill that ourselves for our own home consumption, and we have done that all along and we won’t stop doing that. But actually we haven’t gone down that route, I think we’ve been reluctant because of the cost of actually finishing them. You can be adding value but then we’re trying to get them off, trying to get them away in October so we’re not wintering beasts [inaudible] kept heifers that we’re keeping for breeding. So that’s something we’re not considering.

Some people are obviously doing that, with the Highland Cattle, maybe finishing them and again I think here you’ve got the issue of the abattoir, I don’t know whether it’s open or not, it’s a bit hit and miss. Then the abattoir had issues with disposing of offal and the cost of that. I sometimes think that it’s not viable here, there’s abattoirs all over the country and they’re secure, not saying that’s the best way but it seems to be because of costs that’s the way things are going, and by the time you get them to the abattoir and back again.

Renewable energy. On the campsite we’ve got solar panels, and I think we could do more with that using [inaudible] to generate power. We have put that in our building so our hot water is heated through solar panels.

I And that works well enough?

R Yes, it works well, certainly in the summer. In the winter, the system we have in the winter because we’re closed, we had hoped that the solar panels would then heat underfloor heating but it’s just not efficient so we’ve had to put in an electrical heating element to do the underfloor heating in winter to keep the building heated. The idea was good but in practice it doesn’t work. It sounded a good idea because we thought in the summer we need hot water but we don’t really need heating, so we’d do the hot water and it does that, and in the winter because we’re closed we don’t need hot water but we want some kind of heating, and to divert the heaters [inaudible] floor but it’s not efficient.

Increased physical [inaudible] security. Reliance on subsidies. If we have concern on Brexit, we are, obviously we’ve got subsidies that we get in and that is keeping us, if we didn’t have them I don’t know whether [inaudible] The subsidies that we get are really important to us continuing what we do, without them it would be, if say the Scottish Government said that’s the end of subsidies then we would have to look at what we were doing and revalue it, because without that subsidy support it wouldn’t be viable, without that the crofting business wouldn’t because your inputs are so high. People that are crofting full-time and maybe don’t have other income, I don’t know how they survive. I can’t see them, when you see what you’re getting in return, if you’re only selling your livestock once or twice a year, all your inputs for your property, fertilizer and all these things, I don’t see how you could survive without subsidies, so that’s a concern. I think we’d have to then look at what we’re putting in, at the moment it’s cushioning us.

I Is that giving you the resilience from the fluctuations in practice and things?

R Yes, but if you just looked at the hard, as in livestock sold, and what your inputs were in the way of feed, fertilizers [inaudible] and everything, I think you’d get a loss. Actually I’m more than 100% sure that you would be at a loss. Without your subsidies, your agri-environment scheme payments are what makes it cover itself.

I [inaudible] producing public goods. Is there anything you wanted to say you’ve not had a chance to say?

R With this study, when does it conclude, what’s the outcome?

I It’s a four year project, we’re about 18 months into it. The plan now is that we’ve been interviewing people in the other case study areas as well and we try and get some kind of summary together. We’ll come back probably late-summer or autumn and try and have a workshop here and feedback some of the ideas, and you can tell us that we’ve got this wrong or that wrong or we’ve forgotten about this or that’s a misunderstanding, also try and pick out some of the drivers a bit more. Then go away for another year and come back and try and do some scenarios, try and think about what if, what would that impact and how would it impact different aspects of the resilience, not just the production but the environment and the social side as well. Then we’d write it up. Would you like to be informed of what’s going on?

R Yes. If you’re doing workshops or whatever, to be involved in that.

I What would be a good time of year to come here?

R Personally, winter, any time between October and March. For me April, May, June, July and August are busy, then we close in October. That’s maybe a slightly, if it was a workshop, if it was evening…

I Could you come and do half a day?

R I could, just because I’m self-employed and juggling, whereas if you’re trying to get other crofters that might be more difficult. If you’re looking for people, to get them out and to get input from crofters I would say in the winter months when it’s dark, you’ve got a chance of getting people out in the evening. Once the days start getting longer, people work until it gets dark so those that are working during the day are doing all their stuff during the day, so April onwards I think you’re going to struggle.

I That’s very helpful.

End of transcript