ResULTS project: case study C interview 185

Face to face interview with 2 crofters working together, conducted 21/2/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R1 and R2

I So for you it’s not just relying on the crofting?

R1 It’s a bit scary, relying purely on farming. Subsidies could end with Brexit who knows what’s going to happen. I don’t think they’re ever going to end but there could be massive cuts, which would be disastrous. One of the best things that happened to us is we managed to get a water turbine up, and that was an extra, between £25-30,000 a year from the water turbine, so that’s made a big difference knowing you’re not having to rely purely on the croft. We were hoping to do more renewables but [inaudible] tarriff’s been cut off so quickly, it dropped right down virtually to nothing then they’re stopping it in March.

[section deleted as irrelevant]

I So you’ve got your water turbine, which would help, what else do you do?

R1 We are involved in the [area C] Salt Company. To us the biggest involvement is, they do it on our land, it’s just past the castle.

R2 You virtually walk along the coast.

R1 At the moment it’s just a rental on that, although they are planning on selling it up and they’ve come to ourselves to see if we were interested. It’s because it on our land it makes sense, we know them so well, we know a lot about the process, but we’re still waiting to see what… He said, are you interested, I said it all depends on how much. Up until that point they keep on telling us about how little profit they make, I think it was because they were concerned about us putting the rent up. It will be interesting to see the figures before we…

I And you’ve got sheep and cattle as well?

R1 Sheep and cattle, that’s our main thing.

I Is that store cattle primary that you produce?

R1 Yes.

I But you finish on sheep?

R1 We finish lambs. We keep about 200 replacements. We didn’t used to but we now winter them away, that was an environmental scheme to reduce stock numbers of the hill, which is slightly ironic because the stock numbers have never been so low on the hill. They were offering money to winter away so we thought we’d be mad not to go for that. The only downside of that, last year the person we used to winter away with stopped doing it, and it was a panic for us because we were locked into this scheme we had to find someone and we were contacting everyone, plus we put adverts in the paper. Only one farmer got back to us, and that was down in Ayrshire, it was £800 just to get them down there by lorry, they are an amazing land, we went down in January to dose them and they are doing very well but it was a bit further than we would have liked.

I Was the previous owner the guy who died?

R1 No, he was a young guy in the Black Isle and for whatever reason he…

I What does resilience mean to you? We’ve thought about it in terms of having three different aspects to it, one is as a sort of buffer, how much can you absorb of change without doing anything else that you just cut your losses or cut your pay or whatever. Then, can you make small changes, and then there’s about making some more radical changes, maybe your water turbine and the Salt.

R1 Big back-ups, that’s what I class them as.

I Back-ups rather than making…

R1 Or they can even help fund other projects. We are getting plans drawn up for doing a letting cottage over in [inaudible] We like to do things a bit different, so it’s going to be turf roof built into the bank, with a glass front and stonework. Hopefully it will be quite a nice little place. That’s very early stages but we’re hoping that the water turbine will help fund the building process. Rather than just squandering away that money it’s nice to put it into another project. It seems like everybody’s jumping on the tourist, we’d be mad not to, we’ve got a reasonable amount of land on the coast.

R2 And it’s not that well known that there is tourist stuff here.

R1 We had thought of many different things, even campsites, because we know campsites are a great way of extra income with minimal effort, but the idea of having, it could even be hundreds of extra people roaming over our land round here, and a lot of them we know are dog owners, and the idea of lots of dog owners walking around our land was a bit off-putting, so we shelved that idea for the moment.

I But letting is something you could fit in with everything else?

R1 We’re going to go for just a couple, and go for a slightly more high-end market. That’s the plan.

I So if you’re resilient, you’re trying to keep some kind of functions going. We’ve got some lists, are there others that you would like to add to that? Are there things here that you think are particularly important as a family, as yourself?

R1 I don’t know which category it would fall into but the one thing we’re trying to push at the moment is the local produce thing, and we’re working with [area C] Connect. They were trying to push the mutton aspect but for us mutton, lamb, they’re both good produce, that’s fine. The big problem we’re coming up against though is the lack of an abattoir. At the moment we’re taking loads all the way to Dingwall to Munro’s Butcher, but unless it’s a large enough number it just doesn’t make sense. They will deliver over to Skye but not to individual restaurants and hotels, so that’s another problem. Apparently there is a [delivery van] thing we’re going to meet up and talk with them over the next few weeks. I think at the moment they’re dealing with small things, there’s smoked salmon, and there’s some vegetable places in [area C], but they seem to be keen on delivering around the carcasses.

I So you would provide the carcass to them and they would take it to the restaurant?

R1 [Restaurant 1] are keen. I’ve talked to [person 1], she was at the [area C] Connect and we had a chat, she’s very keen. In fact the last time we had a meeting at the [area C] Connect we supplied them with, they say it was [inaudible] it’s not really [inaudible] or mutton, it was really hoggets we gave them, so the meat was still very tender. It was the chef from the [restaurant 1] and some other chefs helped create a nice meal for everybody there, it was lovely. I would love virtually every restaurant [inaudible] hotel on [area C] to be having [area C] lamb or [area C] mutton.

R2 And why not?

R1 We’re coming up against it, this is why not, it’s because of the abattoir.

I Do you think there’s enough or too much sheep meat being produced for the local hotels and cafes? How is that balanced?

R1 I think the problem is, you know [person 2], she was saying that it’s not lack of crofters being keen to do it, obviously a lot of them seem quite keen but just not being able to do it. We’re fortunate, we’ve got a slatted floor set up in one of our sheds so we can fatten animals very easily, and very cheaply, for everybody else it’s quite a challenge.

I So you would fatten them, keep them indoors from October?

R1 The lambs that’s what we’re doing, yes, we take them in about September/October time, and we get them up to minimum 40 kilos.

I And then slaughter them in what, January/February?

R1 Just whenever they’re ready, we don’t really set a time on it. In actual fact sometimes a little bit later is better because the prices tend to go up.

I Do you buy in feed for them, how does that work?

R1 Draff from the local distillery, [distillery 1], and we mix it with sugar beet pellets. Because we get it in a 28 ton load we get it at the same price as virtually anyone in Scotland. If you buy it bagged you’ll pay a fortune for it, especially if you’re buying 28 tons of it, but this way we get it at very competitive rates. We just mix it up ourselves and put it in the pit, a bit of minerals. It’s not the fastest way of fattening but that suits us as well, it’s a very cost effective way of doing it. That was actually a college-recommended diet for lambs, they can eat as much of it as they want.

I Do you have to give them hay as well and things?

R1 No. We did have a wee issue this year, we’ve been doing it for years and every year is different, a few of them were dying for what seemed like no reason but the vet seemed to reckon it could be something to do with the liver, and she put it down to maybe a lack of roughage in their diet. She was suggesting introducing a little bit of silage or a bit of hay but saying that no other ones have died since then. Lambs are great at finding ways of dying.

I Producing local food is a key driver.

R1 Also the fact that we can hopefully make more money out of it as well, that’s an extra bonus. It’s not just a passion of ours, we’ll hopefully be able to make a lot more.

I How important are things like succession and reasonable workload?

R1 Workload, we don’t really think about things like that. Some of my friends talk about doing 40, 50, 60 hour weeks or whatever it is they do but we never factor in hourly rates or anything like that, you just work and do what needs to be done. So as far as workload it’s just work for me.

I In terms of others in the community, what do you think is important to them, is there anything here that’s particularly [inaudible] people or things that they do that would affect you?

R1 You tend to get two different types of crofters up here, you get ones who are hugely passionate about sheep and they’re not maybe the best business people in the world. But I would say we are probably more businessmen than big sheep lovers, we work with sheep every day but we’re not probably quite as passionate.

End of transcript