ResULTS project: case study C, interview 194

Face to face interview with ancillary body, conducted 22/2/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I What does resilience mean to you?

R It’s a key word at the moment. Resilience to me is just getting over any problems, finding new ways, not accepting that’s the only way, striving for new ways to improve and manage. Sometimes it’s just a case of managing, not even improving but managing things.

I We’ve come up with three concepts of resilience, the first one is about absorbing things, you have a bad year and don’t make much money so you cut back on things and pull in your belt, or the weather’s bad and you build a barn. The buffering is just absorbing whatever the change is, adapting is making some small changes, maybe you decide that you’re going to build a barn and you’re going to lamb indoors. Then there’s transforming it, start doing something quite different, it might be energy production or you start doing wilderness tours, tourism and so on. Do those make sense to you?

R Yes, the more people talk resilience number three certainly is. I think they all make sense, they all to me are resilience and some will go further than others.

I Do you think a lot of people are doing the transformative, or are looking to transform at the moment?

R No, I think people are just waiting and hoping that it will stay, things won’t change too much and there’ll still be subsidy and a price that helps them get through the year basically. I don’t think people are looking at us, certain people but not many.

I What is it that you’re trying to maintain? Here’s some functions, these are some ideas that we’ve got about the sorts of things that people want to maintain, are there any of those that resonate with you or are there some things you think important that we’ve not got on that list?

R No, I think they represent it pretty much.

I If I ask you to identify the top five what would you choose?

R Within each group? 22/3/4/5.

I Succession, workload, sufficient local employment opportunities, respect for the community and natural landscape preservation, habitats or enhancement. Is that something that you would value or do you think crofters as a whole value those?

R I think both. I plus crofters, I think the community feel has dropped, it’s not as significant as it was in the past but I think they still want good community spirit and the certain local employment. I’d probably take reasonable workload out, because crofters are exceptionally hard-working, they’re not afraid of work. If you put 10 in instead of 3, personal satisfaction and wellbeing. They want to just have a good croft where they can make ends meet and they can pass to their family or they can be involved in it and they’ve got a good name in the community. That’s pretty much what I think.

I What would give them a bad name in the community?

R Just let the croft go, bad fencing, rushes or bracken coming in, stock maybe not looked after as well, not getting involved in potential gatherings, especially if it’s quite a big hill. I think a local would feel that and, maybe not so much now but certainly the older generation would look upon it, the respect of the community, I think so.

I Do you think some people would do things deliberately to annoy their neighbour or they would do things because they were worried about their neighbours rather than for themselves?

R They won’t deliberately, no I don’t think they would. Although some potentially would, I think there’s some nastiness out there but in general no, I think they don’t want to be seen as the poorer type croft, the poorer stock, the poor stock going through the marts. I think there’s a bit of pride or there should be, especially stock, there’s nothing worse, although people were very held back they wouldn’t say it in public but there will be chat behind closed doors.

I I get this idea that any chat gets back to everybody anyway.

R You need a strong, again it’s maybe that family or couple of neighbours who, I’m always going to say old school, there’s less comes from people of the older generation, they’ll be in their 70s and 80s now. I see it in my family, such and such happened, oh but I never heard, but they wouldn’t say, whereas nowadays it’s all twitter, a youngster will twitter it or there is that potential that it will go out and about.

I So there is quite a lot of use of social media by the younger set?

R Yes. I don’t know whether you’d say even the 40, 50 year old, of course the very young which is to me 20 year olds and younger, they’re using it a bit more now.

I Is there a Facebook group or something like that?

R There are one or two groups but they haven’t progressed. There was a young farmers group that hasn’t progressed unfortunately, and then there’s a few buy and sell groups, but that’s about it.

I I was interested you picked out the natural landscape preservation, how would that affect what a crofter does?

R I think it’s been grilled into them, especially now we talk about the new subsidy schemes, you are the keepers of the land as such, and if you ever talk to a crofter he’ll always say if there’s no sheep on there that would just be heather and bracken, I think that’s how they see it, they’re grazing sheep and cattle especially. I think that’s how things are coming across at the moment.

I Is that correct, if the sheep went away it will all be heather and bracken?

R I think it is, I think we’re seeing it in areas, the lack of, I could give you figures on how much we’re down. For instance, this AECS plan, I’m doing a moorland plan, lower amount of sheep and the heather’s very high and it’s that potential if that goes up it’s wildfire.

I Is it the heather that causes the fire problems?

R Yes, some of the long grasses as well but the heather is the main fuel. Last year we had a couple of bad fires. Even in times, if you get a few days like this it becomes like a tinderbox, it’ll dry out quick and there’s that worry.

I Thinking about the functions you want to keep, what sort of pressure do you think are going to be the critical ones? Here’s a list of drivers, bio-critical, economic or social, any of these strike you as being key, something that’s a particular important driver that we need to keep an eye on or that’s going to have a big impact?

R Weather, we seem to be getting wetter summers and that’s preventing people… Summer was a good time to get a good crop of silage, especially now. That’s getting more difficult, we’re producing poorer quality and we seem to have a longer feeding season from probably, where you could be feeding up until April now it’s gone into May and even June one year when it was so cold. The weather one really strikes me.

I Is that because more rain in the summer or is there just more rain altogether?

R More rain altogether but certainly in the summer, yes. I’m that age where I think it was never like this when I was young, you had a really good spell in June and July, we did but it’s not consistent, it’s not like you get one good summer, one good couple of weeks and that’s it, it’s getting worse.

Brexit seems, sometimes I think it might be ok but I think people are tired of it, sometimes we think it will be alright, we’ll always have subsidies, we have to have subsidies if they want us to continue. But then maybe that goes against resilience because then you’re not thinking ahead or out the box to make money.

I Do you think some people are completely reliant on subsidies?

R Yes. It’s been too easy, not too easy but they expect it and never thought about it without subsidies so it frightens them and they don’t think they can do it, especially here. I agree in quite a lot of ways with that but if subsidy goes food price would have to go up, of course it would but then that’s another, that brings in so much more problems, or does it, I don’t know. I don’t think economically as much as I should but I think subsidy is a big, it could become a big problem if it ever did go.

I Any other social drivers?

R Disease and pest patterns, yes. Certain doses are becoming, fluke and worms are becoming immune to things and it’s always a worry that maybe we become too reliant on drugs, which we have, especially when you have fluke due to the wetness, it’s alright here because it’s so wet. I think that would concern people.

I Is there any way you could manage without the flukicides?

R Yes, be a bit more, try and improve grazing and ? watery areas. You could but it would take a bit of capital to get drainage. Things like that, people aren’t spending as much on drainage, even with a grant scheme. I think that’s it, we’re needing to do a bit more to help get the crofts a bit drier. But it is very wet, and I think sometimes that’s the problem straightaway, people’s motivation is hit because when you go to do it it’s just soaking and they don’t get that break to do it. I think that would be the main ones.

I What sort of mitigating strategies, having identified those are the drivers, wet weather, pest and diseases and the unknown issue about subsidies, and at the same time you’re trying to maintain your good name and some succession and something to do with the landscape. What sort of mitigation, adaptation measures, again those are examples, are there things there that you think a lot of people are doing or should be doing?

R Number one straightaway is reducing stocking rights. People do that a lot, especially cattle and their ewe hoggs, their good young stock, they get it away to the mainland over the winter, away wintering is very popular, at a cost, but some things if you tie in with an agri-environmental climate scheme you can get payment on it. Sheds, people are keen to get the cattle indoors with the option of being in and out, we can’t afford the straw, it’s too far away and it’s at too big a price so some sort of cover, shelter’s better than nothing. That’s the main things to me.

I How resilient do you think the crofting is in Skye?

R It’s mixed. I think there’s a lot more, a lot of these surveys and one or two groups have been formed, Princes Resilience group. You’ve got key people who are, I don’t want to use the word switched-on but they are realising they have to be, they have to show some resilience. I think the majority is steadily doing what they do and if change comes some will react and some won’t, so I would say it would be your average. Maybe I’m a bit harsh on them, some of the younger ones are really switched on and I think they are continuing as it is at the moment but then when something happens they might need to change I think they will have the skills to do it. But they don’t have to at the moment, it’s a bit like we’ll wait and see what happens.

I The Princes Trust Resilience Programme, is there something specific in Skye?

R Yes, it’s been its first year. We’ve got about 15 people to participate in it and there’s various topics, covering a lot of financial side, accounts and general topics. [inaudible] here facilitates it if you want to speak to her she can tell you a lot more about it. It’s very quick, it’s not like you’ve got a year, you virtually have a meeting every second week, so it’s really quick. I think it needs adjusting to crofting level, mainly because it’s being done in Wales and England, but more Cumbria and these sorts of areas so maybe it just needs a bit of tweaking for it to help improve.

I Is it just a year?

R Yes, it’s like a whole year. I think there’s a lot of meetings up until now and then there will be a break, and then there’s two or three more.

I That will be interesting, getting people to think about things in different ways, is that the idea?

R I think so, yes. Initially they have someone who does the books for them and they go through their sales and income and such, and they get some sort of chart that shows what they’re doing. I don’t think it will work as well as it could have this year, I think some meetings should have been earlier, just get people thinking more. It’s a bit trial and error.

I This is the first time you’ve run it, that’s not surprising.

R It’s a different type of farming to what maybe they tried down south. When you come here people don’t want to hear about dairies and silage pits, as much as you tell the speakers, it’s all suckler cows, mainly bale silage, hay in particular. They sometimes slip back into that and you can see people getting fed up, but it will improve.

I Does anybody do dairy?

R No, not now. Someone does it on Lewis apparently.

I Because you do need a big infrastructure to do something like that?

R I think you can get these portable milkers, so rather than have a fancy parlour you can have, it might take you a lot longer, you don’t have ten rows of clusters either side, you have to do one at a time. I don’t know if they sell it liquid.

I It’s more where the meat would then go…

R I must try and find out, they’d need pasteuriser and that legally I think. I think that’s what hits a lot of people, it’s the legal side of things, I don’t know if they make cheese or ice cream.

I Is there goat’s milk?

R Yes, there’s…

I Do they make soap or something?

R Talking about resilience, there’s this group. If you make goat’s soap, she’s in the resilience group. They just love goats. There’s an example of something very different, they don’t like goat’s milk hence why they make the soap. We have that group, and they’ve got 50 sheep as well. They’re a bit of go-getter, they’ve got a bit about them to go and do something different.

I It must be quite nerve-wracking if you’ve got the skills to do something then you try and do something very new, whether it’s goats or energy production or whatever it is, it’s something new and you need to learn a lot of new things.

R She went to a few courses and learnt what to do, but yes it’s just having… Like you say there’s a few hydro schemes but a lot of them were put in by businesses anyway, but you take a risk if you do that. When you think about it, they are the ones who are in this Princes Resilience group so maybe there is a small core that will be good examples to expand it.

I If you think about tourists in [area C] you start thinking about the landscape, but there’s also the wildlife. Are there links there, is it all just sea eagles taking the sheep type issues, are there some positives in that?

R Yes, it’s hard to see, the sea eagle’s an incredible bird but it seems to just be terrible thinking within the croft area it just wipes things out, and that’s throughout [area C]. There are one or two who maybe aren’t really thinking that should stop production, who think the sea eagle is tremendous, but they are very few and far.

I So they’re not seen as an asset to bringing the tourists to go into the pods that you’ve got?

R They would be to those people, yes, but in general I would never say sea eagles are incredible birds, I would have to watch who I said that to, I’d never build them up as some great birds.

I What about the corncrakes?

R Yes, the corncrake is, it’s reducing but again there’s the agri-environment schemes, they’re there to benefit the corncrake and it means the crofter has to adjust his management, and that’s why he’s getting a bit of cash to do it. Some people I think are generally keen to see the corncrake, but if you say you can get X amount per hectare to cut your silage a bit later then I think people are just seeing pound signs. They’re not benefiting because they’re cutting poorer grass, so creating poorer feed. I’d say half would quite happily do it for the corncrake, help bring it back, half are just looking for a quick bit of money.

I And they that it’s as a benefit to them even though they lose out on the forage?

R They seem to, they don’t realise, maybe it doesn’t fit that well. I think they’ve almost spent a lot of money on feed and this has helped them but if you have better quality silage it can reduce your feed bill, which should be. But again people are just not grasping that yet. That’s why we do the odd course on rations and feed nutrition, to try and get people thinking, you can be a bit smarter, that’s the first place you can reduce costs is the feed.

I What about a hen harrier? What’s that scheme?

R The hen harrier is a similar, just managing your moorland. If you have hen harriers and RSPB endorse it and say this area, then you can get into a scheme. More with the moorland, you’re not doing too much, you’re just trying to not over-graze and over-stock and things like that. You don’t make a lot of money on the moorland schemes through it, the hen harrier, but there is money available. When people do it on the moorland I think they’re more thinking about the scheme because they have to reduce their stocking rates at certain times, I think it’s a bit more something that they’re getting a better grasp of what they’re doing. And it helps, it helps you if you have to away winter.

I When you said one of the things that people do to be more resilient is to reduce their stocking rates, how does that make them more resilient?

R Through away winter? You’re not damaging the ground here and they’re going somewhere where there’s more grass, it’s on the mainland, normally Black Isle, even towards Elgin, Morayshire. So they’re getting better conditions and you’re putting the ones you want to treat well, your hardier older ewes will stay here over the winter. You’re putting them to the tup anyway but it’s just that takes the pressure off the grazing, so that’s what the away wintering scheme is about. It’s not a scheme, but you have to pay that farmer X amount per week for bed and breakfast as they call it, they go there for a few months.

It’s great for the local haulage from October especially, he’s just shipping sheep and cattle out to the mainland, then the return in April, so it’s good for him. He’ll have less to do now, especially shifting stock over the winter but that gives him, it’s hard work for him but I see he’s got two lorries now, he’s got a flatbed so he’s taking a lot of hay and fertilizers, feed. He’s a great example of someone who works all hours and has quite a big croft as well at home.

I One of the things we’ve found is people saying the messages they’ve had to date have been all about intensifying, they need more fertilizer and manage things more intensively, and they’ve decided they’re losing money doing that. Starting to think about reducing stocking density and having much more low input/output system, and that gives them a better profit. I wondered when you said people reducing their stocking density, is that the sort of thinking that people are going through?

R There’s a few people, people are maybe coming to the end, they’ve worked hard and getting a bit, shelling a lot of money for feed, so yes, there have been a couple of people who have reduced stock, but they’ve reduced it to a certain level so they still maximise their subsidy. You have to have X amount per hectare for your basic payment scheme, and the same for [inaudible] and they do it so they’re not going to lose out on that. Yes, there have been a couple of people who are quite big have done that recently, and there have been a couple who have asked for figures that they could look at to see if they could reduce it.

That would, especially in the bigger areas where you lose a lot of lamb on the hill because of black loss and such, I think people when they weigh it up it’s going to be better for them [inaudible] it must be horrendous losing so much lamb, not so much cattle, people are a bit more proactive making sure that cattle survive the calves, especially the lamb on the hill. So I think yes, reduce your losses by reducing how many you have.

Sometimes people get a bit out of control to try and bring them back and they’re so out of control they don’t know how much they’ve got on the ground. You try to rein them in and say you could half your flock and still get subsidy on it. I think people fear they’ll lose out on something.

I Is that something to do with their image in the community?

R Possibly, yes. They certainly don’t think they’re the ‘big shot’ or anything but people think, say they half their flock, it’s common sense, especially when someone 60 years old and they’ve got a good subsidy coming in which will help so much. But, no, they just seem to keep going.

I Have you come across Pastures for Life? They tend to advocate for the grass fed livestock, but they also talk about mob grazing, this New Zealand idea. Does anybody do that here, does it work in [area C] conditions?

R Straightaway people say, it’ll not work here, it’s too wet, we don’t have the fields, they’d be negative straightaway. But one or two people I would say who are more, who are very new, not from here, have come in with a different attitude, I’m going to give it a go and they’ve seen it work. But it’s a shorter season, but that’s maybe in Black Isle, you’ve got six months, we’ve only got four, but at least we know… It does work and [inaudible] she’s with a college, she was out in New Zealand so she knows a lot about it and she’s talked a lot about it.

I think people are interested in it but they just don’t feel it’ll work, they feel the fields are too small already or they do a lot of their grazing is on the hill, there’s no way they can do that. One or two have good sized fields and I think people will try to, I hope more try because it is a, but again I appreciate people saying it’s the size of the field, to half it is going to be minuscule and how do they half it and various things like that. I think people appreciate it but they just don’t have the energy to go and do it, especially if they have a job as well. That as well as people are coming home later, they’ve just got weekends to do things and I think that prevents people trying new ideas, it’s just time.

I Where do people get their ideas from, what’s their main sources of information, do you know?

R Talking, a lot of people will know, it’s incredible some of the crofters will know people in Caithness down to Dumfries, they’ll just know people and they hear, and they’ll meet at marts. Dingwall’s a great, and [town 1] has a couple of big days of sheep and cattle sales, and people go to Dingwall as well, they just hear ideas and get chatting. I think also Scottish Farmer, the Farmers Weekly especially has got a bit more to it, Scottish Farmer’s, I’m not saying it’s the thickness of it I think there’s just a bit more technology in the Farmers Weekly, and even the SAC have a beef and sheep newsletter.

People who do that have been around for a long time and even if it’s a basic drawing to store grain or something, people pick up on these things, just a basic article and they’ll pick up on that. Hopefully some of our things as well, mainly under farm advisory but hopefully people here, a bit like [person 9], [person 9] is happy to show how he gets rid of bracken and various things, some people are so new they don’t realise that if you keep beating it down you’ll win in the end. Things like that.

People are, it’s amazing when you talk sometimes you can talk for hours on cattle and sheep, and equally on fences and gates, pen systems, various things, people just have that interest. They’d rather talk about that than politics because they get more from it of course, it’s amazing what you can talk, and it is much more interesting, especially if you have certain characters who tell you about things. I remember going into Harbro and there’s this, one of the crofters is a storyteller and people are just in awe of him, things that he had done down in England when he was lambing, people were listening and taking it all in. Sometimes you pick up things at the likes of Harbro, that’s another great place to go. I think it’s just talking. Even I’m getting enthusiastic thinking about how people just talk, you come in here and hear it, when people come in here you hear of things that they’ve done and it’s really good.

I I hadn’t realised there’s different sorts of fencing.

R Yes, which supplier’s the best and which one lasts longer. Sometimes you have to take it with a pinch of salt and weigh up what you think but it’s the main way, it always has been. [section deleted, personal comment]

I Do you have much links to SRUC, their research farms and research programmes?

R We can. I was with Grampian Country, so I’m interested in pigs and Siobhan our boss at times she got us the chance to go down and speak to the research group and things. So we have that opportunity, and I’m sure if, we’re always told to integrate better but we don’t seem to, even since I’ve been here ten years we’ve never done it but we’re always told to try better but it’s never happened. Sometimes you have little groups, people set up groups. I find here, especially this office, we’re a bit more proactive in that, [[person 2] had Simon Turner, a behaviour specialist at an event the other week.

I Was that well attended?

R For here it was at [area 13] hall, I think there were 15 which was not bad for a Saturday morning. The same day as our one, the one at [person 9’s]. It was a pretty good group. I think we as an office are good at doing that, whereas some offices are not bothered, they’ll take the run of the mill sort of work.

I Is there anything that you would have liked to have said you’ve not had a chance to say?

R No, I think it’s been good. I hope I haven’t come across as [inaudible] I think maybe I’ve been a bit unfair, people always change, you don’t like to change but I think they will, if something happens and they have to change they will. It will knock out certain people and new people will come in, that’s how it works. It’s always this age of a crofter, I think crofters or farmers don’t like to put the responsibility on their younger children because I think they feel the weight of it so that’s why we’re always known as an aged job, 56 or something is the average age, maybe older, but that’s never changed and I think it will always be the same. It’s given me a good job working with these people so I hope it continues.

End of transcript