**Time for Stock Clubs 2.0?**

*‘*[*We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations.*](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/c/charlesrs389215.html)*’* Charles R Swindoll

Imagine a young, 25 year-old man named James who decides he would like to get started in crofting. He has the skills to become a very successful crofter who could contribute significantly to his local community, representing a potential new generation of crofters. But, all is not as rosy at it may seem. The barriers he will face are so significant that he might end up giving up entirely before he has even started.

Firstly, he will likely struggle to find croft ground, either through assignation or sub-let - it can even be difficult to find seasonal grazing although crofts are unused. The second challenge he will face is to find start-up capital so that he can purchase stock and invest in equipment.

From a social perspective, many townships have few active crofters now, reducing the opportunities for informal learning or mentoring. Not to mention that the lack of like-minded peers can be isolating and difficult, especially when problems occur.

Even if James manages to overcome the initial challenges of getting started, he will also have to cope with the challenges that all crofters face now, such as low profitability of livestock enterprises. Moreover, the challenges of combining crofting with other paid employment can be very difficult for a young person starting out both in crofting and their career. The uncertainty created by this year’s CAP reform could seem like the final nail in the coffin for the next generation of crofters.

However, this seemingly impossible situation could create the opportunity to consider new models that would support a new generation of aspiring crofters like James and make better use of the croft inbye land and common shares.

In fact, the indications are that the new CAP reform will create opportunities for both young crofters (under 40) and new entrants, through a form of national reserve. There has also been an increased emphasis on collaboration in rural development policy. Bearing all this in mind, now could be the time to think about setting up ‘New Generation Stock Clubs’.

Proposed model

All members of the Club would be under 40, allowing them to access young farmers funding under EU schemes, (Basic Payment Scheme support and access to capital funding). The group would also be eligible for 60% CCAGS assistance. The new generation stock club would lease ground through a variety of seasonal leases or sublets of croft inbye and common grazings shares. Each club would have mentors to help with different aspects of flock management and marketing.

The purchase of the club’s stock could be partly funded through a model of Community Supported Agriculture, similar to crowd-funding. Funders could be rewarded with updates on the club’s progress and creative gifts such as a cut of Easter hogget or Christmas mutton. If the club invested in cattle, steaks and mince could be offered.

This model would have several benefits for the crofting counties. Firstly, it would help bring unused crofts back into use, especially if the Crofting Commission supported it as a short term response to absentee crofters who intend to return in a few years. Secondly, it would give young crofters an opportunity to understand animal management and the business side of crofting with access to mentors. The pooling of risk would also be a benefit, especially at times when credit from banks is difficult for young people to access. In addition, members would get valuable skills and connections to use in their own future crofting enterprises or enrich existing stock clubs. If successful, they could also help mentor future generations of the stock club. The crowd-funders would benefit by feeling connected to crofting agriculture and enjoy some great produce whilst supporting young people.

Our current sheep stock clubs evolved to meet the needs of previous generations, can we devise new structures that will meet this generation’s needs?

If this is of interest, please contact [janette.sutherland@sac.co.uk](mailto:janette.sutherland@sac.co.uk) to discuss possibilities of funding such as LEADER when it becomes available.