

22 February 2013

Dear Colleagues

As I am sure you will likely be aware, there has been significant concern over recent weeks about the decision taken on the new lease for Raasay Sporting Rights and I have engaged a number of you in correspondence previously. I thought, given the concerns expressed by the Raasay community, it would be helpful to set out some background to this decision and the steps I have taken to address concerns within the crofting and wider community. I would also like to correct any misunderstanding arising from reporting in the media to date. I am keen, where possible, to allay concerns and to ensure that procedures are in place to guarantee Scottish Government decisions have the community interests at their heart, given our strong support for community empowerment and community ownership. I also want to look at ways in which we can also ensure that community benefits are secured from any new lease in this instance.

While initially sporting rights were leased to a private landowner, the lease was subsequently assigned to the Highlands and Islands Development Board in November 1981 for the remaining period of 31 years, reassigned to Raasay Crofters Association in 1995, and ultimately expired in November 2012. Therefore, on 1 November 2011, anticipating the end of the original lease, the Scottish Government Rural Payments Inspectorate Division (RPID) wrote to the leaseholders, Raasay Crofters' Association, to give them notice that their lease would come to an end. I hope this nails any misunderstanding as to the rationale for the sporting rights being re-let.

Following notification of the impending end of the lease, the sporting rights were then advertised during weeks commencing 19 and 26 November in the West Highland Free Press and the Shooting Times, with a closing date for bids set for 14 December 2012. The lease was advertised on the open market as per normal Scottish Government estate management practice. There were five offers submitted by the closing date. Unfortunately, the lowest offer was, as has been reported, from the Raasay Crofters Association. Two of the other offers received, bidding a higher amount than the Crofters' Association, originated from the Isle of Skye. South Ayrshire Stalking's offer was accepted, by civil servants, on the basis that it was the highest offer for the sporting rights.

All applicants were written to on 8 January 2013, advising them of the decision, with an acceptance issued to the offer from South Ayrshire Stalking. Although a final lease had not yet been signed with South Ayrshire Stalking, a firm contract had been made at that stage. At this point in time, it is important to note there had been no ministerial involvement in either the decision or subsequent award of contract. Scottish Ministers first became aware of local concerns when the local constituency member, Dave Thompson MSP, approached me to alert me to the outcome and to investigate the issue and see what could be done at a late stage to address the community's concerns.

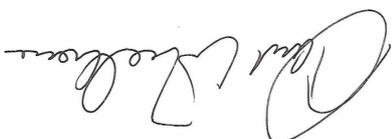
Whilst the Scottish Government is not obliged to accept the highest offer, as I said above, there was a desire in the decision made by officials to secure the highest rental value for the sporting rights. My understanding is that, in taking the decision, it was judged that the new leaseholder would be capable of managing the sport and providing benefit to the local community (holiday lets, trade to shops etc.). I understand South Ayrshire Stalking is very highly qualified in deer management, with the owner being an instructor for deer management courses, and holding other sporting leases across Scotland.

However, I fully appreciate that members of the Raasay Crofters Association are understandably very disappointed at being unsuccessful in securing the lease, as will be the other bidders from Skye. I also acknowledge and put on record that the Raasay Crofters have done an excellent job while they were the leaseholder and, given the need to support local communities in their economic aspirations, I recognise the value of local venison to the island's economy and for the local community in the form of a product retailed within local businesses. To that end a meeting was set up between the Crofters Association and the new leaseholder where proposals were discussed for continuing this venison supply along with other mutual benefits for both the shooting leaseholder and locals. South Ayrshire Stalking has indicated that they are happy to work in harmony with the local community for their mutual benefit and we would expect further meetings to take place with the local community. The terms of lease were amended to ensure that South Ayrshire Stalking would be required to engage on a regular basis with the community.

Furthermore, upon learning of the disappointment within the community on Raasay, and to ensure that community and, indeed, conservation interests are always fully taken into consideration in any similar situations in future, I have instructed my officials that any decision that would result in a local community failing to secure a renewal of a sporting lease where they had been the sitting tenant should be referred to Ministers.

I hope this gives you some confidence that the Scottish Government wants to secure local community benefit on Raasay and that it reassures members and their constituents that steps have been taken to ensure that a similar situation can be avoided in future. If there are any further developments in the dialogue with South Ayrshire Stalking, I will of course keep you informed at the earliest opportunity.

Kind regards



**PAUL WHEELHOUSE**