

Home
► News
Sport
Business
Politics
Features
Going Out

LIVE UPDATES

News
Sport

SERVICES

Search the site
Free daily email
News to your PDA
News archive
Picture archive
Help & FAQs
Contact us

FAVOURITES

Crosswords
The Diary
Local news
Local weather
Fantasy Football
Week in photos
Today's page 1

ADVERTISING

Homes
Appointments
Travelshop
Go Find It
Advertise with us

RELATED SITES

Evening Times
Sunday Herald
Newsquest UK

Millions 'lost' from common good land

MARTYN McLAUGHLIN

November 28 2005

LAND given to the people of Scotland worth hundreds of millions of pounds has been sold or neglected as a result of council mismanagement, according to new research. Local authorities have been accused of failing to protect the country's portfolio of common good assets, which in the late 16th century made up as much as half of Scotland.

Today they are worth an estimated £1.8bn.

The report reveals that some councils have no idea of what common good land they hold, and keep no such records. Critics claim some of the property has been "misappropriated".

The study suggests that huge swaths of land – which were either formerly assets of royal burghs or donated by philanthropists to the people – have been "lost, illegally alienated and neglected" by councils.

It also highlights "manifestly inaccurate financial reporting" of some £180m in common good funds held across the country.

The study, carried out by a charity, the Caledonia Centre for Social Development, blames "chaotic" administration for the situation and wants communities to be able to stake claims for land that is no longer owned by the public. It also calls for a comprehensive audit of the nation's common good assets.

It stresses the need for an overhaul of the existing 15th century legislation relating to the assets, which are intended to exist for the common good of residents of most towns across Scotland.

The common good fund of one Lanarkshire town alone has been drained of nearly £50m in the last decade. Rows over the loss of such assets are being played out in towns such as Ayr, Kinross, Musselburgh, Banff and Largs.

The report – Common Good Land in Scotland: A Review and Critique – points to "literally hundreds of millions of pounds floating about in the form of previously unaccounted for assets, undervalued assets and underused assets".

It adds: "This wealth belongs to the local community and not to the council and can be used to begin a process of civic renewal and physical regeneration."

The Inverness-based charity's estimate that common good assets are valued in the region of £1.8bn equates to nearly £400 for every person.

However, after a survey of every local authority, it says the true figure may be considerably higher, given the inadequacy of council record-keeping.

Scottish Borders Council has been investigated by Audit Scotland after complaints from members of the public over its management of common good funds. The local authority faced criticism for allowing a private housebuilder to build on common good land in Peebles, failing to collect revenues from common good assets, and using thousands of pounds in common good funds to subsidise a private bus firm.

In Lanarkshire, about £50,735,000 has been generated over the past decade from the sale of land held in the Hamilton common good fund. But as of March 2004, the fund held fixed assets worth just £1,765,000. The £49m discrepancy has been used to help finance the Hamilton Ahead initiative, a £240m regeneration project in the town centre. In its list of common good assets in the town, South Lanarkshire Council includes two private developments believed to have been partly financed by the fund: an Asda supermarket and a cinema.

The council points out the land in question was "underused". With the backing of the fund's trustees, officials received approval at the Court of Session for the plans.

The report, which is due to be published tomorrow, also reveals Dundee City Council claimed it did not know what common good land it held and kept no records, while Inverclyde Council wrongly asserted it held no such land.

The study's authors say a major cause of such problems is the decreased awareness of burghs and common good land as a consequence of successive local government reorganisation.

Christine Grahame, SNP MSP for the South of Scotland, backed the report's findings and attacked local authorities for poor monitoring of their common good assets.

She said: "There is a widespread failure on the part of councils when it comes to understanding common good issues and how to look after the assets.

"Any misappropriation of common good assets should be investigated. We're talking about the heritage of Scottish communities which is being eroded.

"Local authorities do not own this land, they are merely stewards, and yet there is no transparency or accountability when it comes to finding out exactly what is where. Every council should be required to carry out a proper and thorough audit of all common good funds, land and property."

PICTURE THIS

On now at Glasgow's Mitchell Library, celebrating 50 years of photos in the Herald and Times

YELLOW, RED ...

...and blue. Barry Ferguson caps a bad weekend for Rangers

this is christmas

Browse our
Christmas
Directory

**CLICK HERE
TO CREATE
YOUR FANTASY
SQUAD!****AdsOnline**

Click here to
book your ad
online now

HousePriceGuide**s1 play.com**

Scotland's no.1
entertainment listings site

**More
Scottish
jobs
bar none****s1 jobs.com****TravelShop**

Airport Parking

TravelShop

Holiday Insurance