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Four new schools join Crofting Connections project in the isles

Pam Rodway of the Soil Association, who runs Crofting Connections, now in its third year, describes the progress the schools have made over the past period.

Crofting Connections is now in its third year in Shetland, with four new schools joining the project this autumn.

Sound Primary in Lerwick brings the first "urban" school into the project in the isles. This year four other urban schools, in Kirkwall, Sornoway and Inverness, have joined, allowing many children and young people with more tenuous links with crofting an opportunity to explore this part of their collective heritage.

The school grounds at Sound now include a sturdy polytunnel and rigs for each class to grow both traditional and contemporary croft crops. This is an opportunity for the local community to become involved in the project too.

Mid Yell Junior High School has also joined, bringing all three schools in Yell into the project and making it available to all children in the isle.

Last year a pupil from Brae High School attended the crofting course at Whalsay Junior High. This link has led to Brae High School and Brae Primary joining the project. The co-operation and sharing of experiences between teachers in schools across the project is a huge asset in bringing crofting into the curriculum in Shetland.

Crofting Connections hosted an event in October as part of Scotland's Islands, with a performance of *Voices of the Island Crofts* at the Scottish Crofting Federation's annual gathering at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye.

A small delegation of pupils from each school brought songs, stories and poems in the languages and

dialects of their own communities to an audience drawn from crofters throughout the crofting counties.

Crofting Connections encourages schools to use the local community as a starting point for inter-disciplinary and cross-curricular learning, including oral history and practical learning from local crofters. This learning is often communicated through the language of the local community.

This was a unique opportunity for crofters to hear the range of traditional crofting dialects within Scots and Gaelic reflected back to them by the children and young people of these communities. The performance was repeated in the evening at Portree High School for parents of pupils from local Crofting Connections schools and other members of the community.

Eighteen pupils and seven teachers from seven Crofting Connections schools represented Shetland at the gathering. It was an opportunity to meet pupils and teachers from other island and mainland communities, including five local Crofting Connections schools.

As well as the performances of *Voices of the Island Crofts*, pupils and teachers participated in workshops and croft visits. The workshops included an introduction to the stories and songs attached to the year's labours on the croft. The pupils learnt a Gaelic milking song, which impressed the Shetlanders in particular.

The Shetland pupils visited two crofts, which demonstrate contemporary crofting activity in Skye and Lochalsh. The first visit was to the township of Borve and Anishader, a community-owned township, where pupils were able to discuss a range of current crofting issues around livestock, forestry, renewables and tourism with crofter Alaisdar Nicolson.

The second visit was to Morag McKenzie's croft at Duirinish in the township of Drumbuie and Duirinish, on the National Trust of Scotland crofting estate of Balmacara, to see the famous and much photographed

Duirinish Highland cattle and to learn about their link to the biodiversity and history of the township.

One of the aims of the Year of Scotland's Islands is to establish cultural links between island areas that encourage exchange and understanding, helping children and young people to appreciate the linguistic distinctiveness of the diverse cultures of Scotland's islands.

Over the three days in Skye, we witnessed this aim in action, as children and young people listened to each other's songs, stories, poems and instrumental pieces with respect and appreciation. And then, the linguistic and cultural boundaries were crossed.

Shetland and Orkney children joined in the Gaelic milking song learned in Margaret's workshop and the very talented musicians from Benbecula took the lead from the equally talented Shetland musicians in playing Shetland reels – a wonderful stramash at the culmination of the evening performance.

Friendships were formed, addresses exchanged and crofting connections were made. These will hopefully be nurtured as the project progresses and continues into its next stage after summer 2012.