

Strategic Directions for the National Forest Estate

Community Woodlands Association

The Community Woodlands Association welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Strategic Directions for the National Forest Estate. CWA was established in 2003 as the direct representative body of Scotland's community woodland groups. We help community woodland groups across the country achieve their aspirations and potential, providing advice, assistance and information, facilitating networking and training, and representing and promoting community woodlands to the wider world.

We chose not to use the online response format which was not sufficiently flexible for our purposes. Instead, our response is in the form of a single paper, focusing on a number of key aspects, primarily around the objective "Delivering forestry for people and rural development benefits" which we believe should be explicitly broadened to align with Scottish Government policy by encompassing community empowerment outcomes.

We recognise that over the last twenty-five years the management objectives of the National Forest Estate have broadened immensely, and now encompass a wide range of environmental and social as well as economic outcomes as showcased by the consultation document.

We understand that there are unprecedented pressures on FCS: both from the general squeeze on public finances and from the cumulative threat of a number of pests and diseases. We believe it is essential that the breadth of activity and aspiration is maintained and indeed enhanced, and that long-term social and environmental objectives should not be sacrificed in FCS's response to current pressures.

The Scottish Government has recently consulted on proposals for a Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill, which included a strong focus on facilitating asset transfer to communities, and has established a Land Reform Review Group, to identify how Land Reform will enable more people in rural and urban Scotland to have a stake in the ownership, governance, management and use of land; assist with the acquisition and management of land and land assets by communities; generate, support, promote, and deliver new relationships between land, people, economy and environment in Scotland.

CWA believe Forestry Commission Scotland, through its management of the National Forest Estate, is uniquely placed to contribute to this new spirit of Land Reform and Community Empowerment, both through the on-going evolution of the National Forest Land Scheme, widely recognised as a pioneering mechanism for community asset transfer from the public sector, and more generally through the increasing prioritisation of community empowerment and rural development through the organisation's practices

The National Forest Land Scheme

The National Forest Land Scheme has evolved and developed considerably since its establishment in 2005. As the NFLS has become more firmly embedded in FCS organisational culture, and the timescales and process have become more user-friendly, the

major remaining constraints on the scheme are now financial – unfortunately these have been sufficient to dampen demand and to significantly reduce the effectiveness and impact of the scheme.

The restrictions placed on public bodies by the Scottish Public Finance Manual, and the increasingly zealous interpretation of State Aid rules, have been widely identified as significant obstacles to community asset transfer and the building of stronger, resilient communities. We trust that one of the outcomes of the Scottish Government’s current focus on Community Empowerment will be to dismantle some of these obstacles, and look forward to the NFLS operating under less restrictive conditions.

FCS Disposals outwith the NFLS

Community asset purchases through the NFLS make up only a small proportion of the total area of NFE land sold in recent years. Had the funding climate been more supportive then we believe a greater proportion of sales would have been to community groups, but even so, it is likely that the majority would still be to other private sector buyers.

Whilst we recognise that the assets sold are those perceived to be contributing least public benefit, it should be noted that this assessment takes no account of the potential for public benefit delivery: indeed the evidence from Abriachan to Mull is that even the poorest (in conventional economic terms) forests can deliver a huge range of public benefits given sufficient creativity, enthusiasm and investment.

At present disposals outwith the NFLS take place with only basic statutory regulations to secure the maintenance of existing environmental and access benefits and there are no mechanisms to safeguard the potential of the asset to contribute to regeneration and rural development. Various measures could be taken to mitigate this:

- The practice of bundling properties into single lots should cease, instead, consideration should be given to splitting properties where practicable, to give opportunities to a wider range of buyers in the interests of diversifying forest ownership and management.
- A greater range of organisations, including local cooperatives and social enterprises, could be accepted as eligible to use the NFLS where there is no community organisation able or willing to buy the land.
- Purchasers of forests and other land asset disposals over a given threshold should be required to produce a management plan outlining delivery of social and environmental outcomes as well as timber harvesting.

Broader community engagement

The consultation document states “We want to encourage local people to get involved with managing local Estate woodlands so we will actively engage with local communities, be open to work in partnership”. Historically FCS has entered a considerable number of formal and informal management agreements with community bodies, and they have often proved an effective mechanism for increasing community engagement and involvement.

However, in the last couple of years, a number of member groups have reported apparently reduced enthusiasm for management agreements from district staff. We are aware of groups who have been waiting for some considerable time for promised agreements to be formalised, and of others who have been effectively directed to the NFLS as the “mechanism for community engagement”.

Whilst we support community acquisition where the community wishes to take that route, it is clear that in some instances partnership working and a management agreement provide appropriate mechanisms to take forward community aspirations for forest management, and a clearer process and set of timescales for achieving such should be made available.

We note that all forest districts now have designated “community” lead officers, and we believe that the post-holders should be encouraged to develop their roles to become champions for the community empowerment agenda within their respective districts.

Broader rural development benefits

Supporting rural development has long been part of the Forestry Commission’s *raison d’être* in Scotland, and FCS is undeniably a very significant provider of employment and contract opportunities in timber harvesting, extraction and transport, and also in road building, drainage, fencing, ground preparation, planting, etc. However, mechanisation and centralisation have progressively reduced the impact of FCS on rural employment. In addition, whilst the NFE covers ~660,000 hectares (>8% of Scotland’s land area), a huge potential resource for rural development, this remains comparatively unexploited (although the recent partnerships to develop renewables demonstrates what can be achieved).

The CWA believes that FCS could have a much stronger focus on delivery local rural development benefits, both through greater access to existing contract opportunities for local businesses and in opening the NFE to a wider range of business initiatives. It has been suggested that Procurement and/or Health and Safety Regulations (or the interpretation of Procurement and Health and Safety Regulations) are often presented as obstacles to change: these should be clarified and if they genuinely do inhibit sustainable rural development then it is the regulations that should be amended, rather than local development stifled.

Agricultural tenancies and woodland crofts

We note that the consultation document says: “We already have over 100 agricultural tenancies and grazing lets extending to 17,000ha, but we hope to bring more of our open ground into active agricultural use. Where buildings and suitable land are available, we are creating starter farms to help integrate farming and forestry.”

We are unclear why, given this commitment to creating new agricultural tenancies, FCS has declined to consider creating new woodland crofts on the National Forest Estate. Whilst, all other things being equal, we believe that community ownership would be preferable, it seems clear that the “direct” method of community bodies using the “land for woodland crofts” section of the NFLS is unlikely to bear fruit.

It is possible for communities to create woodland crofts through the NFLS as a two stage process over a number of years – acquiring land through community acquisition / sponsored sale of surplus land, and then creating woodland crofts at a later date – indeed North West Mull Community Woodland Company have recently done so, however by necessity this is a slow and uncertain process.

Progress with woodland crofts has therefore been disappointing, and could be much enhanced if FCS were willing to countenance a variety of models for woodland croft creation on the National Forest Estate.

Long term investment

In this response we have concentrated on FCS's social forestry objectives, however, we have one general comment. Forestry is inherently a long-term business, with investment only repaid after many decades. Such investment in Scotland's forest has historically been constrained, and in many respects our forest resource now reflects previous financial limitations: limited funds for land acquisition meant that forestry was pushed onto less-than optimal sites, with long term economic and in some cases environmental disbenefits; whilst the need to minimise costs early in the rotation has constrained species choice and inhibited silvicultural "investment" in the growing crop.

Two relatively recent developments offer the prospect for change. The burgeoning woodfuel market has at last provided a potential outlet for small roundwood, offering the opportunity for more intensive and interesting silviculture, which could deliver long term economic, environmental and social benefits. Even more significantly, the on-going development of hydro and wind power on the National Forest Estate looks set to earn very substantial sums of money. Inevitably much will be extracted by central government, we believe that some at least can be retained to provide the long-term investment Scotland's forests deserve.