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STRATEGIC REVIEW OF SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE

QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

The Terms of Reference of the Review as described in the accompanying paper are the starting point for the questions below. Three main areas are under consideration:

1. The respective roles and responsibilities, and working relationships, between the Scottish Executive and SNH.
2. The roles and responsibilities of SNH in relation to other bodies also engaged in work relating to the natural heritage.
3. Whether there are any strategic structural or procedural changes that would allow SNH to manage its business more effectively and efficiently.

Full information about the work of SNH is available on its website (snh.org.uk) or from SNH at 12 Hope Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 2AS (tel. 0131 447 4784).

We are interested to hear your views in response to these issues and specifically on the questions below. You may not be in a position to provide a response to all the questions but we would welcome any information you wish to offer. We will also be pleased to receive any additional observations you feel would be of assistance the Review Team.

Responses are required by 22 December 2004

Questions 1- 3 are introductory

1. What contact have you had with SNH?

Various and wide-ranging at National and local level: grant applications, partnership working, enquiries for information, project planning, SSSI management & through SNH's role as a consultee on planning applications and forestry proposals.

2. Are you responding as a private individual or as a representative of a particular group or body?

Representative of the Community Woodlands Association.

3. What has been your main source of information about SNH (e.g. leaflets, website, personal contact, meetings or events)?

All the above.

Questions 4- 14 relate to the first of the Terms of Reference:

4. SNH is a Non Departmental Public Body (sometimes known as a “quango”). From your experience (and offering examples wherever possible) how do you think SNH’s status as an NDPB impacts on its delivery of natural heritage policy in Scotland?

SNH’s NDPB status may be partly responsible for its apparent conservatism and unwillingness to take a meaningful lead on major issues affecting the natural heritage, either nationally (unsustainable deer numbers) or internationally (climate change).

5. What is your understanding of the respective roles of the Scottish Executive and SNH in setting and delivering natural heritage priorities? What is your perception of, and opinion about, the effectiveness of the interaction between SNH and relevant Departments and Divisions of the Scottish Executive?

Firstly, the question is incomplete without acknowledgement of the increasing role of Europe in providing both direction and constraints to natural heritage priority setting and policy making.

Secondly, there appears to be considerable duplication of responsibilities between various Executive bodies, including SNH, particularly since all are supposed to promoting “sustainable development”, though each interprets this in their own way.

6. How “independent” of Ministers should SNH be? Could the ways in which SNH’s objectives and targets are determined and set be enhanced or improved?

All government bodies should be publicly accountable, however, SNH’s mission statement is “ Working with Scotland’s people to care for our natural heritage”, not “Working with Scotland’s ministers...”, and its objectives and targets should more closely reflect the needs and aspirations of local communities.

7. Do you have any comments about SNH’s Corporate Strategy and Corporate Plan?

As with most SNH publications, the Corporate Strategy is attractively laid out, impressively glossy and full of statements and desiderata with which we all agree. The Corporate Plan has more detail, but too many of the outcomes and targets are process and policy related.

8. SNH regularly (at least quarterly and annually) monitors and reports its progress against Scottish Executive, corporate and environmental targets. Do you have any comments about this monitoring and reporting?

Only that one wonders how much staff time is so consumed, and how much it benefits Scotland’s people or natural heritage.

9. To what extent has SNH achieved its (and the government's) objectives over the last 5 years? Please offer examples. Are there any particular achievements or successes you would attribute, either wholly or in part, to SNH?

To the extent that SNH's specific outputs and targets are predominantly process and policy related, it has unsurprisingly been successful.

SNH grant aid to voluntary groups and others for environmental projects has generally been well targeted and delivered significant benefits, and support for Ranger Services has been effective in enhancing appreciation and understanding of the natural heritage, however, budgets for both appear increasingly constrained.

It is unclear how effective this has been in terms of delivering the "big picture" – we have lots of LBAPs, but we don't (yet) know what the effect, if any, is on biodiversity.]

10. Is the contact between SNH and Parliamentary Committees, Ministers and MSPs effective and appropriate?

Do not know.

11. What do you think about the overall remit of SNH, primarily its scope and priorities?

SNH's remit has become increasingly unclear as its scope has widened and it becomes more difficult to pin down exactly what SNH does (as opposed to what it reacts to).

The organisation's priorities appear to be driven by its responsibility for implementing a succession of executive policies (e.g. SOAC) and administering grant programmes (e.g. Fresh Futures), rather than by any long-term coherent vision.

12. Are the respective responsibilities of the Scottish Executive and SNH with regards to matters including biodiversity, European designated sites, grant schemes and other sponsorships etc. sufficiently distinct and complementary? Would you recommend changes to the way these or any other topics are addressed by either the Scottish Executive and/or SNH?

No specific changes with regard to the Executive/SNH relationship, other than that there should be wider debate and involvement in policy and decision-making (see response to Q17 below).

13. The Minister for Finance and Public Services announced the Efficient Government Review in June 2004. This set a target of £500m annual efficiency gains across the Scottish Public Sector. Are there particular aspects of the efficient government agenda that you consider could be relevant to SNH?

The greatest efficiency savings will be found by reducing duplication of roles and the time that officers of various government bodies spend checking up on each other.

14. Any other thoughts about SNH/government relations?

Questions 15 - 20 relate to the second of the Terms of Reference:

15. Have you (either as an individual or as a representative of an organisation) worked in partnership with, or received funding from SNH? If so, please describe briefly and offer any comments about the success or otherwise of the working relationship.

I have experience of both working in partnership with, and applying for/receiving small environmental capital grants from SNH, and also as a director of a national organisation part funded by SNH.

Generally the experience has been positive: the grant application system is relatively easy to work and area office staff are usually very helpful at the project development stage.

Two caveats: funding in arrears can cause cashflow problems for small voluntary organisations especially when the turnaround of grant claims is slow, and, whilst funding for capital expenditure, such as paths, is readily available, assistance with on-going maintenance costs is more difficult to access.

As a national organisation CWA have found senior staff in SNH very supportive of what we do and aware that it is voluntary organisations such as our membership that deliver many of the national policies.

16. Other public bodies besides SNH (e.g. Local Authorities, National Park Authorities) also hold responsibilities relating to the natural heritage. Are you aware of any situations where you feel the respective roles of SNH or other public bodies could be modified to enhance their effectiveness?

The roles of various bodies need to be more clearly demarcated to reduce duplication and enhance effectiveness. For example, during consultation for WGS / SFGS applications, SNH and Highland Council both comment on landscape impact, sometimes adopting diametrically opposite positions.

Some of SNH's advisory functions should be taken on "in-house" by other bodies, e.g. NPAs.

17. Have you any comments about the relative roles and responsibilities of SNH and voluntary bodies (whether national or local) involved in Scotland's natural heritage and people?

SNH is responsible for implementing Executive policy, but in practical terms is almost entirely dependent on third parties, and voluntary bodies in particular, to deliver natural heritage projects, outcomes and benefits.

Wherever possible, SNH's policy- and decision-making processes need to be more transparent, inclusive and accountable, and in particular, open to community input.

For example, the recent NNR review, which led to the dedeclaration of a number of sites, was carried out without consulting either site managers or the general public, and according to a set of subjective criteria which appear to have been unevenly applied across Scotland.

The NNR review represents a missed opportunity to engage local communities in a positive discussion about the value and purpose of

the NNR suite; if, as the Corporate Strategy suggests, NNRs exist “to raise the profile and awareness of Scotland’s natural heritage, and demonstrate best practice in managing it”, then this designation should be a matter of public debate.

18. Considering rural services in particular, would you welcome greater local integration of SNH functions with those of other Departments and agencies? What benefits could this offer?

Unclear how this would work in practice. The most obvious benefits will be in reducing duplication – either by joint appointments with pooled budgets, or transferring functions between the various bodies.

19. SNH is involved in partnerships throughout Scotland delivering projects or services relevant to the natural heritage. What do you think about the effectiveness and management of such partnerships? Would you recommend any changes? Examples would assist.

The raison d’etre of partnership working is that such projects can overcome the compartmentalism of the various arms and agencies of government, and be “greater than the sum of their parts”. Partnership projects work well and achieve their objectives when the partners allow the project to develop it’s own identity, and fail when partners attempt to assert the primacy of their own respective agendas.

SNH has worked very well at regional level in Highland e.g. Rural partnerships and has taken a lead when it comes to pooling budgets and making joint decisions. They are to be commended for that.

20. Any other comments on the relationship between SNH and other bodies?

Only to reiterate that the “sustainable development” is bigger than the remit of any one agency, but it is not necessarily advanced by having 10 representatives of different government bodies and agencies sitting in a room and pushing their own organisations’ slant on the matter in hand. There should be reduced duplication, more pooling of budgets, and a greater role in decision making for the organisations who actually deliver policy outcomes on the ground.

Questions 21 - 26 relate to the third of the Terms of Reference:

21. Are you confident that, if necessary, you can readily contact or find information, advice or assistance that you may require from SNH? If not, please say why and give any examples of where you have had difficulties.

SNH area office staff are generally very helpful. However, they may not hold necessary information in an appropriate form – for example, when involved in writing the county LBAP, SNH were unable to provide a list of national priority species occurring locally.

22. Are you content that information and advice issued by SNH is of a standard and consistency appropriate to the circumstance of any request? Examples of topics or instances where you feel there is scope for clarification or other improvement would assist.

Not always. As SNH area office staff become increasingly more desk-bound and involved with policy making and providing reactive responses e.g. to planning applications, they inevitably are less directly engaged with and informed about the natural heritage, and have less time to go out and find the answer to an inquiry.

23. SNH has an organisational structure that groups its functions into national advisory, strategy and corporate services complementing a network of teams and offices across Scotland which provide local services to people and the natural heritage. Do you have any comments on this approach? Is your contact with SNH more likely to be with a local SNH office or with one of the national services? Would you offer any suggestions for improvement?

I have found area offices generally helpful, within the limitations discussed above. Contacts with national services have been less satisfactory, with replies sometime patronising and unhelpful.

24. Have you any suggestions regarding the roles, responsibilities and effectiveness of the SNH Board, its 3 Areas Boards and 2 Committees?

Their roles and responsibilities are not well known or understood.

25. Do you have any comments regarding SNH's management of risk, including the delegation of responsibilities for decisions throughout SNH?

Too much central control, and decisions which need to be passed "up the ladder" can take an unreasonable time to be made.

26. Have you any comments about the nature of the advice you have received from SNH or any other comments or suggestions regarding possible structural or procedural changes that you consider could enhance the effectiveness of SNH?