

The Future of Forestry in Scotland – response from the Community Woodlands Association

Introduction and additional comments

The Community Woodlands Association (CWA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

CWA was established by its members in 2003: it represents 200 community woodland groups across Scotland who collectively manage a hundred thousand hectares of woodland and other land, delivering very significant public benefits in a range of fields from timber production and recreation to health and education.

We support the principle of completing the devolution of forestry, by agreeing a transfer of Forestry Commissioners' powers and duties, as they relate to Scotland, to Scottish Ministers, and recognise the need for a new legislative framework for forestry in Scotland, but have some significant concerns regarding the specific proposals.

We note that in most practical respects Scottish forestry is devolved already: the Scottish National Forest Estate is owned by Scottish Ministers and the activities of private (and community) sector forestry are funded through the Scottish Rural Development Programme. FCS and FES are funded by the Scottish Government, they work to deliver the Scottish Forestry Strategy and other Scottish Government policies, and the heads of FCS and FES report through the Scottish Government's Environment and Forestry Directorate to Scottish Ministers. These arrangements are generally considered to work well and have broad consent from a wide range of stakeholders.

We note also that even after the proposed changes, some matters will remain reserved to Westminster, most notably many of the tax arrangements pertaining to forestry.

1 New organisational arrangements for the management of forestry in Scotland

- *Our proposals are for a dedicated Forestry Division in the Scottish Government (SG) and an Executive Agency to manage the NFE. Do you agree with this approach? Please explain your answer.*

We do not agree with this approach. We do not believe that the benefits of such an approach have been effectively articulated by the Scottish Government, nor are there sufficient reassurances regarding the mitigation of the potential disbenefits of such an approach.

In particular we are concerned at the proposal to subsume the policy and regulation functions of FCS within a dedicated Forestry Division in the Scottish Government; we note that such a division could be subject to merger or restructuring without any further public consultation.

As currently structured, Forestry Commission Scotland has successfully championed forestry in Scotland as a broad church embracing a wide range of stakeholders, delivering a huge variety of public benefits and enjoying unprecedented levels of public approval. In particular, FCS has been a strong and committed supporter of community forestry, both in terms of the developing policy context and through funding, e.g. the Seedcorn & Community funds: small pots of money which have facilitated very substantial change.

We are concerned that if FCS were absorbed into the SG it would lose the ability to maintain this broad vision and the budget to support it; and that its focus would be progressively narrowed to supporting a small cadre of industrial stakeholders.

CWA believes that Scottish forestry and the Scottish people would be best served by the establishment of a unified Scottish Forest and Land Service, charged with managing the National Forest Estate, regulating and supporting the full diversity of private and community sector forestry and retaining responsibility for policy development for the sector.

- *In bringing the functions of FCS formally into the SG, how best can we ensure that the benefits of greater integration are delivered within the wider SG structure? What additional benefits should we be looking to achieve?*

The “benefits of greater integration” are not well articulated in the consultation document, so naturally it is unclear how to ensure they will be delivered.

We also see no direct link between integration within SG structures and integration of thinking or delivery against SG policies and agendas. We note that FCS has demonstrated remarkable flexibility in recognising and delivering against a broad range of SG agendas from climate change mitigation to community empowerment and with programmes from starter farms to Branching Out. This is in stark contrast to some apparently “integrated” divisions within SG which remain locked in a silo mentality.

We would also be very concerned that there would be a drive to further integrate FCS IT and other back office systems with those of other SG divisions. The experience of SRDP has been that such integration failed to deliver promised efficiencies and has proven a major obstacle to delivery.

- *How should we ensure that professional skills and knowledge of forestry are maintained within the proposed new forestry structures?*

Whilst there would be little immediate change as FCS staff would be transferred into the new SG division we believe it inevitable that forestry expertise and background would be diluted over time, even if the forestry division retains its identity.

We consider that professional skills and knowledge of forestry would be best maintained by establishing a unified Scottish Forest and Land Service.

- *What do you think a future land agency for Scotland could and should manage and how might that best be achieved?*

We recognise that FES already manages very substantial (>200,000ha) non-forest assets, and we have no objection in principle to this increasing, either through acquisition (e.g. following the devolution of the Crown Estate) or the transfer of assets from other SG bodies, however we note that this may also require the transfer of budgets and specialised staff.

The more important questions in our opinion relate to the objectives of management. As the Land Reform Review Group noted, land is a precious and finite resource which must be managed in the public interest and for the common good, and this should be the guiding principle for a land agency for Scotland.

2 Cross-border arrangements

- *Do you agree with the priorities for cross-border co-operation set out above, i.e. forestry research and science, plant health and common codes such as UK Forestry Standard? Y/N*

Yes

- *If no, what alternative priorities would you prefer? Why?*

n/a

- *Do you have views on the means by which cross-border arrangements might be delivered effectively to reflect Scottish needs? E.g. Memorandum of Understanding between countries? Scotland taking the lead on certain arrangements?*

We believe the most effective means to deliver forestry research and science is through the retention of a specialised Forest Research & Science (FRS) organisation.

Such a body would have responsibility for plant health issues on a UK basis, and could also take ownership of common codes (UKFS, etc)

The future FRS could be “owned” by one of the partner nations, but might better be structured as a jointly owned company or partnership.

The process for commissioning research will inevitably change, and this may have implications for research priorities in the future. We note that Forest Research has well-established social research programmes which have gradually become more attuned to the needs of the sector – it is important that there is continuity in commissioning to maintain expertise in the organisation.

3 New legislation

- *Should the Scottish Ministers be placed under a duty to promote forestry? Y/N*

Yes

- *What specifically should be included in such a general duty?*

We agree with the provisions outlined in the consultation document, however we consider they are narrowly drawn and incomplete, and that the duties on Scottish Ministers should include the management of the national estate to contribute to the delivery of social policy agendas, i.e. to empower communities; to promote social and economic development; and to promote health, well-being, social justice and the progressive realisation of human rights.

- *Recognising the need to balance economic, environmental and social benefits of forestry, what are your views of the principles set out above?*

We note that the document references social benefits from forestry in this question but is otherwise silent on specifics; it appears to draw heavily on the principles of the 1967 Act, which do not adequately represent the broad range of objectives and activities which constitute modern forestry. We are therefore concerned that the statutory focus will be overly on the “*economic*” (understood narrowly as equating solely to timber production), and believe that there should be a much more specific elaboration of “*social*” and “*environmental*” objectives, as well a broader understanding of the economic benefit of forestry.

As noted previously we consider that the guiding principle should be that “land is a precious and finite resource which must be managed in the public interest and for the common good”.