

Note of a meeting with Forest Enterprise Scotland, 24 May 2016.

Attending; Simon Hodge, CEO of FES; Jo Ellis, Head of Planning and Environment; Chris Nixon, Environment and Ecosystem Services Manager; Charles Dundas, Scotland Public Affairs Manager, Woodland Trust Scotland, and LINK Trustee; Deborah Long, Head of Plantlife Scotland; Beryl Leatherland, Convenor Scottish Wild Land Group, and LINK Trustee; Sian Williams, Senior Policy and Casework Officer (UK Forestry) RSPB; Ross Anderson, Chair Scottish Campaign for National Parks; Eddie Palmer, Chair Scottish Badgers; Emily Platt, Species Protection Co-ordinator, Scottish Badgers Alice Walsh, Development Officer LINK.

1. Brief overview of the Forest Estate and FES environmental work.

The Estate covers 8% of Scotland, over 500k hectares of varied habitat beyond woodlands. FES reports to Keith Connal, Natural Resources Team. There are 3 delivery functions: land management; estate development and commercial services. Jo and Chris are part of the land management function where environment delivery is focussed. Chris's role in steering the environment function, working with the small environment teams within each of the 10 districts, and the inhouse team of 4 ecologists, combination of policy role and steering work on the ground.

There is c 67k hectares is designated for conservation /environmental value and historic environment assets. FES works with SNH and others to keep in favourable condition, currently 95% are in FC or recovering.

There is a rolling survey of open habitats to identify priorities for the estate as a whole. They are about 2/3 through this process to look at 20k hectares by 2020. Giving new information for future planning. Peatlands and its restoration are a key area, a focus over last 2 years with help of the Peatland Fund, keen that this continues. So far over 2k H of peatland restored over a short timeframe.

Native woodland, a big area, planting on Ancient Woodland sites of the estate, aim to restore over time. 2/3 of way through with starting intervention on those sites, working with WTS and others.

Invasive species, esp. Rhododendron, big problem, ongoing. Original survey identified 40k hectares of Rh, about half way through with clearing, and also follow up needed as it regenerates taking more of the programme, makes it harder to treat new areas. Its still a major programme with a real contribution to improving a whole range of habitats. FES trying to work with neighbours to target the work, keep areas clean.

Six priority species for FCS, capercaillie, research around predator relationships, lots going on in CNPA. Keen to find out why caper thriving there. Black grouse, red squirrel, pearl bordered fritillary, chequered skipper, lots of progress on monitoring, and juniper, how to improve its condition on the 50 sites within the estate.

Historic environment, protecting sites within woodland plans, focusing on dry stone masonry repair. All need partnership with others and thanks to all our organisations for this, couldn't do the half of it without us.

Process on land management planning for each forest area, how it might be developed in future – clearer guidance for staff to help them think carefully about how key biodiversity interests can be enhanced in future, what is practical and achievable within the planning process. Improving the general environment within the estate.

Charles asked what problems this was trying to solve.

Jo - were formerly forest design plans, now looking to longer timeframe, where we see land going, ie a woodland, what steps are needed to get there, permissions needed, obtain these at the right stage, show people what we are doing, multi benefits. The plans are where all operations come together. Process of using new concepts like ecosystem services and natural capital to think holistically. Some aspects are tricky, eg climate change adaptation, not clearly thought through for each area, what are the things to do in any one area, use it as a framework to enable people not to miss thinking like habitat quality. It is inhouse and have called on external expertise. S Pepper and R Worrall have been involved to get an independent view.

LINK bodies are interested and would like to help.

Deborah - Does it fit into SNH's work on wider landscape. The estate seems an excellent place to start.

Jo - not an island, now trying to look outside, where FES fits, its a big player in some areas, less so in others. Habitat networks, catchment management, recreational networks. This is the way to encourage wider thinking through the land management process.

Simon - plans hierarchy, what scale is best to look at. Whole range of scales. Helping to connect local work with regional and national contexts. A good eg is the Red Squirrel stronghold, need to think strategically and long term, setting the context for a particular forest area, influences other decisions for that area. Still a work in progress. Natural Capital thinking - we will never get the best answer from data. How to moderate process with a sensible balance. It is an organisational framework for taking lots of issues into account, social and economic ones too. How do you make these judgements?

Ross - are urban and urban fringe areas in the mix too?

Chris - yes, sold some assets to fund more work on urban forestry, major part of what we do.

Challenging as resource intensive. Working with WTS Space for People.

2. The Land Scotland proposal. FES thinking on future structures and how it may affect direction. What are the key threats and opportunities - discussion of FES and LINK approaches with an eye to achieving best environmental outcomes and The Future of the Forestry Commission in Scotland and how FES see this developing.

There was no firm intelligence on Land Scotland. Simon suggested that our previous discussion paper on the future of the FC might have planted the idea of a single Land agency to manage public land in the public interest. FES manages 75% of public land, so is a significant player. Richard Lochhead was keen on the logic of thinking of management public land as more of an entity. With new circs of Roseanna Cunningham and Fergus Ewing portfolios covering major aspects of what FES does, will be interested in their dynamics. Will be signalling importance of rural economy and desiring to see contribution of forestry to it increase, what will that look and feel like. Helpful that 2 publications were already there - [contribution of forestry to Scotland's economy](#) and contribution of the [national forest estate](#) to the economy. Traditional forest economy of wood is important and the tourist economy, wider component of value, of Scotland's landscape and environment, will want to promote and present that very strongly. F Ewing should be aware of tourist economy from his previous post. Unsure what he will make of it and at what pace it will go forward. Also unclear how it will relate to recast of the FCS. Expect to continue expansion of forestry vigorously, repositioning programme, selling off assets, maximising forestry in climate change p and restoring old mining and industrial land. The collapse of Scottish Coal without restoration of land, solutions are needed, and possible opportunities there. Also natural flood management, increase action on ancient woodlands, firm commitments there, mental health connections, commitment to community and locally owned renewable energy.

Charles - the Discussion Paper was not the considered view of LINK and thinking had moved on, there is some apprehension about changes, not necessarily overjoyed by proposal, best case scenario is that FES becomes LS and takes on the extra 25% of land and continues with its good work. Was that a realistic prospect?

Simon- Some optimism. In 2012 the senior team thought about the future, concluded strongly that its focus was on delivering public benefit from public land. The historic focus on forestry has changed over time, no longer selling off land because it is unplatable, its now about integrated land management, how to deliver desired outcomes through management, restoring blanket bog, not dogmatic about trees, hope they are continuing on that basis, that is their messaging. Simon's sense is that Govt values what FES does, and will be open to it carrying on the culture of delivering practical benefits around Scotland. Question of what will happen to FCS functions, the ones that FES do not deliver. That is not so clear and needs work. There will be a public consultation.

Charles - it shows how discussions within a small group widen and views coalesce into something more people can support. Simon agreed that is the value of an integrated approach. The LUS desire to bring agriculture and its thinking in more. Silos and layers approaches. Example of the advantages of the joint work by SNH, RSPB, FES, NTS and CNPA etc in the Cairngorms, which could happen without the CNPA, but is made easier by it. Simon would like to see agriculture more focussed on delivering public benefits. Discussion of market failures, bringing into focus what the market, or incentives, do not deliver.

Deborah – we can support the double role of demonstration and bringing the thinking into the policy debate, ie agriculture support.

Jo – ecosystem services gives another language, hard to use, bring it down to earth, at its heart gives means to assess and compare.

Chris – meetings held on 'fog clearing', focus on how these concepts can be applied in a helpful way. Task to continue process of improving how we reflect that benefit. Will sent links to summary of environmental work over the last 5 years. FES has been reasonably good at describing the value of conservation work, now more important to encapsulate more without creating fog.

3. The refresh of the Scottish Forestry Strategy, role of meeting Scottish planting targets and new woodland recreation targets, Ancient Woodland restoration, tackling invasive species, future of Regional Forestry Strategies

SFS is essentially an FCS doc, 2017 due for review. Jim Dewar done some scoping work. It jostles with LUS. SFS has endured a long time. No certainty on its future. FES is an important player in implementation. Principle hook is the LUS for FES, also interested in where the LUS goes in future. Keen advocates of bringing LU thinking together. Energy in the pilot schemes has been fantastic, lots of politics around it. Reading tea leaves, LUS will be used to inform it, logical way ahead, but LUS is not compelling, its influence is visible, and other influences might be greater, depends what ministers think. When Govt is focussed on expansion, cannot escape the impact on other land uses.

Jo – where forestry species strategy fits in, not clear, issue is about land use, not forestry. Could be regional plans rather than regional strategies? Focus on spatial challenge, on woodland expansion and removal, around windfarms, some coming into focus, the more that can be set in a strategy the better. Jo O'Hara and Jim Dewing navigating that. FES less so.

New LUS. Is it going in the right direction? It is essentially question of cost. Do more of these, no more money, no incentive for cash strapped local authorities. Difficult when it gets to drawing lines on maps. Spatial planning for the built environment - would anyone say let us do more of that!

Deborah – from our perspective if it ain't broke don't fix it. We would like to see the FES model taken forward. LUS Pilots have not changed anything on the ground, probably due to lack of cash for moving forward. If Govt wants to look at ways of doing it, would see FES example as a leader over the pilots.

Simon- Not telling landowners what to do, can be a focus for incentives as a driver for where the public benefits are. Would be beneficial if that became possible, ie sustainable flood management. FES is only a small player in some catchments.

Chris – often a bottom up thing, drawn into talking to others to achieve the objective, if the right things are in the plan as long as you can spot the opportunities.

Deborah – gap is incentivising your neighbours to line it all up.

Simon – flooding is a good example, chicken and egg, no sense of all players working to the same game plan. Rhododendron example, can only play our part, inspire others, do best to engage them.

4. Meeting biodiversity obligations including deer management.

Deborah – how are you engaging with the Route Maps, building biodiversity obligations into what you are doing?

Chris – see it as the core reference doc for operations. Alongside FCS, have an implementation plan, see that continuing. Will report periodically. It is not a game changer or introduced anything new. Deer management, absolutely crucial to the value of the estate. The best thing we do, if nothing else, fundamental. Have a skilled team, working to focus on particularly vulnerable areas, target below 10 per square km, relating to improving habitats over time to 2020. Engage with others via deer management groups.

Simon – political context has changed. FES historically taken battering from other landowners, tense relationships now improving, more sense of shared agenda with threat of compulsion. Still way to go, need more of a consensus across rural Scotland on sustainable management of deer. RACCE work helpful and opportunity to give practical advice to Govt. Land Reform provisions on deer mgt and sporting rates an issue for some. LINK's position to set up rebate for those that manage deer in a sustainable way. RACCE to consider progress in autumn. Discussion about how our views are in there (at top level only), capacity issue for us to engage with 40 plus groups. Simon felt Richard Cooke's personal commitment to collaborative approach is very important. Native Woodland Survey, clear on what the job is there. FES and ADMG relations improved over years, sense of shared objectives. Beryl - can be compared to improved relationships on access, except for the usual suspects.

5. FES' approach to provisions of the Community Empowerment Act.

Jo - FES is not named in the Act though will be working in the spirit of it. Two things, transfer of assets to communities and framework for local communities to be more involved in management of public assets. As part of the Right to Buy legislation communities could declare at any time whether they wanted forest land, rather than just at time of sale. This has been positive and influential in Govt. The CEA takes it forward another step, with provision for lease as well as sale. Every part of Govt with land assets has to be open to community interest in taking on assets. FES is adapting its approach as time goes on. It tended to operate business and finance on a programme basis, will be important to look at local level involvement in land management planning, how budget is used, responding to a more local conversation on specific bits of land. The 10 districts cover broad areas, lots of issues to consider for longer term engagement in decision making, and facilitating those who want to manage assets for themselves. At moment it is consultative, ie on Wiat, cannot do it on every plan, have to work out how it meets needs without breaking the system wrt FES resources and community interest. FES tends to have processes, it will have to become more flexible.

Simon – some parts of FES earn money for other parts, like environmental work (with additional

Govt funding for this too), need to look at finance flows and consequences nationally, need a strategic framework to help people understand impacts across the board.

6. Update on Permitted Development Rights re Dec 2014 order.

Beryl recapped on the issue, including the NGO monitoring programme across 11 Local Authority areas and the NPs, and asked how FES was finding it. We had no issues with FES tracks though there are some problems with commercial forestry tracks not always being up to standard or following SNH guidance, and can be difficult to tell what is proposed from the level of information provided. Hoped it was not creating too much difficulty for FES.

Jo- was quite a big process to set up for FES, now system in place is working fine. Of 30 in, all decisions made without need for further input. One issue is the staff resource for no perceived benefit, and different timescales of 3 and 5 years between the various systems out of sync. She would like to see it regulated through the land management process looking forward -LAs are already statutory consultees on Land Management Plans – would like to see it more joined up.

Beryl - From LINK's perspective we don't know yet if landowners are constructing without prior notification, we will depend on information coming in over the summer; at mercy of members of the organisations involved in sending us alerts.[Alice – this bit was an aside and I think it can be omitted]. LINK participated in the SG review and stakeholders' meetings, the report is not yet out, will be pursuing that. There is a lot of voluntary effort involved in keeping up with proposals. A minority of councils do not put the information online and of those that do, they seem to manage their online portals differently.

Jo - If it was integrated with Forestry plans FES would be carefully looking at their roads, think that would remedy it and allow people to focus on the places where there are issues.

Wrap up: Agreed the meeting was very useful opportunity to catch up, and will keep liaison open as events unfold.

Chris sent links to reports below, and is happy to be contacted for questions, or further discussion.

[Action for the Environment on Scotland's National Forest Estate](#)
[Deer Management on the National Forest Estate](#)

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