



Sharon Robinson
Forestry Commission Scotland
Silvan House
231 Corstorphine Road
Edinburgh
EH12 7AT

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Scottish Environment LINK
2 Grosvenor House
Shore Road
Perth
PH2 8BD

Tel 01738 630804
Fax 01738 643290

enquiries@scotlink.org
www.scotlink.org

Dear Sharon,

Consultation on the National Forest Land Scheme

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment organisations comprised of 36 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society. Members own and manage around 186,000 ha of land of which at least 50,000 ha is woodland, our views are informed by our practical experience in land management. LINK Woodland Task Force member bodies listed at the end of this letter have expressed support for this response.

In summary we support the transfer of forest land for sustainable management by communities and for affordable housing and believe it provides an excellent opportunity to contribute to creating a socially and environmentally sustainable forest economy and culture in Scotland. However we do feel strongly that FCS should ensure public benefits are maintained and enhanced through transfers and provide more support to communities in developing management plans, resources and skills to enable these multiple goals to be achieved.

Community Acquisition

- We recognise that communities have the ability to deliver increased non-market benefits eg biodiversity, recreation, environmental education, rural development and regeneration. However, FCS land must only be managed by community groups where there is an agreed plan of sustainable management for a given period.
- Management aims should be compatible with the Scottish Forestry Strategy and other key national objectives including Agenda 21, the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy as well as UKBAP –as such they should promote the ethos of sustainable development, sustainable forest management and conservation of Scotland's biodiversity.
- FCS should recognise that different forests and communities may have diverse needs and objectives and encourage the delivery of a diverse and enriched national forest estate, environment and culture. As such the NFLS should

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provide advice, grants and regulation without being overly restrictive on future management. In particular, there is a real opportunity to develop forestry crofts in Scotland, promoting rural development and urban renewal and promoting forest certification.

The application process

- FCS should provide advice to communities regarding forest management – and access to inventory information, production forecasts, biodiversity data etc. The NFLS should consider how to enable communities to access adequate funds to seek advice and resources to undertake proper management and business planning.
- Existing commitments for forest management – for example application of the UK Woodland Assurance Standard, timber supply contracts, statutory designations - should be disclosed to the community prior to the start of any sale or lease process and will thus be integrated into future management. The community body may decide to take on those commitments or lease-back those commitments to FES or other bodies.

Valuation

- We are concerned about the proposed timing and mechanism for valuation. The current proposal suggests that FSC will only conduct a valuation after the community has formally applied to purchase the land. However much of the information from the valuation should be disclosed to the community prior to the start of any sale or lease process. This would enable a community body to better assess whether it wishes to engage resources in making an application.
- The valuation should be carried out by a body that is independent of both parties. The valuation should be based on the net financial contribution of the land to the FES, rather than the estimated market value. It should also consider the public benefit the sale/ lease.

Evaluation

- Applications should be evaluated independently and include representatives from the FCS National Committee for Scotland and from regional forestry forums
- Evaluations should be carried out with a vision of possible opportunities and public benefit within the framework of national strategic objectives for forest land – including the contribution that community management can have to biodiversity conservation and local development – and in consideration of the opportunity cost of non-sale. Contractual commitments, biodiversity designations or access rights should not be grounds for rejecting applications if capacity and commitment to appropriate management are addressed in the application
- The consultation period should not be extended beyond 60 days
- Management and business plans, as well as Scottish Land Fund and Regional Fora assessment, should be a key factor in evaluating the “capacity” and commitment of the community to manage the land and should take into consideration the forest condition and characteristics (including economic potential and biodiversity).

Land for Affordable housing

- Selection of sites should consider biodiversity and habitat conservation requirements such as the identification of Ancient Semi Natural Woodland, PAWS, other woodland on the Ancient Woodland Inventory and any other valuable semi natural habitat (including open ground). Care must also be taken to avoid impacting on cultural heritage, surrounding high biodiversity woodlands and species or forest habitat networks and open-ground habitat networks.
- Social and economic conditions and requirements should also be considered. We support the inclusion of Communities Scotland and local housing partners in the discussions but would also like to see local communities, perhaps through Community Councils, involved.
- The affordable housing scheme associated with this site should aim to be attractive and of an environmentally sensitive wooden-build, promoting the use of local skills and the use of heat efficient energy sources, particularly wood-sourced. New residents should also be encouraged to take an interest in their surrounding environment through access initiatives, interpretation, wildlife information and other such projects.
- Applications should be evaluated by experts in social and housing issues such as Communities Scotland and local authorities
- If trees are lost, we would like to see, as a condition of sale, compensatory/mitigation planting that would meet UKBAP native woodland targets and not damage important open-ground habitats and species.
- Revenue accrued from sale or money saved from removal of management responsibilities for land identified for affordable housing should be ring-fenced for the enhancement of public benefits from the remaining national forest estate

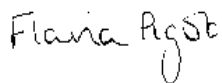
Sponsored Sale of Surplus Lands

- Scottish Environment LINK very much welcomes plans for notification of the sponsored sale of surplus land.
- However, there is concern that the criteria, procedure and strategic objectives of sponsored sale of surplus lands are unclear. These should be clearly elaborated – by a body that represents key national and local interests – such as national and regional forestry forums – prior to embarking on these sales.
- We do not advocate land is disposed of with high biodiversity value, instead, we advocate that FCS commits to restoring, maintaining and enhancing the land as a national asset. However, where surplus land is identified adjacent to land with high biodiversity value, registered charities which are recognised environmental, cultural heritage or recreation organisations should be eligible to purchase land as part of the first round along with communities, both as separate bidders as well as part of joint partnership bids.
- Conditions for sale and ownership should consider social, environmental and economic benefits in the future – rather than going to the highest bidder (who will not necessarily be the best caretaker/ manager)

Forest crofts

- One option not mentioned in the consultation document is the concept of forest crofts. This is where a group of prospective tenants, or a crofting organisation, can apply to buy or lease FCS land to establish crofts that will be based on sustainable woodland/ forestry management. Forest crofts will seek to develop systems of forest management that will contribute to the local economy and skills base whilst protecting and enhancing the ecological and cultural heritage of forests. Crofters should either work full time on the crofts or work part time within the local community and the crofts should not be managed as holiday homes.
- The NFLS should be developed to take account of the possibility of the creation of forest crofts and should provide a means by which forest crofting bodies can acquire and manage land.
- The creation of forest crofts must protect and enhance woodland and open-ground biodiversity, both on forestry plantations transferred from Forestry Commission Scotland under the NFLS, as well as SFGS-funded extensions onto existing common grazings/in-by-land. This includes forestry on and neighbouring designated sites - Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) - and for important species, such as golden eagle, breeding waders, geese, corncrake; and important habitats e.g. peatland and machair.

Yours sincerely



Convener, LINK Woodland Task Force

The following LINK member organisations support this statement:

Council for Scottish Archaeology
Reforesting Scotland
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB Scotland)
Scottish Native Woods
Woodland Trust Scotland