

Finding the Common Ground on Sustainable Upland Deer Management Civic Mediation Process

A summary of the process so far

1. Project Overview

In early 2021, Centre for Good Relations (CfGR) started conversations with the Finding the Common Ground (FtCG) Steering group - a set of key interested stakeholders who wanted to explore how to improve relations between different stakeholders, and build collaboration, in the deer management sector.

At that time, the Steering Group consisted of the Association of Deer Management Groups, Plantlife, Scottish Land and Estates, Trees for Life, Woodland Trust, with Cairngorms National Park Authority and NatureScot playing an advisory role.

In May 2021 the FtCG Steering Group commissioned CfGR to carry out an initial assessment, which involved talking to 46 people involved in the upland deer management sector to understand the issues and assess whether civic mediation would be beneficial to help build up relationships and support collaboration.

The findings of the assessment gave the Steering Group the confidence to go ahead with a full-year project, putting together a project brief, which was put forward by ADMG and Scottish Environment LINK as a joint project. Funding was gratefully received from ADMG, CNPA, Future Woodlands Scotland, Loch lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, NatureScot, Scottish Environment LINK and Woodland Trust.

For further background and detail, the FtCG Project Brief can be found [here](#) and a Summary of CfGR's Assessment can be found [here](#).

The project is being independently evaluated by Callum Leavey-Wilson (University of Edinburgh) to assess the value and impact of the process, and contribute as a case study to his PhD.

2. Process

The approach involves a process of **accountable dialogue**, taking place over the course of a year, and focuses on building better relationships by bringing people together who see an issue from different angles, using their skills and expertise to work out how, together, they can find solutions to that issue. The intention of mediation is to effect positive change in situations of conflict, contention or division. The work supports sustainable positive change and lays the basis for better collaborative working to agree on and develop long-term solutions.

The format of the delivery phase of the process involved an initial residential workshop, which will be followed up by additional workshops and mediative interventions. The workshop took place in Stirling on 29th - 31st August 2022 and was attended by 42 individuals from deer and land management, government (officials, agencies, regulators), environmental non-Government organisations, community forestry, science and research.

Following the workshop, In October 2022, Forestry and land Scotland (FLS) joined the FtCG Steering Group to support the ongoing process.

The workshop programme was varied and flexible, and included opportunities to explore:

- opinions about upland deer management - identifying elements or truths that all members of the group agree on
- the consideration of group/sector perspectives - highlighting positive and negative perceptions about their own group, and how they view others
- honest questions people wanted to ask each other about their perspectives
- the personal costs of working within the upland deer sector
- how different people involved in the upland deer sector felt about the losses they have experienced or may experience in the face of change
- what a 'Just Transition' looks like for people involved in management of the uplands, and identifying examples of good practice
- how current structures and functions within the upland deer sector are operating and ensuring inclusivity
- who holds positions of leadership in their sector/group and how they can influence others in a positive way
- commitments about working together that everyone can agree on going forwards

The workshop provided participants with opportunities to socialise informally with each other and connect with each other personally.

The overall feeling of the process was positive; with participants showing a general curiosity, open-mindedness, and willingness to participate, whilst recognising that there was a degree of initial scepticism and concern on the part of some people.

3. Key observations and messages from the workshop

- There is unanimous agreement that ongoing change in upland deer management needs to continue to help tackle the climate and nature crises
- Participants feel that those affected by change in their sector need support and leadership, and there are leadership roles for people in all aspects of the deer sector
- There is no clear understanding of what the ultimate vision is for sustainable upland deer management, or how to implement the DWG recommendations
- Participants in all aspects of the deer sector fear loss of something if the issues aren't effectively explored and worked through, from losing cultures and traditions to missing opportunities to achieve biologically diverse landscapes
- Some of the key conflicts come from differences in land management objectives between neighbouring properties; there is an appetite to learn from past differences and find ways to accept the legitimacy of different objectives
- Participants feel that change for the upland deer sector should enable a 'Just Transition' for everyone, but that this depends on factors such as:
 - better communication and transparency (helping people to understand why change is necessary)
 - having a long-term vision or roadmap to help people understand how they fit
 - agreeing on what it looks like to manage land in the 'public interest' alongside 'private and business interests'
 - understanding how people will be impacted and managing expectations
- Some parts of the deer sector need to be engaged more as part of this process (some of whom for a number of reasons were unable to attend this workshop), including, landowners, stalkers and the Scottish Gamekeepers Association
- Participants care about their role in the deer sector and recognise in each other the passion and commitment to work collaboratively

4. Areas for further dialogue

Participants were asked to consider the areas they felt there is a need for further dialogue as the process progresses. A summary of the key areas is captured below:

Leadership and communication

- Understanding the 'vision' for deer
- Understanding 'change', what it is, priorities, scale, pace
- Greater clarity on expected roles and tasks
- Gain clarity on Scottish Biodiversity Strategy objectives and how they will be developed
- Meaningful incentives (both financial and regulation)
- Eliminating/addressing unhelpful negative media rhetoric
- Integrated policy
- How do we do more to link farming and deer management?

Just Transition

- Engaging stalkers on the ground
- Gauging community interest in stalking/deer management
- Engaging those not in the room/bigger audience
- Exemplars of work/relatable case studies
- Finding opportunities for collaboration
- Maximising the potential of venison for Scottish society
- Meaningful incentives (both financial and regulation)
- Are we doing enough to democratise deer management?

Accountable dialogue

- Accountability
- Respect
- Statement of accord: something to remind us of what we have achieved together

Science and information

- Agreeing on impact and density targets
- Woodland capacity and woodland design
- How do we do more to link farming and deer management?

Note: For any duplication above, there was a recognition that some of these areas are relevant to

more than one context.

5. Commitments

The conversations culminated in the development of a set of commitments that the group are prepared to keep and communicate within their respective groups and organisations:

- We will recognise the person as well as the role that they play
- We will respect the fact that other people will have other objectives (and demonstrate respect in the way that we speak and interact)
- We need to carefully consider how we talk about deer in the public arena/in the press (think about how other people may interpret/take what we are saying)
- We will remember that we are talking about people's livelihood, their way of life, their culture
- We will recognise the factors that affect the pace of change
- We recognise issues around patience/impatience – and the need to take people with us
- We will inform our members and colleagues that this process has happened/is happening so that they are aware of the possibility that things can be moved on
- We will aim to be prepared so as to manage issues that come up that need to be acknowledged and dealt with
- We acknowledge the work that's been done by the pioneers who have been looking for ways to work positively on deer management (they have taken a lot of the flak and criticism for us over the past years)
- We will make efforts to understand the language/phrases which upset people and change the narrative in a way that is constructive
- We will engage with the existing Deer Management Groups and other associations/forums (and will do so respectfully)
- We will all proactively confirm and demonstrate that respect is important in Deer Management Group meetings (and we will do this in ways which acknowledge the past and learn from previous mistakes)
- We will encourage members of Deer Management Groups and other associations and networks to give timely, honest feedback as appropriate where there are issues of conflict/ things which are difficult & uncomfortable – and where things are going well



These commitments will be re-visited and refined as the process develops and more participants are engaged.

5. Participant feedback

Following the workshop, CfGR contacted participants to gather feedback on their thoughts and reflections on the workshop.

Participants acknowledged that the conversations that took place helped them to understand each other better and see the issues from others' perspectives.

Many were also encouraged by the openness and the positivity of the conversations, while recognising there is still a lot to do to address the challenges within the upland deer sector.

Some people felt more empowered within their role and acknowledged a realisation of the position of leadership they have in this sector.

6. The process ahead

Next steps in the process will include further workshops and interventions, which are currently being shaped by the outcomes and feedback of the Stirling workshop.

CfGR will engage with other stakeholders who were not present at the Stirling workshop.

Callum Leavey-Wilson will conduct his evaluation in parallel, and during the year after completion of this process.

Workshop 2

A further workshop was held online on 3rd November 2022. Invitees included all who attended the Stirling workshop in August and all those who were unable to attend at the time.

Focus of the workshop:

- a discussion to explore viewpoints on the vision, strategy and plans for deer management
- share updates with the group on further plans for the FtCG process, including other conversations we are having with people or groups who weren't at the Stirling gathering, and
- offer the opportunity for input to be shared within this group on how our commitments to each other are being progressed.

A presentation was given by a senior official to set the context for the first discussion point on the Scottish Government's strategy and vision for deer management in Scotland. Participants were then invited to discuss what they had heard in breakout groups and plenary. The key points from this discussion are summarised as follows:

- It was questioned whether the vision is shared [by all]
- Communication about the vision is not clear or engaging enough or relatable to the people 'on the ground' (land owners and managers)
- The vision needs to account for the impact of other herbivores, as well as deer
- The vision needs to show people what we are trying to get to through better management of deer
- There is still a lot of thinking to do around the details of the vision and the intention is for it to be done with stakeholders and in a joined up way with other drivers of change
- There are a lot of challenges affecting managers' ability to deliver deer culls,

including bottlenecks in the venison market

- Good practice in deer management should be acknowledged and promoted more
- There needs to be acknowledgement of biases and complexity
- Those who are not directly involved in [FtCG] process need to be engaged and brought along with it

CfGR facilitators outlined plans for the FtCG process going forwards:

- knowledge and understanding workstream - currently in development, workshop likely in February
- stalkers and landowners workstream - meeting in March
- final workshop in May/June
- CfGR conversations participants and steering group liaison throughout

The last session of the workshop gave an opportunity to share what actions, conversations and collaborations participants have been working on or developing since the Stirling workshop in August. Many of the participants have been developing positive dialogue and partnerships.