Evaluation of three forestry focussed sub-regional pilot studies delivered as part of the Land Use Strategy (LUS)

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Advice on regional and sub-regional forest planning

Modern forestry policy and practice focusses on the goal of sustainable development and delivering a range of benefits to society from trees and woodlands. To help ensure the expansion of well managed woodland and forests, Forestry Commission Scotland published *The Right Tree in The Right Place*, to provide advice to planning authorities when preparing forestry and woodland strategies, and to promote the adoption of a positive approach as standard practice. The key value of a forestry and woodland strategy is its ability to guide the future expansion and restructuring of woodlands in an area so that benefits for the local economy, communities and environment are maximised.

There are however other methods and approaches that can be used to recognise, evaluate and plan for the contribution that trees and woodlands can make towards the delivery of economic, social and environmental outcomes, taking into account local circumstances and factors as well as potential conflicts with other land uses. In line with this assertion, three sub-regional pilot projects were undertaken and evaluated to assess their ability to guide local level land use decision-making, in line with the overall objectives of the Land Use Strategy (LUS), and to assess their potential to help realise new woodland creation opportunities.

This note does not intend to replace the advice articulated in *The Right Tree in The Right Place*, rather, through the evaluation of three different pilot projects, it aims to recognise the potential strengths and benefits of sub-regional forest planning processes, as well as aspects that worked less well. The advice and issues raised in this note have a particular focus on engagement with stakeholders to address the challenges related to conflicts between different land uses and land management objectives. The conclusions (page 6) also include broad suggestions for future policy and practice in sub-regional forest planning.

Summary

Context for the LUS Forestry Focussed Sub-Regional Pilot Studies Evaluation Project

Scotland has an ambitious target to create **100,000ha** of new woodland during the period 2012-2022. This recognises the range of important benefits that well-designed, well-managed woodland and forests can deliver. However, Scotland's land resource is under pressure to deliver a range of benefits, this being the core premise of Scotland's first Land Use Strategy (LUS) which provides the overall policy context for land use and management in Scotland. As land is a finite resource, conflicts can occur between competing land uses, as can be the case with farming and forestry.

Recognising these pressures, the Woodland Expansion Advisory Group (WEAG) published its report in 2012 where it advises on the types of land best suited for tree planting in Scotland in the context of other land based objectives. It also sets out recommendations for promoting good-practice and local processes for woodland expansion for the delivery of multiple benefits. The WEAG report recognised that current, regional scale forest planning might not be the most suitable approach for identifying woodland expansion opportunities and delivering multiple benefits. Accordingly, WEAG recommended that sub-regional forest planning pilots should be undertaken across Scotland with a view to rolling out this approach more widely in

the future, if desirable. To this end, three sub-regional pilot studies were identified by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) through discussion with relevant stakeholders.

Following on from the WEAG pilots, the LUS Forestry Focussed Sub-Regional Pilot Studies Evaluation Project has been undertaken *"to inform future policy and practice in sub-regional forest planning, supporting the strategic objectives of Scotland's Land Use Strategy (LUS)"*. The evaluation considered the three sub-regional pilots to ascertain their ability to guide local level land use decision-making, in line with the overall objectives of the LUS. The evaluation also investigated the processes used in the development of each pilot, the balance of costs and benefits and the main strengths, weaknesses and areas of good-practice evidenced in the pilots.

Main findings of the LUS Forestry Focussed Sub-Regional Pilot Studies Evaluation Project

One of the main findings from the evaluation was that strengths and benefits identified across all three sub-regional pilots have the **potential to help realise new woodland creation opportunities**, supporting the WEAG's premise for sub-regional forest planning. As such, it may be appropriate to **roll out sub-regional forest planning more widely across Scotland**. Furthermore, the evaluation has highlighted how **sub-regional forest planning is a more meaningful scale** for engaging certain 'bottom-up' stakeholders, such as farmers and local communities, when compared to more traditional regional scale Forestry and Woodland Strategies. Finally, as there are limited opportunities to regulate for land use through current land use delivery mechanisms, **building consensus around a desired land use strategy**, often through informal partnership working approaches, is the key mechanism for land use delivery on the ground, including forestry and farming.

The research process and the sub-regional pilots

The overall aim of the evaluation was **to inform future policy and practice in sub-regional forest planning, supporting the strategic objectives of Scotland's LUS**. This aim was supported by five main objectives, indicated in the box to the right. The evaluation process comprised seven main stages including data collection and analysis. The data collection methods used in the evaluation were semi-structured interviews and criteria based document review. The semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key forest planning stakeholders.

Objectives of the evaluation
1. To examine and evidence the processes that helped to shape each pilot project
2. To assess and examine each pilot in terms of its potential ability to guide local level land use decision making to help meet the overall objectives of the LUS
3. To provide evidence on whether the pilot projects have influenced local level land use decision-making to help meet the overall objectives of the LUS
4. To provide evidence and views from responsible organisations and stakeholders in the pilot areas on whether the benefits of the pilots justify the costs and resources required for their development
5. To identify strengths, weaknesses and good-practice in the pilot frameworks

The three pilots were each different in terms of their scope, scale, activities and approach, as outlined further below:

- **Cowal:** the Cowal peninsula is located in south-west Scotland, forming an important feature within the Firth of Clyde. Cowal lies primarily within Argyll and Bute Council's jurisdiction, although its north-eastern portion falls within the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park. The peninsula is heavily forested (47% of the land area) and is subject to a range of additional constraints to further forest development and restocking (e.g. deep peat, high ground, waterbodies etc). The Cowal pilot is focussed on

a study and report commissioned by FCS that was finalised in September 2013. The study involved a 'Right Tree Right Place' type spatial analysis to assess strategic constraints and opportunities for forest development. This was supported by stakeholder engagement to scope out local level issues for consideration in forest planning and to help form a view as to whether or not there is capacity for further forest development on the peninsula.

- **Dumfries and Galloway:** the Dumfries and Galloway (D&G) local authority area is located in south-west Scotland bordering England at the Solway Firth. Forested land makes up approximately 31% of the total D&G area which, whilst less than Cowal, is still higher than the current Scottish average of 18%. The D&G pilot has broken the local authority area down into seven discrete sub-regions. Specific local policy has then been developed for each of these sub-regions to improve planning at this scale by outlining the specific local issues that applicants will need to consider in their woodland creation proposals. The sub-regional planning is also informed by more traditional 'Right Tree Right Place' type opportunities mapping which provides a strategic steer on land use categories for forest development.

- **Flow Country:** the Flow Country pilot (Flows) is located in the far north of Scotland in Caithness and Sutherland. The Flows pilot was challenging to define for the purposes of the evaluation. On discussion with local FCS personnel and other stakeholders it became evident that an appropriate focus for the Flows pilot would be issues surrounding the strategic removal of 1980s productive conifer forestry to support the restoration of high conservation importance peatland habitats. Furthermore, this work in the Flows is supported by existing partnerships, landscape planning tools and local level FCS guidance and decision-making processes that provide the basis for sub-regional forest planning in the area. These aspects of sub-regional forest planning were the focus of the evaluation.

Summary of key findings

It is recognised that all three sub-regional pilots, whilst having a distinct focus on forestry, have taken a broader view in terms of land use conflicts and aimed to integrate different land based objectives where possible – i.e. they have taken on the role of an integrated Land Use Framework type mechanism 'by proxy'. This integrated land use role is considered to be a key strength of all three pilots. This section on key findings of the evaluation is structured around the five objectives. The first part on general findings however cuts across several evaluation objectives.

General findings

- **Key themes emerging from the evaluation:** the evaluation identified some nineteen key themes for sub-regional forest planning. **Mechanisms** – the various means by which sub-regional forest plans can be translated into practical land management action on the ground – was identified as the most important theme across all three pilots and all categories of stakeholder engaged in the evaluation. The role of **consensus building** as a mechanism for delivering a desired sub-regional forest plan was highlighted as a particularly important issue given the absence of 'stick' based mechanisms to regulate land use.

- Land use integration is an important consideration in sub-regional forest planning: a theme on **land use interactions and integrated land use** was identified as an important aspect of sub-regional forest planning in all three pilots. In essence, considering the wider land use impacts of forestry on the balance of different land uses within a management area (i.e. land use balance) is an important planning issue at this scale. In some instances it was felt that sub-regional forest plans effectively take on the role of an **integrated** land use strategy 'by proxy'.

- Different aspects of sub-regional forest planning can be more or less important for different stakeholders: the theme on **land use interactions and integrated land use** was identified as a particularly important issue for FCS indicating that whilst FCS' primary remit is forestry, wider land use issues are undoubtedly a key consideration. On the other hand, a theme on **partnerships and governance** was identified as a high importance issue for local authorities and NGOs.

- Data and evidence is a critical issue for NGOs and private sector stakeholders in the Flow Country pilot: the **data and evidence** required to underpin sub-regional forest planning and the various processes therein was identified as a critical issue in the Flows pilot given the contentious nature of the woodland removal policy that the data supports. This may be a particular issue for private sector forestry interests and conservation NGOs as these stakeholders arguably have the most to lose / gain from woodland removal.

Processes used to develop the pilot frameworks – key findings

- **A range of methods and approaches have been used by the pilots to develop policy frameworks and integrate LUS principles:** methods used by the sub-regional pilots focus on the following categories: **spatial analysis**; **ecosystem services**; and **stakeholder engagement**. Many of these methods appear to be working well and could be of wider relevance to sub-regional forest planning practice elsewhere in Scotland.

- **Central importance of developing a more detailed understanding of local level forest planning issues:** all three pilots focus on identifying, assessing and collating local level forest planning issues i.e. the main constraints and opportunities for forest development at the sub-regional scale. These collated lists of local issues are the primary means for securing new planting opportunities whilst maintaining a desired land use balance in the management area, supporting the delivery of multiple benefits. All three pilots have sought to build consensus on the lists of local level planning issues through stakeholder engagement, recognising that consensus is the key mechanism for delivering a desired land use strategy in the absence of stronger land use regulation. The D&G pilot adopts a particularly clear and structured approach to collating and presenting local level planning issues for each sub-region considered.

- **The main purpose of stakeholder engagement in sub-regional forest planning is to build consensus on local level planning issues:** building consensus is critical as a mechanism for land use delivery. To this end the pilots have used a range of stakeholder engagement approaches including 1-2-1 meetings, group meetings, workshops and site meetings to discuss the practical implications of sub-regional forest policy. There is a tendency to focus on technical stakeholders as opposed to the wider public and affected communities though the range of technical stakeholders engaged can be diverse e.g. statutory agencies, NGOs, private sector forestry interests, universities, deer management groups and representative bodies.

- **None of the pilots adopted formal partnership working arrangements:** this approach worked well for the D&G and Flows pilots: in the D&G case, a highly structured approach to

stakeholder engagement was adopted and priority stakeholders were engaged early-on and bought-in to the process; in the Flows case, there is a long history of partnership working and stakeholders are used to working together. Conversely, the absence of formal partnership working arrangements in the Cowal pilot caused some issues, primarily due to cross-boundary nature of the pilot.

Guiding local level land use decisions to deliver the LUS' strategic objectives

- **All ten LUS principles are relevant to sub-regional forest planning:** dependent on the specific context, all ten LUS principles are relevant to sub-regional forest planning. The only principle that was found to be non-applicable in some contexts was the LUS principle on **vacant and derelict land (VDL)** which covers issues around assessment of the VDL resource, quantity and condition of VDL, constraints and opportunities etc.

- **The pilots integrated the LUS principles to varying degrees:** the D&G pilot integrated the LUS principles most comprehensively, in contrast to the Cowal and Flows pilots which only integrated some of the LUS principles fully. This finding is intuitive as the D&G pilot encompasses a much broader spatial area (the whole local authority) and is therefore likely to encounter a much broader range of land use / management issues.

- **The LUS principle on climate change has only been integrated fully by one pilot:** the LUS principle on **climate change** is critical given that the LUS is a requirement of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. Full integration of this principle is premised on consideration of climate change mitigation **and** adaptation, however it was only translated fully by the D&G pilot which included detailed consideration of mitigation issues as well as some consideration of adaptation within the forestry sector and the role of forestry supporting adaptation in other sectors.

Costs and benefits of the pilots

- **The costs associated with developing the pilot frameworks are generally small:** financial and in-kind (staff time) costs are small and may even be negligible where sub-regional forest planning is undertaken as part of a more traditional, regional scale FWS (as was the case with the D&G pilot) as opposed to a stand-alone exercise (Cowal and Flows). Costs associated with the Flows are higher given the lengthy

timescales involved and the contentious nature of woodland removal / greater need to build consensus through more extensive stakeholder engagement.

- **The balance of costs and benefits associated with sub-regional planning is tipped in favour of benefits across all pilots:** this may be particularly relevant for government agencies / regulators who frontload costs (officer time) to secure consensus around detailed local forest planning issues early-on to minimise costs associated with case work once the pilot framework is adopted.

Strengths and weaknesses of the pilots

- **The evaluation identified a range of strengths and weaknesses within the pilot project frameworks:** for example, various aspects of stakeholder engagement were identified as key strengths of the Cowal pilot and stakeholder meetings / workshops provided an opportunity for networking and dialogue that might not otherwise have happened. There were no specific weaknesses or drawbacks to the D&G pilot approach.

- **Data limitations were identified as key weaknesses within the Cowal and Flows pilots:** the accuracy and / or granularity of key datasets, as inputs to land use planning models and spatial analyses, was identified as a key weakness in both the Cowal and Flows pilots. The absence of 'perfect data' in this regard highlights the importance of site level assessment / FCS forest planning case work as a key regulatory 'backstop' to ensure that practical land management decision-making on the ground is aligned to regional and / or sub-regional forest plans and strategies.

Conclusions

The evaluation has led to the identification of some broad suggestions for future policy and practice in sub-regional forest planning. It should be noted however that as the research undertaken was based on only three pilot cases, the findings, conclusions and broad recommendations are indicative only. In this regard, it is recommended that Scottish Government and Forestry Commission Scotland undertake further research and deliberation before any firm action on sub-regional forest planning policy and practice is taken (e.g. rolling out the approach more widely).

It is also worth noting that a direct comparison between the three pilots is not necessarily desirable as each model of sub-regional forest planning considered has its own strengths and weaknesses. In particular, these sub-regional analyses have been designed to meet specific local circumstances and objectives. Notwithstanding this issue, the following outlines the main conclusions and, where relevant, recommendations, identified through the evaluation project:

1. **The strengths and benefits of the pilot frameworks identified in the evaluation have the potential to help realise new planting opportunities:** many of the identified benefits of the pilot frameworks can help to make the case for further woodland expansion within the management area, supporting the WEAG's rationale for sub-regional forest planning. Example benefits in this regard include: building consensus amongst stakeholders that additional forestry development can be accommodated (Cowal); and identifying fine grained planting opportunities within constrained landscapes (D&G FWS). Given this, it may be appropriate to roll out sub-regional forest planning approaches more widely across Scotland, supporting the Scottish Government's woodland expansion targets. Sub-regional planning may be particularly helpful where there are areas of potential land use conflict and / or where the local authority area is diverse (see Conclusion No.5).

2. **A qualitative approach to assessing land use balance / cumulative effects of woodland creation is preferable:** qualitative assessments of land use balance are preferable to 'masterplanned' approaches that attempt to quantify or prescribe the balance of different land uses within a management area e.g. by 'drawing lines on a map'. Qualitative descriptors can provide a useful articulation of what matters in a management area (e.g. important land uses, key natural assets, management issues etc) and can reflect the dynamic nature of land use i.e. qualitative descriptors can be readily updated to account for land use / management changes on the ground.

3. **Overall, whilst approaches need to be tailored to specific local circumstances, the Dumfries and Galloway model has a number of key strengths that could make it**

preferable in a range of forest planning contexts: the D&G pilot has a number of key strengths, no identified weaknesses and integrated all ten LUS principles (eight principles were integrated fully including the principle on **climate change**). Also, costs associated with sub-regional planning may be lower when integrated with a more traditional, regional scale FWS (sub-regional activities can be 'piggy-backed' onto regional activities e.g. stakeholder engagement) and the D&G model provides a very clear, structured approach for presenting sub-regional issues, potentially helping to expedite application procedures by providing clear guidance for applicants. Furthermore, a D&G type model has been adopted in the recently published Ayrshire and Arran FWS. Despite this, it is important to stress that drawing a direct comparison between the three pilots is not necessarily desirable. Each pilot has its own strengths and weaknesses and has been designed to address specific local circumstances and objectives.

4. **Sub-regional forest planning can increase the relevance of FWS to 'bottom-up' stakeholders:** the sub-region is a much more meaningful scale for engaging 'bottom-up' stakeholders such as farmers and local communities. Better engagement in this regard can help to achieve agreement on local level issues, supporting forest planning by consensus. Notwithstanding this, there is generally a need for better engagement of the wider public and local communities in sub-regional forest planning.

5. **The adoption of sub-regional forest planning approaches would add value to regional scale FWS in most contexts:** sub-regional planning may be particularly relevant where the local authority area is highly diverse (e.g. in terms of landscape, management issues etc), where there is potential for land use tension / conflict or where there is a particular need to optimise land use change in order to deliver a desired balance of different land uses (including farming and forestry) within the management area.

6. **Formal approaches to partnership working in sub-regional forest planning may not be necessary for the delivery of desired outcomes:** this may particularly be the case where key priority stakeholders are involved early-on and buy-in to the planning process or where there is a long history of partnership working between relevant stakeholders. However, formal partnership working approaches (e.g. where partners are required to sign-up to a formal partnership agreement or work under the prescriptions of a formalised Terms of Reference document) may be required where the management area crosses jurisdictional boundaries or where the first two criteria are not met.

7. **Consensus building is a vital mechanism for the delivery of a desired land use strategy in the absence of suitable 'stick' based mechanisms:** there are limited opportunities to regulate for land use within the current land use delivery 'landscape' therefore building consensus around a desirable land use strategy is the key mechanism for delivery on the ground. This approach works where land use provides revenue (e.g. farming and forestry) but is less effective otherwise. In particular, land use / management change may be less likely to take place on private commercial land where there is no financial incentive to do so (new or better revenue). This is less of an issue for forestry (which provides revenue) but

can constrain the delivery of integrated land use strategies that include provision for non-revenue providing land uses (e.g. peat).

8. **The balance of costs and benefits in sub-regional forest planning is tipped towards benefits:** financial and in-kind (staff time) costs associated with sub-regional forest planning can be minimal, especially where the sub-regional aspects are delivered alongside more traditional, regional scale FWS aspects (see Conclusion No.3). There can be a particular benefit for statutory agency type stakeholders as front-loading costs (staff time) can reduce costs later on (e.g. staff time spent on forest planning case work).

9. **Sub-regional mechanisms should be subject to full public consultation and formally adopted by local authorities:** full consultation can increase the democratic accountability of sub-regional policy and frameworks, ensuring that mechanisms are robustly defensible. Formal adoption of sub-regional forest plans within local authorities (e.g. as supplementary guidance to Local Development Plans) can help to ensure that they are actively used as inputs to woodland creation application and Forest Plan consultations, by local authorities and other consultees.