National Stakeholder Group Meeting - Biodiversity

Draft notes of Meeting

17 April 2024

1. **Welcome and Introductions**

* Alan welcomed everyone to the meeting and chaired a roundtable of introductions.

**Attendee’s:**

Mairi Gougeon– **Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands** (presenting)

Alan McDonnell – SE LINK and Trees for Life

Andrew Weatherall – SE LINK and RSPB

Andy Ford –CNPA

Andy Rockall –Community Woodland Association

April Armstrong – Confor Scotland manager

Chris Stark – Clyde Climate Forest

Claudia Rowse – Naturescot

Colin Edwards – Forest and Land Scotland

David Leslie – Confor Processors Group

Deborah Long – SE LINK

Don Milton – National Access Forum

Guy Watt – Scottish forest and timber technologies industry group

Helen McKay – Chief Forester of Scotland

Kim Dowsett – Climate Change Committee

James Pendlebury – Forest Research

Jayne Ashley – South of Scotland Enterprise

Leona Baille – Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park

Louise Simpson –Institute of Chartered Foresters

Niall Evans – Lantra

Richard Heawood – Historic Environment Scotland

Rob Clarke –Highlands and Islands Enterprise Simon Ritchie – Woodland Trust

Thomas Widrow – John Muir Trust

Liz Walker – Scottish Government Nature Division

Rahul Singh – Scottish Government (Ministerial support)

Rachel Palmer – Scottish Government (Ministerial support)

Dave Signorini – Scottish Government (presenting)

Helen Sellars – Scottish Forestry (presenting and break-out chair)

Alan Hampson – Scottish Forestry (chair)

Juli Titherington – Scottish Forestry (minutes)

Bob Frost - Scottish Forestry (breakout-chair)

David Ferguson - Scottish Forestry (minutes)

Brendan Callaghan – Scottish Forestry

1. **Opening Remarks – Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands**

The Cabinet Secretary gave the opening comments and covered the strategic framework, how biodiversity is in decline and the importance of woodland biodiversity. Key points:

* How all woodland types can create an environment where biodiversity can thrive, and to think about this in a holistic way.
* The importance of mitigation including woodland creation, to limit the adaptation needed, and the importance of building resilience. The two crisis are inextricably linked.
* Ensure that forestry continues to deliver towards our climate change objectives the economy and jobs, whilst delivering for our people and communities and supporting nature.
* Look forward to hearing about priorities and what tools/approaches we can develop to deliver more biodiversity benefits in the context of SFM.

A question was posed on integration for forestry and agriculture in the Agriculture Bill and secondary legislation. The opportunity to better integrate support schemes for forestry and agriculture is being pursued as part of the Agricultural Reform Programme - grant support for forestry will be covered in secondary legislation.

1. **Scottish Biodiversity Framework update – David Signorini** Interim Director of Environment & Forestry,Scottish Government

David updated the group on the framework of policy around biodiversity, including the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, delivery plans, Natural Environment Bill and statutory targets. The Strategy is to be published in Summer 2024.

1. **Woodland Biodiversity – Helen Sellars** Head of Sustainable Forest Management, Scottish Forestry

Helen presented her paper covering the international and domestic context; how we measure biodiversity; what measures do we have and what do they tell us about biodiversity; what are the key challenges to improving biodiversity; and next steps for research, monitoring and metrics. The paper also lists current guidance and tool available for info.

Key points:

* Biodiversity is changing and declining
* NFI Woodland Ecological condition (WEC) is the most comprehensive assessment we have for all our woodlands and provides a proxy for biodiversity
* All of our woodlands have the potential to contribute by having more of these characteristics.
* Challenges for improving woodland biodiversity are grouped as: resilience to climate change; managing over-grazing; woodland management and creation and resourcing.

The paper can be downloaded here:

[Background Paper - National Forestry Stakeholder Group - 17 April 2024](https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/1573-national-forestry-stakeholder-group-background-paper-improving-biodiversity-across-all-forests-and-woodlands-april-2024/viewdocument/1573)

There was a comment about how we could make more use of the work done on sample plots for production forecast for 3-4 cycles and the information in there on species diversity. The point was made that our forests are not the monocultures they were - there is much more diversity and open space now.

1. **Discussion around the two questions posed relation to priorities in the face of climate change, and what new tools or approaches could be developed.**

**Herbivore pressure**

* To enable species rich, woodland and greater natural regeneration, requires focus on browsing pressure.
* By allowing woodlands to regenerate themselves we make them more resilient
* The more we reduce deer the more natural regeneration will be created
* Funding for control of herbivores needs to be part of funding for land generally, because this is not just a forestry issue. It needs to be embedded in the Agriculture bill.
* A campaign on effects of deer to influence public opinion was suggested, as well as promotion of the use of deer and creation of deer larder network (Good Food Nation, National Park branding)

**Climate change and understanding the implications for our woodland**

* Need to balance protecting what we can, whilst also accepting that some change is inevitable and working to understand what that looks like.
* Need to look at tipping points and what we may need to do – what will things look like under 3 degree warming (and associated unstable climate).
* Maybe we need to look internationally for (timber) species if we are looking at a 3 degree rise then native may not be the way to go.
* We can no longer ‘restore’ favourable condition – climate change has already progressed and we know now that we will lose some habitats and species so we need to plan for that.
* Need to know what is the adaptive capacity and how do we adapt – going back is not an option - Helen’s research project.
* Suggestion to take a triage approach – need to address the drivers of change towards increased resilience. So we need to maximise biodiversity to maximise resilience.

**Woodland management and creation**

* Spatially target efforts on best place for ecological outcomes and connectivity/native woodlands/natural regeneration
* Needs to be a focus on restoring nature networks and systems, rather than designated areas.
* Need to focus on existing woodland management and also need new woodland and the connectivity that brings to address fragmentation.
* Suggestion to focus on specialist biodiversity in woodland habitats and not just generalists.
* Be clear on what we are we trying to protect and why. It takes 60-100 years to take on the niche role so we can’t want for new woodland to be created.
* Concerns that we get over-protective of areas or species, and the risk that we then become unable to deliver anything.
* Need to focus on (align legislation) systems and functionality and not features.
* Should we be looking at incentivising work regionally based on local priorities – such as nature networks, expanding up the hillsides? Need to allow for spatial movement of woodlands.

**Scale, monitoring and resourcing**

* A question was raised around what scale are we looking at (landscape or stand) and how will it be paid for?
* Also how we plan to measure this change?
* Need to drive change at pace and scale
* Need other landowners, land managers and sectors to do their bit on biodiversity too.

**UKFS/UKWAS**

* Views were shared that our productive woodlands can deliver more for biodiversity but that creates more constraints.
* Are UKWAS and UKFS are working enough, in terms of encouraging better delivery? Concerns that 65% single species is too high.
* Need to recognise the positive change already taking place due to UKFS/UKWAS but also that more needs to be done.
* Productive conifer pay for the delivery of other biodiversity related work.
* Need to think about people and livelihoods and retain an economically viable sector.
* Reiteration that all trees and woodland can deliver on biodiversity – all trees provide a habitat function. Highlight of a recent finding of rare fungus on spruce.

**People and communities**

* People and communities need to be at the heart of this, we need to understand how they feel about it, and they need to be engaged.
* At high level, people are aware of the crises, but translating that into action on the ground is something that needs more work.
* Need to develop efforts to further engage the wider public.
* Raising people’s awareness of the importance of forestry for community, environment and economy – draw out the cumulative benefits.
* More awareness of Rhododendron impacts

**Definitions**

* Be clear that we are talking about a broad definition of woodland, i.e all the open space, unplanted areas and margins
* Be clear about climate change is more than temperature (in the question)

**Skills and knowledge exchange**

* Need farmers, local communities and estates etc. which are more informed and better positioned to help deliver these goals
* Use of demonstration forests to show what has been done and the effect it has - peer-to-peer learning
* Helping land owners with the options available to them
* Make better use of data

**Tools**

* Something similar could be done to the farm biodiversity audit App
* Rethink Carbon App and stacking of biodiversity credits. Proposed a two-way system, by both land manager but also citizen science

1. **Summing up – Alan Hampson** Head of Policy and Practice

**Alan summed up the meeting with a number of key points as follows:**

* Forestry should not be considered in isolation – it needs to be seen as part of wider landscapes and integrated with other land-uses, especially agriculture.
* Forests need to be viewed in an extensive way - consider system functionality, networks/catchment scale, not just individual features.
* It is important to address at landscape scale, herbivore impact – especially deer.
* Knowledge exchange through peer-to-peer learning and upskilling, together with technological approaches, can help managers assess what exists and identifies opportunities to enhance biodiversity.
* Targeting is key to identify priorities and focus skills, knowledge, expertise, and funding accordingly.
* It is important to agree common messages on the benefits that everyone can champion.

1. **Next steps and close**

* We will circulate a note to everyone and to the Cabinet Secretary
* There is a lot to take away and consider – this will help to shape the SBS action plan and the SF resilience AP work. For example: further consideration will be given to local level app to assess biodiversity.
* In relation to the biodiversity research project outlined by Helen (complementing the carbon study) views are welcomed (by mid-May to Helen please)
* Thanks to everyone for coming and their contributions.