

An evaluation of partnerships between Forestry Commission Scotland and Community Groups 2009/10.

Community Woodland Association March 2010

Introduction

Many established relationships between community groups and Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) are termed as partnerships. Styles vary from informal arrangements with no written agreement, to more formal partnerships including those with joint management structures. A range of community organisations are involved: community councils, formally established organisations representing both communities of place and interest, as well as local development partnerships and statutory bodies.

The extent of community engagement and scope of community aspirations varies greatly: some groups seek information and involvement, others volunteering opportunities, others aspire to long term acquisition of management control. Likewise, some partnership arrangements cover all aspects of forest management, including timber harvesting and contracting, others focus on specific areas of activity, e.g. recreation and environment.

A 2006 study commissioned by FCS/Community Woodlands Association (CWA)/Highlands & Islands Enterprise – Community Land Unit¹ examined partnership working, to evaluate whether the current partnerships represent the best working arrangements for both the community groups and FCS, to understand how well FCS and community groups work together and to identify best practice; benefits and value of the partnerships; problems and aspirations; and opportunities for improvement.

Following the publication of the Scottish Forestry Strategy (SFS) in 2006 a suite of progress indicators were identified. Under the SFS Community Development theme the following indicator was chosen:

"Independent satisfaction rating of community partnerships on the national forest estate".

The full description of that indicator and methodology can be viewed at: [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/sfsindicators.pdf/\\$FILE/sfsindicators.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/sfsindicators.pdf/$FILE/sfsindicators.pdf). The baseline figure for this indicator was calculated from the written survey responses carried out during the 2006 study.

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The executive summary can be seen at [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fcsevaluationpartnershipsexecsummary.pdf/\\$FILE/fcsevaluationpartnershipsexecsummary.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/fcsevaluationpartnershipsexecsummary.pdf/$FILE/fcsevaluationpartnershipsexecsummary.pdf)

In 2009 CWA were commissioned by FCS to update this figure by way of a follow-up questionnaire survey of community groups working in partnership with FCS.

CWA drafted a questionnaire in discussion with FCS & CWA staff. The selection and phrasing of questions would enable comparison with the results from the 2006 study and more importantly reflect current attitudes. The questionnaire, and text of the covering email, are reproduced in Appendix A.

Identification of Partnerships

FCS provided a spreadsheet of community partnership contacts, compiled from data supplied by the 10 Forest Districts totalling 120 groups.

CWA, in collaboration with FCS, reviewed this and agreed a final list of 90 current groups to contact. These appear to comprise 53 Community land or woodland groups (including a number of Development trusts), 18 other voluntary sector groups (often representing communities of interest), 9 community councils and 10 other statutory bodies or partnerships.

The effort need to compile a final list with accurate contact information from the initial contacts provided indicates that an improved system for managing this information within Forest Districts is required. Furthermore, a number of proposed community contacts were with individuals/ groups that responded to the questionnaire that they did not have an active relationship with the FCS. This raises the question whether the current lists used by FES for determining numbers of community partnerships is accurate and the number of active partnerships more likely to be <100.

There were significant regional differences in the distribution, with 43 of the 90 contacted partnerships in the 3 "Highland" forest districts: North Highland, Inverness, Ross & Skye, and Lochaber. This probably reflects the longer history of community involvement and engagement in the Highlands.

The number of partnerships reported (8) and contactable (4) in Scottish lowlands FD was surprisingly low, given the prominent role of social forestry objectives in this district, although it may be that this Forest District does not categorise the majority of its community relationships as partnerships.

Responses

Questionnaires were sent out by email with a brief covering letter, on 9 February 2010. The questionnaire was then resent to those who hadn't responded by that point, with a reminder, on 12 February 2010. The original closing date of 21 February was extended to 28 February, and no further responses have been received since that date.

The survey elicited a total of 36 returns, including one that read: "i received your questionnaire but as we have had no contact from fcs never mind a meeting, i am unable to respond." Bellsquarry woodland working group.

All returned questionnaires were acknowledged with a thank you email.

Returns were received from 20 community land / woodland groups, 8 statutory bodies & partnerships, 7 other community groups and 1 community council; i.e. the highest response rate was from statutory bodies and partnerships, with

a good response from the voluntary sector and a very low response from community councils – this was in line with expectations and previous experience.

Again there was considerable variation between forest districts, with 21 (a clear majority) responses from the 3 “Highland” Forest Districts.

A breakdown of the distribution of partnerships identified, contacted, and responding, is presented below:

Forest District	Questionnaires distributed	Questionnaires returned
Cowal & Trossachs	7	0
Dumfries and Borders	7	3
Galloway	6	1
Inverness, Ross and Skye	22	11
Lochaber	12	5
Moray & Aberdeen-shire	9	3
North Highland	9	5
Scottish Lowlands	4	3*
Tay	9	4
West Argyll	5	1
	90	36

* Including Bellsquarry – see comment above.

Questionnaire responses

Responses for the “closed” questions are tabulated below. Percentages are calculated according to the number of responses to each question (shown, e.g. as n=32), which was not constant – not all respondents answered all questions.

How long have you been involved with the project /partnership? (n=32)		
Less than 5 years	11	34%
5 – 9 years	9	28%
10 or more years	12	38%

Mean length of involvement reported by respondents was 8.4 years.

Do you feel that there is mutual understanding of objectives and work programme between the community and FCS? (n=32)		
Yes	18	56%
No	2	6%
Partial	12	38%

How do you rate the level and type of communication between FCS and the community? (n=33)		
Excellent	7	21%
Adequate	20	61%
Poor	6	18%

How often do community representatives meet with FCS staff?				
	About practical, operational matters? n=31		About planning and strategic matters? n=32	
Weekly	1	3%	0	0%
Monthly	7	23%	5	16%
Quarterly	4	13%	6	19%
Not at all	3	10%	3	9%
Other (please specify)	16	52%	18	56%

Other broke down as follows:

Practical, operational matters: As necessary 6, half-yearly 2, annually 1, other answers 7

Planning and strategic matters: As necessary 7, half-yearly 2, annually 4, other answers 5

Do the achievements of the community-FCS partnership meet your organisation's expectations of the partnership? (n=32)		
Yes – completely	7	22%
No – not at all	3	9%
Not yet	6	19%
So far to date, but there is more to do	16	50%

NB: Responses to this question will be used to determine the "independent satisfaction rating of community partnerships on the national forest estate."

Does your organisation aspire to change the community-FCS partnership structure to enable delivery to work better? (n=32)		
Continue with partnership as presently constituted	19	59%
Continue with partnership with different structure	5	16%
Community acquisition under the National Forest Land Scheme	3	9%
Other – please explain	5	16%

Others: respondents generally indicated that they did not feel the question was particularly appropriate – they didn't have a partnership as such.

Analysis of empirical questions.

As a stand-alone survey, responses to the closed questions as tabulated above present a generally positive picture of FCS-Community partnerships from the community perspective. A majority of respondents felt that there was mutual

understanding of objectives, at least adequate communication, and wished to continue with the partnership as presently constituted, as it had met expectations to date although there was more work to do.

Analysis of Open questions.

In addition to the closed questions noted above, two questions were presented with text boxes permitting more discursive answers.

What are the key issues or planned projects facing your community-FCS partnership in the next 3 year? Please list:

This question provoked a wide range of responses which are not easily tabulated. Some respondents took the opportunity to make general comments on the partnership, some very positive:

We would like to develop closer working relationships with the local Forest Enterprise team. A new 'Community' member of staff has recently been appointed, this is great news

The key issue for this partnership is to continue the excellent relationship that exists between partners and continue it for the benefit of countryside users and the mutual benefit partners will gain for their organisations by doing so.

and some very negative:

Project was systematically strangled by [FES staff member] in concert with others. FCS constantly moved the goalposts, reneged on previously agreed positions, deliberately misled key partners...

How would we know?! We know nothing about FCS future plans for our area

A few respondents cited lack of communication, and delays in implementation as "issues", e.g.

We used to meet FCS official visitors from around the world who were interested in how FCS communicated with the local community. We were invited to add to this input. This no longer happens.

Future Projects identified by community groups	
Recreation & visitor facilities	9
Biodiversity / Environmental enhancement	6
Health / Education / Youth groups	5
Other	3

19 respondents identified future projects, as categorised above (some identified more than one category of project). A couple of answers eluded categorisation, e.g. *Care and maintenance of current facilities*

"Other" included: *Renewable energy supply, housing, redevelopment of sewerage works*

What do you see as the main barriers to progress? Please list:

Responses to this question were much easier to tabulate, as below.

Main barriers to progress identified:	
Funding	11
Communication	8
Limitations & lack of commitment of FCS and other agencies	8
Limitations (manpower, time, resources) of voluntary sector groups	5
Other	2

Concerns over funding referred to both local FD budgets and the perceived national financial difficulties.

No real barriers apart from severe national financial difficulties

Funding! Both organisations are in difficult times with regard to budgets.

Several respondents made extensive comments regarding communication:

In the past we have had several meetings with FCS over the years, particularly with regard to the SAC designation in this area. I personally came away with a feeling that meetings for the FCS were a box that had to be ticked - 'Community consulted? Yes. Now we can carry on as intended!' The process of consultation was completed but there never appeared any genuine intent to address our concerns, or keep us informed.

It is unfortunate that although FCS know they need to communicate with the local community they invariably forget to do so until the last minute. If communication could be done at an earlier stage we would feel that the relationship is more of a partnership. We feel that there has been a tendency for FCS to turn inwards over the past 3-4 years after a period of extending a very long arm to welcome us more into their world.

Whilst another made a recommendation for improvement

It would be fantastic if FCS staff throughout Scotland could be trained in community liaison/ consultation - and all recognised the value of community... singing from the same song-sheets!

The category "Limitations & lack of commitment of FCS and other agencies" covered a range of responses from the FCS-specific:

Lack of interest on part of FCS.

Lack of a settled contact in FCS.

to more general comments on

Bureaucracy: the current political climate seems to be making people frightened of committing themselves.

Government/civil service rules, practices & obscurity

There was also recognition of the limitations of community groups:

Maintaining the motivation of volunteer work force.

We are a small community with a very small proportion interested in Heritage preservation and interpretation and those that are come mostly from the older members of the community therefore our manpower resources are limited.

Discussion

Overall headline picture: general positive view from respondents, but with some emerging dissatisfaction, widespread concerns over future resource allocation and the level and effectiveness of communications. Also it is clear that Forest District information management needs to be improved. Our analysis is as follows:

Partnerships are seen to be of value by the majority of respondents, who have a wide range of projects they wish to progress through partnership working; however, there are number of improvements which could enhance outcomes of future partnership working.

1 Many partnerships date from a time when partnerships were the only option available. Thus a range of relationships between FCS and external local stakeholders have been couched in terms of "partnership", not always appropriately so. Simultaneously, internal targets seem to have incentivised the identification of partnerships.

There is a need to establish a realistic baseline number of partnerships, whilst realigning internal targets to incentivise quality rather than quantity of relationships and outcomes.

2 The perceived decline in communication may reflect the passage of time and a revision to past practice – the community partnership is no longer the shiny new thing, and in the face of new projects and pressures on FD staff it may be easier to allow communications to slide, and forget about the community interest until the last minute

There is a need to restate the importance of (mutual) communication, and clarify the Forest District responsibilities with respect to communications. (note: not necessarily in terms of a rigid calendar of meetings – more in terms of making sure that communities are timeously informed)

3 Other concerns reflect a mismatch in expectation – communities may be fully committed to the partnership, but the Forest District may not be able to be so – delivering on community expectations is only one of the District's objectives, and national policy changes may override local aspirations.

There is a need for greater clarity at the outset as to the extent and limits of Forest Districts' ability to deliver, and a stronger commitment (centrally) to supporting Forest Districts in the delivery of local aspirations.

Appendix A

The questionnaire, and the text of the covering email, are reproduced below.

Dear Sir / Madam

I've sent you this email as you are listed by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) as the main contact for <name of group>. If you are no longer the main contact I would be grateful if you could forward this email to the appropriate person.

The Community Woodlands Association has been commissioned to carry out this study, which aims to evaluate and identify opportunities for improvement in partnership working between communities and FCS. The survey should only take 10 -15 minutes. Please answer as many questions as possible. Thank you for taking the time to help us in this study, your input and feedback is much appreciated.

Please return this questionnaire to Caroline Derbyshire at admin@communitywoods.org by Friday 20th February. Should you have any queries regarding this survey, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards

Caroline Derbyshire
CWA administrator.

The Community Woodlands Association was established in 2003 as the direct representative body of Scotland's community woodland groups. We help community woodland groups across the country achieve their aspirations and potential, providing advice, assistance and information, facilitating networking and training, and representing and promoting community woodlands to the wider world.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate and identify opportunities for improvement in partnership working between communities and Forestry Commission Scotland. Please answer as many questions as possible and continue on an additional sheet if you require. Thank you for taking the time to help us in this study, your input and feedback is much appreciated.

1. Organisational details

Name of Woodland / Partnership: _____

Your organisation's name: _____

Name of person(s) completing questionnaire: _____

Your position / role in organisation: _____

Contact tel no. (incl. STD code): _____

How long have you been involved with the project /partnership? _____

A. Partnership operation

1. Do you feel that there is mutual understanding of objectives and work programme between the community and FCS? Please tick one	
Yes	
No	
Partial	

2. How do you rate the level and type of communication between FCS and the community? Please tick one	
Excellent	
Adequate	
Poor	

3. How often do community representatives meet with FCS staff? Tick as appropriate		
	About practical, operational matters	About planning and strategic matters
Weekly		
Monthly		

Quarterly		
Not at all		
Other (please specify)		

B. Partnership achievements

4. Do the achievements of the community-FCS partnership meet your organisation's expectations of the partnership? Please tick one	
Yes – completely	
No – not at all	
Not yet	
So far to date, but there is more to do	

C. Future of the partnership

5. What are the key issues or planned projects facing your community-FCS partnership in the next 3 years? Please list:

6. What do you see as the main barriers to progress? Please list:

7. Does your organisation aspire to change the community-FCS partnership structure to enable delivery to work better? Tick all that apply	
Continue with partnership as presently constituted	
Continue with partnership with different structure – please give suggestion	
Community acquisition under the National Forest Land Scheme	
Other – please explain	

Please return this questionnaire to Caroline Derbyshire at admin@communitywoods.org by Friday 20th February. Should you have any queries regarding this survey, please do not hesitate to contact me.

The information supplied on this questionnaire will be held electronically for analysis. It will be treated in confidence and only used for the purposes of this study and held in full accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Appendix B: List of respondents by Forest District

Group	Forest District
Abriachan Forest Trust	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Auchterhouse Community Woodland Action Group	Tay
Alyth Hill User Group	Tay
Ballater Rural Dvelopment	Moray & Aberdeenshire
Bellsquarry woodland working group	Scottish Lowlands
Bennachie Centre (Aberdeenshire Council Ranger Service)	Moray & Aberdeenshire
Borders Forest Trust	Dumfries and Borders
Carron Valley Development Group	Scottish Lowlands
Cairngorms, Rothiemurchus & Glenmore Group	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Friends of Denlethen Woods	Moray & Aberdeenshire
Destination Loch Ness	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Dunragit School	Galloway
Fernaig Community Trust	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Friends of Jubilee Wood	Dumfries and Borders
Friends of Newtonhill Community Woodland	North Highland
Glencoe & Glen Etive Community Company	Lochaber
Glengarry Heritage Association	Lochaber
Great Glen Way (Highland Council)	Lochaber
Glen Urquhart Land Use Partnership	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Highland Council Youth Development Services	North Highland
Kinnoull Woodland Park Group	Tay
Kylerhea	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Lochaber Geopark	Lochaber
Eilean Ban Trust	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Minard Community Trust	West Argyll
Rogart for the Future	North Highland
Rosehall & District Action Group	North Highland
Rumster Outdoor Centre Management Group	North Highland
Strathglass & Affric Community Company	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Strathglass Glen Affric	Inverness, Ross and Skye
The Nevis Partnership	Lochaber
Trees for Life	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Venlaw Community Woodland	Dumfries and Borders
Viewfield Garden Collective	Inverness, Ross and Skye
Westmuir Community Development Trust	Tay
Winton Loan Woodland Trust	Scottish Lowlands

