



Evaluation of  
Partnerships between  
Community Groups and  
Forestry Commission  
Scotland

# Final Report

A Study for the Community Woodlands Association

## Evaluation of Partnerships between Community Groups and Forestry Commission Scotland

Final Report (Executive Summary)

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Community  
Woodlands  
Association



**Highlands & Islands**  
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# Executive Summary

## Background

The Community Woodlands Association in partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise commissioned this study. It examines the overview of experience of FCS-community partnership working over the last 10 years and how it is perceived by both communities and FCS District staff.

## Methodology

The study incorporates four methods of information collection: desk research; a questionnaire survey; telephone interviews and two focus discussion groups.

The study sample was drawn from the FCS partnership list of a total 84 partnerships. The majority of these are associated with small rural communities (less than 3,000 population). The partnerships vary in style of agreement across 4 broad categories, from informal partnerships with no written agreement, to more formal arrangements including those with joint management structures. A cross-section of the following variables was included in the study sample:-

- Type of partnership agreement
- Stage of maturity of the partnership/ length of operation (start date ranges from 1994 – 2005)
- Origins of the partnership
- Geographical location across 14 Forest Districts
- Forest size and type (ranges from 0.5ha to 14,768ha, with 51 partnerships working with less than 400ha)
- Key interest and focus of the specific partnership e.g. access, economic regeneration, conservation etc.

## Key Findings

Overall the consultation responses from FCS staff and community representatives show consistency and a high degree of correlation, with the exception of a few project specific issues. Feedback on the whole has been very positive regarding the value and operation of partnerships. It clearly indicates that both community representatives and FCS staff feel that the partnership approach has offered added-value compared with trying to work alone. The commonest perceptions of “THE MOST important benefit” in the questionnaire survey were:-

- Community Empowerment: introducing a sense of influence over destiny of local environment, and
- Access to recreational amenities.

# Executive Summary

## Origin and Development of Partnerships

There is wide diversity in partnership formats and the nature of the communities with which FCS has developed a relationship. Formal agreements are not seen by FCS staff or community respondents as a pre-requisite for all types of community involvement.

Constructing partnership agreements was one of the few areas of conflict reported. In particular, the time taken to establish agreements needs to be addressed. There is a strong staff voice to retain flexibility in the format of agreements, allowing due consideration of the future commitments they specify for both FCS and the community. Given the organic nature of partnership development and ongoing dynamics in the community, long term implications need to be considered.

## Partnership Operation

The study confirms that there is in general very good communication in both directions, with communities reporting FCS District staff as very accessible. In some areas (e.g. budget planning and resource availability, operational policies and rules) clearer and more accessible information provided by FCS could help prevent misunderstandings or resentments from developing.

Information and guidance on insurance requirements, and which elements are covered under FCS provision, have been raised as an area of lack of clarity and mixed messages. There is a clear request from both staff and communities for FCS to offer the flexibility to tailor insurance requirements to circumstance and the degree of risk, and to acknowledge that “one solution is not appropriate for all”.

Community involvement in partnerships is characterised by small numbers of dedicated volunteers (commonly 6-15 people). Limitations and frustrations were reported by both community representatives and FCS staff to arise from:-

- Reliance on a core number of people with difficulty in identifying successors
- Lack of interest/time by the majority of forest users to volunteer in partnership activities
- A sometimes very limited focus and interest of community group members.

The people resource available for partnership work is stretched. FCS staff remits often cover large geographical areas, a range of responsibilities, and face increasing demands in community engagement. On the community side, the resource is often fragile and unstable - although enthusiastic - with succession problems, reliance on a few individuals and volunteer fatigue being commonly reported.

# Executive Summary

## Partnership Funding

Partnerships gave wide-ranging estimates of expenditure, from no cash input to a few investments of over £1 million. Partnership work has in many cases brought funds to a project that FCS alone could not have provided. However, partnership spend is not easy to define due to the different routes through which funds are channelled (in-kind, FCS direct spend, charitable funds through community groups), making cost-benefit analysis very difficult to undertake.

It is clear that some benefits are not related to levels of expenditure; all the partnerships recording zero expenditure reported perceived benefits through better communication and resultant actions.

The majority of partnerships have no income, aside from small funds generated through membership subscriptions, and are dependent on grant funding and ongoing FCS support. Given that access has been a key activity to date and features strongly in future plans, infrastructure maintenance costs are going to become an increasing overhead in the future. Whilst communities are able to contribute to maintenance through volunteer work parties, they reported difficulty in identifying any funding sources willing to support ongoing maintenance costs.

Specific actions raised in the study to address some sustainability issues were:-

- Increased promotion of volunteering opportunities in upkeep of the woodland and project activities, in parallel with promoting use of the facility
- Development of a clear strategy to meet long term maintenance costs of partnership-led infrastructure projects
- Wider sharing of information and experience on local revenue generation, including research and development work on local added-value products.

## Partnership Activities and Achievements

To date community engagement has centred most strongly and successfully around recreation and access, with a mix of beneficiaries between local residents and visitors. Activities have commonly broadened out from a single-focus starting point. Benefits include increased exercise leading to improved physical health, increased social interaction opportunities addressing isolation issues, education and learning, and engaging young people.

Economic development objectives, including the creation of local work opportunities, have been more complex and challenging to deliver. Consequently, progress has been slower on this front.

The difficulty of quantifying partnership benefits was raised by a number of respondents. The

# Executive Summary

intangible benefits are intrinsically difficult to measure – attitudinal changes, increased understanding and awareness and social capital. FCS has initiated some research in these areas. As resources are already stretched, it is important that monitoring be built into existing community and FCS records and reporting systems where possible rather than creating additional work.

## **Future Development of FCS-community Partnerships**

The consultation raised questions about the future level of FCS priority and resources assigned to specific activities and benefits, for both existing and new partnerships. Whilst the “Working in Partnership” publication identifies FCS partnership commitments in broad terms, the areas of focus were seen to be changing, aligning with Scottish Executive priorities. It was felt that a step change is taking place in the focus of the impact of partnership benefits. This was perceived as including increased delivery in areas of more concentrated population, especially of social inclusion and health benefits. This has raised a concern as to potential resource implications for the current predominantly rural-based partnerships.

Networking has been cited during the study as positive and productive, with some reference to development work being undertaken by the Community Woodlands Association. The use and value of networking could be increased to good advantage, both locally between community partnerships within one Forest District, and more widely throughout Scotland. More structured networking could promote and enable a greater degree of self-help between partnerships, potentially easing some of the demand on staff resources.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations

A number of specific actions are recommended based on the study findings which can be summarised as follows:-

Summary of Recommendations	Action to be taken by:-
<p><b>1 Partnership Format and Agreements:</b> Clearer guidelines should be provided by FCS on the full range of partnership format, clarifying for each option:- timeframe and procedure for establishment; levels and frequency of expected FCS support and community contribution; degree of flexibility to change the agreement in the future.</p>	<p>FCS in collaboration with community partners, CWA, HIE Community Land Unit</p>
<p><b>2 Insurance Cover:</b> Clear and consistent guidelines need to be available on the insurance requirements for community groups to undertake different activities on FCS land, and which elements are covered by FCS provision.</p>	<p>FCS</p>
<p><b>3 Partnership Induction:</b> An induction course and/or users' guide on national FCS policy and practice pertinent to partnerships should be developed to introduce new community groups and office bearers to FCS partnership work. Community partners should also provide a proper induction for their new Board or committee members at the local level.</p>	<p>FCS, CWA, community partners</p>
<p><b>4 Financial Sustainability:</b> There is a role for awareness raising among partnerships of the free advisory support available in Scotland on financial sustainability issues.</p>	<p>FCS, CWA, social economy support organisations e.g. HISEZ (Highlands &amp; Islands Social Enterprise Zone), Social Enterprise Academy, Senscot, Community Energy Company, DTAS.</p>
<p><b>5 Measuring Change and Benefits:</b> There is scope to explore joint working with other agencies or research bodies to establish a shared measurement framework for partnership activities.</p>	<p>FCS, individual partnerships, Community Planning agencies</p>
<p><b>6 Future Focus of FCS-Community Partnership Work:</b> FCS needs to clearly communicate to community partnerships its specific future priorities and resources for activities and benefits as the new Scottish Forestry Strategy evolves, in particular, the balance of rural and urban focus.</p>	<p>FCS</p>
<p><b>7 Learning and Support:</b> A proactive, strategic approach to networking between partnerships to share experience and expertise should continue and be further developed.</p>	<p>FCS, CWA, community partners</p>



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