



# Community experiences of the National Forest Land Scheme

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## Summary

1. This report presents two case studies of communities which have bought land through the National Forest Land Scheme. It is intended to complement other studies, by focusing on emerging outcomes connected with **community cohesion, capacity building and social development**.
2. The two communities included in this study are only in the early stages of managing newly acquired forests, so this report provides indications rather than proven conclusions. They have very different histories and dynamics. Every community, community group and context will be **unique**, and the contrast between these two illustrates a range of factors that affect outcomes. Factors that they have in common are wide disparities in geographical origin and personal financial security, low average local incomes, scattered distribution of households, and focus on local jobs and affordable housing.
3. Before buying the forest, communities can have **high expectations** of what ownership will do for them. These are in the early stages often quite idealistic (based on a vision, or a symbolic idea of community). However there were very practical expectations as well in both cases: owning an asset such as a forest is expected to open up income streams and contribute to solving problems of affordable housing.
4. Frustrations can result from these high expectations, not only because idealism needs to turn into pragmatism about the **scale of the task**, but also because the practical benefits can take a long time to appear. In both communities, people found it hard to understand **timeframes for processing funding and planning applications**.
5. Both communities demonstrated high levels of both **democracy** (inclusive rules for participation) and **participation** (membership, and attendance at meetings or elections) in relation to the NFLS. Inclusivity is one of the criteria for NFLS eligibility, and compared with cases elsewhere in Great Britain, where the community group is not open to all, this is a significant factor in limiting conflict with the wider community. It also contributes to equitable and transparent **benefit distribution**, although this is contested by some established businesses in one of the communities.
6. A central focus of this study was the development of **community capacity**, or ability to manage community development. Although this was not an explicit goal of the communities themselves, capacity was enhanced through gaining experience, training courses and enhanced networks with external (government and non-government) organisations. It is in the area of **business management and fundraising** that skills are most needed. Beyond specific skills, opportunities to **network with other communities and organisations**, and provide guidance to others considering the same scheme, is rewarding, but not taken up to the same extent in both communities.
7. Development of **community governance** (organisation and decision-making) is less clearly an outcome of the NFLS. Both communities had a large number of existing committees and groups, and in one community this is widely experienced as

- overload. However the need for **formal organisation and accountability** is clear in the case of the NFLS and despite what might be called 'committee fatigue' those who had participated in training for company directors felt this was a very significant benefit.
8. Both community woodlands continue to make progress: both have secured major **grants** since the interviews for this study were conducted. These are good preliminary indicators of **sustainability**. Both emphasise that they do not want to remain dependent on grants in the future, and have business plans for ensuring that (as required by the NFLS).
  9. In both communities, the NFLS has had a positive influence on the **links between the community and FCS**, although again where the community has a history of partnership with FCS not everyone distinguishes clearly between the benefits of partnership and of ownership.
  10. Forest **ownership** (even under the conditions of the NFLS) is unlikely in itself to bring together a **divided community**. Furthermore where ownership is preceded by long experience of (non-owning) partnership, awareness that the community now owns part of the forest is distinctly mixed so its effect is difficult to determine.
  11. While partnerships with FCS can bring many of the benefits, **ownership** throws the need for skills into sharper focus. The psychological effects of ownership also have the effect of **changing perceptions of what is possible**: community members see more potential for leasing to local business, opening up access, converting local heating systems to woodfuel, and hosting Forest School, when they own the forest, even though all of these are in fact possible under public ownership.

## Acknowledgements

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The report is produced for the use of the social policy programme in FCS and associated colleagues. It does not therefore incorporate detailed discussion of academic concepts or definitions, but focuses on the organisational implications of the findings. A more theorised version will be incorporated into further work on community forestry in Great Britain. Please contact [anna.lawrence@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:anna.lawrence@forestry.gsi.gov.uk) for further information.

# Introduction

## Background

As defined by FCS, “National Forest Land is the forests, woods, open land and other property owned by Scottish ministers on behalf of the nation, and managed by Forestry Commission Scotland” (Forestry Commission Scotland 2005) The National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS) gives communities the opportunity to:

- o buy or lease National Forest Land where they can provide increased public benefits;
- o buy National Forest Land in order to create woodland crofts, subject to delivery of public benefits;
- o buy National Forest Land which is surplus to requirements. Surplus land is land that makes little net contribution to Forestry Commission Scotland’s [FCS] public policy objectives.<sup>ii</sup>

Applications for the Community Acquisition option under the NFLS must demonstrate that they are in the public interest. Two of the criteria used to determine this are:

- o demonstrate benefits to the whole local community rather than only some individuals in the community
- o show that benefits for the immediate community are not outweighed by dis-benefits to the wider community, environment or economy

To date five communities have successfully completed application. Two relevant studies have been carried out:

- an internal review of community based applications (focusing on ‘review how successful the Scheme has been in providing opportunities for communities to buy national forest land’)
- evaluation of all partnerships between FCS and communities over the last 10 years

FCS is now interested to understand the experiences of the successful communities, and to compare that with the communities’ expectations.

## Objective

The study aims to explore whether acquiring land through the National Forest Land Scheme has successfully delivered the group’s objectives in terms of community cohesion, capacity building, and social development.

This study forms part of a wider scoping study coordinated by Forest Research in 2008-9, to explore the diversity of experiences of community forestry in GB<sup>iii</sup>.

## Research methods

Three communities were proposed as case studies by FCS. Two agreed to participate and fieldwork was conducted in Dervaig (October 2008) and Laggan (December 2008). A summary of relevant facts about these two communities is given in table 1. These two communities differ not only geographically and demographically, but also in terms of their exposure to media and research interest, and the degree of perceived politicisation of the issues.

Research data was drawn from semi-structured interviews with directors or trustees of the community forest company or trust, other members, non-members (where possible) and key FCS staff involved in the transfer and technical advisory work. One group discussion was held in each community, supplemented in Laggan by recent workshops facilitated by the community forest administrator (Calvert 2008).

**Table 1. Facts and figures about the case study communities**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Dervaig</b>	<b>Laggan</b>
Number in community	350 adults	220 (114 households)
Number in CF company or trust	166 full members (eligible to vote, or stand for election to board of directors) 40 associate members (live elsewhere, no voting rights)	88
Eligibility for membership	Residence in specific post codes from within the areas PA73 to PA75	Residence in post codes within Badenoch
Governance structure	Company limited by guarantee; 12 directors, serving for two years before standing down or for re-election	Company limited by guarantee; 8-11 directors, serving for two years before standing down or for re-election
Other indicators of participation	Approx. 60 came to last AGM, and to the Extraordinary GM to change minor details of the company papers.	Whole community balloted in 2003 on purchase of whole forest vs. purchase of small parts vs. no purchase; return rate was 66% of whom 85% were in favour of buying parts of the forest
Area of forest owned	Langamull: 250.83ha (largely Sitka spruce planted 1963 177ha; other conifer 37ha) West Ardhu: 421 ha (conifer 283ha of which Sitka 139 ha)	Gorsteane: 4.3 hectares of woodland Achduchil: 0.8 hectare of bare land Blackwood: 13 hectares of woodland and bare land

Area of forest managed in partnership with FCS	0	1349 ha (Strathmashie)
Date bought	2006	2006
Purchase price	£343,000	Gorstean: £35,000 Achduchil: £10,000 Blackwood: £30,000 <sup>iv</sup>
Historical relation with Forestry Commission / national forest	FC was provider of a significant amount of employment; throughout the planting in the 60s and 70s and into the 80s they provided much of the employment but otherwise little interaction.	High profile campaign. 1998: first (five-year) partnership agreement between FC and a community, to jointly manage forest. New 25 year partnership signed in 2004.
Legal entities created	North West Mull Community Woodland Company (company limited by guarantee)	Laggan Forest Trust Laggan Forest Trust Forest Company (trading arm for forest management activities)
External funding sourced for purchase and management	Scottish Land Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, The Robertson Trust, Hugh Fraser Foundation, significant local fundraising and an interest free loan.  Latest award: £726 000 from the SSTTF (see below) for timber road	Scottish Land Fund <sup>v</sup> Big Lottery 'Investing in Ideas' funding to develop a business plan / apply for outline planning consent Big Lottery Technical Assistance funding: in process (early 2009), £139 650 Big Lottery TA funding to build Forest Centre (and various other funded projects in partnership before ownership <sup>vi</sup> )
Previously published documentation	None.	Laggan has been the focus of much attention in its cutting edge role as adversary and then partner of the FC (e.g. Inglis and Guy 1998, Tylden-Wright 2000)

Interviews and group discussions were combined with site visits to stimulate discussion. Where possible interviews were recorded and transcribed. In line with data protection and research ethics, the transcriptions are held on file at Forest Research. Confidentiality was guaranteed to those taking part, so names are not associated with any quotations included in the report. A list of guide topics for the interviews is given in box 1.

### **Box 1. guide topics for discussion**

*This list serves as an aide memoire for the researcher, and is not treated in the same way as a questionnaire. The themes are addressed in the order in which they naturally arise:*

1. general impressions / expectations / outcomes
2. comparison of ownership with other forms of tenure / rights / relations (e.g. partnership)
3. effects on community: definition, representation, cohesion, capacity, social capital, wellbeing, economy, origins, development, sense-of-place
4. public interest / funds
5. experiences with other organisations including FCS
6. thoughts on future directions

Within the constraints of the 10 days allocated for this study, an exploratory approach was taken to analyse recurring themes found in the two case study communities.

The results of the study are reported drawing extensively on quotations from respondents. The time spent in each community was sufficient to gain an idea of the *range* of opinions and views, as indicated by convergence of responses (i.e. people increasingly repeating the same views, or same groups of views). Quotations provide a flavour of genuine local opinion but are anonymised in line with research ethics, to encourage respondents to express themselves frankly. The report has been reviewed by contributing members of each community and feedback incorporated.

## Research findings

### Dervaig

*The bottom line I think, from my point of view, this is a personal opinion - is that if we were starting out today and the "for sale" notices went up ... knowing what I know now would I still be putting my hand up saying let's form a group and let's do, it the answer is "yes, yes, yes".* A director, North West Mull Community Woodland Company

### Background

Dervaig is a community of about 350 people in north-west Mull. It had no prior experience of partnership with the FCS when in 2006 it became the first community to buy forest through the NFLS. This land had been identified by FCS as surplus. In the words of one FCS forester:

- *The woodlands were put on the market because they were landlocked - in fact I don't think the larger of the woodlands would be sold these days because a lot of it is ancient semi natural woodland and poor sites.<sup>vii</sup>*



Although this report does not focus on the purchase process, which has been evaluated elsewhere, the particularly consultative approach taken by Dervaig residents in approaching the purchase has fed through into later experiences of consensus:

- o *We took a lot of inputs from the community open meetings and drop-in type sessions, opportunities for people to make contact by telephone or whatever means so that we did have well documented, what was important to the community.* [a director, NWMCWC]

The approach also helped by building on experience of others on Mull:

- o *Our experience actually of getting to the purchase was rather more protracted than we would have wished. But I think that was because we were the first and therefore we were breaking new ground the whole time and finding our feet. Having said that we did have some good backup support in terms of an advisor.* [a director, NWMCWC]

The Business Plan for the company estimates that 60 000 tonnes of timber are ready for harvesting in Langamull. In order for the community to cash in on this, they must extract the timber, and there is currently no suitable means to do this. The public roads cannot sustain this usage and at the time of research all hopes were pinned on achieving funding to construct a timber road across the island. By April 2009 a grant of £726 000 was confirmed for the links outwith the community woodlands and work was scheduled to commence in September 2009. the effect of this on the role of forestry for community development could be dramatic and will be followed with interest.

A part-time administrator has been employed since 2006, and a part-time development manager since 2008, to support the community and bring in funding and planning applications. By March 2009, the Company had cut and distributed timber and firewood, purchased (jointly with local landowners) a Woodmizer Mobile Sawmill, established use of the forest in Forest School activities, submitted an application for funding a timber road through the Scottish Strategic Timber Transport Fund (SSTTF) <sup>viii</sup>, submitted planning applications for affordable housing, developed plans for woodland crofts, commissioned a feasibility study into setting up a wood energy supply company, and commissioned a Forest Design Plan.

There are already tangible economic effects:

- o *we have got a thinning licence to West Ardhu at 15% and it's expected to crop 70,000 tonnes so you can do the maths, we are not exactly short of the odd tree.*
- o *at the moment we are doing it really on a somewhat ad hoc basis, we put out notification through newsletter and by email to the community that we can provide trailer loads, ... you get your name on the list and we give an indication of when we can deliver, but it is done at the moment on a voluntary basis;*
- o *People give a donation for it at the moment but we realise that you can't really have a 1,000 tonnes of fire wood with people donating so it has got to be got on to a more commercial basis.*

[dialogue at village meeting]



## Expectations

Perhaps because it was the first, expectations of the NWMCWC have been high. These focused initially on bringing matters under the control of the community:

- *In summary what really stimulated us to go forward was having seen that the forest was for sale, or two lots of forest were for sale, and the community not wishing that forest to fall into some nameless organisation off island ... Whereas we felt that we really could make the forest and things linked to it, really work for the community.* [director, NWMCWC; village meeting]
- *It was also felt that through ownership of the woodlands it would open up so many other things. Probably the biggest one of which, on which we would be judged is affordable housing.* [participant, village meeting]

Several respondents commented on the degree of 'idealism' involved in the purchase:

- *I mean the purchase was really more a vision than based on practical knowledge about forests.* [a director, NWMCWC]
- *some people felt that the feasibility study reflected a lot of naivety on the part of the people who were wanting to set up the [company].* [Mull resident, not member]

Despite this and the considerable organisational and business challenges facing the community company, this idealism has been converted into hard work and organisation, with some challenging but potentially achievable plans on the horizon. Members of the board of directors were clear about what the forest might reasonably provide for them, and their aspirations focused largely on economics linked to social justice. As a community woodland it is much more than just a forest – it is the focal point for a number of projects. Affordable housing was repeatedly mentioned as the most significant of these because it can provide tangible benefits to those most in need within the community.

The development manager articulated this as two quite distinct objectives:

1. *the forest should have the ability to provide us with initially a minimal income stream but to deliver the roads. Once it has delivered the roads there is a potential for it to deliver a constant income stream if it is managed properly, not vast figures but a significant inflow of benefit to the community year upon year upon year.*
2. *Whereas taking a small part of that forest and turning it from forest into buildings lets us make an initial impact on a housing issue that's solved and will wash it's face as it were from thereon, so not be a burden to us but be a constant asset. If you tried to take land which is suitable for building and accepted by everybody as being an ideal building plot you would never lay hands on it because you would be buying it at the market price* [NWMCWC development manager]

Participants at the village meeting were careful to limit expectations:

- *if we don't get the road and we've got the "do nothing" option then there is still the opportunity to take sufficient timber out to be able to manage what is capable of being managed ... the "do nothing" option still would keep the woodlands available to the community. The housing provisions and the other items that the forest school and all the rest of it could still continue because they are not dependent on timber sales.*

## Community dimensions

Dervaig is a economically diverse community, and its households have widely varying levels of financial security. One member estimated that 75% of the population consists of incomers. There is only one person on the committee who grew up on Mull, and it is clear that much of the energy for the community woodland comes from people who have moved in from elsewhere.

Membership of NWMCC is open to all adults living with specific post codes from within the areas PA73 to PA75. The fact that nearly half of all adults in the eligible area are members, is striking. Members can vote at AGMs and stand for election to the board of directors. Whilst it is clear that a small group of core members does most of the work (largely but not entirely equivalent to the Board of Directors), much of this wider membership is active. Reportedly, around 60 members turn up to AGMs, which is remarkable for a scattered island community.

When asked what was the point of membership if it is (a) free and (b) inactive, the committee members nodded agreement with one who said:

*Speaking as a member of the company but not a director of the company, [you join] because that evinces support. You have public meetings, you show up because it is interesting and then you think okay right that's a good idea. A dozen people are doing the hard work and the least you can do, it seems to me, is to show that you have got a tangible sort of support, I don't often turn up to do physical labour but at least you are giving some psychological support.*

There were several indications that the benefits are available to all the community. In addition to free membership open to all, wood is being provided (in return for donations) to any resident, not only members of the woodland company.

Two examples of early achievements show real commitment to the link with community. Several residents showed interest and pride in the ruined village, and some had collected aerial photos from before and after the forestry plantations. As we took a path through the trees to the forest, one commented, 'I really like the cathedral effect' [of 45 year old sitka spruce]. The other example is the way in which local schools have quickly formed connections with the forests:



- *You will see a couple of lovely signs, one at each of the two woodlands. they were all artwork that was done, there was a little sort of competition in the two schools Ulva Ferry and Dervaig, and each of the children has a picture as part of those signs and they thoroughly enjoyed that bit*
- *Yes that sort of led them in. And then they went up so they had this sort of celebration of the complete signs just before the summer holidays and then after the summer holidays they started their forest schools. So it's been a long process but it was a good lead in to the forest schools. [residents, at the village meeting]*

One of the schools has started Forest School activities, and staff commented that they would not have thought of this if it were not a community woodland. One teacher commented that it is great, and 'the kids love it'.

Some committee members noted that the community's general sense of confidence has been 'greatly enhanced' by having the woodland, but there was wide recognition of the issue that it is difficult to generate a sense of ownership amongst some parts of the community:

- *People call it 'our forest' when it's going well, but when something needs doing it's 'your forest'.*
- *It is slightly depressing when someone taps you on the shoulder in the Co-op and says 'excuse me the gate's off in your woodland, are you going to mend it?' and they live in the village. [Committee members, village meeting]*

Humour and pragmatism was expressed around recognition that every community has its sceptics:

- *I have heard one or two sceptics and they don't consider it their wood. They will refer to the directors as 'your wood' and it is not so, it is 'their wood' and you have got to remind them of that. There is quite a lot of scepticism.*
- *I think in any activity taking place in any smallish community, you have got your enthusiast, you have got your worker bees, you've got your sceptics, and that's human life.*
- *It's a case of water off a duck's back, if you can't convince them ... the scepticism isn't antagonistic.*
- *Our dogs love the woodland don't they (laughter), they're not sceptical.*

There are those who are not involved in any way with the community woodland. The few interviewed seemed not to be members of any community group and were reluctant to put in the voluntary time that they felt was being asked of them.

Overall, however, there is a noticeable effect on the community's 'sense of community' and several commented on the boost to a general sense of confidence. They pointed out however that Dervaig is an active community and that the woodland is not its only



achievement. Commenting on whether Dervaig was typical, and how others could learn from their experiences, residents observed:

- *What's worked here is that there is a sufficient pool of people to be directors, to form a group, to get on with it and put in all that effort and volunteer time and so on. Even when there's a knock back with the road you can hear the confidence about doing this, or doing that which I think is very impressive. I'm not sure how unusual this community is in having such a supply.*
- *Ok I think you've got an example here where it is working but I kind of think we're lucky as a community to have those resources on tap.*
- *Coming from north Yorkshire I was amazed when we first got involved with what was going on, on the island and we'd come here for many, many years on holiday. But when first of all the village hall went up, the new village hall which is a super building, it appeared to go up almost like that [snapped fingers]. There's not many villages with a catchment area that Dervaig's got that would be able to deliver an asset like that.*
- *There's a lot of support too between the different groups too. I mean you know the woodland group is supportive of what's going on in the village hall and vice versa and other groups as well. [discussion at village meeting]*

These are clear indicators of existing social capital: people prepared to act on behalf of the community, and good cross-linkages between groups.

## Meanings of ownership

Apart from the comments already given, that owning the woodland was seen as a way of opening opportunities for the community, there was wide expression of positive feelings about ownership, tinged with caution.

- *I think if you were to ask most people within the community they would say yes it's great that the community owns the woodland but because it takes so long to actually get things going we can't yet say with certainty that there have been huge benefits come in. I think with a lot of people there is a pride in ownership.*
- *I'm optimistic. I think ... trees, they take a long time to mature ... it won't be for my benefit it'll be for the next generation and the next generation. Because I'm not going to live long enough to see the whole thing.*
- *[ownership gives] a lot of pleasure, but certainly there are at times considerable frustrations, partly at the slowness of which things move, partly at certain parts of the bureaucracy that still exists which prevents you actually moving at the sort of pace that you would like to be - and obviously at times financial realities have to kick in. [reflections on ownership at the village meeting]*

One commented at the village meeting, 'It feels a heavy burden'. He was expressing a realistic view that others engaged with, but the same man showed around me both forests with considerable pride and affection the next day.

More tangibly, several directors and residents mentioned ways in which community ownership had influenced decisions they had taken:

- o *We are in the middle of building a house at the moment and we have decided to go for a log boiler because we know that we will get logs from the community woodland and that just feels a very good thing to be doing. It is a very small way that we can play the tiniest part in supporting our local community woodland.*
- o *There are certainly a lot more people asking for loads of wood (laughter).*
- o *I was approached by someone else last week who's changing their heating system and asked whether they could buy the next 10 year's timber up-front from us because they felt that would be a benefit to them but also to us because it would produce an income for us in times when we don't have a great deal of income. That is also an obvious commitment from the area and an obvious benefit to people if they feel they can wander in the door and say can we do this.*

### Capacity building

There are two ways in which discussion indicated capacity building within the community, one simply through gaining and reflecting on experience, and the other through organised training.

The committee and other community members were openly reflective about their experiences. They focused in particular on the steep learning curve they had travelled up in terms of technical knowledge about forestry, and about project management and funding.

- o *Starting from knowing nothing really, it was all very new. How you manage forests, how forests should look and what processes ... we have learnt an awful lot about how you look after a managed forest which none of us I don't think had ever really done or thought about.*
- o *I wouldn't say we acquired that much technical knowledge.*
- o *No we've picked bits from the Forestry Commission but with the best will in the world none of us are ever going to become foresters. We do recognise for instance that our next person to be employed could possibly be project-manager-come-forester, maybe initially on a part-time basis. We don't have those skills and I personally don't feel that that is our role to actually acquire in-depth those skills we need to have an awareness.*

Concrete indicators of capacity are provided by the amount of training arranged by the administrator (table 2).

**Table 2. training opportunities provided through NWMCWC**

Topic	Provider	Funder	No. of participants

Directorship training	James Hilder, Mull and Iona Community Trust (MICT)	Community Land Unit (CLU)	20
Recruitment Training	James Hilder	Big Lottery / HIE	8
Presentation Skills	CLU	CLU	1
Ignite Woodfuel Training		NWMCWC	1
NPTC chainsaw use CS 30& 31	NPTC	mainly funded by the individuals and part funded by Lantra for over 50 y.o.'s on one occasion	12
Archaeological Mapping	Scotland's Rural Past	Scotland's Rural Past	20
Woodmizer training	Frank Gamwell (woodmizer instructor)	NWMCWC and the partners involved in this machinery.	5
Advanced Woodmizer	Frank Gamwell	Community Woodland Association (CWA) and hosted by Knoydart Forest Trust	2

## Challenges

Some of the points referred to above already indicate areas that have been challenging for the Directors and members of the company. The most frequently mentioned was that of keeping up the momentum, as people come to terms with the time-frames involved in forestry, and bureaucracy:

- o *There was a huge amount of community interest in the buying process and the big celebration when it actually became 'ours'; and lots of interest and lots of input of ideas of what could be done and everything else. Since then - because obviously we don't straight away start making money with it - it's going to be a long haul before we are actually making money and so you're reliant on volunteers and so on - and the process of getting things done takes so long, that that interest has seeped away a bit. People still know that it belongs to everybody but there isn't that enthusiasm, that sort of 'ooh' 'what's going on?' quite so much and it results in a bit of a shortage in volunteers some times for things. [member of village hall committee, not NWMCWC director]*
- o *If you talk to people generally and say "I want to put a plan together that's covering in the short term 10 years" frankly they look at you as though you're a*



*bit up the wall, because it's beyond most people's idea of planning. [participant, village meeting]*

- o *I think if we are honest with ourselves we had hoped that we would be considerably further forward than we are now and we therefore have to explain appropriately to the community the reasons why things are taking a bit longer, and in the main they are very understanding about that.*

Particular frustrations were expressed around aspects of the bureaucracy involved:

- o *external agencies, the time they say it will take you to do this and so on ... like the forest design plan, they say "right that's going to be 6-12 months for starters until you get that in place". Because you've got to have this, this, this and this and then you've got to consult with so many other or potentially with so many other agencies, RSPB, SNH etc, etc, etc, and they've all got their particular little take on things.*
- o *Yes I mean a classic example of that is that we're confidently forecasting that we will have our forest design plan completed by the end of this year. So it will actually be in to FCS by early January; and they're telling me that the earliest they can have it reviewed and agreed is May. Now if we can put it together in 3 months including all the consultation why can't they review it quicker than 5 months?*

The resource itself presents a challenge, partly because a substantial part of it is mature, and partly because there is currently no means of extracting it. This aspect constituted less of a surprise to people, but comment frequently expressed a perception of neglect:

- o *one of the problems is because it's Forestry and has been left and abandoned [director, village meeting]*
- o *if one is blunt about it that was one of the major reasons why the Forestry Commission put the woodlands up for sale because it was so difficult to get the timber out [another participant, village meeting]*
- o *There was no [forest design] plan for this and we believe that is because they put one tick in the box which says "too hard don't go there in terms of long-term harvesting and development".*

Others simply noted the scale of the task they had taken on:

- o *I think sometimes it may be because of the vastness of it - because it is bigger than what a lot of other forest groups own.*
- o *And whereas we've got 700 hectares the vast majority [of other community woodland groups] were talking between 50 and 100 hectares which puts it into perspective and in a lot of cases that was woodland which was simply an offset of existing managed Forestry Commission land. So all they were doing was picking up a small piece and perpetuating the management that already existed. And of course what we've got is the whole lot but it has effectively not been managed for a lot of years and some of it never since it was planted in 63, 64.*





- o *It's not a small piece of road we're talking about it's a vast length of [timber] road [that needs to be built].*

## Public cost and benefit

The community is keenly aware of its reliance on grants. As stated in the public newsletter of Jan 2009,

*Since its inception the Woodland Company has received a number of grants. Without this assistance a fledgling company such as ours with no steady income would not be able to operate. It is hoped over time to develop income streams to allow progress sustainably without the need for regular grant support. Notwithstanding this, all land owners make use of schemes such as the Scottish Rural Development Programme to finance infrastructure, replanting etc and we expect to tap into this funding. Grant funding this financial year has mainly covered salaries, overheads, expenses and training.*

Several participants at the directors' meeting in Dervaig also expressed appreciation of a certain degree of luck with their timing:

*If we look at the village hall resources as compared with village halls across Scotland then we are in a very favoured position and I think that is as much timing as anything. There are many, many villages around Scotland that really would like a village hall and they are in a much more difficult position. So for Dervaig I think we've done pretty well.*

Amongst all the members of the Board and company that were interviewed, there was a consensus that:

- (a) public funds are well used;
- (b) *we do relatively poorly out of public money in other respects (such as public road maintenance) and in terms of the standard services you might expect in more urban areas;*
- (c) *the public [i.e. Dervaig community], when we had to buy the Forestry, did pull out all the stops in terms of raising money. We needed about £21,000 within a 9-12 month period which for a small community is quite stretched;*
- (d) *when our road project goes ahead that will be an improvement to the road even if you never ever walk, set foot in the woodland there will be improved public roads and that is going to be for everyone, all the road users, farmers, everyone, tourists.*

There was also a strongly and consistently held view that the company is aiming for sustainability:

*we did say right at the start that we did not want to become grant junkies. We were warned about that by at least one other woodland ... Because at the time*

*they took over their woodlands money was freely available and it perhaps put them into the wrong sort of mindset for what you need long term at this game. [a director, NWMCWC]*

## Relations with other organisations and communities

There is no doubt that the project has provided an enormous amount of new experience of working with a range of government, community and funding organisations. Although hard to quantify, this constitutes a significant part of the capacity development in the community.

Despite the novelty of the project, and the very wide range of duties of the Beat Forester based at Aros, he has been supportive and contributed much time, including sitting on the Board of Directors as a co-opted member for a while.

*Right from day one we've had a very good working relationship with a lot of branches and areas of the Forestry Commission; they have been very supportive, as supportive as they can be without stepping across boundaries that we're not allowed to step across. So that has been a good experience both from the local Aros office area up through to the top echelons of the Commission. [participant, village meeting]*

In terms of linking up with other organisations:

- o *Certainly yes [this has changed]. We've got a huge network through the community woodlands association; we talk with other community woodlands and if you need to know something you contact our main contacts within the community woodlands association and there is usually someone who's had that problem and has solved it or else you work together and you work it out. So there is a very good network. [administrator]*
- o *Certainly when I've asked people for assistance they've always if not been able to assist directly, pointed me in the direction of other people and I've also had people from other woodlands contact me ... a guy up on Skye actually rang up to say they were applying to the same [SSTTS] for funding could he have a copy of what we'd submitted, so he could see how to phrase what ... So yes there is a network definitely and it is working I think. [company development manager]*

Members have been invited to conferences, delivered presentations and participated in workshops. Several times their experience is specifically sought out by others:

- o *[a year ago we] went down to [another community in Argyll] to talk to a group there who were considering putting in an application to buy some woodland there and they had gone from the keenness to the "why are we bothering" type thing so we were actually asked to come along to their AGM and make a little presentation to them to show that, yes it is possible, you've got to have a certain amount of*



*belief but if you actually want something you can actually make things happen, and that was a great experience from both sides actually*

The Mull and Iona Community Trust was seen as a great source of support:

- o *Initially we worked on the basis that we wanted to prove that we could do it ourselves, didn't we, and we took some advice but we didn't become part of the community trust there. But I think what Mull and Iona community trust illustrates as well is something that is island-wide - that there is an element of 'get on and do things', 'get up and go' element. ... if you live in an island community there's got to be a greater degree of self sufficiency.*

## Laggan

*A lot of us have never owned anything in our lives so for the community it's fantastic. It's symbolic.* [Committee member, Laggan Forest Trust]

## Background

Laggan has a relatively long and well documented history of community relations with the forest and the Forestry Commission. On the Laggan Forest Trust (LFT) website they describe themselves as 'Pioneers of Joint Forest Management'. While they were not the first community to buy a woodland, nor the first to buy one from the Forestry Commission, they were the first to enter a formal partnership with the FC in 1998. Their web pages provide details of activities, funding partnerships, fund-raising events and decision-making processes (Laggan Forest Trust 2009).

*It was quite radical in that it gathered momentum very quickly. I mean that got a lot of attention, a lot of media.* [committee member, LFT]

As the Business Plan for the NFLS purchase explains:

*The Laggan Forest Partnership was established in 1998 between Forest Enterprise (FE) [now FCS] on behalf of the Scottish Ministers and Laggan Forest Trust (LFT), which represents the 220 people of Laggan, a scattered community which lies between Newtonmore and Loch Laggan in Badenoch. The 5 year partnership allowed LFT to play an active part in the management of the three plantations which make up FE's Strathmashie Forest. It was set up after a long campaign and struggle by the community to create more jobs in the area and has succeeded in achieving this primary aim. In doing so it has attracted new residents, changed the nature of the forest and provided recreational facilities to further tourism in the area. In 2004 the partnership agreement with the Scottish Ministers was*

*rewritten and a 25 year partnership agreement signed. As well as contributing to the management of the forest through rolling 5 year business and forest design plans. (Laggan Forest Trust 2006)*

The FC (and subsequently FCS) has made substantial investment in the site, building the mountain bike trails in the forest. Usage has risen from zero to 20 000 per year. As part of its contribution to the partnership, FCS funded a community forest foreman until 2004, and since then has funded a part time administrator post as a service contract to manage local forest contractors; the LFT pays for other parts of her time and for a part time secretary. This arrangement is described by the administrator as one of the defining features of partnership:

*Since the partnership began [FCS has] paid a contribution towards management of the forest using local contracts, to facilitate the partnership and make sure that local contractors were getting the work. ... otherwise it wouldn't be a partnership.*

Despite tensions between LFT and a few businesses, other businesses were happy to acknowledge the knock-on effects of the partnership and particularly the mountain bike trails:

*About 25% of our trade is mountain bikers. Without the mountain bike centre being there and being part of the forest and what foresters have done, the Forestry Commission, that trade wouldn't exist. [B&B owner]*

The same person noted multiplier effects:

*The fact we've got the forest trails and some information boards and the new green route, all of those things have got major spin-off for us. We had a couple staying who are both in their eighties, she'd stayed with us before at this time of year, and because they know the green trails there, they happily walked down the glen through the forest, think it's all great. Without that being there they wouldn't feel happy to do that walk, wouldn't want to walk back on the road.*

In 2003 the community plus Associate Members of LFT were invited to vote on purchasing four pieces of land, of which three were then purchased. The Business Plan states:

*Over the years concern has been expressed by the Community that much voluntary effort could be put into developing the forest, only for the Forestry Commissioners to decide that Strathmashie is no longer viable and sell it to the highest bidder. A consultation exercise and a ballot was held in 2003 with the whole community and Associate Members of LFT. The return rate was 66% and 85% were in favour of buying parts of the forest. (Laggan Forest Trust 2006)*

The processed was clarified by the administrator:



- o *The community were asked what they wanted, i.e. the whole forest or the smaller packages for development of specific projects, this followed a feasibility study to examine all options so that the community were aware of all risks, benefits etc. for both options before taking the vote. (administrator, by email, 16 Dec 2008).*
- o *LFT has bought very small pieces of the most valuable land in terms of potential for development. The FC [FCS] still has the forest management responsibilities (apart from the small areas of forest on the land bought by LFT). [FCS]*

From the FCS point of view, success with the Forest Centre is crucial and they are observing with interest. They will have the right to buy it back if the Centre is not built within seven years. Having built up a close relationship, there are hopes and regrets among both FCS staff and Laggan residents, some of whom can see ways in which the FCS could have invested if they had still owned the land. These are issues which can only be addressed through capacity building, a central issue in Laggan.

## Expectations

Because Laggan has such a well-established history of partnership with the FC (and subsequently FCS), much comment about the forest is related to this partnership. It is sometimes hard to disentangle experiences of campaign, partnership and ownership. In the context of the last 15 years, ownership of three small pieces of strategically valuable land has enormous potential understood by a few key actors, but is relatively unnoticed by the majority.

Nevertheless those directly involved were clear about the potential:

- o *The reason that we need the pieces of land is to develop our business plan; so without us owning these bits of land, basically we wouldn't have the Forest Centre, we wouldn't be able to put our eco-walk and what's our business ideas which have come from the locals. And that's intended to employ local people which will keep the kids in the school, use the local shop, the local pub. [Committee member]*

The expectations expressed in the Business Plan may express those of the community when they voted for buying parts of the forest – i.e. to avoid losing the fruits of their efforts if FCS were to decide that 'Strathmashie is no longer viable and sell it to the highest bidder'. Other expectations made explicit there are:

- This projected volume of visitors will propel Wolftrax into the top seven most visited destinations in Badenoch & Strathspey based on the tourism figures for 2004.
- The forest centre could provide a western gateway to the Cairngorms National Park. The area around Laggan is rich in history and has an important part to play

in introducing visitors to the area as they enter the Park. Arts and crafts exhibitions will also be held either of the work of local artists/craft workers or high quality work by nationally renowned artists.

- The centre will provide facilities for educational purposes, particularly for the many school groups who currently visit the forest for biking or trekking as well as the local schools.
- The centre will be a showcase for sustainability.

These aims were reflected in conversation with Board members and the administrator:

- *The forest centre is vitally important, if we don't get that forest centre I think we are in trouble. ... we want to do it our way and we have the criteria that we want, we would like it to involve... it may have examples of local agriculture, it may have local crafts, we wanted to have a showcase for us ... we do want to bring more people in but we want to make sure that the local people that aren't working, haven't got employment here living in this community have got a chance of employment. [Board member]*

Those close to the situation (including founding members, administrators, and FCS staff) noted that idealism had fuelled the purchase, and was now tempered by realism and skills shortages in the community:

- *I think it was a very idealistic thing. Don't get me wrong, I'm very pleased the community now owns land. I think that's a good thing for the community going forward and for the community's survival as a highland village. ... But I do think there was a very idealistic view of how it was all going to be, very rose tinted of how things were going to happen. [former Board member, resident, business owner]*
- *now that we have health and safety there are lots of rules and regulations, they didn't look on it that way, they thought that everybody could go away on a Saturday and cut trees down and build houses without planning permission and log cabins and the community would basically run and that's not how it's run [current Board member, and founding trustee]*

The biggest point of concern is the need to provide local jobs for local people, and try to prevent the younger generation from moving away. Some residents drew parallels with the National Nature Reserve at Creag Meagaidh, managed by SNH, where the first employees were all from beyond the local community which did not have the management skills. Since then local people have received training, and the same can, they believe, be done at Laggan.

One Board member also related it to hopes of improving the social life of the community:

- *I do believe that the forest centre and the eco work and the burial ground and the tree nursery, these things will bring people back in. [Board member]*

It is in this connection that Board members expressed themselves so strongly when correcting the phrase 'visitor centre'. They were adamant that the new centre will be a 'forest centre' – it is for the community, not for visitors. Nevertheless there were differences of opinion about how 'central' this will be: several expressed concerns that the 'forest centre' could move the centre of the community away from the village.

Woodfuel forms a part of the expectations package, but it was clear that this takes only vague form in most people's minds. Unlike Dervaig, only a core few have a sense of the possibilities.

Another expectation expressed by some (but about which others feel ambivalent) is attracting more people to come and live in Laggan. As one B&B owner said:

- o *One of the things that actually did draw us was the fact that when we were looking [for somewhere to set up business] we discovered on the Forestry Commission website the tender for the café and bike shop at - at a place called Laggan and we got the map and we were, oh yeah, that's that village we've seen when we've been driving to the west coast, oh it's quite nice round there - that's a community that is obviously active, that's a new thing that's starting up in that area, that has to be a benefit to a B&B business.*

The same factors were less attractive to long-term residents with fewer resources:

- o *Well I think the idea from the start was that it would keep some of the younger generation in the community – but personally myself I cannae really see that. For one thing, if they want to go for a drink at night, if they're no' living within walking distance of the pub ...*

## Community dimensions

The LFT is attempting to make this project work at a challenging time of declining population and skills base. Their motivations are quite clearly community-oriented. The situation in Laggan is perhaps summarised best in the words of one resident since birth, a founding trustee and a Board member, who described the loss of social life in the community:

*There are lots of people who have come in and lots of people have different remits and everything else and people don't socialise like they used to do, it's just the way that life is in general.*

Whilst there is a significant number of incomers in Laggan, local accents and knowledge were much more apparent at the board meeting than they were in Dervaig, and the majority present were locally brought up. The LFT administrator estimated that the average household income was £11-15000 per annum, and noted

*there's a high level of resentment with the number of holiday homes to the number of actual family homes .*

Committee members estimated this at 70 locally occupied houses, compared with 56 holiday homes.

Many distinguished between this and the benefits of resident incomers:

*The people that have moved in, in actual fact they have often got the expertise ... these people have been really important to this community because they are often the ones that come up with the ideas for ... maybe making goats cheese or whatever, but they tend to be very entrepreneurial where we are not really like that so it's a mixture of both and I think it's good. [Board member]*

In fact a substantial amount of the work in achieving ownership, finding major grants etc. has been done by a handful of incomers who have business management skills. One B&B owner reported that she felt as an outsider more able to ask awkward questions, and challenge some of the idealism around ownership.

*I wanted people to have thought it through freely and not be hoodwinked into doing things or felt that they had to do it because that's what they perceived that the community to want them to do. And I wanted them to think things through very carefully.*

However few people felt that the forest partnership had enhanced community cohesion:

*I would say if anything it's causing more division. It causes even more fall outs and animosities. I know of three, four people who don't speak to each other.[business owner]*

Whilst she related this to personalities rather than the community itself, she also noted that the animosities emerged around the partnership, not specifically around ownership:

*I don't quite know that [owning the land is] causing any more division than there already was there - other than there's now the things being built and what further investment do we give in fund raising. To me it's just the same level of conflict that was already there.*

Some bring energy and vision, while others are less fully involved, as the following dialogue between the administrator [A] and a trustee demonstrates:

- o [A] You're a member, you actually own that land as well.
- o [pause] Oh right, OK. [laughs] I just never think about a' that things. Like I live my own little life. [laughs]
- o [A] You're a member – you're a trustee you're on the list .. You signed a piece of paper saying you wanted to be a trustee years ago
- o *That was probably my husband's idea. I probably just agreed. Well he worked in the forestry*

[dialogue between LFT administrator and trustee]



Issues of social coherence aside, the community is distinctive for its multi-committee governance style. Several mentioned the plethora of committees in the village, and the demands this makes on the more active members. Three trustees commented independently on this issue:

- o *“has it brought us all closer together?” Not totally at this moment, my opinions are that there are too many committees in Laggan, for a small village. and I find it ridiculous and each one is very powerful.*
- o *I think it necessary for there to be community representation and a community to be looking after itself and doing things, but there doesn't need to be this number of committees. ... a lot of the incomers find the whole committees quite exhausting. An awful lot of them come away from the corporate world of committees and meetings and really don't want to be a part of it too much.*
- o *I'm not a person that's very keen on a lot of meetings. I did join in one or two, took photos, the paths. But I would never put my name forward to be fully committed, because I work shifts in the summer anyway, so my time is pretty busy. You have to make money.*

Finally one comment indicated a sense that Laggan is challenged by being small and scattered:

- o *I actually would guard against other communities of our size trying to do it. I see what has happened across Nethy Bridge and Abernethy and what they have and they're a much bigger community they can pull on far more people, far more income we're a very small community, very diverse spread out geographical community.*

## Meanings of ownership

There was a strong consensus among Board members, about the motivations for ownership. One response, which was typical, was:

*[it was based on] a desire to actually own our own forest and to not have it sold from underneath us, to try and have local jobs and local enterprise and to have a sense of ownership.*

The speaker recognised that by the time LFT did buy National Forest Land it was unlikely that the FCS was going to sell it to anyone else, but this incentive was stated repeatedly as a reason, even for the recent sale.

In Laggan most experience relates to the partnership, and the whole Strathmashie forest. Although the energy of the core group has shifted to the pieces of land that the LFT now owns, most people spoke about the whole forest when asked about the benefits of owning the forest; they were thinking in terms of the partnership. Some were even unaware that the LFT had bought these three pieces of land.

- o *sitting as a member of the community I'm not totally sure quite what the community think they now own. ...And I'm not totally sure as to how they now*

*perceive themselves as being landowners – which effectively they all are.* [former Board member]

- o [Interviewer]: So it's neither here nor there whether the community owns the wood or not?
- o *Ehhh. [Long pause.] I might have to contemplate that one.* [a trustee]

Others who are more actively involved focused on the symbolic value, both internally and externally:

- o *A lot of us have never owned anything in our lives so for the community it's fantastic. It's symbolic.* [board member]
- o *I think it's shown the FC [FCS] that the Trust is actually moving forward rather than just sitting doing nothing, and nothing moving.* [administrator]

More people focused on the economic potential:

- o *It's given the potential for their vision to come to fruition. ... they're tiny bits of land but they're sufficient at the moment to be able to bring on developments that will bring more people into the area.*

and the expectation of being able to lease the space to local businesses.

Several saw it as a catalyst for new ideas and building up experience:

- o *ownership has given them the ideas. As people actually see things happening it'll bring more people on board with more ideas. [i.e. they didn't think of asking FCS, but are thinking of doing this if the LFT owns it]*
- o *The main issue is credibility with the bank because you need to have substantial funds in the bank to move standing sales ahead, and Laggan hasn't.*
- o *we have to take on health & safety, and it could be like somebody fly tipping in the car park and we have to suddenly take responsibility for that. [Before] all the time we could lean on the Forestry Enterprise [FCS] for everything, [now] we have to start taking responsibility of our own bit so we have to grow up a bit and that will come definitely.* [Board member]

Ways in which it has obliged them to 'take responsibility' as this board member saw it, were often the most immediate response to the question of what difference owning land had made:

- o *The single biggest difference it's made to us is paying to clear up fly tipping. It will cost us £60-70 a time. We will also have to replace fences.*
- o *Thankfully we don't own the forest.*
- o *The biggest shock was we thought it would all happen overnight.*

From a core few (3 or 4 people) there was a consistent vision of the value of owning land, because it opened opportunities that didn't otherwise exist. Affordable housing, and outlets for local businesses, play a central role in this:



- o *The partnership is very important because on a lot of fronts we can get together and say well perhaps we can do this, but I think that our plan for the other things wouldn't have gone ahead if we didn't have our own land, it's just too complicated.* [Board member]
- o *They've come up with land for affordable housing in Laggan at the moment, but basically it's based around a wage of £27,000, so it's affordable housing but unfortunately nobody earns £27,000. If we have our own land we could [aim to do this more affordably].* [Board member]

In summing up this sense of ambivalence, we should note that it is a difficult time at which to understand the impact of ownership on the community, caught as it is between potential and exhaustion:

- o *I think a sense of pride could be given to the village again. I think if people were more ... if people wanted to be more aware because I think that's one of the problems because it's been going on for so long, that some people are quite tired of it all.* [resident, former committee member]

## Capacity building

As with other aspects discussed above, much experience has been built up around the issue of capacity building but little of it can be directly attributed to ownership of land. Several central players recognised that the LFT does not have the capacity to manage the forest at the moment, but that ownership provides the potential for income to employ a forest manager and develop a forest plan, and also potential credibility with the bank. Whilst some were frustrated by the apparent slow pace of change, others felt it was the only way to build up sustainability. This is matched with experience from around the world – but there is clearly a tangible issue with the way in which people experience slowness in Laggan. Even those who were very supportive of the partnership expressed frustration and confusion about the process:

- o *I firmly believe the Forestry Commission should have built the Forest Centre. It would be built by now. We are still messing around with architects; we are still messing around with community consultations yet again, impact assessments - yet again. We've been through all of this, we're wasting public money in going through all that again. They don't understand what they should be doing or shouldn't be doing and how they need to keep people informed.* [former Board member, business owner]

In response, the LFT administrator explained that there were two feasibility studies, one a business impact study in relation to the proposed forest centre, and the other, the earlier community consultation about buying the land in the first place. But these distinctions appeared not to have been communicated.

Taking the broader view of the partnership experience, many emphasised how they had learnt from this experience:

- o *If this had happened 10 years ago we wouldn't have taken in [subcontractor] we would have said 'we can do this ourselves' and we tried to do these sort of things and we found out that we couldn't do them in actual fact. And we have learnt along the way, we are a lot wiser at this stage. [Board member]*
- o *There is a changed mindset in the community. We kind of said "this is our wood", almost like we owned it when we didn't. And - you know - "we are going to do it our way" but in actual fact we have realised that they [FCS] are there to help us and they want to help us, and I think they are very positive about it. I don't think there is a hidden agenda which is what we used to think. [Board member]*

This more reflective approach creates its own complexities however:

*We just didn't have the expertise and it's important for business, especially when you're working with people like the Forestry Commission that have to account for everything. Now we need to make sure that whoever gets these jobs has got the experience. [Board member]*

A considerable amount of training has been carried out through the LFT, but as with other aspects of this study, most was in relation to the partnership not ownership. It has provided some lessons, particularly by showing the importance of asking for commitment in return for training:

*We did make some enormous mistakes. We brought people in here and they got lots of training and they went into the first week to work and after a few weeks found it was very hard work and they haven't continued to work within the woodlands.*

## Challenges

The preceding sections show that Laggan has accumulated a great amount of experience, during which it has addressed both external and internal challenges. This has created a legacy of relationships, aspirations and sensitivities. The fact of owning pieces of land represents partial fulfilment of a long-held aspiration; but this in itself creates a new set of challenges, and brings a new focus to earlier challenges.

Most prominent amongst these are the anxieties of a few businesses. As the Business Plan notes:

- o *Some disquiet exists within the business community relating to displacement of trade in the first year of Wolftrax with some businesses believing they have lost trade. It will be crucial to work with local businesses to ensure they receive the benefits of the projected 50,000 visitors to the forest. Steps have already been*



*taken by the commitment to extend the bike trails ensuring longer and overnight stays by the visitors. [Business Plan]*

Although it is of course not possible to verify, it was not clear that these businesses were in fact losing out financially, and considerable resources have been expended in seeking to reassure them and include them.

- o *A certain number of businesses are very outspoken that see the purchase and the future developments as conflicting with their own businesses [LFT administrator]*

The LFT has commissioned the business impact study to alleviate fears, but this in turn has aggravated other members of the community who see endless demands for impact studies, without tangible progress (as indicated in the capacity section).

Another prominent challenge is the time factor, also mentioned above.

- o *it's all gone a bit quiet because everything is taking so long ... it has been a long time and they don't understand that things do take time ... a lot of people assume that there's somebody full time working paid to actually bring this thing on whereas there actually isn't and a lot of the work is done on a voluntary basis [LFT administrator]*
- o *I am quite sure, I'm quite confident this will all go ahead. There is some negative feeling about it all but it is just because it has taken such a long time. I mean we kind of, when it first happened, we thought 3 or 4 years it will all be there but it doesn't, these things take years. [Board member]*

And more critically (although from the same person who objected strongly to the business impact assessment):

- o *some people have no concept of the real world ... you're dealing with government bodies, with funding organisations, you've got to raise money you can't do it all so uniquely. It's no good bleating and saying we should change the system. That is the system, you have to accept that's the system that's how it works, organisations have their funding they have their financial years we have to follow that. [resident, former Board member]*

A sample of comments at the Board meeting and during interviews reflects this challenge of maintaining morale:

- ~ *we were naïve and starry eyed ... we worked better with the FC.*
- ~ *yes we'd have overstretched ourselves.*
- ~ *in future as we gain confidence ...*
- ~ *the bits we've bought are lying idle.*
- ~ *there is a lot of apathy at meetings*

A core group of committed Board members are continuing with faith in the forest centre, and it may well be that change will only happen through tangible outcomes, rather than by trying to address the morale issue directly.

More practically, as mentioned above, the lack of skills continues to be a challenge - administrative skills as much as technical skills.

## Public cost and benefit

The overall impression shared by many people in Laggan is of a community in a different phase from that of Dervaig, looking inward to address the challenges that have accumulated through experience, rather than outward to network and share lessons with others. Much less 'public money' was consumed in buying the very much smaller area of land here than in Dervaig. In addition Laggan's legacy of 'struggle' and political profile associated with the forest affects the way people see the use of public funds in transferring assets to a particular community. There is a sense that the community, or a committed core of campaigners, worked hard and against the odds to gain partnership status, and people feel less need to justify the sums involved.

There were nevertheless clear answers if asked about the use of public money, along the same lines as those given in Dervaig:

- o *I mean if I was going to compare it to spending money for the Olympics or anything else, this is a long-term thing, whereas the Millennium Dome or whatever else, this is small-fry but what it does for a small community like this is vast, what it does for our lives – it enriches our lives, it gives us something to focus on and it is vitally important*

Again most comment on this area related to experiences of the partnership (for example, the poor sustainability of employment training inputs). Perhaps because the employment benefits have accrued to a minority, some expressed concern about the 'fine line between public benefit and vested interest' and the need to keep an eye on the multiplier effects for the whole community. It is apparent that this cuts both ways – there are vested interests in blocking community enterprise as well. The business impact study commissioned for the next Big Lottery application goes a long way to researching and documenting this.

Finally, a frequent and relevant comment made by those at the heart of current work towards the forest centre, was that the use of public funds should be considered in balance with the great amount of voluntary work contributed by residents and in particular the director of the LFT Forest Company.

- o *people don't know the amount of work that goes on in this office, that's the one thing, ... they don't know what [the LFT administrator, and director] do, and if they knew the amount of work that went on here ....*



## Relations with other organisations and communities

- *Our ability to work with partnership is strengthened enormously, I would say* [founding trustee, Board member]

Laggan has benefited from strong and insightful guidance from the Forest District Manager (FDM), who has attended a large number of meetings out of hours, and proactively sought ways to work with the LFT's aspiration to own the forest before possessing all the skills to make that feasible. The comments below reflect this and the effect of a positive approach from the FCS district staff.

Almost all respondents highlighted the growth of mutual understanding that comes through working together:

- *That's come with experience, that's come with working alongside them for 10 years and you know we have had our squabbles and arguments but we have come through. Plus [the director and community forestry officer] have got a good relationship with them and that has just come with time.* [Board member]
- *We see quite a lot of the FC [FCS] staff, it's not just [the FDM] ... In comparison to a lot of others we do have a much stronger relationship with the FC [FCS] and we're able to move things more than other communities have been able to.*

Several felt they had moved on from more a polarised situation in the mid 1990s:

- *We went into the partnership with the aim of eventually having total ownership ourselves but since then we have learnt that actually the partnership works very well, and we can call on their expertise which we didn't have and - like any sort of agency like SNH, or the Forestry Commission, they have an expert in every field and being able to call on them has just been fantastic.*

This relationship is one that many want to continue:

- *even if we were to own it [i.e. the whole forest] I think we would still be wanting to have a partnership with the Forestry Enterprise [FCS] just because of the timber.*

Interested but detached members of the trust observed that the relationship was not perfect:

- *I think there is still some guardedness to the relationship on both sides. I don't think it is as open and honest as it could be. ... I think it comes down to the history of what has happened in the past here.* [resident, former Board member]

Much of this rests with individuals and personalities concerned about loss of jobs:

- *they have to blame someone*
- *at the moment because they can't see the development and see that there is going to be more opportunity for more work, because it has taken so long to get*

*to this stage, then it hasn't reduced their conflict issues, because they assume that it's not going to happen "... and just because we bought the land doesn't mean to say we're going to get more work .. " and so on and so forth.'*  
[administrator]

FCS staff also pointed out how they have learnt from the experience. They showed considerable dedication to finding ways to respond to the aspirations of some LFT members, and have created situations where LFT can gain experience without failing to deliver on contracts.

Ownership has highlighted some very specific challenges to the community and focused all attention on applications for planning permission and grants. This has taken some of the attention away from forest management, and hence possibly reduced tension with FCS. Some Board members instead saw the relationship as strengthened, not distracted:

- o *I think that if [FCS] is getting less hassle it's because we're learning how to work with [them]. I'm quite positive about that and actually until you work for an agency and you know how they have to work, from this narrow point of view - I'm used to it, so I think [the FDM] does a good job.* [Board member]
- o *I think we've increased our efficiency of working so [FCS] is seeing less problems.*  
[administrator]

As the above discussion indicates, much of the attention on networks and partnerships in Laggan focuses on the relationship with FCS. Other organisations were scarcely mentioned. The administrator had arranged exchange visits with other communities but this was much less evident than in discussions with Dervaig members, possibly because more was done in the earlier stages of the partnership, in the late 1990s. The overall impression is that Laggan is confronting more immediate internal challenges. Two senior FCS staff commented that the Community Woodland Association (CWA) had been a useful vehicle for introducing capacity elsewhere, but this was not fully reflected in Laggan. In fact, the administrator found it difficult to get takers for courses on offer. She mentioned three areas in which training had been offered, without any uptake from board or community members or local forest contractors:

- o CWA training courses to increase capacity and learn from other groups experience;
- o opportunities provided by FCS for Laggan board members to attend FC courses;
- o funding provided by FCS for the administrator to run a First aid course to update all contractors.

Again, all of this is based on the experience of partnership and is not a consequence of the NFLS in particular. Given the scarcity of evidence for impact of the NFLS however, this material provides some indications of ways in which community partnerships and networks may or may not be strengthened through collaborative working.



The partnership with FCS has shown that by engaging with other bodies it is possible for a community to achieve far more than it would alone. This has been extended through partnerships with business, such as that being trialled with Scottish Woodlands. The trial standing sale contract provides the community with the opportunity to increase its capacity – in this case to eventually be able to manage standing sales alone. Being in partnership with Scottish Woodlands, LFT hopes to increase the confidence of FCS that they can do it.

## Discussion

In a preliminary evaluation of the effects of community based land reform in Scotland, Slee and Moxey (2008) note the 'considerable complexities' of assessing impact, but conclude that:

*Whilst the direct effects may be small, as measurable by standard socio-economic indicators such as employment, the less quantifiable effects may be very significant in building social capital. Over the longer term it should be possible to ascertain whether such gains in social capital comprise an adequate justification for public policy development and spending ... (p.20)*

Gains in social capital can be defined and measured in many ways including trust, reputation and reciprocal action (Adger 2003), along with closely connected notions such as community 'capacity' (Barker 2005). The assumption that there is a link between this and collective action has recently been questioned (Ishihara and Pascual in press) and there is a need for a thorough review of and testing of indicators against the material presented here.

There is indeed evidence of gains in social capital, and capacity, within the communities that have participated in the National Forest Land Scheme, although it is difficult to attribute such gains solely or even directly to the NFLS itself, and there is an important effect of pre-existing conditions. In other words, a forest purchase through the NFLS provides significant opportunities to change the way the community operates, generate new experiences and new financial power. The key word here is opportunity, however, and there are areas where this opportunity could be better supported if it is not to be lost.

Both communities demonstrated high levels of both democracy (inclusive rules for participation) and participation (membership, and attendance at meetings or elections). The requirement for open-ness is one of the NFLS conditions, and anecdotal comparisons with other community woodlands in the UK suggest this criterion is significant in limiting conflict with the wider community. The levels of participation cannot be required however, and demonstrate a genuine interest and commitment in the concerned communities.

Some indicators that suggest themselves through this study include the following, although they are not all easily quantified:

- number of able and willing residents (e.g. with skills and experience in project or business management)
- percentage of eligible residents who are members of the company or trust
- percentage of members who vote or attend meetings
- numbers of candidates offering to stand for election to board
- grants accessed (although this indicator should be treated with caution, as both communities noted the dangers of depending too long on external funding)
- quality and extent of resource
- number of community groups
- percentage of forest group members belonging also to other community groups
- linkages to external groups, networks and organisations
- numbers participating in training
- numbers participating in conferences and workshops, or giving advice to other community groups.

## Lessons relevant to community groups

Whilst a study of two contrasting communities, both in the early stages of managing newly acquired forests, can only provide preliminary indications of factors supporting success, the following points are worth bearing in mind for communities considering a purchase under the NFLS.

1. There is a mixture of economic, social and symbolic motives underlying a community's interest in an NFLS purchase, and it is important to be clear which can be satisfied. To make an economic contribution (which has not yet been demonstrated) the forest resource needs to be of a scale which will present serious funding and management challenges.
2. The social values are important but a forest purchase is unlikely in itself to help bring together a disparate or conflicted community. In some ways ownership may feel a more lonely path than partnership; certainly Laggan's experience shows the value of partnership for developing constructive relationships with outside organisations.
3. Purchases are often motivated by a strong element of idealism, connected with the symbolic value of ownership. This is a valuable and powerful force to provide the initial impetus, and can connect to greater involvement after purchase, but can also obscure the need for a wide range of practical and business skills both during and after purchase.
4. Management of the forest and associated projects requires formal organisation and this can compete with existing committees and groups within the community. The demands of a forest project can highlight these calls on people's time and require a

- wider look at how things are organised. On the other hand it can certainly benefit from cross linkages and members who are also members of other community groups.
5. As the project progresses there will be a shift from idealism to pragmatism, and it may be helpful to consider involvement of new members of the group. In any case it is essential to look ahead to the demands of fund-raising, project management and company or trust management. Successful community groups will recognise the need for these skills before starting, and either have them amongst their members or take up opportunities for training.
  6. Both communities, although very different, found that a significant challenge was maintaining momentum in the face of external timeframes. Considerable patience is needed to put together various stages of grant and planning applications, and external organisations (government agencies and funding bodies alike) can take a surprisingly long time to process these. The timeframes can appear mystifying and frustrating, and it is helpful for community leaders to prepare for this.
  7. Participating in wider networks, sharing experience through workshops and conferences, is rewarding and stimulating, and Dervaig members spoke of it with great enthusiasm.
  8. In any community there are sceptics about new projects. This scepticism needs to be managed; in some cases it is slightly demoralising, but even in more severe cases it will not completely undermine the potential for success. More serious issues are presented by members of the community who feel threatened by the project. It is too early to tell whether the evidence gathering process in Laggan will allay these fears, but it is a significant effort by the members of the Trust.

## Lessons relevant to FCS and other partner agencies

1. Whilst it is unwise to generalise from two case studies, they do show a wide range of factors involved. Every group and context is unique, and this makes it difficult to produce guidelines to enable the FCS to manage the NFLS and support the outcomes. The study shows the importance of the local knowledge of FCS staff, and relationships between groups and FCS staff.
2. The previous section (recommendations for community groups) indicates areas that would benefit from FCS knowledge and awareness. It may be helpful to note that the psychological effects of ownership have the effect of changing perceptions of what is possible: community members see more potential for leasing to local business, opening up access, converting local heating systems to woodfuel, and hosting Forest School, when they own the forest, even though all of these are in fact possible under public ownership.
3. Some of the areas where communities need most support are with skills outwith FCS's traditional expertise, but where its experience in partnership and across the range of government and non-government organisations in Scotland and the UK can help to provide the connections needed. These include:

- community governance – a sensitive area where intervention is not appropriate but where opportunities for sharing experience can be beneficial. The training in company directorship was particularly valued in Dervaig.
  - capacity building in business and project management;
  - opportunities for increased external networking and partnership, though communities going through intense internal challenges may not be able to take up these opportunities so readily;
  - facilitation of learning from experience.
4. The issue that was most discouraging for community members, was their experience of frustration and (to them) inexplicable delays in funding and processing of applications. While it may not be within the power of partner organisations to change these timeframes it can greatly help to show understanding and to communicate regularly about the expected timeframes and progress of applications.
  5. Finally the NFLS represents novel experiences and challenges for FCS staff and others from the land use sector. It is not only the communities who benefit from sharing experiences but also staff from supporting organisations. Visits and discussions with colleagues and communities who have participated in the scheme, would be a valuable support for staff less familiar with the issues.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The Forestry Commission is referred to throughout as FC Scotland (FCS) except where the reference is to pre-devolution historical context, in which case the correct designation is Forestry Commission (FC).

<sup>ii</sup> It also makes provision for Registered Social Landlords (housing associations) and other housing bodies to buy National Forest Land to provide affordable housing. These cases are not covered by this study.

<sup>iii</sup> See <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/website/forestresearch.nsf/ByUnique/INFD-5STBZ2>.

<sup>iv</sup> The purchase price was £75,000, legal fees were £5,875 so the total acquisition cost was £80,875 of which the Scottish Land Fund provided £60,656, that's public funds, the Community Land Unit provided a grant as well of £15,165.00, so that is public funds and the trust made a contribution of £5,054.

<sup>v</sup> The Scottish Land Fund was launched on 26 February 2001 by the New Opportunities Fund, a National Lottery distributor, with the aim of contributing to sustainable development in rural Scotland by assisting communities to acquire, develop and manage local land or land assets. The Fund was made available to help communities establish the feasibility, complete the purchase, and undertake the development and management of local land and land assets. Highlands and Islands Enterprise administered the Scottish Land Fund on behalf of the New Opportunities Fund. It has now been succeeded by the Big Lottery Fund programme - Growing Community Assets. The Scottish Land Fund has assisted 150 communities to acquire land and develop land-based projects since its launch in February 2001. Its successor is managed by the Community land unit, established by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 1997. The aim of the team is to increase the role of communities in the ownership and management of land and land assets, and the sustainable management of these resources for the benefit of the community.

<sup>vi</sup> ERDF, MFST, other funding bodies – Highland Council, SNH, Local enterprise Company, National park authority.

<sup>vii</sup> The Scottish Forestry Strategy (2006) identified a need to reposition the NFE to address the following priorities through acquisition and sales:

- \* safeguard 'national forestry treasures';
- \* deliver forestry for people and rural development benefits where people live and work;
- \* manage landscape-scale core areas for threatened species and habitats;
- \* retain sufficient timber production potential to facilitate market stability and development;
- \* use acquisition/disposal, partnerships and other arrangements to generate a greater scale and pace of change; and
- \* sustain sufficient regional presence to exercise policy development, exemplar and leadership roles.

A portfolio analysis tool was developed to assess the economic and non-market benefits currently derived from different parts of the NFE

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<sup>viii</sup> The £13m Strategic Scottish Timber Transport Fund was established in 2005, and aims to facilitate the sustainable transport of timber in rural areas for the benefit of local communities and the environment. This has generated a significant amount of business development in both infrastructure, and innovation. To date 23 projects have been successful in securing over £7.5 million of funding through the STT Scheme, and the Timberlink shipping service on the west coast has been set up and is supported by the STT fund. £5 million have been made available to the fund by the Government for the next three years.