



# WOODLAND CROFTS

## Progress Report to the Woodland Crofts Implementation Group

July 2011

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### Scope of Report

This report covers the period from summer 2008 to the present. It focuses on activity and outputs from the woodland crofts officer role, primarily involving the NFLS. However, it also considers the broader context, and projects being progressed under other (not former FCS) ownerships.

## **Background**

### **Role of the Woodland Crofts Implementation Group**

The woodland crofts implementation group was convened to take forward woodland crofts in 2007, based on the original Steering Group which had reported to ministers on the subject, but including additional members. These new members were Communities Scotland, Community Woodlands Association, Highland Council and Highland Birchwoods and the group was now known as the Woodland Crofts Implementation Group (WCIG).

The role of the Group was to oversee the implementation of woodland crofts made possible by the changes to crofting legislation, and the revision then underway of the National Forest Land Scheme to explicitly include woodland crofts. This work involved consideration of a range of issues including planning, funding, housing & woodland management, and culminated in a 'launch' seminar for woodland crofts held in Inverness in May 2008. Since then it has continued as an ad hoc steering group for the work of the Woodland Crofts Project Officer.

### **Woodland Crofts Officer role**

One of the original recommendations of the WCIG was that a project officer be appointed to support those looking to create woodland crofts. Following their launch in 2008, a woodland crofts officer (WCO) was appointed for a 3 year term, managed by HIE's Community Land Unit and supported by FCS. This officer, in partnership with stakeholders, continued the work of clarifying outstanding issues, produced written guidance on various aspects of woodland crofts, and provided support to community groups. Groups creating woodland crofts on the National Forest Estate through the NFLS were the focus of this support, but wider assistance was also given.

In addition, secretariat was provided to the WCIG which continued to meet annually during this period, expanding its membership to include the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust, Scottish Natural Heritage, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Argyll & Bute Council and NFUS.

### **Woodland Crofts progress to date**

To date, at least twelve community groups have given serious consideration to the establishment of woodland crofts, with others having highlighted the possibility. All twelve have received support from the WCO to varying degrees, in accordance with both their needs and the stage of development of their projects.

The outcomes have been mixed. In some cases, further consideration revealed that the woodland crofts model was not an appropriate solution to community needs. In others, approval for purchase through the NFLS was subsequently followed by funding difficulties, resulting in projects being dropped, delayed, or scaled back. In many cases, a commitment to woodland crofts exists as a future objective, but more immediate priorities are being progressed first.

However, woodland crofts are now imminent 'on the ground' on Mull, with Kilfinan and another group not far behind. These groups are finding practical solutions to some of the issues associated with woodland crofts, and thus providing precedents for the groups that follow. It is worth noting that these 'front-runners' are mature, well-established groups who have been involved in land management projects for many

years. At the other end of the scale, new groups with an interest in woodland crofts continue to appear eg Kirkton (Lochcarron).

Even where groups have not in the end progressed their own woodland crofts projects, they have sometimes made a critical contribution to the understanding of the model and its options. A case in point would be the Embo Trust, whose exploration of croft housing models with the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust has yielded a range of options to deliver croft housing which is linked to the tenancy of the croft.

Another aspect of note is the type of ownership on which woodland crofts are currently being developed. Of the 3 advanced projects alluded to above, 2 bought their land at a time when woodland crofts were not available ie this was not an objective of the purchase at the time. Subsequently, the changes which enabled woodland crofts allowed these groups to respond to local needs and circumstances by establishing crofts. The third group did buy their woodland via the NFLS at a time when woodland crofts were available, but having started the process well before, included woodland crofts as a future commitment rather than an immediate priority.

This probably reflects the lengthy lead-in time for community projects generally, especially those as significant and potentially complex as woodland buyouts. Where these involve a new concept with no precedents – as here - timescales are likely to be further extended. Progress to date should be considered in this context.

Finally, there has also been interest in privately-owned woodland crofts. These were always anticipated on an individual basis, but also appearing now are private owners interested in establishing woodland crofts for tenants, with very similar motivations regarding woodland management & community benefits as are found amongst community owners.

### **Woodland Crofts issues and barriers**

A number of issues have been recognised which have had a bearing on the progress of woodland crofts – though some are not exclusive to them. These are listed below under various categories:

#### General

- Initial misconceptions about the model (amongst communities, & others):
  - is about woodland management
  - not primarily a housing solution
  - livestock can integrate with woodland, but not replace it
  - 'affordability' is not a requirement, but an option
- Model not yet fully integrated into other policies & strategies – eg local authority development plans, indicative forestry strategies etc
- Public benefits of woodland crofts not generally recognised
- Limited active promotion of the model to date, due to unresolved issues (see below....)
- Conversion of plantation woodlands into woodland crofts technically challenging
- Limited precedents for smaller scale management to refer to

### Funding

- Generally constrained funding environment
- Specific difficulties funding purchase of public assets (BIG lottery)
- Limited examples to date of 'alternative' funding approaches
- Sale of timber to tenants and entry fees have potential to support purchase but cashflow may be an issue
- No grants specific to woodland crofts yet available

### Communities

- Reality of developing woodland crofts more challenging than anticipated: funding; planning projects; etc
- Establishing woodland crofts is a significant undertaking, especially for newly-formed groups with less capacity
- 'Community of place' - eligible for NFLS and CR2B – do not always include people with strong knowledge of forestry, especially alternative approaches
- 'Community of interest' more likely to understand the opportunities/constraints but not able to access 'official' mechanisms to develop woodland crofts

### Crofting

- Difficult period in crofting generally (crofting reform agenda)
- Use of crofting as the legal mechanism restricts woodland crofts to the crofting counties – interest exists elsewhere
- Crofting arouses strong feelings (positive and negative) so some not keen on woodland crofts simply because they are part of crofting

### Housing

- Some interest in woodland crofts driven more by housing opportunity than woodland management opportunity (but is this reflective of crofting more generally?)
- Community control croft tenancies – need therefore to control croft housing too
- Croft housing delivery (and control) options exist, but most as yet untested

### Delivery

- NFLS anticipates projects will primarily be woodland crofts ones; in practise woodland crofts are generally elements in a more complex mix
- Most successful groups progressing woodland crofts do so as 'phase 2' – initial focus usually on other project elements
- Emphasis to date has been on National Forest Estate via NFLS; existing community and private landowners can also be good candidates for woodland crofts projects

## **Feedback from Groups**

In the preparation of this report, feedback was sought from some of the more active groups as to their own experiences in progressing, or trying to progress, woodland crofts. This was intended to 'cross-check' against the observations of the Project Officer (above). This was an informal process, rather than rigorous or systematic, and the following gives a flavour of the responses received:

### Positive comments:

- Potentially significant social benefits from repopulating area (used to have its own school)
- Much improved diversity in land use and planting over area involved
- Opportunities for local people to establish/alter their lifestyle
- A small but regular income to the community from croft rents
- Potentially 4/5 additions to the local housing stock

- Proactive approach and lots of input from FCS conservancy when needed
- FCS staff patient, informative and helpful
- More young families are returning to the village and surrounding area, interested in the crofting initiative - bringing small children too for the school!
- Possibility for people to help sustain themselves through affordable housing and rural business opportunities
- Clarification of issues by WCO was extremely useful
- Although project did not progress, gained experience and developed policies & procedures which will be useful in the future

#### Negative comments:

- Not a well thought through initiative at FCS country level with regard to other procedures (eg long term forest plans)
- Lots of 'furrow ploughing' as a result of being first out of the blocks
- Felt BIG lottery encouraged applications which they were never likely to approve (*more than one response*)
- Were not able to convince BIG lottery that there would be more than a handful of beneficiaries from project
- Should have employed a professional to draft our funding bid
- Wide variation in valuations – feel there should be a fixed price per hectare, with a fixed rate of support, for woodland buyouts
- Though NFLS is a great scheme its procedures were not fully understood by local FE staff resulting in inappropriate advice
- If woodland crofts are such a good idea, and FCS are now permitted to lease land, why do FCS not establish such crofts on their land?
- Croft housing loan scheme should never have been removed
- Feel that a 'routemap' would be very useful to enable any community groups to progress the woodland crofts initiative
- Is a great concept but needs dedicated funding, otherwise NFLS approval raises expectations for nothing

#### **Next steps**

The following is a list of key questions the WCIG and the organisations represented should consider when discussing the next steps with Woodland Crofts. They include:

- Should the WCIG continue to meet, if so, in what format and what should be its remit e.g. support to delivery, development of the model etc?
- How should the final guidance be presented and promoted?
- How does the wider discussion regarding Land Reform impact on woodland crofts?
- Are there other delivery models that should be explored, particularly when looking at establishing woodland crofts on community / private land?