

# Woodland Crofts Partnership response to Draft Highland Forest & Woodland Strategy 2018

## The Woodland Crofts Partnership

The Woodland Crofts Partnership (WCP) is a partnership of 4 third-sector organisations, seeking to promote and develop woodland crofts. It comprises the Scottish Crofting Federation, the Community Woodlands Association, the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust and Woodland Trust Scotland. We welcome this opportunity to comment on the Draft Highland Forest & Woodland Strategy 2018 (the Strategy).

The Scottish Crofting Federation is the only member-led organisation dedicated to promoting crofting and it is the largest association of small scale food producers in the UK. Its mission is to safeguard and promote the rights, livelihoods and culture of crofters and their communities. Tel: 01599 530 005, [www.crofting.org](http://www.crofting.org)

The Community Woodlands Association is the direct representative body of Scotland's community woodland groups. It helps community woodland groups across the country achieve their aspirations and potential, providing advice, assistance and information, facilitating networking and training, and representing and promoting community woodlands to the wider world. Tel: 01309 674 004, [www.communitywoods.org](http://www.communitywoods.org)

The Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust is a registered charity helping rural communities secure long term solutions to their local housing needs. It represents a wide range of interests including communities, local government, landowners, crofters and housing associations. By helping rural communities meet their needs for additional affordable housing it plays an important role in actively supporting their long term viability. Tel: 01463 233 549, [www.hscht.co.uk](http://www.hscht.co.uk)

Woodland Trust Scotland is part of the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity. Its vision is a UK rich in native woods and trees, enjoyed and valued by everyone. In Scotland it is currently leading the Croft Woodlands Project. Tel: 01738 635544, [www.woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk)

## Introduction

Overall, we support the proposals in the Strategy, and its Vision and Strategic Themes. It is clear, generally balanced, and well-argued.

**However, we are disappointed that there is not greater reference to woodland crofts in the Strategy.**

More generally, we feel there is insufficient emphasis on a more locally-focused approach to forestry, delivering benefits to the communities who actually host the forests. Too often in the past most of the benefits of forestry have accrued in areas remote from the forests themselves; a more local approach would bring both sustainability and rural development benefits. Woodland crofts have a key part to play in this.

In our comments on the draft strategy, we aim to highlight some of the key attributes of woodland crofts and illustrate those areas of the Strategy which can be supported by them.

## **What is a woodland croft?**

We define a woodland croft as a registered croft with sufficient tree cover overall to be considered a woodland. Note however that this is a descriptive term and there is no distinction in law between a woodland croft and any other kind of croft. Nevertheless, it is useful to highlight woodland crofts as a separate entity not least in terms of the opportunities and benefits they bring to the forestry sector.

Woodland crofts integrate small-scale woodland management with other land management activities and offer opportunities for housing and business development, thereby contributing to livelihoods and lifestyles.

They are supported by Scottish Government (for example being included in the Scottish Forestry Strategy and referenced in the current Programme for Government), by Forestry Commission Scotland, and by various Local Authorities in the crofting areas, such as Highland Council and Argyll & Bute Council.

Further information on woodland crofts can be found from various sources, in particular our website [www.woodlandcrofts.org](http://www.woodlandcrofts.org)

## **Challenges & Opportunities**

Section 4 of the draft Strategy highlights a number of challenges facing forestry in Highland. Many of these can we believe be countered by more intensive, high quality management with a focus on local processing and utilisation. Such an approach can be costly for the traditional forestry sector, but is part and parcel of a woodland crofts approach, where resident woodland occupiers are able to deliver high levels of management input on a very regular basis. This can bring benefit in managing for timber quality, for biodiversity, for resilience and response to storm events, for deer control and disease surveillance. Adding value locally, on croft, keeps more of the timber pound in local communities and reduces timber transport.

## **The Highland Context**

Crofting is available as a form of land tenure throughout the Highland Council area.

Throughout Highland, it is possible to create new crofts under the provisions of the Crofting Reform etc Act 2007. This opportunity, together with the extensive & unique nature of Highland's woodlands, means that the area has significant potential for woodland crofts – something which is not currently reflected in the Strategy. Further, some existing crofts within Highland may be suitable for conversion to woodland crofts by the establishment of new woodland on them

## **Woodland Crofts in Highland**

The Strategy includes 8 key Strategic Themes to support its vision for forestry in Highland. We reproduce these below with comments (in italics) as to how woodland crofts can contribute to the delivery of the policy objectives associated with these themes:

### **Theme 1 - Woodland Expansion**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*Most people registering their interest in a woodland croft with the Woodland Crofts Partnership indicate they are willing to take on bare land on condition they plant it, thus new woodland croft creation can contribute to woodland expansion targets.*

*Woodland crofts by their nature integrate multiple management activities, and being generally smaller-scale, woodland on them necessarily complements other land use. In particular, they integrate forestry with agricultural activities.*

*Native timbers are especially suited to adding value, often in innovative ways, hence it is highly likely that woodland crofters will take advantage of growing native woodland, and converting & marketing their timber.*

*As woodland crofts are typically smaller woodlands, they represent just a small proportion of deer ranges; accordingly, deer control must of necessity be carried out in a collaborative manner, with neighbouring interests.*

## **Objectives**

- Support increased levels of productive and multifunctional woodland expansion across Highland;
- Encourage planting that contributes to integration with and expansion of native woodland and other woodland habitat networks;
- Encourage woodland expansion that delivers 'ecosystem services' relating to mitigation and adaptation to climate change, including flood plan management objectives;
- Encourage a collaborative and balanced approach to deer management that support the Highland economy whilst safeguarding its forests, woodlands and wider environmental interests;
- Support woodland expansion and crofter forestry schemes that help better integrate forestry with agriculture;
- Contribute to the implementation of the recommendations of the Mackinnon Report for woodland expansion.

## **Theme 2 - Economic Potential**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*Most woodland crofters will expect their woodlands to make a contribution to their incomes. As a result they will manage them productively. However timber produced is most productively utilised when the crofter's time and skills can be used to add maximum value, before the product is exported or sold into local markets. Such an approach reduces the transport of bulk, lower value timber thereby reducing timber traffic. It can also make economic those woodlands constrained by access issues, without necessarily needing costly infrastructure improvements.*

*A woodland crofter will typically manage their own woodlands directly and spend a proportion of their working week doing so. This represents increased employment in the forestry sector, albeit on a self-employed basis, with corresponding economic benefit to a community.*

*Most woodland crofters will instinctively heat their own homes using woodfuel. This will logically extend to harvesting and processing woodfuel for onward sale locally, helping to develop and sustain local biomass markets.*

*As alluded to earlier, one of the key features of the woodland crofters approach to timber utilization is the aspiration and ability to add the maximum value to locally grown timber. The construction market is an ideal opportunity for this: with relatively affordable 'appropriate technology', the woodland crofter can, either individually or through a co-operative approach, process hardwoods for flooring, joinery & furniture making, whilst also processing durable softwood species for cladding and post & beam framing.*

### **Objectives**

- Continue to work with the Highland Timber Transport Group (HTTG) to facilitate forest industry collaboration to improve timber transport infrastructure including rail and sea;
- Work in partnership with HTTG to identify priority road improvement projects and remove the majority of constraints through a medium term programme of investment in improvement;
- In conjunction with the Highland Timber Transport Group, actively seek ways to integrate rural roads infrastructure and land-use planning;
- Encourage the wider use of woodfuel in domestic and smaller-scale commercial settings to support the development of the Highland-wide biomass supply chain;
- Support the development of local hard wood products;
- Promote growth of markets for timber grown in Highland for sustainable construction.

### **Theme 3 - Climate Change**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*Management of woodland on woodland crofts is diverse: of ages and species, and management objectives. This diversity helps bring resilience in the face of the challenges brought by climate change.*

*A key element in controlling disease and harmful pests, threats expected to increase with climate change, is regular surveillance and prompt action to address any issues discovered. The woodland crofts model involves a frequent presence in the woodland and an intimate knowledge of it, both of which provide an essential basis for forest protection.*

*Management also typically involves a continuous cover approach using smaller-scale equipment, so systems like LISS will be the norm. As alluded to under the 'economic potential' theme, woodland crofters will process timber locally, reducing timber miles, and champion its use for construction and fuel as part of their general business outlook.*

### **Objectives**

- Support forestry proposals that enhance environmental and soil protection through sustainable flood and catchment management;
- Support increasing use of woodfuel for renewable energy;
- Continue to encourage diversity of species within woodland creation and long term forest plans to adapt to climate change and improve resilience against pests and disease;
- Promote increased use of home-grown sustainably produced timber and timber products for construction and house building through Highland Council's sustainable procurement policy;
- Raise awareness of Voluntary Carbon Standards such as the Woodland Carbon Code as mechanisms for help to realise the benefits of carbon sequestration;
- Continue to implement SG Policy on the Control of Woodland Removal when considering development proposals that involve the loss of trees and woodland;

- Encourage wider use of Low Impact Silvicultural Systems (LISS) where appropriate to increase long term carbon retention;
- Support opportunities for peatland habitat restoration in combination with “peatland edge” and “transition” type woodland and habitat connectivity as part of restructuring / long term forest plan proposals.

#### **Theme 4 - Community Empowerment**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*The community woodland movement has been one of the successes of the community empowerment agenda. Community woodland owners have been at the forefront of the creation of woodland crofts (eg in Mull, & Tighnabruaich), and there is no reason to believe this cannot also be the case in Highland. The significant area of woodland managed by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) provides a resource potentially available to community groups via the FCS Community Asset Transfer Scheme – and woodland croft creation can be a part of that.*

*One of the benefits to communities of the woodland crofts model is its combination of a woodland-based economic opportunity with affordable housing, both priorities in most rural communities. Thus the expansion of community-owned woodland crofts has the potential to deliver against affordable housing need alongside other benefits.*

#### **Objectives**

- Continue to support asset transfer, community woodland ownership and management within Highland;
- Encourage local engagement in scoping meetings relating to Forest Plans and woodland creation proposals to deliver local benefits;
- Encourage community owned wood-related energy projects in woodlands;
- Encourage and promote community led affordable housing within appropriate woodland settings as described in The Highland’s Council Trees, Woodland & Development Supplementary Guidance;
- Support accessible access and recreational facilities, local employment, rural skills and community energy projects.

#### **Theme 5 - Environmental Capital**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*The personal stewardship and high levels of management input & attention to detail potentially provided through woodland crofts result in high quality management with a corresponding improvement in woodland condition. These same attributes also assist in the restoration & management of vulnerable forest ecosystems, and can maximize the chances of successful regeneration of native forest.*

*This approach also means woodland crofts are an ideal model for the sensitive restoration of PAWS sites, and management of ancient woodland and heritage trees.*

## **Objectives**

- Promote woodland management and expansion that restores, enhances and safeguards biodiversity and habitat connectivity;
- Support sustainable forest management proposals that meet the UK Forestry Standard;
- In conjunction with other partners, promote the benefits of incremental restoration of Plantation on Ancient Woodland (PAWS) sites;
- Ensure that woodland expansion proposals and long-term management plans protect and promote Highland's historic environment and cultural heritage, including gardens and designed landscapes and heritage trees.

## **Theme 6 - Development and Tourism**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*Croft enterprises are often highly diversified and many crofters offer tourism facilities and services. A woodland croft is an opportunity to provide such services, based on the woodland resource. An obvious opportunity is the provisions of huts – timber built and set in the woodland – helping to contribute to the crofter's livelihood and the wider tourism economy.*

*Woodland crofts can also integrate housing with both existing and newly established woodland, with the advantage that the resident crofter provides on-site woodland management input. This can also be an opportunity to bring undermanaged woodlands back into productive use, by creating woodland crofts from them.*

## **Objectives**

- Ensure that provision for new planting and /or management of existing tree cover are incorporated as integral elements of development briefs and master plans for new development and regeneration proposals across Highland;
- Promote opportunities for funding streams such as WIAT to contribute to enhancement of urban fringe areas through improvements to local woodlands, particularly those in or near deprived areas;
- Work with woodland owners, managers and other stakeholders to identify and develop the potential of strategically located new and existing Highland woodlands (for example, forest parks) as future visitor and tourism attractions and destinations;
- Encourage woodland tourism initiatives to sign up to Visit Scotland Welcome Schemes;
- Support opportunities for linking accessible and active outdoor access/recreation and tourism in and between Highland forests and woodlands, including mountain biking, walking and activities such as orienteering and eco- tourism;
- Support the restructuring of woodland and forestry along tourism corridors;
- Support sensitive housing/hutting/developments in woodlands in accordance with Supplementary Guidance on Trees, Woodland and Development.

## **Theme 7 - Health and Wellbeing**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*Evidence from the register of interest held by the Woodland Crofts Partnership indicates that aspiring woodland crofters have a wide range of intended uses for their woodlands on securing a woodland croft. Many of these involve a forest school approach to learning, craftwork, bushcraft or other outdoor activities.*

*Some also see an opportunity for using the woodland as the basis of therapy in various forms, both formally and through a more informal 'retreat' approach. Such non-traditional woodland enterprises have potential to deliver economic benefit from woodlands which in conventional economic terms may be considered to be of little or no value.*

### **Objectives**

- Support Continue to work with the Highland health sector and other stakeholders to raise awareness of the role of trees and woodlands in provision of health benefits;
- Support and extend the benefits of joint health initiatives such as "Branching Out" and the Green Exercise Partnership" across Highland;
- Promote the role of woodlands in providing a resource for physical activity close to where people live and work;
- Support and promote development and management of the Highland Core Paths network;
- Ensure that provision for responsible public access to forests and woodlands is embedded in woodland creation proposals and maintained within existing woodlands using the frameworks of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and Land Reform Act;
- Encourage and promote the use of Highland forests and woodlands for outdoor learning through Forest School and Highland OWL

### **Theme 8 - Business and Skills Development**

*Woodland crofts can help deliver the policy objectives under this theme in a number of ways.*

*Most importantly, woodland crofts provide a 'nursery' for growing the new generation of forestry workers. Young people brought up on a woodland croft will be imbued with the much discussed 'forest culture' and will often have a degree of forestry skills and experience. Such people will instinctively be aware of the opportunity to build a career based on using those skills.*

*Increasing the numbers of woodland crofts will also help bring forestry work from being a remote and often unseen activity to one of everyday life. This awareness and understanding will enable youngsters from the wider community (and not just crofting families) become familiar with forestry activities and the career and employment opportunities they bring.*

### **Objectives**

- Working collaboratively with industry and education partners across Highland and the Scottish Forest and Timber Technologies Skills Group, promote the sector as a potential career choice to new entrants;
- Improve links between schools, FE/HE institutions and industry through the support, development and delivery of rural skills and apprenticeship programmes and active engagement with Developing the Young Workforce;
- Support curriculum and training provision in the Highlands to ensure they are up-to-date, appropriate and meet the needs of the industry;

- In partnership with industry initiatives such as the Highland Forest Industry Cluster, explore and promote the development of accessible and stimulating apprenticeship schemes across the Highlands and encourage employer engagement with such programmes;
- Support knowledge exchange and explore cross-cutting opportunities with other land based sectors operating within the Highlands.

## **Conclusion**

Woodland crofts deliver against most of the key strategic themes in the Strategy. Due to the smaller-scale, more intensive approach employed, their development will not impact on the 'traditional' forestry sector. Indeed, they can add value to it by offering solutions to 'problem' woodlands where an industrial approach is found wanting, and are well suited to the management of native woodland, especially on sensitive or designated sites. They also generate new entrants for the industry 'grown' from their 'family forestry' approach. They can also play their part in woodland expansion, where woodland crofts are established through planting bare land.

**With the unique nature of its woodland resource, much of it native, Highland offers better prospects for the development of woodland crofts than many other crofting areas. Given the benefits they bring, and the support for the model from the Scottish Government, we recommend that they are included as key priorities in the Strategy.**

Woodland Crofts Partnership  
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