Note of National Stakeholder Group meeting – 14 November 2024:

Increasing the Benefits to Local People and Communities from Urban Woodlands

Attendees: See Appendix 1

Welcome and Opening remarks

1. Paul Lowe (Chair), Chief Executive of Scottish Forestry welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Mairi Gougeon MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands provided opening remarks, making a number of key points, including the following:

    - *Delivering community benefits* **–** Urban and peri-urban woodlands can deliver a range of public benefits (e.g. climate change mitigation and increased biodiversity), as well as direct social benefits to the people and communities that live close to them.

    - *Realising their full potential* – Given 80% of Scotland's people live in towns and cities, including some of our most deprived communities, it is important that we work together to ensure that our urban and peri-urban woods realise their full potential.

    - *Working together* – Through working in partnership a great deal has been achieved over the last 20 years, helping to ensure that urban and peri-urban woods have become an integral part of our green infrastructure, supporting the regeneration of our urban communities and helping address the legacy of our post-industrial landscape. Great examples of partnership working come through the Clyde, Forth and Fife Climate Forests.

    - *Where next?* – While we should be proud of achievements to date, there is always more to do and this meeting is about coming together to learn from our achievements, look at innovative ways to deliver more, build on our partnership working and think about how we prioritise and target our collective, finite resources.

Overview of the discussion paper and questions to be considered

3. Dr. Amy Nicolson (Communities and Urban Woodlands Advisor at Scottish Forestry) provided an overview of the discussion paper and the strategic issues identified within it, including:

    - ensuring complementarity of finite resources;
    - building and sustaining partnerships;
    - addressing skills and capacity gaps;

- supporting the planning system and town planners to increase sustainably managed woods in and around towns;
- the sustainability of benefit delivery; and identifying priority areas to target.

The paper was shared with participants ahead of the meeting and is available as a separate document.

4. She also outlined the questions set out in the paper for consideration in the breakout rooms to follow:

   i. Do you think these are the key strategic issues that need to be considered or are there other ones we've missed?
   ii. What are the priorities for action to work on collectively?
   iii. How can your organisation contribute and help ensure Scotland's urban woodlands deliver more for people?

Break out group discussions

5. Bob Frost, Head of the Forests for People team at Scottish Forestry introduced the breakout groups. Meeting participants were split into two groups to discuss the above questions before a rapporteur for each group reported back to the plenary.

6. Key themes and strategic issues discussed included: leadership and collaboration; skills and capacity; woodland management; community engagement; and targeting and prioritisation.

7. A more detailed summary of the breakout room discussions is provided in Appendix 2.

Summing up, next steps and closing remarks

8. Paul Lowe thanked everyone for their input to a thought provoking and stimulating discussion and invited participants to send any further thoughts, comments or ideas to Amy Nicolson and Bob Frost by 22 November. He noted that there was much to consider and that Scottish Forestry would now take some time to reflect on these conversations before identifying appropriate actions that Scottish Forestry could work on with partners.

9. He also informed the group that the next National Stakeholder meeting is likely to take place in spring 2025 and that further details and the topic of the meeting will be shared in due course.

10. The Cabinet Secretary, Mairi Gougeon, MSP, highlighted a number of Government initiatives that are underway that will help to address some of the challenges discussed at the meeting, such as the Land-based Learning Review. She closed the meeting by thanking everyone for their participation in what she found to be a very informative and helpful session.

Appendix 1: Organisations represented at the meeting

1. Chief Forester for Scotland
2. Community Woodlands Association
3. Clyde Climate Forest
4. Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust
5. Fife Climate Forest
6. Forest Research
7. Forestry and Land Scotland
8. Forth Climate Forest
9. Future Woodlands Scotland
10. Green Action Trust
11. Historic Environment Scotland
12. Institute of Chartered Foresters
13. Lantra
14. James Hutton Institute
15. National Access Forum
16. NatureScot
17. Scottish Environment Link
18. Scottish Environmental Protection Agency
19. Scottish Forestry
20. Scottish Government (including representatives from the following divisions: Future Environment; Land Reform, Rural and Islands Policy; Nature; and Planning, Architecture and Regeneration)
21. Scottish Land and Estates
22. South of Scotland Enterprise
23. Scottish Tree Officers Group
24. Trees for Cities
25. Woodland Trust Scotland

Appendix 2: Summary of breakout group discussions

Strategic Issues

Discussion centred around the strategic issues associated with increasing the delivery of benefits from urban and peri-urban woodlands. Points raised have been grouped thematically below:

Leadership and coordination

- Scottish Forestry is taking the lead in some areas, but there is still some uncertainty about who leads on other elements and it would be beneficial if there was an overall lead in Government to support coordination and networking, particularly given the fact local authorities are so stretched.
- Do we need a single, central agency to oversee 'liveable spaces' to take forward urban planning and development and how urban trees and woods are integrated? A wider view beyond just looking at urban woodlands may help to understand who is doing what and help identify resources.
- Need to make connections between the work of Scottish Forestry on urban and peri-urban woodlands and the work of others on trees outside woodlands and green infrastructure more widely, such as Nature Scot, Scottish Government Planning Division and Local Authorities. Could look to what the Tree Council in England is doing with its Tree and Woodland Tool Kit.
- We need to bring the sector together. Should we consider an urban forestry and green infrastructure task force to drive this forward (including SEPA and Scottish Water)? Could we hold an annual national urban forestry and green infrastructure forum to report on progress and knowledge exchange?
- Scottish Forestry could have a pivotal role in supporting forest and woodland strategies, providing leadership and guidance to local authorities in the production of these strategies.

Skills and capacity

- There are concerns about capacity and funding for a suitably skilled workforce.
- Knowledge and skills on woodland creation exists, but perhaps it is less so for woodland management, particularly for urban woods.
- If the rural forestry sector is buoyant, that is likely to pull foresters in that direction, potentially making a career in urban forestry less appealing.
- If 80% of the population are in our towns and cities, perhaps we should make more efforts to promote professional forestry in these areas.
- Having better managed woodlands in proximity to schools and incorporating woodlands into more regular teaching could lead to a greater love and respect of nature, and in turn, more interest in working in the sector in the future.
- The fear of artificial intelligence taking jobs was mentioned. Forestry is perhaps less impacted and could be seen as offering security and longer term opportunities.

Woodland management

- There are more opportunities to finance woodland creation than ongoing management, but this is where funds are most needed.
- Standards / benchmarks / quality assurance can help promote best practice.
- How close a woodland is to people is not the only thing to consider in terms of increasing benefit delivery – accessibility is key – e.g. paths, infrastructure, connectivity, and structure (i.e. not too dense to increase perceptions of safety).
- Many of the most successful woodlands appear to be the ones that are more like parks - with more open space to be enjoyed by young families.
- We also need to consider the types of species we use in terms of the benefits they provide and their resilience to climate change and pests and diseases.
- Issue with new town development agencies having had large budgets for initial green infrastructure, but these areas now fall under the responsibilities of local authorities or third sector, and there are not enough resources to manage the areas.
- Consideration also needs to be given to woods that people cannot access, but contribute to the character of the area e.g. along the side of motorways
- There is uncertainty about how to manage deer damage in urban environments.
- Any investment needs long term maintenance. If this is not in place it can lead to a lack of confidence in the process and the possibility that potential benefits are not realised.

Community engagement

- Community engagement is important to foster support for urban woodlands and for their ongoing sustainability – building a sense of ownership and ensuring strong connections between communities and their local woods.
- This in turn will help to increase nature restoration.
- This is about more than just consultation, communities should have strategic involvement, agency and be able to truly influence what happens in their local neighbourhoods, including through ownership.
- Potentially need more targeted funding for community engagement aspect of urban tree planting.
- Community engagement is crucial to help manage antisocial behaviour, and can help resource things like litter picking.
- Rangers are a useful way to promote the use of urban woods and get people out and about.

Targeting and prioritisation

Improving understanding and evidence

- There are lessons to be learnt about why some urban woodlands are better managed and used than others and we need to understand what has worked and what hasn't so that we can target resources more effectively.
- Could there be a potential study on woodlands in and around town sites 10 years later, after initial investment in management, to better understand the drop off in use of some woodlands?

- Few local authorities know their current woodland cover and land assets. This baseline is required so future resources can be targeted.
- There is a need to understand the balance of trees, woods and forests in an urban context. Should an inventory map of the urban forest nationally or a 3:30:300 map be commissioned?
- How clear are we about the distinct challenges that face urban as opposed to rural woodlands? Is it size, availability of grant, ownership issues, visitor pressure, etc?
- Recognition that urban woodlands are often well used. However, data (e.g. on usage) is perhaps not collected. Need to think about how this data is managed across local authorities and Scottish Government.
- Is there a way that scale could be factored into urban woodland planning to use resources more efficiently?

Other considerations

- Priority areas need to relate to available resources. If there is less money available, then perhaps we need a tighter definition of where that money is spent.
- Alternatively, for many organisations seeking funding, having broad targeting criteria can help when trying to fit their own priorities and project ambitions into different funding streams.
- We need multi-criteria analysis for where to prioritise urban woods, over and above the current population centred approach. This should include habitat networks, climate mitigation, climate adaptation, flooding, etc. as well as social and health/well-being benefits.
- Targeting of resources needs to include management of existing woodlands as well as new woodland creation.
- Clyde Climate Forest worked with eight local authorities to consider where land is available and where planting should be prioritised but these areas are often in conflict with development. We should therefore prioritise putting effort into ensuring local development plans include nature networks, woods and trees, as retrofitting them is difficult.
- Should we consider setting a target for urban canopy cover across Scotland?
- Is there a way that we can ensure that trees are defined within local authorities as essential infrastructure and given a similar status to buildings/architecture to help with their prioritisation and protection.

Ways that stakeholders can help to address the challenges and realise the opportunities

- Partner networks, such as the National Access Forum, could be used to promote the benefits of using urban woodlands, including public access.
- The Scottish Tree Officers Group is looking to recruit a coordinator who could hopefully work to help promote collaboration and consistency across local authorities.
- South of Scotland Enterprise has a Natural Capital Innovation Zone which can act as a testing space for new ways of working.

- Forth Climate Forest is working with local authority planning colleagues to assist with local development plans, e.g. what would 20% to 30% canopy cover in new development look like? Results of this analysis could be shared more widely.
- Future Woodland Scotland is spending £10 million over 10 years on its Urban Forestry Programme to help green Scotland's towns and cities.
- Green Action Trust could utilise the Central Scotland Green Network to get more engagement on issues and identify opportunities for collaboration.
- Trees for Cities has been looking at whether there is more they can do in Scotland to support strategy and leadership.
- Dark Matter Labs is looking at a model for financing trees across Glasgow. It has demonstrated the need for connection across local authorities and the opportunity of tying into the wider sense of place.