

## Community experiences of the National Forest Land Scheme

Community forestry is on the increase in the UK. Various models are emerging, some of which include community ownership of the forest. Ownership presents new challenges and opportunities for community development, including skills development, local economy and democracy. This study focuses on one scheme managed by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) to support community acquisition of forest from the national estate. It explores community expectations and experiences, focusing on the meanings of ownership, the practical challenges in terms of business management skills, governance challenges (community organisation and democracy), external relations with other organisations and communities, and sustainability.

## Background

The National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS) gives Scottish communities the opportunity to buy forest land currently in public ownership. Successful applications must demonstrate that they are in the public interest. To date, six communities have successfully completed an application. FCS commissioned this study to better understand the experiences of the successful communities, and to compare these with the communities' expectations. The communities selected were the first to participate in the NFLS and, like most Highland communities, are characterised by wide disparities in geographical origin and personal financial security, by low average local incomes, scattered distribution of households, and by a focus on local jobs and affordable housing.

## Objectives

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

## Methods

Two communities were invited to participate as case studies. In-depth interviews, group interviews, site visits and background documents provided information. Draft conclusions were reviewed and refined by members of the community forest groups, and by FCS staff with local relevant experience.



*"A lot of us have never owned anything in our lives so for the community it's fantastic. It's symbolic"*

A director, Laggan Forest Trust

## Findings

- Psychological effects of ownership change perceptions of what is possible: community members see more potential for leases to local business, opening up access, converting local heating systems to woodfuel and hosting a Forest School when they own the forest, even though all of these are, in fact, possible under public ownership, and/or partnership.
- Communities have high expectations of what ownership will do for them. Idealism drives the initial idea but business management and fundraising skills are also needed from within the community or through training. Frustrations were expressed, particularly about timeframes for processing funding and planning applications.
- Inclusivity is one of the criteria for NFLS eligibility and, compared with cases elsewhere in Great Britain where a community woodland group is not open to all, the high level of democracy and participation in these two groups has been a significant factor in limiting conflict with the wider community.
- Capacity in the communities was enhanced through gaining experience, training courses and

enhanced networks with external (government and non-government) organisations including FCS, and opportunities to provide guidance to other communities considering the scheme.

- It is less clear that community governance (organisation and decision-making) can be attributed to the NFLS. Both communities already

had a number of committees and groups, and found a need to simplify this. However, those who had participated in training for company directors felt this was a very significant benefit of the NFLS.

- Both communities have recently secured major grants for development, which are likely to help them become financially self-sufficient in future.

## Recommendations

### Lessons for communities

- To make a financial contribution (which has not yet been demonstrated) the forest resource needs to be of a scale which will present serious funding and management challenges. It is helpful to plan for the skills to address these challenges (for example, through involving experienced members of the community or by seeking training).
- Idealism is a valuable and powerful force to provide the initial impetus but can obscure the need for a wide range of practical and business skills both during and after purchase.
- Management of the forest and associated projects requires formal organisation. This can compete with existing committees and groups so the overall demands on the community should be considered.
- Considerable patience is needed to put together various stages of grant and planning applications, and external organisations can take a surprisingly long time to process these. It is helpful for community leaders to prepare for this.
- Community group members recommend participating in wider networks, and sharing experience through workshops and conferences.

### Lessons for FCS and other partner agencies

- Every group and context is unique, underlining the importance of the local knowledge of FCS staff, and relationships between groups and FCS staff.
- Ownership can open up new possibilities (or challenges) for engagement because the psychological effects of ownership change perceptions of what is possible. However there is a need to manage expectations and respond realistically to community hopes.
- Communities find delays in processing applications frustrating and confusing. It can greatly help to show understanding and to communicate regularly about the expected timeframes and progress of applications.
- Some areas where communities need most support are with skills outwith FCS's traditional expertise. However, FCS experience in partnership can help to provide the connections needed. These include community governance (e.g. training in company directorship); capacity building in business and project management; opportunities for increased external networking and partnership; facilitation of learning from experience.
- The NFLS also represents novel experiences and challenges for FCS staff and others from the land-use sector. 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.