

Getting Value from Local Woods

Summary Conference Report



Across Scotland, dozens of new initiatives are growing into a dynamic sector: local small and medium sized businesses and community initiatives to own, manage and use woodlands and their produce. How can this growing sector help to realise the Scottish Government's aspirations for economic development, land use & forestry, community empowerment, health and education, land reform, and conservation?

This was the challenge addressed in a sell-out conference in Birnam on 11 November 2016 organised by the Forest Policy Group, a small informal think-tank of forestry professionals interested in promoting sustainable forestry.

The conference heard directly from the people who are involved in making these initiatives happen, highlighted via presentations, interviews and audience discussion. Seventeen case studies were presented to showcase themes of business, ownership, social benefits, and support networks.

The evidence shared is compelling. Locally controlled forestry delivers meaningful economic, social and ecological value from woodlands, often creating and enhancing such values where they did not exist under previous arrangements. This is a sector which deserves support, given its ability to deliver key priorities identified in public policy. The Forest Policy Group therefore advocates that a significantly higher profile be given to this sector in all discussions about the future of forestry in Scotland.

The conference heard brief accounts of the following case studies:

Business development

- A local partnership of six families owning a 20 ha oak woodland near Aberfeldy, facilitating community use and enjoyment, and providing timber for the furniture business of one of the partners.
[[Angus Ross www.angusross.co.uk](http://www.angusross.co.uk)]
- A local sawmill, established as a social enterprise near Dunfermline, turning over £300,000 annually, providing new jobs and skills (particularly for long-term unemployed), supplying timber to the local market and helping to bring woods back into production.
[[Scottish Wood www.scottishwood.co.uk](http://www.scottishwood.co.uk)]
- A successful architect-led design-and-build business in Inverness demonstrating the successful use of Scottish timber and developing new technologies to build high quality houses, training and employing 30 craftsmen in its local workforce.
[[Makar www.makar.co.uk](http://www.makar.co.uk)]
- A 30ha softwood plantation near Ullapool bought by an enterprising environmentalist now supporting the livelihoods of three generations of the same family, all living in self-built houses in the woodland.
[[North Woods Construction www.northwoodsdesign.org](http://www.northwoodsdesign.org)]
- A well-established tree nursery in Taynuilt developed as a family business, providing locally-sourced trees for large forestry companies and individual customers.
[[Taynuilt Trees www.taynuilttrees.co.uk](http://www.taynuilttrees.co.uk)]

Woodland ownership

- Two plantations (adding up to 700 ha) formerly regarded as uneconomic to harvest in north-west Mull, purchased by a community company and brought into production whilst also accessing EU and private sector finance to support a new extraction route (costing £2.3 million) for these and other plantations, bringing 600,000 tonnes of previously landlocked timber to market. Along with other projects (hydro power, housing, new woodland crofts) this contributes to the sustainable economy of the island, and to building confidence and resilience in the community.
[[North West Mull Community Woodland Company www.nwmullwoodland.co.uk](http://www.nwmullwoodland.co.uk)]
- Woodlands totalling 1000ha in the parish of Birse, Deeside, owned and/or managed by a Community Trust, yielding income to support a wide range of community development projects and assets, and underpinning local democratic infrastructure.
[[Birse Community Trust www.birsecommunitytrust.org.uk](http://www.birsecommunitytrust.org.uk)]
- Woodlands in Knoydart managed by a community company to enhance the local environment and provide timber and firewood for residents, supporting 3.5 FTE jobs.
[[Knoydart Forest Trust www.knoydart-foundation.com/about/knoydart-forest-trust](http://www.knoydart-foundation.com/about/knoydart-forest-trust)]
- A former Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) plantation near Tighnabruaich, Argyll, owned and managed by a community company which has established sawmilling and firewood processing, a local composting facility and a hydro scheme, currently supporting 5 FTE jobs.
[[Kilfinan Community Forest www.kilfinancommunityforest.co.uk](http://www.kilfinancommunityforest.co.uk)]
- A 40 ha privately-owned woodland at Kirkhill, Inverness, managed by the owners as a productive native broadleaf woodland, including on site timber conversion.
[[Craggach Woods www.forestpolicygroup.org/blog/craggach-woods-part-1](http://www.forestpolicygroup.org/blog/craggach-woods-part-1)]

Social impact

- A pioneering 540ha community-owned forest on Loch Ness side, currently being restructured and providing local employment, forest schools and adult education, mental health and offender rehabilitation, skills training, social enterprise and outdoor education. This includes service contracts with NHS and Highland Council Care and Learning .
[[Abriachan Forest Trust www.abriachan.org.uk](http://www.abriachan.org.uk)]
- Transformation of a neglected woodland in Castlemilk by a Housing Association to become a local resource, bringing significant environmental, community and economic benefits to the area. They reported a Social Return on Investment of £6 benefit for every £1 invested.
[[Cassiltoun Trust www.cassiltountrust.org.uk](http://www.cassiltountrust.org.uk)]
- A successful initiative by a charitable social enterprise to manage a neglected 5ha woodland adjacent to a psychiatric hospital in Lochgilphead to improve people's mental and physical health using the natural environment, to assist with learning, training, volunteering and supported employment.
[[Blarbuie Woodland Enterprise www.blarbuiewoodland.org](http://www.blarbuiewoodland.org)]

Supporting organisations:

- Community Woodlands Association which supports the efforts of its 175 member groups, managing a total of 50,000ha of woodland.
[[Community Woodlands Association www.communitywoods.org](http://www.communitywoods.org)]
- Tayforth Machinery Ring which helps an increasing proportion of its 1,000 farmer members to bring their small woodlands (mainly 0.5-5ha) into production.
[[Tayforth Machinery Ring www.tayforth.co.uk](http://www.tayforth.co.uk)]
- Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers, a co-operative which helps members with training, development and marketing of quality Scottish timber, to utilise the existing resource, encourage management of woodlands, and reduce the need for hardwood timber imports.
[[Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers www.ashs.co.uk](http://www.ashs.co.uk)]

Challenges

The conference also heard that it was not always plain sailing. Most have had to confront issues to do with acquiring land, public liabilities, recruitment of trustees with suitable skills, and economics of scale. Planning issues were also mentioned by many, in relation to affordable housing on community forest land, or new housing affecting and affected by woodland. In one example, where the group had a long and debilitating struggle with liability claims after a storm, as well as encroachment from new housing, the group finally decided to give up.

[[Jubilee Wood www.forestpolicygroup.org/blog/jubilee-wood-case-study](http://www.forestpolicygroup.org/blog/jubilee-wood-case-study)]

Conclusions

1. Locally based businesses can develop market opportunities not readily accessible to conventional forestry interests. They can create innovative products and services, and provide small but critical employment opportunities, often in economically fragile locations. These businesses can make forestry far more relevant and important for local communities.
2. Many community initiatives operate as small businesses. Commerce and community are not mutually exclusive constructs. Woodlands provide an environment that can provide both people and business with mutual benefits from a balanced approach.
3. Forestry is a means to an end; local forestry can meet a very wide variety of ends beyond timber and jobs. There is an increasing supply of good evidence to support the claims of this sector that

it contributes positively to social, economic and environmental outcomes at a local, regional and national level.

4. The local forestry sector can thrive alongside, and often in partnership with, bigger forestry enterprises.
5. This was the first time that direct evidence had been brought together from such a wide range of local forestry case studies. Evidence is more diverse and sometimes harder to access than for large-scale business and projects, but it is there, in numbers, words and pictures, and should not be ignored.
6. The evidence points to special aspects of this contribution:
 - 'Sticky' money, which recirculates in the local economy;
 - Satisfaction levels from development of entrepreneurial skills, meaningful employment, volunteering, and connectedness with community and place;
 - Interconnectedness between elements e.g. sawmills linked with previously neglected woods;
 - ability to fill gaps and address market failures e.g. bringing 'uneconomic' woods into production;
 - An emphasis on quality of provision – whether social care, furniture or houses.
7. Several cases highlighted the real value of local forestry for housing, particularly affordable housing using quality Scottish timber, and providing quality living space which can help to reconnect communities and place. It was in the area of housing, and urban forestry, however, that participants highlighted most stress – particularly in relation to insurance and the impacts of planning and regulatory systems.
8. Acquiring woodland is a real challenge for communities, small groups and individuals, because of the price of land and the tendency for land sales to involve very large areas. While many of the cases were based on community efforts, other models were also shown to be successful.
9. One example after another pointed to the invaluable role of FCS support through advice, grants, and research. There are good opportunities to target grants and support to help the sector tackle challenges including:
 - a. Acquisition - getting hold of woodlands;
 - b. Access to business know-how and advice;
 - c. Avoiding the risks of burn-out, public liability, and regulatory burdens.Relatively small amounts of funding were capable of starting some very interesting projects with real benefits. Small and very small businesses have to compete in a sector which receives very substantial subsidies and tax incentives, but they deliver value in terms of jobs, bringing woods into productive management, and community development.
10. There is enormous potential for growth in this sector, delivering local needs appropriately. Scotland will need smart strategic thinking and investment to make the most of this potential. Participants highlighted the need for space to grow and adapt. Factors identified which will help included: belief, mentors, and grants. Supporting or intermediary organisations are also invaluable, and the examples here highlighted the role of trust and equality of membership.

Appendix: the evidence base

Twenty-five case studies have been prepared, and will be posted on the FPG website as they are finalised. The studies which were featured at the 11 Nov 2016 conference are those highlighted above.