1. Minutes of Scottish Forestry Strategic Advisory Group meeting held on 2 July 2024

**At Battleby and on Microsoft Teams**

***Draft for approval***

**Present:**

Paul Lowe, CEO (PL)

Alan Hampson, Director of Policy and Practice (AH)

Jonathan Taylor, Head of Scottish Forestry Executive Office (JT)

Brendan Callaghan, Director of Operational Delivery) (BC)

Zahid Deen, Director of Operational Services and Transformation (ZD)

Helen McKay, Chief Forester for Scotland (HMcK)

Eleanor Ryan, Non-Executive Advisor (ER)

Phil Taylor, Non-Executive Advisor (PT)

Richard Morris, Non-Executive Advisor) (RM)

**In Attendance: (for specific agenda items)**

John Risby, Conservator Highland and Islands

Matt Young, Improvement Conservator

**Apologies:**

James Stuart, Non-Executive Advisor

Gary Henderson, Acting Head of Finance & Business Support

*To note the members of the SAG joined the team meeting of Perth and Argyll Conservancy in the morning to learn about the Conservancy’s work. This was not a minuted session and was for discussion only.*

1. **Welcome and declarations of interest**

RM noted a new declaration of interest; that his wife had been appointed as the Director of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs Countryside Trust and that the trust had just secured £5k funding from Scottish Forestry.

Paul gave an update to the group following the recent publication of the official woodland creation statistics. The group acknowledged the tremendous achievement in reaching the 15,000 hectare mark, and wanted to record their sincere appreciation and recognition of the work of staff across the organisation.

Also noted was the appointment of the new Director of Finance, who would be starting in September, the new forthcoming report on the economic contribution of forestry in Scotland and the laying in the Scottish Parliament of the report of Scottish Ministers’ administrative arrangements required under the Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Act 2018.

The group discussed the reaction of stakeholders to the woodland creation statistics; both Confor and the Woodland Trust had been constructive and whilst recognising the challenges of the reduced budget, were seeking to find ways to make the case for forestry, its positive benefits and therefore the need for accompanying budget. The group felt a future discussion on stakeholder perceptions of forestry would be useful, what the issues are, and what SF and the sector are engaging on.

**Action:** Schedule a discussion at a future SAG meeting on managing stakeholder perceptions of forestry, and what Scottish Forestry/the sector was doing to address the concerns and how to best present the benefits that forestry delivers. JT

1. **Minutes and actions of previous meeting**

The minutes for the SAG meeting of 29 February 2024 were accepted as a record of the meeting; AH noted some minor amendments which would be incorporated and the minutes would be recirculated to the group.

The open actions were noted and updates provided:

* AP16/23: Women into Leadership discussion – although the action was closed, ER requested that ahead of the next update to the SAG on the Women into Leadership work, Marelle and colleagues to explore setting up an anonymous feedback form (2 -3 weeks ahead) to gain up to date insights and provide a summary of work so far. MD/ZD
* AP18/23 **–** Linked to this action on PSR, Paul to discuss with SG colleagues (within Directorate) whether the EELG Public Sector Reform paper produced from Mike Neilson could be shared with SAG members. PL
* Following on from above action, Paul to explore if Timothy Orr or Tim Ellis could attend the SAG discussion on PSR later in the year. PL/JT/ZD

1. **Discussion on the new Strategic Approach to restoring Scotland’s Rainforest**

John Risby gave a presentation on the new strategic approach to restoring Scotland’s rainforest. In this he noted that Scotland was home to its own temperate rainforest, boasting a variety of rare species and habitats. The areas of remaining rainforest were however facing some serious challenges from fragmentation, overgrazing, invasive Rhododendron ponticum, pests and diseases and climate change.

The 2023-24 Programme for Government contained the commitment to “further restore and expand our iconic Atlantic rainforest and ancient Caledonian pinewoods, encouraging action and investment to improve their condition and that of other ancient woodlands”. A key output from John’s year’s work as Scottish Forestry’s rainforest action coordinator had been the preparation of a strategic approach and funding framework for Scotland’s rainforest. The strategic approach aimed to learn from past experience and focused on tackling the key threats co-operatively and at a population or landscape scale. This was intended to improve the condition and health of the rainforest, enable it to regenerate and expand and better withstand climate change impacts.

The approach also sought to ensure community benefits were delivered and activity is sustained into the long term. The approach aimed to co-ordinate Scottish Government activity and funding, strengthen partnership working, improve complementarity of funding and assist in blending funding and attracting private finance.

With limited funding and people to implement, a phased approach was proposed. Initial priority areas which were able to deliver co-operatively at a landscape scale had been identified. These nine initial priority areas were spread across the rainforest zone and included those identified as landscape scale projects by the Alliance for Scotland’s Rainforest. The new strategic approach had been developed with input from a number of partners and stakeholders and had been recently approved by Ministers.

The group thanked John for his work in developing the new strategic approach. Whilst the approach would be a significant step forward in identifying target areas and taking a more coordinate approach, it was recognised that future funding would be a constraint. The group discussed how it may be useful to demonstrate and feed back to Ministers not only progress and achievements but the potential impact of lower funding not only in relation to new grant aid work, but also the potential impact on previous investments, for example in re-appearance of rhododendron after clearance. Alternative funding models were discussed and whether payments for ‘biodiversity credits’ might emerge as a robust finance stream in future. JR recognised that at the current time there was not a likelihood of these becoming a formal funding mechanism for a few years.

The group supported the people centred approach of the strategy, and felt this was vital to secure landscape scale delivery. It was suggested that as the work was taken forward, thought should be given to ensure that the biodiversity but also wider benefits of restoration could be fed back into these communities.

1. **Discussion on the Learning for Casework Project**

Matt Young spoke to his paper on the Learning for Casework project. He gave an overview of the background to the project and the recent investment Scottish Forestry had made in learning and skills development, including

* Creating its own Learning and Skills Development team
* Development of a Learning and Skills Development Strategy
* Refreshing the Induction content for new joiners to the agency
* Refreshing the Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) to focus only on technical forestry training
* Launching a professional development programme for new Assistant Woodland Officers / Woodland Officers (WOODS programme)
* Work had commenced to design a management and leadership programme
* Developing a Scottish Forestry tile for managing all learning activities and hosting our learning materials on the Scottish Government’s Pathway platform

Significant progress had been made but it was recognised that further work was required to support colleagues to ensure that all received the right level of learning support in light of the variable levels of experience and expertise in the agency. In practice this would also support greater consistency and quality of approach.

It was acknowledged that how colleagues needed to be supported on their learner journey had to change. Prior to the pandemic, staff would often learn on the job and be supported by the most appropriate team with relevant experience. During the pandemic existing staff adjusted to remote working and new joiners were inducted at a time when side by side working was not possible, meaning methods may not have been as effective. Significant loss of experienced staff had also impacted the ability to provide consistent learning and development support and informal skills transfer. A more robust approach was required to fit the needs of staff and the agency, to understand and close the gaps in knowledge and skills, including consistent use of processes.

The project was initially conceived as a response to woodland creation being below target in 2022/23 with skills both internally and externally being identified as a contributing factor. Since then, the landscape had evolved, with a higher level of applications approved and planted during 2023/24 and the reduced budget for woodland creation announced for 2024/25. Recently woodland creation in terms of the quality and type of woodland being funded had been under increasing scrutiny with a change in the tone of press coverage, increased FOI requests and, in general, a move to schemes having greater scrutiny. All of these changes meant that it was more important than ever for SF staff to receive the right level of learning support for their development while also ensuring that casework was handled correctly, consistently, and efficiently.

ZD noted that it was important that the project delivered quick gains to demonstrate its value and that staff could see the improvements. He advised that this should be an iterative process, delivering benefits and improvements early, rather than a major exercise only delivering change some time down the line.

RM welcomed that the project’s scope would be expanded outside of the agency, which would help address some of the concerns on the quality of applications received and failure demand.

HM recognised the concern over potential inconsistencies in the application of practice across the Conservancies. In addition to strengthening learning and development she noted that it would be important to ensure internal and external guidance needed to be kept consistent and up to date.

There was a discussion about learning aids or processing reminders. PT noted if there was greater scope for the use of check lists or other similar tools to help manage potential failure/errors in a structured manner, as opposed to relying on training and reference back to guidance documents. The complexities of these points were discussed but it was agreed that this project would explore this avenue as part of its work.

MY welcomed the feedback, and would reflect back into the project; the group agreed it would be useful for a progress update later in the year.

**Action:** Provide an update to the SAG later in the year on the progress with the Learning for Casework Project. MY/ZD/BC

1. **AOB**

N/A

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

19th September 2024 (rescheduled to 5.11.24), Saughton House, Edinburgh.

| **Action Point Tracker** | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ref** | **Meeting** | **Action** | **Lead / Staff Member** | **Target Date** | **Status** |
| AP14/23 | Dec 23 | Woodland Creation MI – JF/MA to Develop MI to take into account feedback from SAG members. Update requested 2024 back to SAG. | JF/MA | Late 2024 | Open |
| AP16/23 | Dec 23 | ER/HMcK to present a paper on Women into Leadership to SET. MR/JT to ensure actions on both Women into Leadership and Values/Behaviours reflected in Corporate Plan and Strategy. | MR/JT | Dec 23 | Closed – Paper presented Dec 23 |
| AP17/23 | Dec 23 | Corporate Plan and Strategy - rewording of Purpose to remove repeat of ‘effective’ in future iterations of Purpose. | MR/JT | Dec 23 | Closed |
| AP18/23 | Dec 23 | Schedule discussion of Public Sector Reform at future SAG*.* | MR/JT | Nov 24 | Closed |
| AP19/23 | Dec 23 | Management of the bark beetle (Ips Typographus) - AH/Head of Tree Health to take into account feedback from discussions with SAG members | AH/Head of Tree Health | Jan 24 | Closed |
| AP20/23 | Dec 23 | Deep dive into Risk/Contingency Planning as a whole for SF at either AAC or future SAG. JT/MR to schedule. | JT/MR | Dec ACC | Open |
| AP1/24 | Feb 24 | Forest and Woodland Biodiversity AH/HS to take into account the feedback from the SAG members in the presentation of the information and questions posed to the forthcoming National Forestry Stakeholder Group. | Ah/Helen Sellars | March 24 | Closed |
| AP2/24 | Feb 24 | PL to explore if Timothy Orr or Tim Ellis could attend the SAG discussion on PSR later in the year. Paul to discuss with SG colleagues (within Directorate) whether the EELG Public Sector Reform paper produced from Mike Neilson could be shared with SAG members. | PL/JT/ZD | Presentation Nov SAG | Closed |
| AP3/24 | July 24 | Update to the SAG on the Women into Leadership work, Marelle and colleagues to explore setting up an anonymous feedback form (2 -3 weeks ahead) to gain up to date insights and provide a summary of work so far. | MD/ZD | Dec or early 2025 SAG meeting | Open |
| AP4/24 | July 24 | Schedule a discussion at a future SAG meeting on managing stakeholder perceptions of forestry, and what Scottish Forestry/the sector was doing to address the concerns and how to best present the benefits that forestry delivers. *Update: discussed with Head of Forests for People, Head of Regulations and Communications Team on taking more strategic view of engagement.* | JT | SAG session in early 2025. | Open |
| AP5/24 | July 24 | Provide an update to the SAG later in the year on the progress with the Learning for Casework Project. | Improvement Conservator, ZD/BC | Update at SAG December meeting | Open |