

Response ID ANON-VEPG-2GRR-F

Submitted to Future Grant Support for Forestry
Submitted on 2023-05-17 15:42:52

Ministerial Foreword - Forestry in Scotland is a sector that we can be justly proud of.

1 - Introduction and Rationale for Providing Grant Support for Forestry

1. Do you agree that grant support for forestry should continue to be improved and developed as a discrete scheme within the overall package of land support?

Yes

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

The grant support scheme needs to be significantly revised to make it more capable of achieving objectives relating to climate change, biodiversity, landscape, access etc. It is too focussed on the production of commercial crops of Sitka spruce, which, whilst important, are not resulting in more diverse woodland creation schemes.

2. Are there any changes that would allow for better complementarity between the forestry and agriculture funding options?

Not sure

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Others are better placed to comment on the opportunities for better complementarity between funding schemes but, given that we feel that the current scheme requires significant changes, it makes sense to investigate if those changes can be better achieved through links with other agricultural funding options.

2 - Forests Delivering for Scotland's Climate Change Plan

3. How can the support package for forestry evolve to help tackle the climate emergency, to achieve net zero, and to ensure that our woodlands and forests are resilient to the future climate?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

The current FGS should be modified to ensure far more diverse kinds of forestry. The current scheme results in an overwhelming focus on the planting of Sitka spruce for commercial harvesting with results that could well work against achieving net zero. Such planting can have a detrimental effect on both landscape and biodiversity.

4. Private investment through natural capital and carbon schemes can make a valuable contribution to climate change. Do you agree that the grant support mechanism should have more flexibility to maximise the opportunities to blend private and public finance to support woodland creation,

Not sure

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Such blending of private investment and public finance could well make a contribution to climate change but only if both aspects worked together in a positive way. Policies and procedures would need to be developed such that positive outcomes resulted.

5. How could the current funding package be improved to stimulate woodland expansion and better management across a wide range of woodland types, including native and productive woodlands?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

A wider range of interests requires to be involved in the development of woodlands. At present developments are often progressed with the interests of the landowner being paramount. Often the landowner is a commercial organisation such as a pension fund with few if any local connections. This often results in a commercial crop such as Sitka spruce being the dominant feature of woodland development.

A more diverse range of woodland types would almost certainly result if the interests of other stakeholders such as local communities were far more heavily involved with woodland creation. We support the conclusions and recommendations in the recently published report of the Forest Policy Group on 'Communities experiences of new forest planting applications in Scotland: the final report' (www.forestpolicygroup.org)

6. Do you agree that it should be a requirement of grant support that woodlands are managed to ensure that they become more resilient to the impacts of climate change and pests and disease?

Yes

How can the grant scheme support this?:

Involving interest groups such as local communities, local wildlife groups, community councils in both the design of woodlands and in their subsequent management would help to ensure that the wider issues relating to the impact of climate change and pest and disease are adequately addressed. Funding mechanisms that achieve such ends could also be devised. For example, are the current regulations relating to the planting of trees on peat appropriate if the aim is to reduce the emission of CO₂? They only deal with planting on peat of more than 50 cm whereas evidence exists that indicates that planting on shallower peat is detrimental.

3 - Integrating Woodlands on Farms and Crofts

7. Which of the following measures would help reduce the barriers for crofters and farmers wanting to include woodland as part of their farming business? Please select all that apply.

Are there others not listed above?:

N/A

8. Establishing small woodlands can have higher costs. What specific mechanisms would better support small scale woodlands and woodland ownership?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

N/A

4 - Forests Delivering for People and Communities

9. How can forestry grants better support an increase in easily accessible, sustainably managed woodlands in urban and peri-urban areas?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

N/A

10. How can grant support for forestry better enable rural communities to realise greater benefits from woodland to support community wealth building?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

The Friends of the Ochils (FOTO) believe that significant improvements could be made to the regulations and practice associated with both tree planting and commercial schemes.

We believe that communities should be involved far more meaningfully with woodland and forestry developments for two significant reasons.

First of all, communities often have a strong sense of place in relation to areas for planting and reflecting that sense of place in design proposals will result in a more positive approach to eventual schemes.

Secondly, much of the funding support for grant aided schemes comes out of the public purse and therefore communities should have a significant influence on what is proposed.

There are several improvements that could be made, all of which are detailed in the Forest Policy Group report on the experience of communities. We would wish to highlight the following as being particularly significant.

- Prepare and agree guidance for communities and agents and to make what is, at present, a complex process more easily understood by communities.
- Bring communities into the design stage much earlier and involve them in the initial design. At present it is the experience of FOTO that we are presented with a worked up planting proposal which has obviously gone through discussions between other interested parties such as the agent, Scottish Forestry, the landowner etc but not local communities. Any changes made after the circulation of a draft design are generally marginal, resulting in a feeling within communities that the development is largely a fait accompli by the time they become involved.
- Make the application process far more open and transparent which in turn would help to involve more individuals and communities in the process. At present, documents relating to forestry applications, including comments by interested third parties such as local communities are not placed in the public domain for all to read and draw upon. (See response to Q 12)

11. How can the forest regulatory and grant processes evolve to provide greater opportunities for communities to be involved in the development of forestry proposals?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

It is the experience of FOTO that, whilst it is fair to say that the design of forestry schemes has improved over the years along with the greater involvement by agents of community groups, serious concerns remain. Communities should have a statutory role in woodland and forestry developments such that they feel that the social and environmental impacts of new forestry receive equal weighing along with economic benefits. At present, there is a growing disconnect between communities and land ownership with more and more estates being sold to corporate bodies, investment funds or charitable trusts. As recognized in a recent report by the Scottish Land Commission on Scotland's Rural Land Market and Natural Capital, "The increase in demand and values for plantable forestry is a significant shift in the land market, driven by the rise of investors and commercial forestry." The extremely generous grants for woodland and forestry which result in the highest level of public funding, hectare for hectare, for rural land use in Scotland, would seem to prioritise the economic objectives over all others.

12. How can the forestry regulatory and grant processes evolve to ensure that there is greater transparency about proposals and the decisions that have been made on them?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

At present, a serious barrier to community involvement in the regulatory and grant processes is the lack of openness and transparency with the application process. Unlike the planning application process for local authority housing etc, documents relating to forestry applications, including comments by interested third parties such as community councils, friends groups, access forums etc are not placed in the public domain for all to read and understand. The Issues Log goes some way towards the provision of the required information but it is not sufficient in itself. Furthermore, no information of any worth is placed on the Scottish Forestry Public Register; the map provided only shows the outline of the site with no detail on planting, access routes, deer fencing etc.

13. Forestry grants have been used to stimulate rural forestry businesses by providing support with capital costs. Do you agree that this has been an effective measure to stimulate rural business?

Not sure

a. How could this approach be used to support further forestry businesses?:

N/A

b. How could this approach be used to support further skills development?:

N/A

14. How could the FGS processes and rules be developed to encourage more companies and organisations to provide training positions within the forestry sector?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Desired outcomes cannot be achieved without investing in training to address the skills gap. However, involving communities and volunteers in forestry development has the potential to increase the numbers involved with the forestry sector.

5 - Forests Delivering for Biodiversity and the Environment

15. The primary purpose of FGS is to encourage forestry expansion and sustainable forest management, of which a key benefit is the realisation of environmental benefits. How can future grant support better help to address biodiversity loss in Scotland including the regeneration and expansion of native woodlands?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Adjusting the FGS to support a more diverse forestry development with a move away from commercial Sitka spruce would help to address biodiversity loss and help the expansion and regeneration of native woodlands.

16. Herbivore browsing and damage can have a significant impact on biodiversity loss and restrict regeneration. How could forestry grant support mechanisms evolve to ensure effective management of deer populations at:

Landscape scale?:

Given current deer populations many woodland and forestry schemes rely on extensive deer fencing. This has a negative impact on the landscape, certain bird species and recreational amenity including a significant impact on access. Controlling deer populations to the point where new planting and natural regeneration can take place without fencing should be a desired objective. Longer term, such control will enable regeneration of woodlands which, with current deer populations, is difficult. Grant support that might otherwise be spent on fencing could be used to fund professional control of deer populations.

Small scale mixed land use?:

If control of deer numbers is not an option for small scale developments the use of biodegradable, not plastic, tree shields is an option.

If you wish to make any other relevant comments, please do so in the text box below.

Please add your comments here.:

As indicated in our responses, we believe that some focussed changes to policy need to be made to the FGS to achieve more diverse forestry development than is being achieved at present. The involvement of communities in this process is required to ensure their support for planting schemes.

About you

What is your name?

Name:
Friends of the Ochils

What is your email address?

Email:
[Redacted]

Are you responding as an individual or an organisation?

Organisation

What is your organisation?

Organisation:
Friends of the Ochils

Scottish Forestry would like your permission to publish your response. Please indicate your publishing preference:

Publish response with name

We may share your response internally with other Scottish Forestry policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for Scottish Forestry to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?

Yes

I confirm that I have read the privacy policy and consent to the data I provide being used as set out in the policy.

I consent