

ANGUS COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE – 16 JANUARY 2024

DRAFT ANGUS FORESTRY & WOODLAND STRATEGY 2024 - 2034

REPORT BY ALISON SMITH, DIRECTOR OF VIBRANT COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

ABSTRACT

This report seeks approval of the draft Angus Forestry & Woodland Strategy 2024-2034, which contains the Council's proposed policies in relation to forestry and woodland. The Report also seeks approval for a six-week period of public consultation on the Strategy and its associated Strategic Environmental Assessment between January and February 2024.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Committee:

- (i) Approve the proposed draft Angus Forestry & Woodland Strategy (Appendix 1) and supporting Environmental Assessments (Appendices 2 and 3);
- (ii) Authorise public consultation of the draft Angus Forestry & Woodland Strategy and associated Strategic Environmental Assessments over a six-week period during January and February 2024;
- (iii) Authorise the Habitat Regulations Appraisal for consultation with NatureScot over a six-week period during January and February 2024; and
- (iv) Note that following public consultation and analysis and consideration of responses, a further report will be submitted to this Committee for formal approval of the Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2024-2034 and Environmental Assessments. This report will also detail the comments received and any changes made to both the Strategy and Environmental Assessments as a result of consultation responses.

2. ALIGNMENT TO THE COUNCIL PLAN

- 2.1 Commitment to delivery of this project contributes to the following priorities in the Council Plan 2023-2028.

Caring for our Place

- Take action to mitigate against climate change by delivering our Transition to Net Zero Action Plan: 2022 to 2030 and leading on the delivery of a Sustainable Energy Climate Action Plan (SECAP) for Angus to reduce area wide emissions.
- Produce a Local Development Plan for Angus.
- Enhance and restore Angus Biodiversity, corporately and with a range of stakeholders.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 With the twin climate and biodiversity crises that we are currently facing, it is more important than ever that our landscapes are resilient and can adapt to ongoing challenges. Increased forestry and woodland are needed to sequester carbon to reduce climate change. They are needed to increase natural flood management by reducing the flow of water into watercourses, thus reducing flooding in settlements downstream. They are also needed to increase biodiversity and the resilience of woodlands to climate change. To do this, there is an urgent need for significant land use change across Angus with a substantial increase in forestry and woodland. The Scottish Government has a target of 18.000ha of new woodland each year from 2024/25. Securing a green recovery on a path to net zero: climate change plan 2018–2032 sets

out the Scottish Government's pathway to our new and ambitious targets set by the Climate Change Act 2019. This Plan sets out that this will require that appropriate land be moved out of farming as we currently understand it into forestry and peatland.

3.2 Woodland covers 13% of the UK land area and 18.8% in Scotland. (Forestry Statistics 2020, Forest Research). In Angus, forest and woodland cover is currently around 10.7%. The lower than the Scottish average percentage is in part, likely to be a result of lowland areas being some of the most productive agricultural land in Scotland. In addition, the high levels of grazing pressure on upland areas by deer and sheep, together with muirburn associated with sporting estate management, have also contributed to low levels of woodland cover.

3.3 Native woodland covers only 2.3% of the area of Angus. According to the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland around half of this is in poor condition and it is often severely fragmented. Woodland in poor condition is at risk of being progressively lost. However, woodlands which are in good condition, regenerating naturally and, therefore, form part of a wider woodland habitat network which is more resilient to climate change and will have substantially increased biodiversity value. Given the above and the biodiversity crisis, there is compelling justification for substantially increasing the area and connectivity of native woodland in Angus. Other relevant considerations for the Strategy to assess and address include:

- The high densities of deer in some parts of Angus are preventing woodland regeneration taking place, without deer fencing.
- Across Angus there are a range of international, European, national and local biodiversity and landscape designations. Similarly, there are a number of historic environment designations.
- According to Riverwoods a partnership initiative led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust which aims to create a network of thriving riverbank woodlands and healthy river systems across Scotland, typically, more than 50% of the riparian vegetation along Angus watercourses is in poor condition and in some cases this percentage is greater than 75%
- Landscape Special Qualities have been assessed for each landscape character type in Angus which should be considered when developing proposals. NatureScot has identified Wild Land Areas in Scotland and Wild Land Area 16: Lochnagar - Mount Keen is partially within Angus.
- Forests and woodland can absorb high levels of recreational use compared with other land uses. Access to accessible woodland close to where people live can increase physical and mental health, through a strong association with nature.

3.4 The Council's Woodland & Forest Framework (2011) is now considered out of date, as it pre-dates the Scottish Government acceptance of a need for widespread land use change to address the twin climate and biodiversity crises and government policy and aspirations and recent changes to planning legislation. In addition, Section 159A of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 (as amended) introduces a requirement for Local Authorities to prepare a Forestry & Woodland Strategy. The 2011 Framework provided area guidance, but the proposed statutory Strategy provides specific policies and proposals to deliver the vision and objectives of the Strategy. Separately, woodland management plans for Council owned woodlands are under preparation by the Parks Service.

3.5 It is a requirement that the Forestry & Woodland Strategy also identifies Woodland of High Nature Conservation Value, which the current 2011 Framework does not include. For the information of Members, Woodland of High Nature Conservation Value within Angus extends to 6,300 hectares, which equates to 3.35% of Angus (excluding the part within Cairngorms National Park). This percentage includes Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) which are excluded from the native woodland calculation, which therefore leads to a higher percentage than native woodland alone.

4. CURRENT POSITION

4.1 The new draft Forestry & Woodland Strategy has been prepared in-house with guidance from a steering group comprising Council Officers, and representatives from Scottish Forestry and NatureScot. Angus has been assessed using GIS datasets and mapped according to sensitivities which may affect suitability for forestry and woodland expansion. Areas are categorised as either Preferred, Potential or Sensitive. The map is included as Appendix 2, and there is also an [online map viewer](#) which enable policy areas to be viewed in more detail including areas identified as Woodland of High Nature Conservation Value.

4.2 As noted in paragraph 3.5 above, the Strategy is required to identify Woodland of High Nature Conservation Value (WHNCV) in Angus, which is defined as all woodland included within the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland and Ancient Woodlands, including Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) as detailed in the Ancient Woodland Inventory Scotland. The Strategy seeks to protect these types of woodland through a series of policies and proposals. Forests and woodland are also protected through Felling Licence Regulations administered by Scottish Forestry.

4.3 The Strategy also aspires to create woodland habitat networks within Angus. There is substantial scope to increase productive forestry within Angus to help contribute towards the ambitious Scottish Government target of 18,000ha per year by 2024/2025. (The Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2020-2021). The Strategy supports new forestry where it complies with the guidance contained within the UK Forestry Standard and within this Strategy which sets out environmental standards with which forestry must comply. The following illustrates several areas where there is scope to increase Forestry:

- On flood plains or along river corridors to increase biodiversity, enhance woodland habitat networks and the resilience of landscapes to absorb natural flood events.
- On fertile lowland areas to grow quality timber, provide shelter, create landscape structure and reduce wind-blown soil erosion with associated impacts on air quality within our settlements.
- On upland farmland to provide livestock shelter and to diversify farming; produce timber; increase biodiversity and contribute towards natural flood management by slow watering flows through river catchments to reduce downstream flooding.
- On moorlands (excluding peat soils) to create a natural tree line with montane scrub; increase biodiversity; potentially produce timber with native trees; and slow water flows through river catchments to reduce downstream flooding.
- Close to towns and villages to increasing opportunities for woodland recreation, link to urban nature networks, produce quality timber and strengthen the landscape setting of settlements.
- To connect native woodland fragments to create woodland habitat networks and landscape structure within which farming and productive forestry can take place.

4.4 Forests and woodlands have significant potential to mitigate the nature and climate crisis as follows:

- Increasing forest and woodland cover in Angus as part of the Strategy will therefore lead to increased carbon sequestration and thus have positive benefits for the climate. It will also have positive impacts on biodiversity and can help create landscapes with increased resilience to climate change by slowing water flows through river catchments as well as reducing erosion. Woodlands which are regenerating and expanded to increase connectivity will have increased biodiversity and resilience to climate change.
- Wind-blown soil erosion can often be an issue in lowland Angus, not only eroding valuable soils but also creating dust storms which affect air quality in settlements. With the climate predicted to become warmer and stormier the Strategy will encourage forests and woodlands can shelter and reduce wind-blown soil erosion and provide shade.

5. PROPOSALS

5.1 The vision of the draft Angus Forestry & Woodland Strategy 2023-2024 (attached as Appendix 1 to this report) takes into account the aspirations of the steering group noted in paragraph 4.1 above and is detailed below:

“Our vision is that forests and woodlands of Angus will flourish and expand, provide high quality timber and form woodland nature networks with increased biodiversity.

Angus landscapes will be resilient to climate change with forests and woodland storing carbon and playing a key role in natural flood management through slowing the flow of rainfall through the landscape. They will create attractive opportunities for recreation close to where people live and work and will provide opportunities for land-based businesses to adapt to a sustainable future.”

5.2 To implement the vision, the Strategy contains 9 key objectives, which are also replicated below:

1. *Protect and encourage the natural regeneration and significant expansion of woodland of high nature conservation value.*

2. *Ensure restoration of condition of existing native woodland, increase its biodiversity value and resilience to climate change.*
 3. *Promote the increase in riparian woodland and the establishment of natural treelines.*
 4. *Promote the creation of woodland habitat networks as part of an Angus-wide nature network.*
 5. *Increase the contribution of forests and woodland to mitigate the effects of climate change.*
 6. *Significantly increase the area of productive forestry to provide quality timber as a sustainable building material.*
 7. *Ensure that where deer fencing is necessary, paths, promoted routes and access to landscape features including hills and riverbanks are not obstructed.*
 8. *Increase opportunities for forest and woodland recreation close to where people live.*
 9. *Encourage the integration of forestry and woodland management with other land uses as part of sustainable diversification of rural business.*
- 5.3 These objectives have guided the content of the Strategy and will inform a wide range of other Council Plans, strategies, and action plans, such as, the Local Development Plan, the Local Biodiversity Action Plan, Angus Council Woodland Management Plans and the Tay Estuary and Montrose Basin Local Flood Risk Management Plan.
- 5.4 The Strategy includes a range of policies and proposals to achieve the objectives and realise the vision. For example, policy 1 contains eight sub-policies which protect and encourages the regeneration and expansion of woodland of high nature conservation value, which contribute towards objectives 1 to 5 in paragraph 5.2. Similarly, policies 5 and 6 together help diver objective 3.

Next Steps

- 5.5 Should Committee approve the draft Angus Forestry & Woodland Strategy (appendix 1) together with the Strategic Environmental Assessment (appendix 3) for public consultation, the documents will then be put out for a 6-week consultation period between January and February 2024. Public consultation will take place using the Engagement HQ platform and publicised through the council's social media channels. Targeted communications advising of the consultation will be sent to key stakeholder groups along with a briefing note and offer of follow up discussion.
- 5.6 As required by the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended), the Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) (as contained in Appendix 4) is only required to be consulted upon with NatureScot. However, we will include this document as part of our consultation to ensure that the wider public can have access to all the supporting environmental assessments to fully consider the Strategy.
- 5.7 Once the public consultation has ended, the responses will be collated, and any appropriate changes will be made. After that process has been concluded, a report will be submitted to the Committee to approve the final Angus Forestry & Woodland Strategy and the associated Environmental Assessment. The report will also detail the results of the consultation exercise and detail any appropriate changes made to Strategy, SEA and HRA.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no financial implications that arise from this report. Advertisement costs associated with the consultation will be met from existing budgets. Funding for forestry and woodlands is available through the Forestry Grant Scheme administered by Scottish Forestry for the implementation of the Strategy.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Risk

- 7.1 Without the Strategy, the vision and objectives would be less likely to be achieved with woodland of high nature conservation value at increased risk of becoming lost, with climate change and biodiversity benefits whilst should result from the Strategy being potentially unrealised. The ability of the Council to address the biodiversity and climate crises, would be compromised without an effective Forestry and Woodland Strategy. This would equally apply addressing flooding and biodiversity issues in Angus as well as contributing towards the delivery of national policies.

7.2 As noted above in paragraph 3.4, section A159 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 (as amended) introduces a requirement for Local Authorities to prepare a Forestry & Woodland Strategy identify Woodland of High Nature Conservation Value. The Strategy is required to form part of the evidence base for the new Local Development Plan and is required to support policies within NPF4.

7.3 If the draft Strategy is not approved for consultation by this Committee, the resulting delay may leave a gap in our evidence base, inhibit our ability to address the biodiversity and climate crisis, and will not accord with the requirements of legislation.

Strategic Environment Assessment

7.4 In line with the requirements of the Environmental Assessment (Scotland) Act 2005, an Environmental Report has been produced and is attached as Appendix 3. The report has assessed the significant environmental impacts of the Strategy and details how any potential adverse impacts can be mitigated. A SEA Scoping Report was previously prepared and responses from NatureScot, Historic Scotland and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency have been considered in the preparation of the Environmental Report. The comments of these organisations is included as Appendix C (Pages 49 to 53) within the Environmental Report.

Habitat Regulations Assessment

7.5 As required by the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended), a Habitat Regulations Appraisal has been carried out to consider impacts of the Strategy on Natura 2000 sites (Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, and in Scotland – Ramsar Sites). The Habitats Regulations Assessment (contained in Appendix 4) and as noted in paragraph 5.6 above, will be the subject of consultation with NatureScot.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 A screening Equality Impact Assessment has been prepared and accompanies this Report.

9. CONSULTATION

9.1 As members of the steering group, both NatureScot and Scottish Forestry have been consulted in the preparation of the Strategy.

NOTE: No background papers, as detailed by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.

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List of Appendices:

Appendix 1: Draft Angus Forestry & Woodland Strategy 2024 – 2034
Appendix 2: Area Guidance Map
Appendix 3: Environmental Report
Appendix 4: Habitats Regulations Appraisal



Equality Impact/Fairer Scotland Duty Assessment Form

(To be completed with reference to Guidance Notes)

Step 1

Name of Proposal (includes e. g. budget savings, committee reports, strategies, policies, procedures, service reviews, functions):

Step 2

Is this only a **screening** Equality Impact Assessment

Yes

(A) If Yes, please choose from the following options **all** reasons why a full EIA/FSD is not required:

(i) It does not impact on people

No

(ii) It is a percentage increase in fees which has no differential impact on protected characteristics

No

(iii) It is for information only

No

(iv) It is reflective e.g. of budget spend over a financial year

No

(v) It is technical

No

If you have answered yes to any of points above, please go to **Step 16**, and sign off the Assessment.

Step 16: Sign off and Authorisation. Please state name, post, and date for each:

Prepared by: Stewart Roberts - Countryside Officer 8 November 2023

Reviewed by: Doreen Phillips, Senior Practitioner – Equalities 9 November 2023

Approved by: Kelly Ann Dempsey, Team Leader – Environment and Climate Change
27 November 2023
