



REPORT TO: SPECIAL MEETING OF MORAY COUNCIL ON 24 APRIL 2024

SUBJECT: DRAFT MORAY WOODLAND AND FORESTRY STRATEGY 2024

BY: DEPUTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE (ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY AND FINANCE)

1. REASON FOR REPORT

- 1.1 This report asks Council to agree the draft Woodland and Forestry Strategy as part of the evidence collated for the new Local Development Plan and to agree that the draft Strategy be subject to public consultation for a period of 12 weeks.
- 1.2 This report is submitted to Committee in terms of Section II (13) of the Council's Scheme of Administration relating to approval of Council Reports and Strategies of a corporate nature including Local Development Plans.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 The Council is asked to agree:

- (i) the draft Moray Woodland and Forestry Strategy 2024;**
- (ii) the draft is made available for public consultation for 12 weeks; and**
- (iii) that responses to the draft will be reported back to the Planning and Regulatory Services Committee.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Moray is one of the most wooded regions in Scotland with 34% of the area covered with woodland, compared with a national average of 19% across Scotland.
- 3.2 Woodland and Forestry Strategies are a statutory requirement under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 as amended. The Local Development Planning Guidance 2023 requires that the Local Development Plan Evidence Report (which is subject to a separate report to this meeting of Council) should be informed by an up to date Woodland and Forestry Strategy for the area.

- 3.3 The current Moray Woodland and Forestry Strategy was approved in 2018 with one of its primary uses being to steer new woodland planting under Scottish Forestry grants scheme.
- 3.4 To progress the new Strategy (**Appendix 1**), Carol Anderson Landscape Associates was commissioned, funded jointly by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), Scottish Forestry and the Council who have worked in partnership to prepare the draft. The consultancy team included experts from forestry, landscape, economic impact and ecological backgrounds.
- 3.5 When approved the Strategy will be supplementary guidance to the existing Moray Local Development Plan 2020 (MLDP) and will form part of the new Moray Local Development Plan 2027 when approved. The Woodland and Forestry Strategy will also be used to inform the Regional Spatial Strategy, which will provide a strategic view of Moray's future land uses, taking account of growth, food production, infrastructure, Moray's outstanding natural and built environment and will also be subject to extensive consultation. The draft Woodland and Forestry Strategy covers the MLDP area, excluding the Cairngorms National Park Authority area which has its own Woodland Strategy.
- 3.6 The draft Strategy has been informed following wide reaching and in depth early engagement, including the following groups of consultees;
- Organisations involved in the planning and management of woodlands in Moray.
 - Moray-based nursery growers and businesses involved in timber processing and the manufacture of timber products.
 - Organisations involved with education and training in the forestry sector.
 - Charitable organisations providing opportunities for young people to engage with woodlands in Moray.
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 - NatureScot and other bodies with an interest in woodlands and nature conservation.
 - Tourism bodies and Moray-based businesses involved with woodland-based tourism and recreation activities.
 - The Joint Community Council and follow-up meetings with individual Community Councils were held separately if requested.
 - Community groups who own and/or manage woodlands as well as the Community Woodland Association.
 - Scottish Land and Estates (joint meeting held with a number of Moray-based estates) plus individual follow-up meetings held with some other estates who could not attend the SLE meeting.
 - The National Farmers Union.

4. **PROPOSALS**

4.1 The purpose of the Strategy is to help deliver Scotland's transition to net-zero future and the Scottish Government's commitments on;

- Sustainable development and economic growth
- Mitigating the global climate emergency
- Reversing biodiversity loss
- Increasing community health and well-being

4.2 The Strategy will principally be used by landowners and managers, Scottish Forestry, the Council and stakeholders when considering woodland creation schemes, felling applications and Long Term Forest Plans.

4.3 The Strategy recognises that forestry is an important contributor to the Moray economy generating more than £39 million per year and providing direct employment for almost 1000 people. Forestry in Moray is a mature sector of the economy made up of the following inter linked activities;

- Primary forestry and timber extraction
- Processing of timber and manufacturing of woodland based products
- Services provided to support forest operations
- Tourism related activity based around visits to Moray's forests and woodlands

4.4 Moray is home to 90 forestry and timber processing businesses of which 80 are micro sized businesses with up to 9 staff, 10 are small businesses with up to 49 staff and 5 are medium sized businesses with up to 250 staff. The region plays an important role in underpinning the wider UK forestry and associated timber construction sectors. It is home to a well-established arboriculture sector that incorporates some of the UK's largest tree nurseries as well as some thriving and innovative timber engineering operations which make an important contribution to the construction sector.

4.5 The majority of Moray's woodland and forests accommodate tracks and paths for cycling and walking which are an invaluable resource for both local people and visitors to the area. There are a number of community owned/ managed woodlands in Moray.

4.6 Moray's woodlands and forests provide a wealth of benefits for the environment, hosting numerous protected animal species important to the area including red squirrel, black grouse and pine marten. Many of the woodlands are included in the Ancient Woodland Inventory, which are areas under continuous forestry cover since 1750, which have a rich and diverse soil value and other associated flora and fauna. Several of Moray's woodlands are considered to be of national and international importance for their biodiversity value and are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest and/ or Special Areas of Conservation. In addition to biodiversity value, the woodlands and forestry support ecosystems including carbon storage, natural flood defences and improved air quality.

4.7 The draft strategy has identified a number of key issues to be addressed, which have been informed through early stakeholder engagement;

- Climate change
- Threats to existing woodlands and forests
- Barriers to the creation of new woodlands
- Skills shortages in forestry
- Productivity in the forestry sector
- Timber production, manufacturing and sustainability
- Barriers to increasing the health and well-being benefits of woodlands, forests and trees
- Lack of investment in recreation and tourism facilities due to budget constraints

4.8 The vision in the draft strategy is to *“increase the value and benefit of Moray’s woodlands; to support economic growth, improve biodiversity and our climate response and provide opportunities to boost health and well-being.”* The objectives are to;

- Increase new multi benefit woodlands in Moray- spatial guidance is provided indicating Preferred, Potential, Potential with Sensitivities, Unsuitable and Sensitive areas for new woodland creation across Moray. Six broad landscape areas have been defined across Moray to provide more specific locational guidance on woodland creation and other related opportunities.
- Optimise the economic potential of Moray’s woodlands- loss of productive woodland may occur through progressive forest restructuring and potential future large scale development such as wind farms, roads construction and electricity transmission projects. The Strategy also seeks to increase forestry-related education and skills and boost employment in the industry. Increase the use of local timber in processing and construction and grow the number of sustainable timber processing and manufacturing businesses in Moray. Increase the number of tourist visitors to Moray’s woodlands and forests.
- Improve the health and vitality of Moray’s woodland ecosystems- protect important woodland habitats and species, help the recovery of nature by connecting and increasing biodiverse woodlands, improve the resilience of woodlands to climate change.
- Foster greater connection between Moray’s communities and woodlands- promote the use of woodlands to improve health and well- being, promote the start to finish forestry related economy of Moray, encourage urban planting and the creation of woodlands close to settlements, expand Morays’ network of woodland based leisure and recreation infrastructure.

4.9 A Delivery Plan is included within the draft Strategy with a range of actions identified to deliver the objectives. The Delivery Plan requires further work and input from partners during the formal consultation period. Some of the actions will require funding through a strategic approach and these opportunities will be further investigated.

- 4.10 It is proposed that the draft Strategy is made available for formal consultation for a period of 12 weeks and responses are reported back to a future meeting of the Planning and Regulatory Services Committee. The Council will work with partners to engage with communities and land-based industries to raise awareness of the draft Strategy and encourage participation.
- 4.11 During the consultation period, Scottish Forestry have offered to provide a “tour and talk” for members, including a visit to one of Moray’s sawmills.

5 SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

(a) Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))

The draft Strategy identifies the wide ranging benefits which Moray’s woodlands and forests bring and in doing so support the Corporate Plan objectives relating to economic, social and environmental, outcomes.

(b) Policy and Legal

Preparation of a Woodland and Forestry Strategy is a statutory requirement.

(c) Financial implications

The cost of the Strategy was split evenly between Scottish Forestry, HIE and the Council, with each partner contributing £15,000.

The Council’s contribution was met from the local development plan revenue budget.

The final version of the Strategy will include a detailed Delivery Plan, which will set out the role of partners and funding opportunities.

(d) Risk Implications

There is a risk if the Council had not progressed the draft Strategy then this would be flagged as evidence missing from the Local Development Plan Evidence Report.

There is also a risk that the economic, social and environmental benefits and opportunities are not recognised and realised.

(e) Staffing Implications

None at this stage.

(f) Property

The Council owns areas of current woodland and other land covered by the Strategy.

(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact

None.

(h) Climate Change and Biodiversity Impacts

Woodland in Moray sequesters approximately 869,000 tonnes of carbon per annum. Climate change is a factor in the increased incidence of tree diseases and changing weather with increased extreme weather events. Over grazing of woodland, erosion of peatland and a lack of diverse vegetative succession can increase the risk of wildfire. Decarbonising the forestry industry is a key challenge for future.

The biodiversity benefits and opportunities have been highlighted in this report.

(i) Consultations

The Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance), the Head of Economic Growth and Development, the Legal Services Manager, the Chief Financial Officer, the Democratic Services Manager, the Principal Climate Change Officer, the Transportation Manager, the Environmental Protection Manager and the Equalities Officer have been consulted and comments received have been incorporated into the report.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The Moray Woodland and Forestry Strategy has been reviewed and it is proposed that the draft is subject to 12 weeks public consultation. The draft strategy recognises the significant economic, social and environmental benefits and opportunities associated with the Moray's woodlands and forests.

5.2 A draft Delivery Plan is included which will be further developed during the consultation period.

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Background Papers:

Ref: SPMAN-813460984-496