

Date: Friday 16th May

Subject: Draft Ideas regarding the development of a partnership with FLS and the felling of Management Coupe 86002 (Creetown LMP 2021)

Introduction

Since November 2024, several Creetown residents have considered developing a community-based SCIO in Creetown to partner with FLS on management of the Balloch Woodland. In pursuit of this, our “Core” or “Initiation” group have:

1. Met several times since November 2024
2. Held four open public meetings in the Waverley Hall (two with FLS)
3. Leafleted every home in Creetown twice
4. Held two short discussions with local youth club and considered other ways of engaging our young people
5. Met with many other stakeholders including some of those who led the Balloch Wood Community Venture, Glasgow University School of Social and Environmental Sustainability, and people in the Region who have an interest in community woodlands generally
6. Developed a website and communications

We now have 72 people on our mailing list (+ 1 FLS and 6 councillors), including nine people who are willing to stand as Trustees. Two of us have agreed to stand as co-chairs, one person will act as secretary, and another has agreed to act as treasurer. We will register officially as Balloch Community Woodland Group, Creetown (to distinguish us from other places called Balloch in Scotland).

Thanks to the kindness of one Creetown resident, we have a small amount of money that is being looked after by the Creetown Initiative (CI). The CI will continue to look after our affairs until we become an independent SCIO. We are being supported in our SCIO application by Lauren McDaid at TSDG. Our intention is to submit our application to OSCR at the end of May.

This note provides some background as we understand it, a draft “Purpose” for our SCIO, and our understanding of the sentiments expressed by community members who responded to our many invitations for comments on the felling of Management Coupe 86002 (and to some extent Coupe 86006, although the issues driving that decision are a little different than those for 86002).

See

<https://forestryandland.gov.scot/what-we-do/planning/active/creetown-land-management-plan>

Background

The 69 hectare mixed woodland known as the Balloch Wood provides a backdrop to the Dumfries and Galloway village of Creetown ([population 664 in 2022](#)). It is adjacent to an area of ancient semi-natural woodland and has within it about 40 hectares of plantation forestry. This woodland is managed by Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) whose predecessor organisation (The Forestry Commission) signed a 25 year Management Agreement with the Creetown Initiative from 5th February 2009 to 4th February 2034. This is still in place but can be ended if a new Agreement is made.

Three things have changed since this Agreement was put into effect. First, the community group that was implementing the Agreement has now been disbanded after completing most of the Agreement's goals. This has left a gap in organised community effort and local capacity to continue engaging with FLS. Second, under a 2021 Land Management Plan, much of the plantation forest was harvested in late 2024. In January 2025 Storm Éowyn caused significant damage to the remaining trees.

As a result of FLS felling and Storm Éowyn, the remaining plantation area is vulnerable. There are many exposed edges around shallow rooted, tall Sitka Spruce (the majority of the remaining trees in the plantation – in Management Coupes 86002 and 86006), and will inevitably fall in the event of future strong winds.

Third, there have been a number of changes in the external context. These include:

- The establishment of FLS in April 2019
- The fact that FLS is the only government agency that is entirely self-financing, and the general sense in which Southern Scotland is regarded as “production forest” with 30% forest cover (mainly productive conifers) and investment in Southern Scotland in wood processing, nursery and other forest industry infrastructure
- FLS desires to reduce its liabilities, including many former small scale production forest/woodlands, and focus on more cost-effective operations. This includes encouraging community (amenity) forest and asset transfers where possible
- Tighter finances and reduced staffing levels at FLS and the Council
- A big reduction in CI capacity – only managing existing projects, no in-house consultancy any longer with 4 staff leaving
- A more challenging financial environment in general
- The legacy of COVID
- The legacy of BREXIT
- The designation by UNESCO of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Reserve and later, the development of Climate Hubs across Scotland
- The growth and experience of several environment and community-development focussed organisations and initiatives
- The present and future impact of the climate and nature crisis
- Demographic changes
- The decline of town centres, village retail and local economies generally (including Creetown), and simultaneous declines in public transport and community assets (consolidation of surgeries, schools, banking/post offices, ...)
- Broader opportunities and challenges afforded by local, national, UK and international policies, strategies and conventions, including those relating to Biodiversity Action Plans, Sustainable Development Goals and economic/regional development plans.

All of these things and others affect how a Partnership between FLS and any community SCIO might be framed perhaps a little differently today than it was in 2009.

The FLS' long term vision for the woodland is to ensure a mature woodland backdrop for Creetown for as long as possible while gradually transitioning the woodland back to broadleaf woodland that will provide a range of natural habitats ([Creetown Land Management Plan, 2021](#)). While the current scheduled felling is complete and replanting of woodland is underway, the remaining woodland is

now so vulnerable that FLS wishes to bring forward the felling date from 2037 to 2025. This would end 'Production Forestry' and result in the woodland becoming 'Amenity Woodland.'

All of these factors indicate the need for a new Agreement between the community and FLS. On the community side, this is best served by establishing a robust SCIO that can work with FLS and other partners for public benefit. The appetite and capacity for forming a SCIO is now proven, after broad consultations, a series of public meetings and community engagement events, and considerable voluntary effort by a Core Group of 9 to 14 people since October 2024. A Core Group of potential trustees with relevant, diverse skills is in place and meeting regularly. Almost 80 people are on a mailing list and regularly in contact. A [website](#) was established in early 2025 and is regularly updated on a voluntary basis by a webmaster who is one of the trustees.

Any new agreement would rest on the significant achievements of the previous group - the *Balloch Wood Community Venture*. What the *Venture* was able to achieve with the then Forestry Commission was astonishing and has formed the backdrop to many successful community events and individual well-being over many years. We owe the people who enabled the developments at the Ponds, Whinnie Face, sculptures, trails, planting, clearing and woodland management a huge debt of gratitude.

Draft Purpose of Balloch Woodland Community Group

The organisation's Purpose is to protect and enhance the xx hectare Balloch Wood for the benefit of local communities and visitors, wildlife and future generations. The activities that will deliver this Purpose will include local education and practical actions that focus on health, well-being, small scale economic activities, and inspiring and empowering community members and visitors, especially young people and those with different abilities.

We will do these things in partnership with Forestry and Land Scotland, with whom we shall develop an Agreement. We will also work with other partners including D&G Council, Galloway and South Ayrshire Biosphere (GSAB), Glasgow University, schools, businesses, community based organisations and neighbouring woodland-focussed community groups, and others as time goes on.

This Purpose and these Activities will be implemented with an eye to social, economic and environmental sustainability. Special efforts will be made to seek community development opportunities while paying attention to biodiversity and to the effects of changing climate and other external forces that could provide challenges or opportunities.

Felling of Management Coupe 86002

A range of views have been expressed by community members. *We would like to make clear that while we now have almost 80 people on our mailing list and have tried very hard to contact everyone (leafleting the whole village twice, four public meetings, two youth group meetings) we do not claim to represent 'the community' in this. We have not had significant youth voice and only about 10% of the village have engaged with us on this question. That may be a large percentage for other things but we are not a decision-making group that 'represents' the community in this decision.*

Many (probably most) of the people we have heard from understand (a) that the remaining coupes are vulnerable to further wind throw, and (b) that these tall, shallow rooted trees will need to be removed one day anyway. These folks generally felt that "cut now" is better than waiting. Others felt

that this suggestion is more in the interests of FLS who have an economic incentive to reduce their liabilities as fast as possible where woodlands can't make money, and that returning in 10 years would be a further drain on FLS resources. Some people felt that keeping the Sitka for another 10 years would result in a better age structure for wildlife habitat. That is to say, by the time the Sitka is cut in 2027, the other areas cut would be more mature.

On balance, though, we have a sense that more people feel that felling now is the better option, rather than waiting to 2037, subject to some of the points below. *Again, this is not 'the community' view just our understanding from the people who came to meetings or wrote to our website.*

If FLS did take a decision to seek an Amendment to fell this year, many of the people we have spoken with would like to use that as an opportunity to strengthen our partnership with FLS. The fact that Lyndy and Martin came to our community event to explain things and answer some of our questions was very much appreciated. Together with the written answers provided by FLS to questions from the community, almost all the questions raised so far have been answered.

Partnership between FLS and a new Community Based Organisation (CBO) / SCIO

Now that a formal group has been established and a SCIO application with a Constitution is being prepared it would be helpful to have a face to face meeting with FLS as soon as possible to discuss activities and a draft outline of a new partnership agreement. These discussions can take as their starting point the draft purpose of the *Balloch Woodland Community Group* outlined above, and the Agreement that is currently in place.