

Edinburgh and Lothians Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2012-2017**Report by Ian Johnson, Head of Planning and Development****1 Purpose of Report**

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to inform Committee of the production and launch of the Edinburgh and Lothians Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2012-17 and to seek endorsement of the Strategy. The report sets out the implications of the Strategy for the expansion and management of woodlands in Midlothian and the role it has in informing policies for the emerging Midlothian Local Development Plan. A copy of the Strategy is available in the Members' library.

2 Background

- 2.1** The publication of the Scottish Forestry Strategy by 2006 marked an important change in the emphasis of forest policy. The Strategy focuses on delivering sustainable development and a range of economic and environmental benefits; and sets an ambitious target of expanding national woodland cover from 17% to 25% by the second half of the century.
- 2.2** The production of the Edinburgh and Lothians Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2012-17 (ELFWS) has been led by the Lothians and Fife Green Network Partnership and was funded by the Forestry Commission (Scotland). The ELFWS was launched on 29th October 2012 by Paul Wheelhouse MSP, Minister for Environment and Climate Change.
- 2.3** The ELFWS has been prepared in order to deliver the Scottish Forestry Strategy at a regional level and to assist the four Lothian Local Authorities in the production of locally focussed action plans. As such it provides a clear vision of how the woodland resource and forest-based economy in the Lothians should develop over the next 40 years and sets out a regional framework to guide the expansion and management of woodland in parallel with wider sustainable development goals. The Strategy sets out the following aims:
- expanding the region's woodland resource;
 - building a strong, sustainable economy;
 - promoting a high quality environment;
 - securing resilience to climate change; and
 - enhancing quality of life for the region's communities.

It does not provide detailed guidance on site-specific sensitivities or the suitability of individual proposals. The importance of site-specific assessments and high quality design that reflect local environmental conditions is highlighted.

- 2.4** Currently woodland of all types comprises 13% of the land cover of Edinburgh and the Lothians. This is some way below the national average of 17%. These trees and woodlands already make an important contribution to the character and environment of the Lothians. They are a key resource for biodiversity, form an integral part of historic landscapes and provide a range of environmental benefits that support land-based industries and make a substantial contribution to the quality of life.
- 2.5** Woodland and forestry have significant interactions with the planning system. Scottish Planning Policy has a presumption in favour of protecting existing trees and woodland resources and acknowledges the range of benefits that they convey to people and the environment alike. The National Planning Framework 2 (NPF2) sets the spatial strategy for Scotland's development to 2030 and designates national developments of strategic importance to Scotland. The Central Scotland Green Network is one of these national developments and presents a major opportunity to build high quality, multi-objective woodland expansion and management into the region's planning policy framework, as NPF 2 must be taken into account in the relevant Strategic and Local Development Plans.
- 2.6** The ELFWS will help ensure that a consistent approach to woodland expansion and management across the Lothians contributes to the aims of the wider Central Scotland Green Network by making the links between its high level objectives, the Scotland Rural Development Programme and other funding opportunities and appropriate activities on the ground. The Forestry Commission (Scotland) will require private landowners and land agents seeking grants for woodland expansion and/or management to develop their proposals in line with the Strategy.
- 2.7** The ELFWS will be interpreted and applied by the Lothian Local Authorities in line with their existing and emerging policy frameworks and the priorities identified in the Single Outcome Agreements. The Strategic Development Plan for Edinburgh and South East Scotland (SESplan) promotes woodland planting to increase competitiveness in attracting inward economic investment, enhance biodiversity and create more attractive, healthy places to live and work.
- 2.9** It is anticipated that the Lothian Authorities will have regard to the ELFWS when preparing their Local Development Plans. In particular, the Strategy identifies preferred and potential woodland opportunities in Midlothian and will help to inform policies and proposals for the Midlothian Green Network in the context of the Midlothian Local Development Plan.
- 2.10** It is also expected that local authorities will make use of the ELFWS, and associated spatial data, in responding to consultations on proposals to create new woodlands, in assessing development proposals that could affect woodland, and in developing action plans for woodland expansion and management in association with new developments. It will be a material consideration in planning applications.

3 Report Implications

3.1 Resource

There are no resource implications arising directly from this report.

3.2 Risk

The main risks are in connection with the delivery of the Strategy or related action plans. This is dependent upon the availability of funding to undertake the ambitious scale of planting and woodland management envisaged by the Strategy; and the willingness of landowners to plant woodland on land currently used for agriculture or other purposes.

3.3 Policy

Strategy

The ELFWS is a key strategic document and important for the delivery of one of the national developments - the Central Scotland Green Network - identified in NPF2. It provides a strategic framework for the expansion and management of woodlands in the Lothians and in Midlothian in particular. It will help inform the emerging Midlothian Local Development Plan and will contribute to the achievement of the following corporate objectives and service priorities:

Corporate Priorities 2012-13:

1: Supporting healthy, caring and diverse communities where local needs are met; 2: Maximising business opportunities; 4: Conserving and improving Midlothian's natural environment.

Planning and Development Service Priorities 2012-13:

- Drive forward sustainable economic development;
- Prepare the Midlothian Local Development Plan.

In terms of the Single Outcome Agreement, the preparation of the Strategy will contribute to the following Local Outcomes:

- continue to improve Midlothian's growing economy;
- make Midlothian a more attractive place for doing business;
- promote inward investment and create quality and affordable business locations; and
- safeguard and enhance the amenity of Midlothian.

Consultation

The Strategy was the subject of full consultation with representatives of the Lothian Local Authorities; Forestry Commission (Scotland); Scottish Natural Heritage; Edinburgh and Lothians Green Space Trust; the Woodland Trust Scotland; the Central Scotland Forest Trust and the Central Scotland Green Network Support Unit.

Equalities

There are no equalities issues arising from the Strategy.

Sustainability

A Strategic Environmental Assessment was carried out in tandem with the preparation of the ELFWS.

4 Recommendations

- 4.1** The Committee is recommended to endorse the Edinburgh and Lothians Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2012-17.

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Background Papers:

Edinburgh and Lothians Forestry and Woodland Strategy 2012-17
File No. 3928 Vol 11