



Confor
Promoting forestry and wood

Engagement with Local People and Communities

Good Practice Guidance for Woodland Creation Proposals



1. Purpose

This document sets out best practice guidance for engagement and consultation processes for woodland creation proposals in Scotland. The guidance is voluntary, but applying it should help achieve the best possible outcome and minimise reputational risk. The guidance is primarily aimed at giving applicants and those who wish to be consulted a better understanding of engagement processes and sets out methods for undertaking meaningful engagement.

It has been prepared by individuals with experience in responding to applications to create new woodlands and by people working in Scotland's forestry industry with the aim of improving the process for local people, communities and people seeking to create new woodland. The guidance was developed through a mediated, collaborative process, and a number of relevant documents were considered. These documents and other sources of useful information are listed at section 9. Advice was also sought from Scottish Forestry and the Scottish Land Commission to help align the guidance with Government policies and processes.

The Scottish Government's vision is to expand our woodlands to cover 21% of Scotland's land area by 2032, which is a vitally important part of a commitment to achieve net zero by 2045. Scotland is a small country and much of our land is unsuitable for trees. Woodland expansion must be carefully managed and balance the interests of land use, landscape, rural economy, communities, biodiversity and carbon storage.

2. Engagement and Why it is Important

Engagement has many definitions and is often described as varying along a spectrum from consultation to empowerment:

Provision of information	This could be information about timescales of work on site etc.
Consultation	A project asks the community for their views but the power to make the final decision remains with the project developer.
Collaborative approaches	decisions are shared between the project staff and the community.
Empowerment	A project supports and enables the community to take over the decision-making arrangements.

Better community engagement is an established aim of forestry policy and practice in Scotland and the overarching principles are set out in the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement 2022 and the Scottish Government's Guidance on Engaging Communities in Decisions Relating to Land. Scotland's legislation on land reform, forestry, community empowerment and forthcoming legislation on community wealth building, all ask landowners and managers to engage with communities. One of the seven key principles of the Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement is:

There should be meaningful collaboration and community engagement in decisions about land.

The Scottish Land Commission have published a series of Protocols to help put the Scottish Government's Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement into practice. The Protocol: Community Engagement in Decisions Relating to Land states:

Engagement should be a genuine exercise in collaboration, and community views should be considered with the aim of achieving outcomes that benefit everyone. People should have confidence that there is a fair and balanced system of decision making in relation to land and should be engaged in decisions that will affect them and their local environment.

Relevant policies, guidance and the National Standards for Community Engagement are listed in Section 9 Other Helpful Resources.

In a forestry context there are other reasons why engagement is important:

Woodland creation is a form of land use change	Proposals should consider people and place, communities can offer valuable local knowledge. Scottish Government guidance states that permanent land use change can be significantly impactful, requiring formal engagement.
Sustainable Forest Management	Public involvement is a key aspect of the UK Forestry Standard which is applicable to all woodlands, meaningful collaboration should help achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. With that in mind, this guidance aims to set out more clearly how engagement can be done well.
Forestry Grant Scheme	Grants are public money and aim to deliver public benefits and support vibrant communities. Effective engagement can help turn this aim into a reality. Please note: this guidance applies also to planting projects that are not in receipt of public funds.
Build relationships	Positive working relationships and communications can lead to a genuine culture of co-operation and support.

Communities can add value. Local people are naturally 'experts' on the places they live. They can offer valuable insights on many levels, including but not limited to:

Sense of Place	Rural landscapes are rich with historic and cultural associations as well as natural heritage. People often have intergenerational relationships with their local spaces. With this comes a sense of custodianship and it's important to respect this.
Design Input	Locals often know their local landscape intimately. They can pinpoint water supplies, the key landscape features and views, where the paths are and may also be able to offer input on year-round habitats and species siting. This can be invaluable in creating a sensitive forest design.

Amenity Ideas:

Woodlands can often improve amenity for both locals and tourists. They can be accessible and have good infrastructure, when planned well. Communities can help advise on what the best opportunities are e.g paths, parking, interpretation, signage.

Clarity around the process of engagement and timescales is important to set the context and to manage expectations. Good engagement will help inform the development of a project and help assure communities that their voice has been heard and that their input has been taken account of as the applicant develops the woodland creation project. Scottish Forestry will advise on an appropriate approach to stakeholder engagement, but it is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that meaningful engagement is undertaken properly and community feedback is considered and addressed appropriately. The applicant should also be able to evidence this.

Appropriate Behaviours

When undertaking the process of stakeholder engagement, the aim will be to give those being engaged with the opportunity to be heard and their views understood. In the process all parties should treat others with respect and endeavour to ensure that no one is excluded because of the actions of others.

Faced with unacceptable behaviour, (whether that's aggression, violence or threats of violence, or any form of discrimination or abuse), anyone in the process should feel able to end the call, visit or appointment if they experience unacceptable behaviour. For the applicant, such circumstances should be recorded in an 'issues log' and Scottish Forestry advised for awareness. For the stakeholder in such circumstances, please consider contacting the person's employer and/or the Institute of Chartered Foresters if the matter involves a member of the Institute. Scottish Forestry should also be informed for awareness.

What are the behaviours that should be encouraged?**Encourage active listening and empathy**

It should be a priority for everyone to actively listen to all parties involved and strive to understand their perspectives fully. Encourage open communication and collaboration to achieve mutual understanding and consensus.

Promote a culture of respect and inclusivity

Foster an environment where all participants in the engagement process treat each other with respect and dignity. No one should be marginalised due to the actions of others, ensure that everyone has the opportunity to express their views without fear of exclusion.

Prioritise well-being

If faced with unacceptable behaviour such as aggression, violence or threats of violence, discrimination, verbal or written abuse or harassment, empower individuals to take action to ensure their safety. Anyone experiencing such behaviour should feel supported in ending the interaction, whether it's a remote encounter over the phone or in writing, as well as in person. Encourage the documentation of such incidents in an 'issues log' to address and prevent similar occurrences in the future.

Understand the position of other people

For example, stakeholders may feel a sense of powerlessness when faced with an application to plant trees and an applicant is required to work within an application process to secure approval to plant. If an agent is employed, they will have responsibilities to their client, and will have to work within budgets that should provide for good stakeholder engagement, but which are not open-ended. Sharing these can help to facilitate constructive dialogue.

3. The Woodland Creation Application Process

The woodland creation application process is initiated by a landowner wishing to create new woodland for specific objectives. The process could be managed directly by the landowner or more commonly by woodland management companies or land agents and frequently involves external consultants for specific and specialist input. The process from concept through to actual planting can take as little as six months or several years, depending on the scale and sensitivity of the proposal. A simplified woodland creation process is shown in the diagram below. The stages at which community engagement should be undertaken are highlighted and discussed in further detail in Sections 5, 6 and 7.

Please note that this diagram is a summary of the woodland creation process for the purposes of highlighting where community engagement happens. A more comprehensive diagram of the process can be found in Scottish Forestry woodland creation applicant guidance:

[Woodland Creation Application Guidance](https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/109-woodland-creation-application-guidance/viewdocument/109)

<https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/109-woodland-creation-application-guidance/viewdocument/109>

[Scottish Forestry Engagement and Consultation Processes](https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/1496-forestry-engagement-and-consultation-processes/viewdocument/1496)

<https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/1496-forestry-engagement-and-consultation-processes/viewdocument/1496>

Woodland Creation Application Process



4. The Community and Level of Involvement

There are many ways of defining communities. At a basic level, a community consists of all the people who live and work in the area, known as 'communities of place'. There can also be 'communities of interest' within and overlapping the community of place.

Community is particular to the place, people and project.

Consider who may be affected and start gathering a list of consultees in the community, typically these may include:

Neighbours	Occupiers of homes and land in the vicinity of the proposal.
Community Councils	Some proposals may cross official community boundaries.
Third sector organisations	Local place based registered charities and other organisations such as associations, self-help groups, community groups, social enterprises, mutuals and co-operatives.
Users / users groups / interest groups	There may be users or groups with recreational, heritage, wildlife or other interests. It is important to try and capture everyone associated with a proposal.

Consider the proposal and an appropriate level of involvement, including input from the community. Woodland creation applicants should review any relevant Community Action Plans or Local Place Plans to understand the vision, aims and needs of the community.

The level of involvement should be proportionate to the scale and sensitivity of the proposal.

Be mindful that communities are complex, diverse and in a constant state of transition and succession. In order to engage a diverse and representative range of people, it is good to use several different approaches. For example, meetings at a certain time of day may exclude a particular interest group, such as parents. Lack of access to public transport may exclude others from attending meetings. Social media, local noticeboards, and local press will all have a different reach in the community. Some groups may need particularly active outreach to include them. Consideration should be given to how to mitigate high demands on community capacity, particularly in areas where there is the cumulative effect of multiple projects. Within a community there may be people who actively get involved and others who don't. Applicants may need to use different approaches to engage a range of people, recognising that there can be capacity and issues of timing e.g. infrequent meetings of Community Councils. A balance is needed between making the effort to give everyone the opportunity to engage, accepting that not everyone wants to.

Community Councils

Community Councils can be considered the most local form of government. The role of a community council is to liaise between public agencies, the local authority or external parties, representing the interests of the local community. The remit of Community Councils has expanded recently following the community empowerment act and the development of initiatives such as windfarms and the associated windfarm community benefit funding.

Not everywhere in Scotland is covered by a Community Council but if the area in question has an established community council, it is a good way of introducing your project. Some community councils will run local information dispersal groups – such as Facebook pages or local websites. Community Councils can also give advice on good venues for engagement events etc.

It should be noted that Community Councillors are not paid, but are performing the role on a voluntary basis in their own time, often evenings. The frequency of Community Council meetings varies from monthly to quarterly. Minutes from meetings should be available on local notice boards and are sometimes additionally available online.

It is a requirement for an established community council to have a designated secretary and that person would normally be the best person to make first contact with.

Consider scheduling regular meetings with your community point of contact to maintain open lines of communication and foster transparency even during brief updates. These regular touch points could enable swift resolution of positive opportunities and challenges, foster transparency and efficiency. Extended periods of silence and reliance solely on formal monitoring methods can result in missed opportunities to identify misunderstandings or unintended consequences. Additionally, consider implementing a standard set of questions to ensure each step of your engagement is fair, efficient, and effective from the perspective of the community.

5. Early Engagement – Preparation of initial proposal

There is an established consensus that early engagement in land use planning decision-making processes can deliver multiple important benefits:

- Early engagement can benefit any proposal.
- It can speed up the planning process (but not always).
- It is an opportunity to notify neighbours and the community of potential changes to the local environment.
- It irons out problems early on.
- It improves the quality of the development.
- It helps to secure consent.
- It builds trust.
- It builds a sense of community.

Scottish Forestry guidance on forestry engagement and consultation processes sets out early engagement as a requirement¹ and it is recommended in Scottish Land Commission Protocols.

Consulting at the point when an application is fully developed is not good practice. As well as missing the opportunity for meaningful engagement it can alienate the community.

These engagements should be evidenced and recorded by the applicant or their agent in an 'issues log'.

At the outset of developing a woodland creation proposal, there may have been initial site assessments and analyses of the land in question. At this stage, advice should be sought from Scottish Forestry, on the key points to address in an application. Often referred to as due diligence, the applicant would scope out these issues by engaging with a range of stakeholders prior to developing an application.

Engagement with the community should begin as early as possible.

A good approach is to start with a blank map. Setting up a point of contact in the community council in a constructive and proactive manner is also good practice. Where there may be specific sensitivities, neighbours could be approached door-to-door, meeting on an equal basis to establish trust. Information such as who the landowner is; what are the management objectives; application timelines and contact details for the relevant decision makers should always be made available. Together with the established point of contact, the timescales for more meaningful engagement should be agreed and the best way determined to circulate information within the community and reach out to everyone.

Early engagement can lead to constructive exchanges and help to identify any local needs and opinions, features of cultural significance and any potential wider impacts.

6. Meaningful Engagement – Draft Plans

Where a proposed new woodland could have a significant impact on a community – for instance on planting proposals greater than 20 hectares in size, carrying out a more formal engagement or consultation is good practice. According to the Scottish Land Commission's definitions, permanent land use change (including woodland creation) should be assumed to have the potential to have a significant impact. This engagement may take place over a longer period, should be more structured, and should give people a chance to have a say on what you are going to do before any decisions are taken. Engagement should be planned to maximise the opportunity for communities and key stakeholders to participate. An engagement event should be promoted by using site signage, leaflet drops, posters, local press, community events and/or social media (with caution).

A range of approaches to meaningful engagement can be used to suit the local context:

- Site visits or walks.
- Small meetings with key stakeholders.
- Telephone contact with key stakeholders.
- Interactive workshop or drop-in event.
- Attend meetings of relevant local groups.

Consider maps and display boards with visual aids as well as online materials to explain proposals. Be prepared to share the thinking behind the proposal e.g. objectives, site conditions, etc, and share the results of any site-specific surveys and consultation with other stakeholders. Consider explaining the context for woodland creation projects, for example that Government has targets for woodland creation and, as set out in Scotland's Forestry Strategy, wishes to see the planting of a range of types of new woodland.

Peoples' views and opinions should be given appropriate consideration, listening is essential. Once formal engagement is carried out, there should be feedback to the community on any decisions taken and the reasoning.

Examples of useful feedback received from community engagement include:

- An understanding of current access routes across the site – with core paths representing only one aspect of allowable access permitted through the Land Reform Act
- Location of water supplies
- Viewpoints and views that are particularly cherished by the local community
- Biodiversity reports and sightings to inform planning considerations
- Input on actual planting times – routes taken by contractors and access limitations
- Culturally important sites such as abandoned farms and villages

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to undertaking meaningful engagement, consideration should be taken as to what works best for any given proposal and is proportionate. A sense of constructive dialogue can be fostered through site walks and face-to-face events. Visual aids and feedback sessions work well. Style and tone of approach is important, just as listening is essential. When things go wrong, admit mistakes, have a conversation and re-evaluate.

7. Submit Proposal to Scottish Forestry – Public Consultation

When a woodland creation proposal requires a grant or an EIA Screening Opinion, it is submitted to Scottish Forestry for review and assessment as part of their approval process.

Woodland creation proposals that are seeking grant support will be consulted on via a Public Register for a period of 28 days, where anybody can comment (unless the scheme has already been consulted on because it required EIA consent – Scottish Forestry will only publicly consult once per application).

The applicant is responsible for alerting all stakeholders that were engaged with in the pre-application stage that the application has been placed on a Public Register. Scottish Forestry may also directly consult with relevant stakeholders.

Consultation responses are considered by Scottish Forestry, together with the applicant, should there be any changes required to address issues which were raised.

Scottish Forestry decide on the approval or rejection of the application.

8. Summary

Community engagement involves respectful dialogue between everyone involved, good community engagement is:

Effective	In meeting, as far as is reasonably possible, the needs and expectations of the people involved;
Efficient	By being well informed and properly planned; and
Fair	By giving people who may face additional barriers to getting involved an equal opportunity to participate.

The value and benefits of early engagement are significant, which can seek to avoid conflicts late on in the process when decisions are made and plans finalised.

Community engagement is an ongoing process and not a one-off activity. It should be constantly worked on so relationships are nourished over time. This is crucial for the success of the project.

Establishing relationships with the local community can help not only the planning and approval stage, but also the delivery of the project, for example if planting is being undertaken by contractors then it is helpful for the community contact to know who to contact to highlight issues during establishment of the new woodland. Issues could vary from road damage, equipment blocking minor roads, litter from contractors and also tree wrapping debris left on site or blowing around locally. This can all be addressed through a clear relationship between the project developer and the local community.

Maintaining communication throughout the establishment process and beyond, will help the individual owner/agent to address concerns or unexpected challenges that may arise and help them and the wider forestry sector to develop a more positive and sustainable long-term relationship with communities. It should also facilitate ongoing trust and collaboration for future mutual benefit.

Top tips

The following 'top tips' are worth bearing in mind:

- One size does not fit all – it's about the right thing at the right time. Knowing what works takes time.
- Speaking to people in advance of an activity rather than after can identify issues before they arise.
- Style and tone are as important as what is said/done.
- Make yourself known and available to stakeholders/ communities as this can help avoid problems escalating.

- Listening skills are essential. Often foresters want to solve problems and take action when just listening works.
- Take time to understand the problem. It may not be what you first think.
- Face to face always works better in difficult situations.
- As well as, or instead of, one-off public meetings, consider drop-in sessions.
- Visual aids (but not just maps) and 'active' feedback sessions work well.
- Admit mistakes, rectify and move on.
- And remember, early engagement should lead to better relationships and outcomes.

8. Other Helpful Resources

- [Scottish Forestry Engagement and Consultation Processes](http://c://Users/ewan/Downloads/Forestry%20Engagement%20and%20Consultation%20Processes%20-%20Sept%202023.pdf)
<http://c://Users/ewan/Downloads/Forestry%20Engagement%20and%20Consultation%20Processes%20-%20Sept%202023.pdf>
- [Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement 2022](https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2022/09/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022/documents/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022.pdf)
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2022/09/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022/documents/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022.pdf>
- [Community Engagement in Decisions Relating to Land](https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/628e17641fd5d_Comm%20Engagement%20Protocol%202021.pdf)
https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/628e17641fd5d_Comm%20Engagement%20Protocol%202021.pdf
- [Guidance on Engaging Communities in Decisions Relating to Land](https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2018/04/guidance-engaging-communities-decisions-relating-land/documents/00534291-pdf/00534291-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00534291.pdf)
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2018/04/guidance-engaging-communities-decisions-relating-land/documents/00534291-pdf/00534291-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00534291.pdf>
- [National Standards for Community Engagement](https://www.scdc.org.uk/what/national-standards)
<https://www.scdc.org.uk/what/national-standards>
- [The Value of Early Engagement in Land Use Planning](https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5ee1fd11139d0_20200611%20SLC%20Report%20SUMMARY%20-%20The%20Value%20of%20Early%20Engagement.pdf)
https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5ee1fd11139d0_20200611%20SLC%20Report%20SUMMARY%20-%20The%20Value%20of%20Early%20Engagement.pdf

Confor has developed Stakeholder Engagement training in collaboration with Aigas Associates. All forest managers are encouraged to participate in this programme. Opportunities to register for future sessions will be promoted [on the Confor website](#).