

Finding the Common Ground on Sustainable Upland Deer Management Overview of the Project (May 2021 to July 2023)

What was Finding the Common Ground and who was involved?

Finding the Common Ground (FtCG) was conceived as a way of exploring how to improve relations between different stakeholders and build collaboration between people working in the deer management sector in upland Scotland.

A Steering Group was established, involving representatives of Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), Plantlife Scotland, Scottish Land and Estates, Trees for Life, Woodland Trust, with Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) and NatureScot playing an advisory role. Funding was gratefully received from ADMG, CNPA, Future Woodlands Scotland, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, NatureScot, Scottish Environment LINK and Woodland Trust. In May 2021, the civic mediation organisation Centre for Good Relations (CfGR) was engaged to support the project, promote networking and dialogue, and

facilitate workshops and structured discussions and events. In October 2022, the Steering Group was strengthened through Forestry and Land Scotland joining.

An initial assessment took place, through meetings with 46 people involved in the upland deer management sector. This focussed on understanding the issues and assessing whether civic mediation would be beneficial to help build up relationships and support collaboration.¹ Once a decision had been made to proceed, there were online and face-to-face conversations between stakeholders, and between stakeholders and CfGR, and Steering Group meetings, and across 2022 and 2023 the FtCG process was structured by a series of increasingly well-attended workshops and events.²

What issues were explored through Finding the Common Ground?

In facilitating the workshops and discussions, CfGR's guiding approach was 'accountable dialogue'. This aims to build better relationships by bringing people together who see issues from different angles, but can potentially use their skills, expertise and diverse perspectives to work out how, together, they can find solutions to issues which they face in common. This creates the possibility of sustainable positive change, better collaborative working, and some agreement on developing long-term approaches to handling issues.

From the earliest workshop in August 2022, key themes and issues emerged:³

- agreement that ongoing change in upland deer management needs to continue to help tackle the climate and biodiversity crises
- the need for leadership and support to those affected by change in their sector, to explore and work through issues from losing cultures and traditions to missing opportunities to achieve biologically diverse landscapes
- debates on the vision for sustainable upland deer management, and on the

¹ A summary of the assessment is available on request from CfGR, and from the FtCG Steering Group, as is the FtCG project brief which was drawn up as a result.

² These were: an initial residential workshop in Stirling (29 – 31 August 2022), attended by 42 individuals from deer and land management, government (officials, agencies, regulators), environmental non-governmental organisations, community forestry, scientists and researchers; an online workshop, held on Zoom (3 November 2022). Invitees included all who attended the Stirling workshop and all those who had been invited but were unable to attend; the work of a 'knowledge exchange task group', which met between November 2022 and February 2023; a one-day workshop in Birnam (23 February 2023),

drawing on the work of the task group, attended by around 50 individuals, which included a number of participants new to the process; a series of discussions involving stalkers and landowners on their estates (including a visit involving government minister Lorna Slater MSP to Glenfalloch Estate, 26 July 2022), leading to a one-day workshop in Invergarry (7 June 2023); a concluding residential workshop in Stirling (23 June 2023) attended by 50 participants.

³ Summary write ups of all the workshops which took place FtCG are available from CfGR and from the FtCG Steering Group. These detail the issues and themes which were discussed and provide key quotes.

issue of 'Just Transition', and on how to implement the Deer Working Group recommendations

- the way that conflicts develop from differences in land management objectives between neighbouring properties

The November 2022 online workshop explored viewpoints on the vision, strategy and plans for deer management (with an initial input from a senior official on the government's approach); updated people on the FtCG process; and enabled participants to share information on how commitments which people had made to each other at the August workshop were being progressed.

One issue which needed handling during FtCG was that some individuals and organisations came into the process as it developed, so that

'scene setting' and 'working agreement' activities needed to be refreshed so that all participants were 'up to date' and helping shape the discussions. Guided by the Steering Group, CfGR focussed on engaging important voices who were less well represented in the earliest stages of FtCG, including stalkers from highland estates, so that by the time of the closing June 2023 workshop, a broadly representative range of voices and perspectives was involved.

The June 2023 workshop was widely considered by participants to be a success in terms of identifying significant common ground on issues (which were acknowledged to remain to some degree 'tricky' and contentious); recognising shared issues which need to be worked on further in future; and in demonstrating that positive relationships and connections had developed through the FtCG process.

What were the outcomes and what are the next steps?

FtCG was developed as an exemplary piece of work: the Steering Group felt the original objectives of the project had been achieved or are being progressed through the ongoing commitment and willingness of those who have engaged. It was seen as a worthwhile process in itself, but recognised as one which could not possibly itself engage every individual who works in deer management in upland Scotland. It is the only known mechanism that addresses the relationships between stakeholders and complements the other processes currently being led by the Scottish Government and others to implement future changes in deer management in Scotland. The approach now needs developing further and extending.

At the June 2023 Stirling workshop, participants came to a common understanding that while deer management has a key role in tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, any changes must also support a healthy and vibrant rural economy, enabling a "just transition" for rural communities. This is encapsulated in a vision that the group put together to describe what they would like the future to look like.⁴ Participants also signed an accord committing themselves to abide by a shared set of principles about how they will communicate with each other, in order to set a standard for respectful behaviour throughout the sector. These agreements and approaches will

enable people in the deer management sector to communicate with the Scottish Government and others with a co-ordinated voice that respects fundamental differences of approach on the environment and the economy. Participants also developed a draft action plan on a series of activities putting their names against specific actions they will commit to continue working on and be accountable for. The action plan will form the basis of ongoing engagement in the sector with the support of the Steering Group.

As a result of the enthusiasm and commitment from participants, immediately following the workshop, the FtCG Steering Group recast itself as the core of a new Common Ground Forum. This aims to continue the momentum of improving relationships as the sector deals with some likely contentious issues in changing times ahead. The Common Ground Forum will develop and deliver future phases of work to build on the progress achieved through FtCG, bringing people from different viewpoints together to work collaboratively on areas of common interest.

⁴ The accord is available from the Common Ground Forum: the vision document is currently being edited.