

Written by the Chair of Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company on behalf of the Board and all members of EYCDC

The Board and a great many members of the Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company were extremely disappointed with the rejection by Forest Enterprise Scotland of our proposal to buy 173 hectares of Gamescleuch Forest including the Ettrick Marshes in a remote part of the Ettrick Valley. The area in question represents but 0.3% of the Forest District.

We have shared the comments and rationale for the initial decision with our members and there is wide-spread disbelief that such a beneficial community project could have been rejected outright on the grounds given. In some cases, the comments are plain wrong and unfounded, but others indicate to us that the Team simply did not understand our proposal, possibly due to the nature of the process. We should therefore wish to point out where in our view the assumptions are false and where there has been a failure to understand the benefits of the proposed community purchase.

We are disappointed that the evaluation panel and FES moved to refusal rather than asking for more information. We were assured that the panel would ask for more information if they needed clarification, and we repeatedly asked throughout the process if there was anything else that we should submit. The guidance to the Community Empowerment legislation on asset transfer states at 10.2 that, 'the Relevant authority should ask for clarification or more detail, "this will help to avoid situations where a request is refused on the basis of a lack of information which the community could have provided, if asked."

We believe that we have a strong proposition. It is a very detailed and well thought through plan, which provides a real roadmap for how, under Community ownership, the forest will be better protected, better managed, provide greater local income and job opportunities and deliver more benefit to the community for many years to come. Indeed, without Community ownership and given FES failure to attract people to the forest, there will shortly be a catastrophic situation in the local area with the only shop closing, the school building abandoned and no prospect of job creation.

We have taken every stated objection or question and addressed each one in turn, providing evidence to support our plan. In many cases the information was contained within our original detailed submission documents or the negative assumption by the panel runs counter to existing Forestry Commission policies and guidance. In some cases we could have clarified and added more detail if requested.

Our plan is completely aligned to the stated political objective of transferring 1 million acres into Community ownership by 2020. We note that there is currently no other substantive or comparable application for any other transfer of land within the Scottish Borders. In

contrast the Highlands and Islands area seems to have many community owned holdings and yet the Ettrick and Yarrow Valleys suffer from many of the same constraints. We have a depth of relevant land and forestry management experience both on our Board and within our broader company membership. I am a former Forestry Commissioner of 11 years standing. In the past I was Chairman of the Royal Scottish Forestry Society's Millennium Forest of Cashel, a community forest on the banks of Loch Lomond. I also manage a number of forest and land holdings, one of a very similar nature to Gamescleuch. The board has extensive experience in commercial and contractor management and will engage professional advice as needed.

All we are seeking to do is to pay FES a fair value for what is a very small part of their overall land estate in the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway district (0.3%) but one which would make a tremendous and lasting positive impact on the Ettrick and Yarrow valley communities.

We therefore welcome this opportunity to re-state to a new, independent body, the key elements of our plan which is both deliverable and achievable and which underpins our continued ability to deliver the wider transformational aspirations within the Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Plan.

I and my Board seek a review of the decision, by written submissions, a hearing and, importantly, a site visit. We stand ready to answer any questions you may have and provide any further representations to support this Review and we look forward to a positive outcome which will benefit our Ettrick and Yarrow Valley communities for generations to come.

Yours faithfully

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Chair of Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company  
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