Delivering community benefits from nature restoration projects in the Cairngorms National Park

Nature restoration professionals' perspectives on community benefits delivery and the related drivers and constraints

A report to the Scottish Land Commission

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1 Executive Summary

On 31 March 2022, the Scottish Government published its Interim Principles for Responsible Investment in Natural Capital. The introduction by the Minister mentions a significant investment gap to achieve nature restoration in Scotland over the next decade. The Minister's introduction also states that Scotland's natural capital has become an increasingly attractive proposition for private investment and that this investment is welcome and necessary, but that it must be responsible. One of the six Interim Principles sets out that investment in and use of Scotland's natural capital should create benefits that are shared between public, private and community interests, contributing to a just transition, that current investment and future increases in land and ecosystem services value should benefit local communities, and that investment and management decisions should support Community Wealth Building by reinvesting value in local economies for their long-term benefit. In 2023 the Scottish Land Commission (hereafter 'the Commission') published guidance on Delivering Community Benefits from Land, which is supported by the Scottish Government. Currently, work is underway, funded by the Facility for Investment Ready Nature in Scotland (FIRNS), to develop a Community Benefits Certification Standard for natural capital investment. At the same time, on 13 March 2024, the Scottish Government introduced a new Land Reform (Scotland) Bill.

In this context, this project is a timely look at the opportunities and challenges related to delivering community benefits from the perspective of those working on nature restoration. It aims to understand what participants perceive to be the key community benefits currently delivered by their work, and what they feel are the drivers and constraints related to this. By evaluating these findings against the Commission's guidance on Delivering Community Benefits from Land, this project hopes to make a valuable contribution to the discussion surrounding what community benefits nature restoration and natural capital investment can and should deliver, and what support may be required to realise these.

1.1 Method and considerations

Through semi-structured interviews, six people occupying a variety of active roles in different nature restoration projects shared their perspectives on the current delivery of community benefits from nature restoration in the Cairngorms National Park. Across participants, a wide range of experience was

drawn upon, spanning the conceptualisation and funding of projects through to the implementation and communication of these to the public. This report explores the variety of views expressed and offers a snapshot of the current practice of delivering community benefits from nature restoration and an indication of the sorts of possibilities and concerns that might warrant consideration in relevant future guidance. As only a limited number of interviews took place, and despite traversing a wide collection of perspectives through just a handful of discussions, this report makes no claim to be generalisable across all nature restoration work in Scotland, or even throughout the Cairngorms. Nonetheless, practitioners and policy makers will hopefully find value in the findings, as many of the key possibilities and concerns highlighted here will likely resonate across places and contexts.

1.2 Key findings

The key findings that emerged from the interviews are as follows:

- As a concept, interviewees generally conceived ‘communities’ to be ‘of place’ or ‘of interest’, deeming the former more important in this context. They wanted acknowledgement that those working on nature restoration projects are more often than not also part of ‘the community’;
- Most interviewees agreed that nature restoration work can, and should, deliver some community benefits, although this was not deemed to be the case in every context;
- The perceived remoteness of a site was often used as a justification for deeming the delivery of community benefits as less relevant;
- Interviewees’ definitions of ‘community benefits’, and what the delivery of these involves, somewhat differed. Yet, they almost universally identified the delivery of social and cultural benefits as key, such as improving nature access, offering skills development opportunities, and facilitating the strengthening of ties between people and place;
- Further, these socio-cultural benefits were seen to indirectly benefit the local economy because they increase local employment opportunities and boost ecotourism;
- Interviewees deemed direct economic community benefits, such as community benefit funds, as less of a priority, or less feasible, due to the current uncertainties involved in nature restoration projects. They also believed that financial community benefits would have limited impact in comparison to social, cultural, and indirect financial benefits;

- Interviewees believed that delivering community benefits can sometimes be vitally important for the long-term success of nature restoration work;
- The interviewees indicated a relationship between the model of land ownership and governance of an area and the capacities for delivering community benefits, although specific relationships around this are hard to infer from a small sample size of interviewees;
- Not all interviewees were familiar with, or enthusiastic about, the Commission's guidance on Delivering Community Benefits from Land; and not all felt it was relevant to their work. However, many of the views and experiences discussed by interviewees aligned with the vision in the guidance and some expressed it would be useful to them going forward.

1.3 Key takeaways

Whilst there are numerous interesting takeaways from this research, the key considerations from the Commission's perspective include: championing the recognition that delivering community benefit is a mutual benefit for the success and longevity of nature restoration work; distinguishing between incidental and additional benefits that come from a project; needing to challenge the notion that the perceived remoteness of a site justifies a lack of community benefit delivery; answering to the challenges projects face in offering direct financial benefits to communities; recognising the complexities of natural capital markets and the understandable hesitancy nature restoration professionals have regarding getting involved in these; discussing the perceptions of incompatibilities between ecological requirements and community desires of some restoration work, as well as between best ecological practice and what natural capital markets may require; seeking new ways to effectively monitor the success and impact of benefit delivery; and differentiating between supporting community engagement and delivering community benefit.

2 Introduction

This report presents the findings of research overseen by the Commission and funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) Consultancy Innovation Programme 2024, jointly delivered by NERC and the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute (ECCI). It seeks to understand the Commission's Delivering Community Benefits guidance in the specific context of the Cairngorms National Park by exploring nature restoration professionals' perspectives of delivering community benefits in relation to their work. It discusses who the relevant communities to restoration work are, what it means to deliver community benefits, which sorts of benefits are preferred or prioritised, and what opportunities and challenges are related to different types of benefit delivery, including the drivers and constraints that motivate or dissuade practitioners from enacting the delivery of certain benefits. The report concludes with reflections on next steps for the Commission in light of these findings.

3 Method and approach

The findings in this report are based on six semi-structured interviews with people who work on nature restoration projects in the Cairngorms National Park: three nature restoration professionals, two people in land management leadership positions, and one natural capital project developer. Semi-structured interviews allow for a discussion which is both focused to the topic of interest (delivering community benefits from nature restoration) and guided by the interests and experiences of each interviewee. This method was chosen as the experiences of participants varied greatly and capturing this variety through an adaptable line of inquiry was important to ensure the adequate charting of a sizable range of relevant opportunities and challenges. As such, the findings draw on a wide variety of experience which included: allocating the funding for various types of restoration work (through public and private means); coordinating, managing, and implementing restoration work (on land owned and governed through differing models, such as estate or NGO-owned areas and on behalf of a range of actors, from investor funds to public bodies); and working directly with volunteers and staff and communicating details of such work to communities and the general public. This enriches the findings with diverse perspectives to provide a snapshot of drivers and constraints those working in nature restoration in the Cairngorms are currently experiencing in terms of realising community benefits. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes and an hour and took place over Microsoft Teams; recordings were auto-transcribed by Teams and then manually checked. Transcripts were coded by themes relating to community benefits and are presented below with care given to capture the diversity of views.

4 Findings

To contextualise the findings, it is necessary to note that interviewees spoke to a broad range of nature restoration work within these discussions, including forest, peatland, river, floodplain, wetland, and habitat restoration, and deer management and predator control. Whilst some described activities that may be conceived as distinct projects on their sites, others described their more general long-term management approach to their site as a whole. The focus during much of the conversations was on woodland and peatland restoration activities, although elements of other aspects were drawn into the discussion at times. The way such activities are funded varies between type of work being done and the particular ownership and governance model of each site. A non-exhaustive list of funding sources mentioned includes: public grants; direct contributions from the National Park Authority; private partnerships with businesses and/or investor funds; revenues generated from other types of activities; and contributions from the partners who own areas of the land/private landowners.

4.1 Who are considered relevant communities?

Interviewees acknowledged there are ‘different levels’ (Int2) of communities to consider in relation to nature restoration and that it can be ‘quite complex in terms of understanding the different communities involved’ (Int4). Discussions regarding the conceptualisation of a community’s relevance to nature restoration work pertained to a site’s remoteness, the categorisation of communities as ‘of place’ or ‘of interest’, and perceptions of who is included in the definition of ‘community’.

4.1.1 Relevancy and remoteness

The first consideration for several interviewees responding to this question seemed to be the remoteness of their work: ‘a lot of our work sites are relatively remote and there isn't a particularly direct, tangible connection between those sites and a community of place’ (Int6). This sentiment was echoed across interviews, as participants conveyed that ‘if [projects] are in a remote place, it’s nothing to do with the community really’ (Int3) because there is ‘no one living there directly’ (Int2). Thus, remoteness was offered as a justification for rendering considerations of community somewhat irrelevant or meaningless.

4.1.2 Communities of place and interest

Those who did identify relevant communities often categorised them into two groups: ‘when we talk about communities, we'd be interested to define that concept, are we talking about communities of interest or communities of place?’ (Int6). Communities of place were identified as settlements within the park, local farms and landowners, and other nearby villages. Communities of interest mentioned within the interviews included deer management groups, volunteers, hill walkers, campers, bikers, and other visitors to the landscape. Whilst some saw the former as a priority over the latter – ‘they're both a priority, but we possibly have more staff resource for communities of place and developing opportunities to involve and engage local communities’ (Int1) – one interviewee noted that in terms of more remote work, ‘communities [of place] are probably not aware, but we will have communities of interest [engaged]’ (Int6) as they may be more impacted by changes to such sites.

Due to their relevance to various aspects of nature restoration, both of these categories of communities were emphasised throughout the interviews at different points. Some participants hinted at the ‘national community’ (Int2) as well, particularly in relation to projects that rely on public funds, as this indicates a (perhaps symbolic) connection to the land for the general public, or through mentions of wider environmental changes benefitting everyone which result from nature restoration projects (such as reduced carbon in the atmosphere).

4.1.3 Being part of the community

Several participants troubled the concept of ‘communities’ being a separate category to those carrying out restoration efforts (and land management work more generally), highlighting the overlaps rather than distinctions between the two: ‘we’re all kind of part of the community anyway’ (Int4) so ‘to talk about local communities is also talking about our staff and volunteers’ (Int1). One explained that over 60 local people are employed by their organisation and another mentioned that many people live in housing provided by an estate their work is connected to: ‘the largest community is the estate community’ (Int5). Another spoke of the ways in which staff were integrated into the wider community due to taking part in local activities and having children in the nearby schools. As such, ‘we are now seen as part of the community’ (Int4).

4.2 What does ‘delivering community benefits’ generally mean?

When asked what ‘delivering community benefits’ generally means to their work, most interviewees primarily emphasised the social and cultural benefits that are associated with their restoration activities, such as skills development and volunteering opportunities, with the provision of economic benefits as a ‘secondary output’ (Int1). Some felt that due to the remoteness of their work, the most relevant benefits were those provided to wider (Scottish) society rather than specific benefits for local communities: ‘we're planting these trees here to mitigate and adapt to climate change and that benefits society…that’s the community benefit’ (Int3). One participant also noted how projects may create disbenefits at first, highlighted in relation to communities of interest who may experience potential disruptions to access and a diminished sense of wildness, for example, whilst the restoration work is underway. This participant continued that the hope is that these communities may come to appreciate the environmental benefit as well as better maintenance of the area for the continuation of their recreational activities following the restoration, indicating long-term benefits should outweigh any short-term disbenefits.

4.2.1 Importance of context

Based on the range of experiences interviewees relayed about the delivery of benefits, it seems vital to ‘not [have] a one-size-fits-all approach’ (Int1) to considering the benefit potential of projects; delivering community benefits was conveyed to be highly contextual. One interviewee described how one project might not be seen to be relevant at all to communities whilst for another, ‘the main objective was community benefits’ (Int3). Further, one interviewee mentioned how their thinking around the potential benefits of a project was partially dictated by what they thought funders would want to see evidenced in grant applications. As such, it seems difficult to provide just one overarching notion of what it means to ‘deliver community benefits’ in the Cairngorms National Park, highlighting the importance of context. Interviewees felt that community benefits should be specific and proportional to a given project, taking into consideration its remoteness, location, activity type and aim, and funder requirements.

4.2.2 Engagement and benefit

When asked about the delivery of community benefits, the majority of interviewees initially spoke to notions of community input and the importance of getting the process of a project right through meaningful engagement practices. It is unclear whether good community engagement is therefore seen as a benefit itself, or a means to secure benefit, or just the automatic direction of conversation when the concept of 'communities' is introduced in these spaces. This illustrates how discussions of communities in relation to nature restoration often turn to notions of engagement practices rather than avenues for delivering benefits. Although community engagement is a necessary requirement of providing community benefits (i.e. in understanding what kind of benefit the community would value), some of the interviewees inferred that community engagement was a benefit in and of itself. This points towards greater acceptance and understanding of community engagement compared with community benefits within the sector.

4.3 Social and cultural community benefits

Social and cultural benefits were presented as the priority category for delivering community benefits through nature restoration work.

Key social and cultural community benefits listed by interviewees:

- Providing opportunities for skills development, volunteering, employment
- Running educational events and facilitating knowledge-sharing and citizen science activities
- Strengthening community ties to place

Key drivers of delivering these listed by interviewees:

- Successful socio-cultural benefits increase community awareness of, and buy-in for, restoration work; it is therefore mutually beneficial to deliver these

Key constraints to delivering these listed by interviewees:

- Sometimes what is needed for ecological success is not compatible with delivering certain socio-cultural benefits, so trade-offs have to be made (e.g. restricting access to areas)
- Similarly, community opinions may not align with what is ecologically required; this limits the ability to offer meaningful engagement as a benefit if such input is ignored to prioritise what will work best ecologically

4.3.1 Providing opportunities

The greatest areas of currently delivered community benefits identified amongst interviewees could be broadly classed as social and cultural. These were mainly discussed in terms of offering skills development and volunteering opportunities like tree planting, maintaining paths and areas for recreational activities, running events to inform people and get communities involved, creating community hubs such as a bothy, and providing educational enrichment activities for all ages, from school children through to adults. For example, it was seen to be important to get local people involved in monitoring and learning about the ecological benefits of work being done, through various citizen science and knowledge-sharing activities such as invertebrate and vegetation monitoring groups. One interviewee explained, ‘we also look at ways we can share the results of our science and monitoring program with communities of interest’ (Int1); this presents an example of the transparent, open, and accessible traits many interviewees are keen to champion in their work. Providing both information and opportunities for involvement were presented as ‘a really good way of raising awareness in the community’ (Int3) which was seen to be a social benefit.

4.3.2 Connecting people and place

Interviewees highlighted how certain projects offer opportunities for ‘connecting people and place’ (Int1) as well as connecting people with each other, which was presented as another key social and cultural benefit. This socio-cultural benefit was conveyed as being entwined with environmental benefit, as ‘in the fullness of time [the environment is] much healthier, nicer…around which you live better and have more attractive access of opportunities’ (Int6). This illustrates how interviewees framed socio-ecological benefits holistically, with some offering the perspective that nature restoration work plays a role in strengthening a community’s ties to the landscape. Furthering this, one interviewee expressed the potential benefits of projects becoming more deeply embedded within communities: ‘how can we build social capital and positively integrate into the social fabric of communities through being a part of local culture…’ (Int1). This desire to be accepted as part of communities, rather than external to them, reflects the complications of trying to define a community as separate to those conducting restoration work. The socio-cultural role some interviewees saw their work playing indicates their perception of the importance of connection and integration, and the benefits that can come from this.

4.3.3 Mutual benefit

Whenever social and cultural community benefits were discussed, interviewees often linked the provision of these with the beneficial impact this also had on the success of the nature restoration work itself. This notion of mutual benefit was conveyed in a variety of ways, namely garnering both initial and long-term support for the project and retaining a young, trained labour force to continue the work. One interviewee summarised these ideas, expressing that 'facilitating a deep understanding and deep connection [for communities] is what's really valuable in making this work sustainable and resilient' (Int1) and 'we need to be working intergenerationally now to have that as part of the culture of this work, that it's something that's passed down through generations' (Int1). Several other participants echoed this sentiment, stating that 'keeping young people in the area is obviously a real priority' (Int3) and explaining how they are 'going out to the local schools to speak to the senior pupils about career opportunities' (Int6). This illustrates how delivering community benefits is of benefit to the long-term success and longevity of a project too; 'we need to encourage people to support us directly, because without that we're goosed' (Int4).

4.3.4 Challenges of delivering socio-cultural benefits

Despite the general acceptance that delivering community benefits is a positive in itself that can also help satisfy the interests of a project, some interviewees conveyed that providing social and cultural community benefits, although desirable, is not always straightforward. There was a perception that ecological requirements can sometimes be brought into tension with community desires, 'so how do you balance those two [environmental and social] things?' (Int2). In such cases, delivering community benefits is 'tricky, because you're ultimately away from the community – but they interact with it and every community has a deep connection with the land around it' (Int2). So, interviewees wondered, 'how [do] you reconcile that…how do we balance what a community might like us to do with what we, as an organisation, think we should be doing?' (Int4). One offered the following conundrum: 'there are very few of our sites that are actually really, really accessible, and we struggled with that ourselves in that we'd quite like to have a few easy access demonstration sites that we can just take people to [but can't]' (Int6). These concerns reveal the perception that it is not always straightforward to deliver socio-cultural benefits, for a variety of

reasons, from distance of a site from local communities to balancing differing ecological and social priorities.

4.4 Financial community benefits

Whilst indirect benefits for the wider local economy and social and cultural benefits were positioned as key, direct financial benefits were often discussed as secondary benefits arising from nature restoration work.

Key financial community benefits listed by interviewees:

- Supporting the wider local economy through job creation and employing local people
- Supporting the wider local economy through spending locally on materials
- Supporting the wider local economy through boosting ecotourism

Key drivers of delivering these listed by interviewees:

- The above indirect economic benefits are driven by holistic considerations for local economies
- Some interviewees had personal aspirations for getting communities to financially benefit in the future through more direct means, although this is not yet evident

Key constraints to delivering these listed by interviewees:

- Difficulties in measuring socioeconomic impact of benefit delivery
- High expectations to deliver financial benefits with a lack of route map for how to reach these
- Not generating a profit to be able to share with communities
- Uncertainties regarding the future of relevant markets (e.g. the carbon market) and engaging with private investors
- Concerns over their reputation regarding the potential for the public to view getting involved with credits as greenwashing
- The current mechanisms for delivering financial benefits may rely on approaches which conflict with what nature restoration professionals view as ecologically appropriate (e.g. an over-emphasis on carbon to the detriment of biodiversity)
- More generally, questioning whether providing direct payments is the best way to deliver community benefits

Although presented as secondary to indirect financial and socio-cultural benefits, interviewees conveyed that nature restoration projects also deliver financial community benefits in the Cairngorms National Park. Participants felt that the greatest financial benefits of restoration work related to the boost these projects provide to the wider local economy, rather than through direct financial contributions to communities.

4.4.1 Supporting the local economy

One participant summarised the general sentiment of the participants as ‘trying to support a resilient rural economy…but in a more practical sense’ (Int1). This included universal mention of the provision of local jobs, which in some small communities provide a substantial proportion of the employment in the area, alongside sourcing materials for projects locally: ‘we do try to use local suppliers and local contractors and local people as much as we can’ (Int3). A few provided examples of how nature restoration projects support ecotourism, which has ‘enhanced communities through the revenue that comes to hospitality and activity providers’ (Int6) and one mentioned the free provision of materials, such as woodchip, to a local community project which would have had to purchase this from elsewhere if they had not offered this.

In general, there was a strong sentiment that, as far as possible, money ‘should be spent locally’ (Int1) to financially benefit communities through ‘downstream impacts’ (Int4). Part of this discussion hinted again at the mutual positive impact of delivering community benefits: ‘it makes sense that people in the area are working on the project, because if people can see the direct economic benefit [to the local economy], then they have more buy in; they appreciate it more’ (Int2). Although interviewees seemed in general agreement about this key financial benefit to communities, there was more variation in response regarding how to measure the impacts of this. Whilst one interviewee described how they are already monitoring and reporting on their socioeconomic impact, another expressed that ‘measuring those and trying to make them tangible is challenging’ (Int4). This issue of measurability and tangibility was a key focus for many participants when thinking through the potential financial benefits their projects could offer communities and was a factor reinforcing the preference for providing employment; there was agreement that one of the ‘most tangible benefits to the community…is that there are jobs – local jobs – created’ (Int6).

4.4.2 Hesitancy towards providing direct financial benefits

Although there was widespread enthusiasm for considering the benefit of their work to the local economy, there was markedly greater hesitancy among interviewees in terms of the creation of community benefit funds or the suggestion of making payments to communities. Speaking for most participants, one confirmed ‘there is no direct payment to [the local community

from their restoration work]' (Int2). Whilst some felt this was an aspiration – 'it's something that's on our radar and personally I would like to see it as a possibility for the future' (Int1) – many saw it as unrealistic or not wholly desirable. One explained, 'the idea of a community wealth fund is not a concept that we've been proactively pushing, partly because it's hard to see the route for it' (Int6). Those with this view expressed that this is because there is often 'nothing to share' (Int4), which is further complicated by the growing discourse that communities *should* be financially benefiting, which raises community expectations that some interviewees felt were too tricky to meet under present conditions.

Participants explained that, currently, the possibility of making a profit through restoration work is mediated by going through existing code systems (e.g. the Peatland Code) which are 'the only mechanism that can actually drive funding into these projects that would allow landowners to disperse some of that back to the community' (Int6). Some interviewees expressed resistance to this model: 'I actually have a real problem with carbon codes…one of the reasons for that is the focus on carbon, and the money that carbon can potentially generate, could lead to some quite perverse outcomes [by ignoring broader ecological and biodiversity benefits]'. They continued, 'the irony is, that quite often [a good project] doesn't deliver the most carbon benefits' (Int4). Regardless of whether the project coordinators buy into the notion or not, organisations have to consider their reputation: 'as an organisation, who would we be willing to sell [credits] to? We don't want to be part of a greenwashing thing' (Int4).

Further, due to uncertainties regarding the future of carbon markets, for example, 'such profit might happen, or might not…[but] you can't really start dispersing it…because of the liability that hangs on your balance sheet' (Int6). This demonstrates that those conducting these projects do not feel able to share profits without the reassurance that their work will continue to be financially secure in the future. Providing a seemingly rare example, one interviewee described 'a pilot project we're running in conjunction with [a company] which has overtly set out to try and create a bit of a community wealth fund [consisting of 10% of their carbon credit profits]' (Int6). However, 'the profit projections at the moment are not really predicting profit' (Int6) due to current wider economic conditions. As such, due to concerns surrounding

validity, in terms of scientific support and reputation, and viability, in terms of profitability, it was acknowledged that this model is perhaps not going to work for all project types and sites.

Questions regarding profitability also surrounded discussions of funding sources for restoration work. Despite there being public grants to support those conducting restoration work to follow woodland and peatland codes, some interviewees felt these fell short in some respects, primarily that 'the income from forestry grant schemes seldom covers the actual costs of doing the work…there's always a big gap' (Int4). As such, money is then required from elsewhere to make up the difference, reducing the possibility of generating profit in the short term. An alternative, or addition, to public grants is to secure private funding. Considering the prospect of engaging with private finance to fund their work, which may diversify the ways in which projects are able to provide financial benefits to communities, there was, again, some hesitancy. This was based on a perceived level of risk that comes with getting involved in private finance mechanisms, as well as the long-term obligations subsequently owed to whoever offered the private finance, and a recognition of the potential for negative public perceptions in taking on such a relationship: 'there's a lot of speculation…it's a new financial market' (Int6). One interviewee spoke to some of these issues: 'looking ahead at possibly getting more involved with private finance or natural capital or delivering biodiversity or carbon credits, I think it would be a real challenge establishing ways to do that ethically and sustainably' (Int1). As such, at present, most interviewees said their work was not yet funded, for the most part, in this way.

When discussing the challenges of taking on private funding for restoration work (instead of public grants) from a landowner's perspective, one interviewee presented the following dilemma: 'if you were a landowner and I gave you the choice of having 100% of the money you needed for free [from public grants] and then all of the carbon credit return is yours to keep, or I perhaps provide 50% of the money, and you have to get 50% of the money from a green finance institute, but you then have to pay back that part out of your carbon credit dividends, most people would say I'll have the free money please' (Int6). Whilst this point of view contradicts the previous viewpoint that public grants are insufficient for covering all the costs associated with restoration work, this example does contribute to the discussion in terms of thinking through the

viability of particular models of funding. Those managing restoration projects clearly have a lot of potential positive and negative implications to contend with, related to choosing different funding sources, being tied into certain contractual obligations, needing to consider the longevity of their work, and managing public perceptions; all of this is set against a backdrop of uncertainty and risk regarding the future of how such projects will be conceptualised, funded, and managed. As such, in this context, 'you're left wondering what the levers are for community wealth fund building' (Int6).

4.4.3 Should projects provide direct payments?

Taking a step back, some interviewees questioned the assumed benefit of direct payments, illustrating this with accounts of how they understand the ways in which they currently financially support communities to be a positive alternative. In addition to the ways in which they see their projects supporting the local economy as explored above, interviewees conveyed that whatever profits may arise from restoration work would be put back into doing further restoration, or into other things that will benefit the community such as building housing on estate land, rather than directly paying communities in cash. This was provided as evidence for how restoration profits may be best placed to benefit communities through financing the long-term success of this work and ensuring its future is sustainable, rather than providing a one-off financial contribution. Overall, in terms of delivering financial community benefits, one interviewee summarised the universal tone of the interviews: 'we do quite a lot [to benefit the economy], but we don't give cash' (Int4).

4.5 Summary of community benefits delivered

The table below summarises the community benefits delivered through sites in the Cairngorms and the drivers and constraints for delivering these, from the perspective of the nature restoration professionals interviewed for this project (use of an asterisk indicates a benefit that was discussed but is not currently delivered by those interviewed).

Table 1: Summary of community benefits and the related drivers and constraints from the perspective of interviewees

Community benefit type	Examples of benefits	Drivers for delivery	Constraints for delivery
Socio-cultural	Skills development and volunteering opportunities; educational events; strengthening community ties to place	Successful socio-cultural benefits increases community awareness/buy-in for projects	Trade-offs between environmental, social, and economic priorities
Indirect economic	Job creation and employing local people; sourcing local materials; ecotourism boost	Holistic considerations for local economies	Tricky to measure socioeconomic impact
Direct economic	Community benefit funds*	Personal aspirations for greater financial benefit for communities	High expectation, but little direction, to deliver these; lack of profit generation; market uncertainty; reputation concerns; questioning these benefits

4.1 The impact of ownership and governance on delivering community benefits

Models of ownership and governance varied between the sites interviewees were discussing; this was framed as central to the ecological success of projects with some indication that it may also impact the delivery of community benefits.

Key aspects of ownership/governance for community benefit delivery as identified by interviewees:

- Broadly, a change in land ownership, and subsequently land use (towards nature restoration work), may offer new opportunities to start delivering benefits
- Large-scale partnership work offers greater capacity and resources for delivering benefits
- Decisions regarding who financially benefits from credits may be complicated on estate-owned land, where owners and tenants may have competing claims
- Similarly, attempts to monetise the landscape may complicate what benefits can be delivered
- Private landowners may not have as much capacity to support processes that facilitate benefit delivery
- Community-owned land may open up new opportunities for communities to benefit from nature restoration work, although this was speculative within these interviews

Within this project, it was difficult to determine the extent to which these variations in opinions and experiences were due to differences in ownership and governance practices and/or other factors.

Between interviewees, a wide variety of ownership and governance models were described and discussed, from partnership work across organisation-managed landscapes, to estate-owned and community-owned land. Ownership type was described as 'absolutely central' (Int2) to the journey of a nature restoration project; the attitude of a landowner is 'absolutely critical to our chances of [project] success… if that landowner is supportive, that's really opens up a lot of potential for us…if they're not, it writes off a big chunk of land' (Int3). Yet, what interviewees also demonstrated, is that models of governance and ownership do not only impact the ecological success of a project but the interest in, and ability to deliver, community benefits from such projects.

4.1.1 Partnership model

Partnership work was praised as beneficial for both the ecological side of efforts and the community side. For the latter, this included: the capacity and resources to offer many of the social and cultural benefits discussed, the ability to make quick decisions that are still based on a great depth and breadth of 'collective learned experience' (Int1) through board meetings between partners which working groups feed into, and the governance structure for different partners to challenge each other's perspectives. Challenges of partnership work included the current lack of structure to 'work on a more equal footing with community groups' (Int1) in decision-making arenas and the practical difficulties of having one partner holding all the funding for a project.

4.1.2 Estates model

For estates, one participant felt that 'the diversity of estates is what gives them endurance' (Int6), suggesting that estates may be in a good position to think about long-term actions which include delivering a variety of community benefits. A potential challenge, though, can materialise through 'complications of the relationships between an estate and tenancies' which 'can slow things up and it can complicate things, especially when you start looking at natural capital

and carbon credits…there doesn't seem to be a lot of precedence in [contexts where] tree planting's happening on tenanted land, how those carbon credits are dealt with in terms of who gets them, the farmer or the landowner?' (Int3).

4.1.3 Land use change

One interviewee spoke specifically to the possibilities for delivering benefits that a change in ownership opened up, from a previous model of ownership and governance which prioritised farming and sporting activities, to the current model in which an investor purchased the land for nature restoration purposes. They described how the prior owners 'would prefer that people weren't there [on the land]' (Int2) as opposed to now, 'the fences have pedestrian gates on them, we actively encourage people to go up there, we've improved access to the site and we'll be putting information boards up to try and make it somewhere that people can enjoy as easily as possible whilst also respecting the sensitive species there' (Int2). This indicates how a shift in focus from other types of land use to nature restoration-related uses could offer more opportunity for the delivery of community benefits, although this is not an automatic guarantee by any means.

Specific complications related to changing land use practices to conduct restoration activities were highlighted in terms of attempts to monetise the landscape. One interviewee noted the potential tensions that may arise from offering volunteering opportunities (a previously noted community benefit) on land intended to make profit for the owner: 'if a landowner says come and voluntarily help fix up my peatland so that it stays in tip top shape for carbon credits, you know, people would probably look at that differently from going up to help restore or help maintain a site that I, the landowner, perhaps restored voluntarily' (Int6). As such, it is worth considering how delivering certain kinds of community benefits may be rendered problematic, or less possible, through certain ownership or governance intentions.

4.1.4 Managing conflict

In terms of governance specifically, one interviewee noted the importance of having processes in place that can manage conflict effectively and 'facilitate forums that bring people around the table' (Int4). They continued to explain that land governed under organisational structures may have better capacity to

engage with the practices required to deliver benefits from projects, recognising that 'larger organisations are probably quite well covered around all of this stuff' (Int4) whilst smaller, private landowners may 'dread' having to put the necessary management plans together, for example, due to lack of capacity or resources.

4.1.5 Community models

Whilst none of the interviewees had significant direct experience of working with areas of community-owned land, and very few areas governed in this way seem to currently exist in the Cairngorms National Park, several speculated around the possibilities this ownership model could open up. One explained, 'if we were to see the natural capital economy at its best, it would provide a mechanism for communities to own land…it can only really do that if the natural capital assets are valuable enough…those mechanisms haven't really been developed yet' (Int2) and 'the current quickest route to getting that done is to purchase a freehold of land and then conduct the work, or take a lease from an existing landowner and conduct the work…[but] should [land] be owned by funds?' (Int2). This line of thinking revealed some of the tensions between the urgency to enact change as soon as possible and a 'utopia' vision of these processes being more community controlled: 'can we create models in which community-owned land funds support [communities]?' (Int2). Another spoke to the importance of community involvement in governance processes, regardless of ownership, which may suggest the multiple ways in which projects could be successful when 'further along the engagement scale' (Int1).

4.2 Opinions on the Commission's Delivering Community Benefits guidance

There was huge variation in interviewee familiarity with, and enthusiasm for, the Commission's guidance.

Key opinions on guidance:

- It largely aligns with the values those working in nature restoration hold, regardless of whether they use it or not
- It can support projects to align with government priorities
- It would be useful if future guidance could cover concerns around decision-making, putting ideas into practice, monitoring socio-economic benefit, and engaging with private finance

- It would also be useful for the guidance to be translated into more practical tools for implementation

Conversations regarding the delivery of community benefits were discussed in the context of considering the Commission's guidance on these issues. When asked directly about their familiarity with this document, some interviewees said they had come across it before whilst others had not, although the Commission's work more generally was widely known about. The response on the extent to which the guidance document is useful to their work was mixed, ranging from 'very useful' (Int1) and 'really really useful' (Int2) to 'I don't think it has much relevance day to day for us…it's very peripheral' (Int3). Perhaps this largely depends on a person's specific role, the perceived remoteness of their work and the model of land ownership and governance in place, although more interviews would be required to ascertain specific relationships between any of these.

4.2.1 General alignment

Those who felt it was a helpful document, expressed that it supports them to be 'clearer in how our strategies [are] aligning with Scottish Government priorities' (Int1). For those who did not find it particularly useful, this was mainly due to containing information they already feel familiar with. As such, its lack of utility was not due to being irrelevant or contrary to their values or approach, rather 'the value system is very much aligned with what we were doing anyway, so there's nothing in there that's going to change anything that we do' (Int3). This led to discussions regarding what else guides interviewees approaches, which encompassed: legal requirements, to make sure their work is compliant with the law; their experience and knowledge gained from being involved in such work for a long time; and their morals, expressing 'it's the right thing to do' (Int5). One summarised: 'we're following government guidance and we're following our own sense of priority' (Int6). However, what is legal, possible, and desirable may not always align when contextualised. One interviewee expressed that a 'challenge in coming up with guidance is you're trying to balance what's currently legally okay to do…and what you should be doing if you want to encourage benefits to the community' (Int2). This suggests that there might be a gap between what is currently required by law and what may be aspirational

in terms of delivering community benefits; being more explicit about how those working in the field can navigate that gap would be a useful addition to the guidance.

4.2.2 Future guidance

Further considerations for future guidance touched on concerns around decision-making, putting ideas into practice, how to monitor the socio-economic benefit of projects, and how to engage with private finance for restoration work. One interviewee felt that when trying to make decisions, it would be useful to have 'guidance around the weight of concerns' (Int2); a steer on how to fairly consider the opinions of different stakeholders, including community members, was proposed as a useful discussion point for future guidance. In addition, thoughts on how to balance the need to, and benefits associated with, consultation alongside the need to make choices in a timely manner and get on with the work. These decisions are complicated, 'you're never going to get a perfect consensus' (Int2) and as such, guidance might benefit from 'acknowledging that front and centre and saying in a situation where you don't have perfect consensus this is how to respond…this is how to keep things moving forwards in a meaningful way' (Int2).

In terms of putting ideas into practice, several interviewees felt some more specific tools and methodologies would be useful, to 'give people like us…the confidence that you as an independent body who care about communities have done a fair amount of research and have come up with a useful tool for making sure everyone is considered and that things move forward' (Int2). Ideas regarding tools for monitoring socio-economic impact were also presented as a useful future step as well as case studies and advice from people who have managed tensions surrounding engaging with natural capital and private finance mechanisms, so people feel informed and guided if taking their work in this direction, including ideas for how a model of community-owned natural capital credits might look.

5 Discussion

The content of the six interviews discussed in this report provide a wealth of information regarding the current appetite for, and practicalities of, delivering community benefits from nature restoration work – particularly in the Cairngorms but with many compelling avenues of consideration for sites located elsewhere in Scotland's rural landscape.

5.1 Key takeaways for the Commission

Whilst this discussion section could pick up on a myriad of insights running through the findings, the following feel most relevant and pertinent to discuss from the Commission's perspective and position in progressing certain conversations within the land reform arena. The hope is that these key points, alongside other insights that readers can glean from the findings, spark conversations regarding the desired future role of nature restoration work in delivering community benefits.

5.1.1 The mutual benefits of delivering benefits

A widespread feeling arising from the findings was that including the delivery of community benefits within the scope of nature restoration work is a key factor in ensuring the success and longevity of these projects; if done well, this can support restoration to be a win-win scenario for communities and the environment. This positive message should be communicated to those who are new to the nature restoration space and seeking guidance on making their work successful.

5.1.2 Incidental or additional?

Whilst it is hugely positive to see that nature restoration work can be linked to many things that benefit the local community, such as employment opportunities, there perhaps needs to be further clarity around distinguishing between benefits that are incidental (thus, would occur anyway) and benefits that are additional (purposely considered and designed as a community benefit).

5.1.3 Challenging the 'remoteness' narrative

Remoteness was repeatedly cited as a justification for not delivering community benefits from nature restoration work. Whilst acknowledging that each site is different, and the possibilities and constraints for delivering community benefits are largely dependent on these contextual variations, there is work to be done to challenge the idea that remote places are irrelevant to local communities and support remote projects to be able to engage with benefit delivery.

5.1.4 The challenges of delivering financial benefits

This report has highlighted the difficulties those working in nature restoration face when considering whether, and how, to deliver direct financial benefits to communities. There needs to be more guidance and support for what this can feasibly look like, including acknowledgement of the different sorts of contexts and constraints people are working within. The various land ownership and governance structures within which projects are conducted can influence both the appetite and capacity for delivering such benefits; thus, more nuanced discussions around direct financial benefits are required to understand and navigate this landscape.

5.1.5 Complexities of natural capital

A key challenge for nature restoration professionals to commit to the delivery of direct financial community benefits is the complexities surrounding nascent natural capital markets. There is a sense that these channels may be key for being able to generate the profit needed to commit to making community payments. In general, though, confidence in natural capital markets may need to strengthen before people can be expected to commit to financing their work through this route. Even then, getting involved in natural capital markets may not be appealing to, or feasible for, certain landowners or governance structures.

5.1.6 Potential tensions between environmental, social, and economic benefits

Those working in nature restoration may feel that they face tricky choices regarding what to prioritise – be that environmental, social, or economic aims. Firstly, there may be a tension between environmental and social goals, for example certain stages of ecological restoration, such as needing to put up

deer fences, may not always be compatible with delivering certain community benefits, like increasing nature accessibility. Secondly, there could be tensions between ecological and economic aims. For example, some interviewees perceived there to potentially be a trade-off between delivering a more biodiversity-focussed project, with the aim of maximising the environmental benefit, versus aiming to deliver greater direct financial benefit for communities, which might come from a more profit-seeking carbon credit focussed project. From this perspective, within current structures, what constitutes environmentally-sound nature restoration does not necessarily generate the biggest profits. Therefore, if they follow what they believe to be best ecological practice, they may be passing up the opportunity to create direct financial community benefits. These concerns speak to a wider conversation regarding ecological, economic, and social trade-offs and how best to prioritise and navigate these in nature restoration work.

5.1.7 The challenges of monitoring

Those working in nature restoration may need greater guidance and support to be able to monitor their delivery of community benefits. It can be tricky to measure the successful implementation and ongoing impact of certain aspects of benefit delivery, particularly less tangible elements such as socio-cultural benefits. Ideas and good practice examples for how sites can monitor and communicate these would be helpful and may build an evidence base to demonstrate the importance of benefit delivery and to provide inspiration for other projects looking to deliver community benefits.

5.1.8 Separating engagement from benefit

To ensure clarity in conversations around restoration and communities going forward, fostering meaningful engagement practices and delivering community benefits must be seen as distinct goals. Whilst having good engagement channels in place does benefit communities (and also the success of projects, by garnering community buy in), this is not the same as delivering community benefits (such as offering educational enrichment opportunities, financial payments, or new walking routes). The relationship between the two is important, and engagement is needed to inform what benefits a community

wants and needs, but engagement should be treated as a means rather than an end in and of itself.

5.2 The findings alongside the guidance

When considering the findings against the six key points noted on page 10 of the Delivering Community Benefits from Land guidance, it becomes evident that interviewees spoke in a way that aligned with some of these points more strongly than others. This indicates areas that may require more attention regarding support for projects to be able to deliver such benefits, and/or aspects of benefit delivery that may be subject to further evolution, so that guidance is proportional and appropriate for what is seen to be both practically possible and aspirational to realise by those on the ground. It is important to not take the below as comprehensively indicative of interviewees', or wider nature restoration professionals', alignment with these points – experiences and opinions may align more or less than illustrated below, as not all ideas will have been expressed within the interview process itself. As such, this table should not be taken as conclusive findings, but as a point of departure for discussions going forward.

Table 2: Summary of interviewee perspectives in relation to key points from the guidance

Key point from guidance	Interviewee alignment	How this point was addressed by interviewees
They consist of meaningful social and economic benefits that promote the sustainable development of communities	Medium-high	Interviewees focused extensively on social and cultural community benefits which also delivered indirect economic benefits for the local area. It was conveyed that nature restoration projects sometimes have the ability to support the sustainable development of thriving rural communities. The hesitancy regarding direct economic benefits provides an interesting topic of future thinking regarding what the delivery of community benefits can meaningfully consist of; it perhaps also points to where projects may need support, if such benefits are deemed aspirational but challenging to realise.

They are specifically for the local geographic community	Medium-high	All interviewees conveyed the sense that local communities of place were a priority when considering benefits; this was most poignant in discussions regarding local job creation and local spending, maintaining and improving the local environment, and providing opportunities for people to engage with each other and nature and learn about the ecology around them. Alongside this though, interviewees were also interested in the provision of benefits for communities of interest, such as walkers, and the national community, in terms of delivering public benefit of clean air and carbon capture, for example.
They require meaningful engagement with the community and should align with local strategic plans where available	Low-medium	All interviewees mentioned the importance of community engagement in general, providing some examples of how this looked different across different sites. However, local strategic plans were not mentioned, so it is hard to assess whether these are normally considered or not, and why that might or might not be the case. Additionally, engagement was sometimes discussed as a benefit itself, as opposed to a requirement in the delivery of community benefits.
They are tailored to the community's needs and agreed upon through deliberation, when possible	Low-medium	Many interviewees spoke about the need for benefits to be suitable for the relevant communities of place and interest. Whilst the importance of community engagement for nature restoration work was discussed more generally, there was less evidence that the community benefits arrived at as being appropriate were agreed upon through deliberation.
They should be monitored and reported on publicly	Low	Most interviewees did not touch on this, but the couple who did spoke passionately about the need for robust and transparent monitoring and reporting of both ecological and socio-economic impacts from nature restoration work, including the impacts of intended benefits.

The scale and impact of a landholding and how that landholding is used determine the proportion of these benefits	Medium	Interviewees implicitly spoke to this point by focusing on different types and scales of, and motivations for, community benefits. However, due to the small sample size it is difficult to infer the extent to which a landholding's scale and governance is the core influential feature for these differences. Despite this, it is possible to note that interviewees mentioned different levels of resource and capacity they had access to, and their various other priorities dependent on the type of landholding they managed, and as such it is possible to say that these things are likely to factor into the proportion of the benefits delivered.

5.3 Questions that remain

Whilst this report has gone some way to answer questions surrounding perceptions regarding the delivery of community benefits through nature restoration, it has also raised some key questions. These include, but are not limited to:

- Should remoteness of sites reduce the requirement to deliver community benefits?
- How can the delivery of incidental verses additional benefits be more widely understood as two separate aims?
- How can the differences between community engagement and community benefits be better understood?
- What sort of nature restoration projects (both in terms of type of restoration activity and funding source) are expected to deliver what sort of community benefits (socio-cultural, direct financial, etc.)?
- What is the best way to monitor, and report on, the ongoing delivery of community benefits, including to communities and stakeholders, so they can give them the recognition they deserve?
- How are benefits distributed amongst communities; are those who potentially lose out from land use changes benefitting?
- How can nature restoration professionals be encouraged and supported to deliver community benefits, and how can this best be communicated?

A final note on questions that remain: the benefits discussed in this report are based on opinions of nature restoration professionals, which is extremely valuable as these are the people on the ground routinely grappling with the challenges and opportunities related to delivering community benefits. Yet, it is important to consider that community members who are not involved in the restoration activities may have different perceptions regarding whether the aspects identified in this report are benefits or not. Thus, a key question that remains is: what do community members not involved in the work perceive to be the key community benefits delivered currently, and what benefits would they like to see?

6 What's next?

This project highlights that delivering community benefits is on the radar for nature restoration work, although there is perhaps more support needed to help projects and communities realise mutual benefits. Discussing some of the perceived opportunities and constraints with those connected to nature restoration work has provided an initial illustration of the state of benefit delivery in certain parts of the Cairngorms, indicated the potential current level of interest, enthusiasm, and apprehension, restoration professionals may feel more widely (although this must be said tentatively, without having more extensive evidence), and offered insights that will help the Commission to pitch their support and engagement with this topic in a relevant, realistic way which meets people where they are at.

Although there is currently no legal framework in place to dictate the types and extent of community benefit delivery required from nature restoration work, there is an expectation from the Scottish Government that such projects adequately consider and deliver proportionate community benefits. The findings here demonstrate strides are already being taken to meet, or go beyond, these expectations in some respects (particularly in terms of social, cultural, and wider local economy benefits) but highlight some of the obstacles in place that may cause hesitation in other aspects (namely direct financial benefits). The findings also demonstrate the importance of considering other factors that mediate capacity and enthusiasm for delivering benefits, such as differences in land ownership/governance models and willingness, or ability, to participate in natural capital markets.

These sorts of concerns raise further pertinent questions regarding a collective vision for how community benefits from natural capital investment can be facilitated by nature restoration in Scotland, and how the delivery of community benefits can and needs to be supported. Hopefully, by exploring current practice and practitioners' thinking, this research makes a useful contribution to current ongoing work on how to operationalise the provision of community benefits from natural capital investment, as defined in the Commission's guidance on Delivering Community Benefits from Land and as set out in the Scottish Government's Interim Principles for Responsible Investment in Natural Capital.