

Report of the Monadhliath Deer Management Group Deer Management Plan Open Day

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With 40 members and covering an area of around 150,000 ha, the Monadhliath Deer Management Group (MDMG) is the largest in the country and, in partnership with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), has recently adopted a new Strategic Deer Management Plan (SDMP). As part of the MDMG's ongoing commitment to partnership and openness, an event for local stakeholders was held on the Alvie and Dalraddy Estates on Tuesday 23 June to help develop the 10 year Strategic Plan. The objective of the day was to inform the widest group of local people who have interests in deer and habitat management and to invite and gather feedback from this group.

Facilitated by the DMG Chair Drew McFarlane Slack, the structure of the event was a mixture of presentations by the Plan Consultant Dougie Campbell and Q&A sessions that actively sought to ensure that all those attending had an opportunity to comment. Participants were then invited out onto the estate to continue discussion in a more informal setting.

Attendance was encouraging with around 40 people representing a broad range of interests. These included the agricultural and crofting community, local stalkers and estate managers, Agency staff from SNH, FCS and CNPA, a representative from the Scottish Government Research Team as well as local residents and businesses. Notably, at least five Community Councils were represented who very much welcomed the opportunity to attend and provided well-informed, pragmatic and extremely useful contributions. Of particular interest were the local communities who were keen to highlight the importance of deer management to an already fragile rural economy, at a time when local businesses in some of the smaller villages were struggling. They also hoped that local landowners could be encouraged to build for the future by increasing employment and land-based training opportunities, particularly for the young.

Whilst the presentation deliberately didn't go into fine detail of the plan, perhaps more usefully highlighted was the importance of the steps in the planning process itself and of engaging with individuals right from the start. Information is a critical component of deer management planning and in this case an extensive initial data gathering period enabled priorities and areas of conflict to be identified. The next crucial step in the development of the MDMG plan was in recognising areas of common ground, upon which to build the negotiation phase.

The result of 18 months of intensive work on the plan has been to find a proposed management solution that 95 per cent of the member properties have subsequently signed up to. It is clear that finding a balance between private and public interests on the face of it has undoubtedly been a complex and challenging task, and in this case has required all those round the table to accept that compromise is necessary. This challenge however, is one not just faced by MDMG, but indeed one that all 45 DMGs throughout Scotland are currently undertaking, albeit perhaps not to the same scale or degree, but certainly with the same expectation.

As was so evidently supported and welcomed at this event, providing opportunities for wider discussion and consultation in the spirit of openness and transparency should be seen by DMGs as a valuable part of the process. Engaging in this way with the wider local interest can only help build confidence and relationships, both of which are essential components if deer management planning is to continue under the voluntary principle.