

AIMS, OBJECTIVES and INCENTIVES



INTRODUCTION

The ten landholdings which participated in the pilot stage of WES have now been accredited since 2013 and in that time, WES has evolved significantly, including its objectives. Far from being just the self-regulation tool it started out as, the scheme is now aiming to be the gold standard certification in best practice land management across Scotland. With the landscape-scale enhancement of biodiversity across Scotland sitting at the heart of its long-term aims, WES is attractive to a wide variety of stakeholders including landowners, politicians, conservation groups and the general public. At the beginning of 2019, our Advisory Board re-evaluated the 'WES vision' and determined that the following objectives define WES going forward and how we plan to achieve them:

1. **Able to prove quantifiably that biodiversity is being enhanced** – At every 5-year audit phase, a quantifiable improvement in the score achieved in the sections of the application relevant to species or habitat must be observed. Examples of what constitutes a quantifiable increase in biodiversity could include: the discovery of the presence of a previously absent species; the increase in area of a certain habitat type; the change in protected area designation from unfavourable to favourable etc.
2. **Challenging to achieve, respected all stakeholders and a publicly recognised mark of quality** – WES is already challenging to achieve and it is our aim for it to remain so, avoiding a so-called 'tick-box exercise' scenario. WES does not tolerate any criminal behaviour and has a stringent breach policy which has been put to the test. WES engages with stakeholders on an individual basis as well as collectively to ensure that we are considering a diverse range of perspectives concerning land management and conservation. It is our aim to boost publicity of the scheme throughout many different demographics to increase awareness of the scheme. Tools for doing this include: social media including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; attending countryside events including but not limited to regional and national fairs and shows; and engaging with stakeholder groups including but not limited to Visit Scotland, expert NGOs, and local biodiversity action groups.
3. **The default standard and accreditation scheme** – by concentrating on levels of biodiversity, a critical concern in political and public spheres alike, and by being inclusive of all management activities and conservation techniques, we aim to be the gold standard accreditation scheme across Scotland.

4. **Promoting balance between socio, economic and ecological interests and factoring in biodiversity as an integral consideration when making land-use management decisions** – WES recognises that, for most landowners, the land must pay and WES aims to maximise biodiversity through the effective integration of habitat management into every-day commercial activities. To achieve this we are joining dots and facilitating relationships between those with the knowledge of how to integrate and those with the land on which it can be achieved, for example: identifying a network of beekeepers that landowners can tap into to increase honey-bee activity; introducing land managers and their teams to knowledge-sharing networks such as the Nature Friendly Farming network and holding free learning workshops in collaboration, with bodies such as Buglife and Soil Association, for land managers and their teams.
5. **Evidence based wildlife and habitat management;** - The completion of the Level 2 application form provides a robust holistic record of life on the land. To observe the information collated is invaluable for landowners and managers in helping to identify what is present, what could be present and what might be missing but might also be necessary to encourage well-rounded ecosystems. Using this data, a habitat management plan can be readily adapted to define new five-year objectives which can be evaluated upon at the five-year re-assessment. From having a clear baseline, it is far easier to measure the success of management techniques and conservation projects and to adapt management depending on what works and doesn't work. WES will use the data collected as examples, to politicians, that landowners are irrefutably contributing to national outcomes and providing public services.
6. **Landscape scale wildlife and habitat management** – WES asks, in the application form, for information about collaborative enterprises with neighbouring landholdings. This may include, but not be limited to, joint survey work being undertaken, joint grants being applied for (e.g. peatland restoration), or habitat corridors being created across boundaries. When meeting with new applicants, collaboration is encouraged. They are encouraged to consider how enhancing particular habitats might complement habitats on their neighbour's land and benefit wildlife. Landscape scale conservation is encouraged at every opportunity.
7. **Promoting and encouraging best practice** – Questions within the application form, do not simply ask whether those working the land comply but asks elaborative questions to test the knowledge of those on the ground. Additionally, when the independent assessors visit the site, they require to verify the depth of knowledge relevant to best practice. Without evidence of adherence to best practice management procedures a pass mark would likely be unachievable. WES does recognise that one size does not fit all and that, beyond statutory best practice, ideas of what constitutes best practice will vary. Resultant levels of biodiversity are therefore the benchmark as to whether the land management practices are environmentally friendly.
8. **Helping others reach WES standards through training and mentoring** – WES is not simply for those who are of a sufficient standard in terms of land management that they can pass the assessment with ease, but aims to help Level 1 members up to our standards by running walk and talk events, facilitating introductions with experts, hosting workshops and helping

to create habitat management plans.

9. **A robust source of wildlife and habitat data in Scotland** – while habitat data is relatively easy to verify, wildlife data is less so. Some survey work is undertaken by professionals, however, much of it is citizen science. Citizen science should under no circumstances be dismissed. Bodies such as the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Butterfly Conservation rely heavily on citizen science projects for much of their data and those who work the land often have far more identification expertise than is generally recognised. Where there are gaps, WES is attempting to educate for example: invertebrate and plant indicator species identification; and tree disease recognition. To increase robustness, one of our long-term aims is to implement consistent recording techniques and methodology across all WES members, however this will take time and will require significant stakeholder engagement.
10. **A useful tool in helping to meet climate change and biodiversity targets.** – By consolidating, otherwise fragmented, data WES can use the data from the applications to demonstrate robustly how landowners and land managers are collectively contributing to national and international climate change and biodiversity targets, including the 2045 net carbon neutral targets and Scottish Biodiversity Strategy targets.

These objectives, which our Advisory Board, Technical Committee and Steering Group collectively agreed upon, are launching WES into its next phase of evolution with considerable impetus. With the recently revised application form, an injection of momentum into the scheme from our new project officer and the first wave of secondary data coming through, WES is at an extremely exciting point in its development and we can't wait to encapsulate more of the good news stories, happening on private land across the country.