

Sticking-plaster measures store up problems for future

The Government cannot expect private individuals to continue to provide housing to tenants free of charge, says **John Blackwood**



At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments were compelled to take action to help key sectors without knowing what all of the consequences might be. The situation called for short-termism, risk and patchwork policy. Housing was at the forefront, with measures taken to protect homes from being repossessed, to house homeless people and to prevent evictions in the private rented sector (PRS).

Along with the rest of society, landlords responded positively. Rents were reduced or written off and homes provided for key workers and the homeless, while fleets of cars previously used for zipping around cities for viewings, delivered meals to hospital staff and communities in need.

As we move through the different stages of the pandemic government is looking at how to tackle the longer-term consequences of the widespread and likely long-lasting economic crisis that is already taking shape. This is where I believe government is starting to err because it is applying the short-term thinking needed at the start of the pandemic to solving the longer-term problems caused by it.

I was dismayed to hear the announcement by the First Minister that the Scottish Government intends to continue the extended notice period on evictions in the PRS for another six months to the end of March 2021. I believe this is only a sticking plaster, which when removed later, will make the underlying wound worse and harder to treat in the future.

If the Scottish Government wants free housing to be provided to tenants, the cost must be covered. Government cannot expect private individuals to provide housing to tenants free of charge, especially when they are likewise losing their income and have their own bills to pay and families to support.

Instead, before rushing into this kind of short-term policy, government should consider the longer-term implications and answer the question "Will the problem be easier or harder to tackle in the future?"

Well, here is the reality of what could happen between now and March 2021: the economic crisis will likely cause an increasing number of tenants to have difficulty paying their rent and those already struggling will rack up larger arrears. This means landlords will see their own income disappear, making it harder for them to support their own families and reducing further and further their room for manoeuvre to help and support tenants. With

that scenario in mind, imagine how much harder it will be to develop a policy intervention in March 2021 rather than understanding the problem now and taking radical action.

What landlords, tenants and the Scottish Government must focus on is how to sustain tenancies. Landlords should continue to be flexible and understanding, reducing rent and writing off arrears where possible, and tenants should ensure that their landlord is kept informed about changes to allow for reasonable solutions to be found.

But unless the Scottish Government uses the powers of Holyrood to put money in the pockets of tenants so they can pay their rent, we will find ourselves back here in March 2021 only with a greatly amplified problem and even less flexibility to find a solution that works for everyone.

Landlords with no rental income to pay their mortgages and rental expenses, may have their rental properties repossessed. What will be the security for tenants at that point? Will the social rented sector be ready to re-home these people?

Other administrations such as the Welsh Assembly Government are looking at imaginative ways to put money into tenants' pockets for rent and I believe the Scottish Government should follow suit as quickly as possible.

The Scottish Parliament has powers to help those tenants in need, and it should be taking action now. For example, the Scottish Government could use Holyrood's existing powers to create new social security benefits and change the eligibility criteria for Discretionary Housing Benefit. At a stroke this would allow more people to gain assistance with paying their rent, keeping them in a home, reducing pressure on social services and ensuring they can more easily contribute to the economy.

Government seems understandably overwhelmed by the sheer number of problems it is expected to tackle and their complexity, but the response cannot be to use short-term measures in the hope that a long-term solution will present itself. What is needed is a radical treatment to the root of the problem, not a sticking plaster to the surface which exposes a gaping wound when peeled off later.

John Blackwood, chief executive, Scottish Association of Landlords



Spruce forests are far from 'lifeless'



For most wildlife it's the presence of a forest that's important, not the species of tree, writes **Dr Eleanor Harris**

Lockdown has had a curious intimacy. Video conferencing gives us glimpses of friends' houses and colleagues' spouses. We swap curiosities cleared from cupboards on WhatsApp. Old photos of a bright red jumper featuring the WWF panda my grandpa knitted me in primary school caused great hilarity. Saving the world's wildlife was my calling then; our holiday glen, with mossy rocks and squirrel-nibbled spruce-cones, was my own rainforest.

Fast-forward the growth of a conifer tree, and I'm working for Confor, the Confederation of Forest Industries. I understand timber markets, carbon flows and sustainability auditing, which barely existed when I wore that jumper. Climate and nature emergencies are national concerns, but positions have polarised. I'm often told those spruce forests, from which I now draw my livelihood, are "lifeless", and forests should not be "exploited" for timber.

This polarisation doesn't fit with my experience of those working forests' singing green labyrinths. Nor does it fit with my knowledge of what's required to hand on this planet to the next generation: replacing vast quantities of plastic, concrete, steel and oil with low-carbon, renewable wood. We need a great reforestation, but it mustn't be lifeless, and sure-

We've got four months to make our environmental protections Brexit-proof

Scotland is at risk of losing crucial safeguards, warns Miriam Ross

ly it already isn't? Was this just my hunch, or was there science to prove it? Researching Confor's report Biodiversity, Forestry and Wood gave me the chance to find out.

There is science. Ecologists have spent thousands of hours listening for birdsong and bats; counting plants in squares and butterflies along lines; fishing beetles and spiders from pitfall traps, or shaking them on to sheets; crunching data on woodcock or dormice submitted by thousands of volunteers. Hundreds of comparative plots – old, young, native, non-native, managed, unmanaged, open, afforested – reveal the difference forests and their management make to wildlife.

The results are clear. Spruce is far from lifeless, and harvesting far from disastrous. Our working conifers support abundant life, and have allowed threatened forest specialists such as woodant, crossbill, ferns, fungi and lichens to recolonise from tiny ancient woodland fragments.

Native trees are undoubtedly of vital importance. Oak hosts an incredible 555 species never or rarely found elsewhere. So it's vital all working forests include a native component, a piece of universal practice adopted around the panda jumper era.

Yet the difference between native and non-native was far less marked than I expected. For most wildlife, it's



the presence of a forest that's important. Management matters more than tree species.

Biodiversity, Forestry and Wood is not just a literature review. Confor has 1,500 members working in forests across the UK. My childhood forest exploration was life-changing, so how much could be learned from their wealth of daily experience over decades, with forests growing around them and wildlife part of their office?

One such practitioner is John Little, a forest manager with Tilhill, who

has worked in Argyll for 30 years. He has seen hen harriers and sea eagles colonise as forests mature, along with red squirrels and signs of their predators, pine marten and wildcat. He is always struck by the contrast in birdsong between forest and the rough grazing it replaced. His new woodland schemes and harvesting and restocking plans ensure micro-habitats such as ancient woodland, wetland and species-rich grassland are identified, protected and expanded within forest designs. "My observation, as a working forest manager

over many years, is that forestry delivers a significant improvement for biodiversity," says John.

I don't have that experience: my forest impressions have been glimpses of green brightening my urban life. But through practitioners' experiences and ecologists' studies, I have found those glimpses were true. Reforestation does solve two problems at once: supplying the renewable, low-carbon wood we so desperately need, and restoring nature.

Dr Eleanor Harris is Confor's Policy Researcher

↑ **Red squirrels thrive in managed forests in Argyll**



environmental standards, it doesn't require them to do so. Indeed, there's nothing in the bill to prevent future Scottish governments rolling back standards and allowing, for example, greater levels of pollution in our rivers, our seas and the air we breathe.

The scale of the challenges facing our natural environment has never been greater. Nor has the strength of public support for government action to protect it. Now is the time to make Scotland's environmental protections as strong as they can possibly be, rather than leaving them weaker. Parliament has four months left to make these new laws work for nature.

Miriam Ross is coordinator of the Fight for Scotland's Nature campaign at Scottish Environment LINK.



Now more than ever we need to monitor our mountain hares

The decision to give mountain hares greater protection in Scotland means it's important that monitoring continues as an essential part of conservation management on our moorland, says **Dr Nick Hesford**

Throughout their European range, mountain hares are threatened by climate change and competition with brown hares. But in Scotland, they occur at greater densities than anywhere else in Europe. Also, their densities on Scottish grouse moors are up to 35 times greater than on moorland not managed for grouse shooting.

In 2018 the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust with SGA and Scottish Land & Estates, held a member survey to collect the most up-to-date information on mountain hare distribution in Scotland. Subsequently, a new species distribution map for Scotland was published in Wildlife Biology. This is the most extensive survey yet and enables us to assess 20-year changes to our mountain hare range.

Almost all the UK's mountain hares are found in Scotland with higher numbers linked to grouse shooting, where they benefit from heather management and predator control by gamekeepers. Traditionally hunted on Scottish moorland, and culled to protect habitat, young forest and sensitive sites, they are also culled on grouse moors to prevent spread of louping ill, a virus harmful to sheep and red grouse. These culls have raised questions about the potential impact on hare populations.

As a consequence, the Scottish Parliament has banned culling of mountain hares except under licence under the new Animals and Wildlife Bill to be implemented from 2021, or when an agreed licensing scheme is in place, despite compelling evidence for the positive association between grouse moor management and mountain hares provided by GWCT science.

Our latest research, based on data from 2016/17, builds on previous GWCT surveys (2006/07 and 1995/96) to help inform mountain hare conservation status, allowing us to identify where their range has expanded or contracted over the last two decades in relation to management for grouse shooting, and examine relationships between mountain hare culling and changes in range.

We found no net change in area occupied over the 20-year period but

changes in range between regions and sites of differing grouse management intensity. Range contractions in S Scotland contrasted with no change in NE Scotland. In NW Scotland range expanded by 61 per cent where there was driven grouse shooting but declined 57 per cent in walked up grouse shooting areas, remaining low/stable in areas with no grouse shooting. We found no relationship between culling and contractions in range. Instead, changes in range may be attributed to other factors – moorland habitat loss through afforestation, overgrazing by sheep, or changes to predator management.

It is important to continue to monitor mountain hares on an ongoing basis. Lamping at night remains the only reliable count method, particularly on moorland, where terrain is more suitable. However, producing robust estimates across all Scotland remains difficult as there is as yet no conclusion about how to count hares outside managed moorland where rugged terrain makes this challenging and dangerous to do at night.

GWCT is promoting the SNH approved night-time counting methodology being adopted by moorland managers and gamekeepers to monitor hare populations on their ground. We have now trained more than 100 land managers and helped establish more than 80 count sites across upland Scotland. Because of the decision to give mountain hares greater protection it's important that monitoring continues as an essential part of conservation management on our moorland and is implemented in other areas of our mountain hare range.

Dr Nick Hesford, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust



HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

On these pages we present articles written by our Friends, with them setting their own agenda, using their own words. Being a Friend of The Scotsman is open to institutions, trade associations, professional bodies, societies, interest groups, charities and others. Individuals are not eligible nor, generally, are individual companies or political parties. The Friends of The Scotsman pages are a forum for discussion and debate and for the transfer of information rather than a marketplace. In return, the Friends sign up to a subscription package that ensures a supply of The Scotsman at a discount rate to the people in the organisation who require it. For more information, e-mail euan.mcgrory@scotsman.com or visit www.scotsman.com