RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

FORESTRY AND LAND MANAGEMENT (SCOTLAND) BILL:

SUBMISSION BY PCS SCOTLAND

PCS union represents around 25,000 members across Scotland and the majority of union members’ of the 1,000 civil servants currently working for FC and FES in Scotland. PCS welcomes the opportunity to respond to this draft Bill and this submission is the result of a wide-ranging consultation with members.

We’d like to highlight some of the staffing issues which we believe need to be addressed as a priority.

Staffing issues
Years of pay restraint and lack of pay progression continue to have a huge impact on staff morale and motivation. The transfer of FC Scotland and FE Scotland to Scottish Ministers adds to the uncertainty for members, not least because there have also been a number of internal reviews over the last 2 years.

There is a strong sense that staff transferring should be well aware of their terms and conditions well in advance. This is contingent on recognising that assimilation of terms and conditions cannot be done on a cost-neutral basis. As we stated in our response to the consultation on the Future of Forestry in Scotland there are a number of long-standing staffing issues which need to be addressed at the earliest opportunity. These include:

- Distinction between operational and non-operational pay and other outstanding issues arising from grading unification
- Ability to transfer easily between FC and FES
- Future of the shared service function and
- Need for high quality training and continuing professional development.

PCS has been involved in negotiations on numerous machinery of government changes and is clear that early negotiations about transfer and assimilation are crucial. A clear commitment to keep staff fully informed is also important.

PCS welcomes the commitment to retain a network of local office and would seek assurances that this will be the same as the current network. However the Sylvan House lease expires 2021. Where will staff be located thereafter?

Keeping existing accommodation and improving/being smarter with the use of technology for meetings and work in the field, where Wi-Fi coverage is a real barrier to efficiency.

Structure
Members are proud to work for the Forestry Commission. There is a strong vocational and professional culture, with staff able to access the necessary practical forestry management experience before moving into other types of roles. Staff are unlikely to move to “generalist” roles in other parts of government.
Fears about the loss of the FC culture under the proposed structure are very real, and sincerely felt. Many members expressed a preference for a single body within the SG, with good and easy interchange to maintain levels of expertise and the close working relationships that are highly valued. Whether real or perceived this change will be seen as a barrier to interchange, undermining the existing organisational focus and diluting the Forestry culture. Change may well be needed to resolve the current ambiguous governance and accountability, but members are not persuaded that what is proposed is the best, or the only, way forward.

The de-skilling of the FC is a huge concern as experienced members of staff retire, or leave the FC for better paid jobs elsewhere. Any structural change that will make it more difficult to recruit and retain staff with the necessary skills and experience could have far-reaching consequences.

PCS recognises that Forestry is strongly supported by SG ministers at present. We welcomed the Cabinet Secretary’s support for the importance of longer-term planning at the most recent meeting with the Unions. However this may not always be the case. This is why a clear public commitment to long-term planning is needed, in conjunction with organisational arrangements that are fixed and stable for the long-term.

**Land management**

PCS members found it difficult to express a view on this aspect of the draft Bill without knowing more about what is planned. Providing the new organisation is properly resourced then there is no strong opposition in principle.

It would be helpful to share emerging thinking on this with the Unions as the draft Bill makes it clear that this could be managing land on behalf of other public bodies in Scotland.

The proposal on land management refers to the “potential to drive efficiencies in the management of the NFE”. Members strongly expressed the view that parts of the FC (such as FES) have been cut to the bone without a clear strategy for the future delivery of Ministerial priorities. It is simply unreasonable to continue to expect more to be done with less resources. The unique nature of Forestry and the potential for decisions to be made in the short-term that will have a detrimental effect in the long-term, are of real concern.

**Branding**

The Forestry Commission name and are brand held in huge respect by land manages, Local Government and of course the public, who own Scotland’s forests.

The decision to rebrand is a difficult one. On the one hand, it is vital to convey a relevant and current image to the public. On the other hand, there is a risk of losing longstanding recognition of a well-established brand. Rebranding will need to balance the core values of the brand with current business concerns.

In 2001 the Post Office decided to mark the move from state to private control with a rebrand. Consignia was chosen as it was believed to convey trustworthiness. It went down terribly with the public and the design community alike. An iconic name and brand was swapped for a nonsense” word that had no meaning. In 2002 the name was changed to Royal Mail at a cost of £2.5 million.
Forestry and Land Scotland sounds like the “"hard hat” side of forestry, an industrial-sounding brand which risks making the agency seem remote and removed from members of the public. Any loss of trust is a valid concern after years of hard work built on the FC brand to encourage engagement with harder to reach audiences and generally to encourage greater use of the outdoors for health and wellbeing.

Change of brand and logo at huge cost when budgets are under extreme pressure would be received badly by FC staff and the public, and may lead to reputational damage for SG and FC.

The FC brand was established in 1919 and it would be short sighted just to drop the brand without considering the full range of options available. For example “Forestry Scotland” or “State Forest Service” is used by many countries including the United States of America and New Zealand.

**Wider social benefits/other issues**

We place sustainable forest and land management at the heart of everything we do. As well as planting trees and producing timber, we’re also enhancing and conserving important habitats, protecting threatened wildlife and preserving sites of archaeological interest. The bill explicitly states that the Scottish Forestry Strategy should include, amongst other things, the “social benefits of forestry”; it is important that to recognise that opportunities for promoting outdoor access and recreation are amongst the most valuable of these social benefits.

On health and wellbeing and the promotion of heathier lifestyles, the FC is Scotland’s largest provider of access and outdoor recreation. It attracts over 9 million visitors annually, supporting over 3700 jobs and in bringing £110 million in Gross Value Added. PCS asks the Committee to take full account of the implications for outdoor access when considering the Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Bill.

PCS Scotland
August 2017