SEARS
Scotland’s Environmental and Rural Services
ANNUAL REVIEW 2008–09
From a very early stage, the Scottish Government made clear that it was committed to reducing bureaucracy and red tape in every area of the public sector, and doing so for farmers and land managers was a top priority for the ministerial team that took office in 2007.

This was always going to be a challenging task, with a cultural change needed in our public bodies, as well new working methods, staff training and better information sharing.

The SEARS partnership is evidence that the bodies involved are rising to that challenge.

It is absolutely clear to me that since its launch at last year’s Royal Highland Show, we have taken enormous strides to improve delivery of services by Scotland’s environment and rural public bodies. The benefits to customers are clear.

This review draws together the highlights of the work undertaken by SEARS since its inception, as well the issues facing the partnership further down the line.

In these difficult economic times, a £150,000 reduction in costs to the sheep farming industry through SEPA waiving its charges, has been a welcome boost, alongside a welcome reduction in the number of inspections and also the creation of single points of contact and coordinated sources of information.

And there is value for money for the public purse to be had with SGRPID, SNH and FCS now co-locating in Golspie, with more projects of this nature in the pipeline.

As SEARS moves to its next stage of development, I look forward to hearing more about its work and listening to feedback from its customers.

Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Minister for Environment.
SEARS Highlights

- 2,000 fewer inspections or visits to land managers six months ahead of the October 2009 target
- £150,000 saving to sheep farming industry as SEPA waive second instalment of annual groundwater licence charge for 2008-09
- 24/7 contact centre introduced in June 2008. SEARS web portal also up and running
- Opportunity for land managers to change personal information with up to nine organisations through a single contact was introduced in June 2008, reducing duplication
- Improved co-ordination of communications between the SEARS partners
- Review of Rural Land undertaken and report published
- SNH, SGRPID, and FCS, along with staff from Highlands & Islands Enterprise and Community Energy Scotland co-located in a new office at Golspie in March 2009
**Introduction**

SEARS is the response to a challenge set by the Environment Minister in 2007, to establish: “...a single environment and rural delivery service...(operating) within the current statutory framework!”. The aim is to co-ordinate the work of a number of public bodies to deliver our services in a better way.

SEARS brings together nine delivery-focused bodies within the Environment and Rural Affairs sector to provide more joined-up services, initially to rural land managers. The 9 SEARS bodies are:

- Animal Health
- Cairngorms National Park Authority
- Crofters Commission
- Deer Commission for Scotland
- Forestry Commission Scotland
- Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency
- Scottish Government, Rural Payments & Inspections Directorate
- Scottish Natural Heritage

The first phase of SEARS development took place between 2007 and 2008, leading to the public launch at the Royal Highland Show in June 2008. A second phase of work was initiated in Autumn 2008. This review presents the progress from inception up to March 2009, and sets out the next phases of work.

**SEARS Principles**

The original brief to work ‘within the current statutory framework’ has two implications: the first being that SEARS aims to minimise the regulatory burden within that framework; the second being that the core roles and responsibilities of the SEARS bodies are not altered. Therefore, SEARS is not an entity or a separate organisation, but rather the product of working in partnership.

The three principles of public service delivery are at the heart of the SEARS approach:

- **user focus** – putting the person and not the institution first;
- **effectiveness** – focusing on real improvements in public value through services delivered for the people of Scotland;
- **value for money** – making sure that each and every public pound is spent wisely.

SEARS is a commitment to working in a joined-up way, and this review gives examples of how that works. We value the distinct expertise and professionalism of the staff in the SEARS bodies. Where skills overlap, we seek to get the best from how we deploy them, demonstrating effective joint working.

SEARS supports sharing of office premises, IT systems and other assets between organisations (and outwith the SEARS partnership, where appropriate), where this adds value.

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SEARS Governance

SEARS is managed as a programme, with a board chaired by Peter Russell (SG Rural Director) and overseen by a Strategic Reference Group (chaired by the Minister for the Environment). Members of the Programme Board are the Chief Officers of the SEARS bodies. To underline that SEARS is not about any one partner, Project Chairs and Managers are drawn from four different SEARS bodies. For the period of this Review, the Programme comprises four projects:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frontline Delivery</th>
<th>Communications &amp; Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chair: Campbell Gemmell</td>
<td>Chair: Ian Jardine</td>
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<td>Project Manager: Mike Garden</td>
<td>Project Manager: Kirsten Thompson</td>
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<th>Co-locations</th>
<th>Direct Land Management</th>
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<td>Chair: Bob McIntosh</td>
<td>Chair: Andy Robb</td>
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<td>Project Manager: Grahame Anderson</td>
<td>Project Manager: Evelyn Alexander</td>
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SEARS Memorandum of Agreement

SEARS is a partnership approach, not an organisation, and so clear understandings are required between the SEARS partners to ensure that the mutual responsibilities supporting joint working are transparent, with clear lines of accountability. A broad memorandum of agreement (MoA), setting out the framework for the partnership, was agreed by the SEARS Programme Board in March 2008 (see Annex 2).

The MoA is intended to minimise the risk that complex cross-charging arrangements create expenditure that undermine the benefits of joint working. To counter this, each SEARS organisation absorbs expenses for initiatives and/or additional running costs below a threshold (£100,000 per annum for the larger partners) to avoid the necessity of cross-charging.

The SEARS partners are all Scottish public bodies responsible to the Scottish Parliament through Scottish Ministers. The principle that costs and benefits should be assessed for the public purse as a whole reinforces this sense of common purpose.
An Evidence-based Approach: User Focus

During the spring of 2008, interviews were conducted with more than 1500 rural land managers to explore their experiences of dealing with the multiple environmental and rural agencies. The survey looked at overlap between the organisations; presented scenarios for the organisation of visits and inspections to their businesses; preferences for access to our services, both by topic and for location; volume of paperwork and sharing their personal data; integration or further integration of the services we provide to them; and how satisfied they were with our services.

The research reveals that most land managers do not experience overlap between the functions of the key Scottish environmental and rural organisations (84%); nor do they experience difficulty in identifying the right organisation to contact (89%); suggesting that neither of these issues represents a widespread or significant problem. The findings also suggest the majority of land managers in Scotland (66%) would welcome further integration in delivering specific services, as long as they could still access the relevant expertise for their business (however 61% of them agreed that they were content with how they currently accessed services).

It was apparent that the concept of a SEARS customer, accessing a range of services from a wide range of the SEARS organisations was an atypical example of the true customer / SEARS interaction. More commonly customers tended to deal with a very small number of SEARS organisations, normally only one or two, with only 15% of SEARS customers interacting with four or more in any one year. This might go some way to explaining the somewhat contradictory responses in the level of service integration desired by customers.

The most valued element of current service provision, and the one thing that land managers would most value in the future, is access to local services and expert support. However, this appears to be concerned mainly with the provision of advice and guidance, because 74% of land managers would support the idea of inspections being conducted by a single officer on behalf of a range of organisations.

It should be noted that there was significant variation of response between the different sectors’ customer sets in some aspects of the research. For example, customers whose main activity was either Forestry or Estate Management were less in favour of a ‘one stop shop approach to the services’, and specifically those in Forestry showed a preference to ‘deal with specialist staff in organisations focused on specific issues’. There was also a variation in response from customers within the same sector but from different parts of Scotland. Future SEARS activity should reflect these nuances. The survey findings suggest that the burden of paperwork (average of 1.83 hours per week) is not substantially greater than that faced by other commercial businesses. However, research showed that the volume of paperwork was identified as the single biggest problem faced by land managers and there remains a strong demand for both simplification and a reduction in the administrative burden.

This project has established benchmark levels of satisfaction with the SEARS family, individual experiences of difficulties faced and how efficiently current opportunities are handled, all of which will be essential in evaluating the operation of the SEARS project.

The executive summary of the research can be found at: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/06/19155303/1
An Evidence-based Approach: Stakeholder Engagement

SEARS has also placed importance on securing stakeholder input as the proposals have developed. At the outset in the summer of 2007 when the proposal was in the design phase, valuable input was secured from the National Farmers Union (Scotland), the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association and ConFor (the Confederation of Forest Industries) on behalf of the rural land management community.

In addition, a series of events were held with the groups above and other stakeholder groups such as the Scottish Crofting Foundation, the Association of Deer Management, the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association and the Scottish Countryside Alliance.

Our Achievements: Improving Effectiveness

Reducing Inspection Activity

SEARS looks for opportunities to reduce or combine separate (service-induced) inspections or visits to rural land managers: the aim is to reduce inspections and visits by 2000, by October 2009. By the end of March 2009, with 2062 inspections saved we have exceeded that target. So what has this meant for SEARS customers in practice?

Example

Integrated advice, regulatory activity and consultation on CAR (Controlled Activities Regulations), diffuse pollution, and engineering activities: (SGRPID, SEPA, SNH & FCS)

Land managers throughout Scotland are subject to working within the new diffuse pollution and engineering regulations. SEPA lead on these new regulations and are responsible for establishing a programme of awareness raising and compliance assessment.

Introducing the integrated service, SGRPID, SNH and FCS have worked with SEPA to streamline the inspection process, thereby reducing the need for SEPA to plan and resource a national visit and inspection programme. All partners involved have combined SEPA’s compliance assessment inspection into a proportion of their planned inspection programme.

In the financial year 2008/09, this has saved the rural land user nearly 900 SEPA inspections. Our partner organisations have raised the awareness of these regulations, improved the environment and assessed national compliance at the same time.
Example

Integrated regulatory activity (SSAFO): (SEPA & SGRPID)

Farmers are subject to visits from SGRPID and SEPA in relation to the Control of Pollution (Silage, Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil [Scotland] Regulations) as these Regulations fall within good farming practice. Prior to SEARS, SGRPID carried out approximately 700 good farming practice inspections, while at the same time, SEPA carried out randomly selected inspections on around 300 farms annually.

With the introduction of this integrated service, SGRPID and SEPA have developed a farm assessment form that will enable SGRPID to deliver a quicker version of SEPA’s inspection and still assess the farm’s compliance with the regulations. SGRPID have combined SEPA’s inspection requirement into their planned inspections for Good Farming Practice.

In the financial year 2008/09, this saved the rural land user approximately 300 SEPA SSAFO inspections. SGRPID have been able to resolve minor non compliances and pollution events without involving SEPA in the process, significantly streamlining the process for the rural sector.

Case Study

Legacy Scheme Inspections

Mrs Bell had entered into the Rural Stewardship Scheme, the Land Management Contract Menu Scheme, Natural Care Scheme, and also has a forestry block under the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme. She used to deal with SGRPID, SNH and FCS separately on each of these Schemes and uncoordinated inspections were undertaken by the three organisations.

In future, for ongoing legacy schemes a new approach to selection and risk management is now being adopted by the three organisations, aiming to inspect no more than 5% of schemes. As a result there will be fewer inspections of legacy schemes and now the chances of Mrs Bell being inspected by the different organisations separately is negligible. overall, a saving of 170 inspections by 31 March 2009 has been achieved.
Case Study
Forestry and deer management: (DCS, Forest Enterprise Scotland (part of FCS))

Mr Brown, a woodland owner, appears to have a problem with excessive browsing, fraying, bark stripping and other damage from marauding deer accessing his land from the neighbouring moorland. He wishes to apply to shoot deer out of season or at night to control the problem and help his trees thrive. Previously he would make such an application to DCS and their staff would have inspected the land to assess the need for the appropriate authorisations under the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996.

It was quickly recognised (through the SEARS process) that Forest Enterprise had staff resources and the appropriate skills base to undertake such inspections on behalf of DCS. This was seen as having the potential to better use the skills in each organisation, and to cut down on the distances travelled to sites, reducing the carbon footprint of this operation and potentially avoiding unnecessary process delays. Now, when Mr Brown makes an application, a Forest Enterprise ranger with local knowledge may visit his woodland on behalf of DCS to confirm the need for a licence.

To 31st March 2009, 31 inspections were undertaken by FES on behalf of DCS.
**Case Study**

**Woodland Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) agreements: (SNH, FCS)**

The Scottish Government has an aim of bringing 95% of SSSIs into favourable condition by 2010. We recognised that we could better achieve this target on woodland SSSIs through closer working between FCS and SNH.

In the past, Mr Campbell, the owner of woodland designated as a SSSI (due to the presence of rare bryophytes, which are mosses and liverworts), would have been approached by SNH if it was required to take action to protect the bryophytes from damage on his site. The SNH area officer would encourage him to make an application to the Forestry Commission to do what was needed. This would have meant that he would get site visits from SNH and FCS, as well as having two different contacts.

Now, SNH pass information on the site to FCS who will take on the lead role in talking to him, aiming to create an action plan to reverse the declining/unfavourable condition of the bryophytes in the woodland SSSI. This means that he only has to deal with one agency, and doesn’t have so many site visits to accommodate.

To 31st March 2009, 76 sites had been visited by FCS staff in this situation, though the number is expected to rise to approximately 100 by October 2009.

“**SEARS (Scotland’s Environmental and Rural Services) kick-starts a joined-up approach to regulation that is much needed and welcome**”

**Reducing Charges**

**Example**

**Sheep farmers: (SGRPID & SEPA)**

In the past, sheep farmers were subject to separate visits from SGRPID and SEPA for sheep identification and movement inspections, and reviews of groundwater licences for sheep dip waste disposal.

By introducing an integrated service, SEPA and SGRPID have streamlined the inspection system and reduced the number of visits. This resulted in SEPA waiving the second instalment of subsistence charges in October last year and they are now consulting on a reduction in charges and a move to annual billing. The proposed reduction in charging of 40% will potentially save the Scottish Sheep sector £133,000 in the coming year.

In the financial year 2008/09, this resulted in 426 fewer SEPA inspections. Despite the reduced number of inspections, compliance with the EC Groundwater Directive remained at previous (or enhanced) levels due to the improved co-ordination between the two partner organisations.
“Whilst this potential cost saving may seem modest, it can be viewed as the start of what must be an ambitious programme of rationalisation of both regulation and inspections. NFUS believes that this move represents a step in the right direction but must signal a move towards a significant reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy. This is a positive example of SEARS working for the benefit of all parties. Scottish Government’s agricultural inspectors have been trained to look at sheep dip disposal approvals during their normal activity on farms, therefore avoiding the need for a separate inspection from SEPA staff and stripping costs out of the system”

NFU Scotland vice-president Allan Bowie; The Herald, 6 March 2009

“The decision is certainly a small feather in the cap of the fledgling SEARS… Faced with obliteration after the last Scottish elections, (SEPA) has taken giant strides to re-invent itself into a caring, listening entity, which is a million miles from the hated, dictatorial organisation it was only a couple of years ago”

Scottish Farmer, October 2008

**Improving Access to Services and Reducing Duplication**

Prior to the introduction of the SEARS concept some customers were not sure which organisation they needed to deal with and they could end up being passed around between organisations. The various SEARS partners’ web sites assumed that customers would know that they could find information on a specific subject on that site – that may not always have been the case. Customer contacts within the SEARS organisations operated rigidly within their area of responsibility and as a result there were customer “hand-offs” between the SEARS partners.

To improve the situation we agreed that we needed to get to the position where we were providing our customers with a joined up service – all our organisations perceived as being one service, with a central way of contacting this service. To achieve this, we made a general enquiry number available (shared between organisations) allowing customers the opportunity to be directed to the most appropriate first contact; we removed ‘hand-offs’ by providing the customer with a direct contact to the relevant specialist, or offered to make contact on his/her behalf; we set up a web page (the SEARS website) with topics listed against the relevant organisation; and we made it possible for our customers to change their contact details for all SEARS organisations by just contacting one of us. Access to services is now through any door, providing continuity and adding value to our customers, but still allowing for customers with long-standing relationships to continue with their individual contacts.

Customers now have the option of contacting the SEARS organisations by:

- **Contacting any of the SEARS organisations; or**
- **Phoning the SEARS customer service number on 08452 30 20 50; or**
- **Logging on to the SEARS web portal at www.sears.scotland.gov.uk**
- **Sending an e-mail to: info@sears.scotland.gov.uk**

To date, the uptake by customers has been less than we had hoped for, with only 63 calls to the SEARS Customer Service line, 30 on line requests for changes to contact details and 5,700 hits on the Web Portal, but feedback from users has been positive.
“We...welcome an initiative that has the potential to reduce administrative and inspection burdens, as well as simplifying the process of accessing information and guidance”

From NFUS, ConFor and SRPBA joint statement on SEARS proposal document, October 2007

Simplifying Processes: Internal Consultation

We wanted to establish a better way of working out when, why and how consultations between the partners occurred. The introduction of the new Rural Development Contracts–Regional Priorities (RDC-RP) grant scheme was seen as an opportunity to examine the extent of internal consultation on proposals for woodland creation and felling. We found that such internal consultation was carried out extensively, and this resulted in a delay to making decisions. We decided that SGRPID no longer required consulting about woodland creation, thereby removing an unnecessary consultation.

To date the success of this initiative has been limited, due to the lower than anticipated uptake of the forestry options available under Rural Development Contracts. Up to 31 December 2008, there have been 89 cases involving some 1316ha, affecting 56 separate businesses.

Case Study

Aerial bracken spraying

Mr Cooper wishes to eradicate bracken through aerial spraying. He is required to notify SEPA under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 a minimum of 72 hours beforehand. Prior to 2008, SEPA would then consult Scottish Water. If the land was within a Site of Special Scientific Interest or within 1500m of a Local Nature Reserve, National Nature Reserve, or Marine Nature Reserve, the applicant would also have had to consult directly with SNH. A range of different publications gave guidance on these requirements.

From 2008, the new service is more streamlined and saves time. A single application process is available and land managers now only need to notify SEPA using this application form. SEPA then undertake the appropriate consultations with Scottish Water and SNH. The only time the applicant may have to deal with SNH is when formal consent is required (circa 10% of cases), though the single application form suffices for this purpose too.

There were 57 applications made in 2008 and there has been a reduction of approximately one third in the time taken to gain the necessary approval in 98% of these cases.
Our Achievements: Value for Money

Co-locations Project

Throughout the last year, SEARS partners have considered opportunities that would allow them to bring together the individual offices they have in an area into one shared building. Co-locations of this nature not only rationalise the public sector estate, with the aim of providing better value for money for the public purse, but also allow our customers to see more than one partner during a single visit, and help the SEARS partners to develop a better understanding of each other’s roles, thereby improving the service that they provide.

After only three weeks in their new office at Golspie, FCS staff found that useful links were already being forged with the other SEARS bodies in the building.

“It has been something of a revelation to discover just how many of our customers and stakeholders also have regular dealings with our partners. Simply meeting up with colleagues from the other three organisations at tea break has greatly increased our knowledge and understanding of what they do and, in time, I’m sure joint initiatives and higher levels of collaborative working will flow from this. Having the ability to just “pop next door” and discuss issues face to face is already improving communications and co-operation between the partner organisations”

Tim Cockerill, Forest District Manager, FCS

Over the period covered by this Review, we added to the co-locations that had already taken place in Clydebank, Inverness and Perth, by coming together, or starting the works that will bring us together, at the following sites:

- Edinburgh – since March 2008, SNH staff have co-located with the Forestry Commission at Silvan House;
- Balloch – from summer 2008, SEPA staff have co-located with Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park Authority staff in Balloch;
- Golspie – a new office was built to house SNH, SGRPID, and FCS, along with staff from Highlands & Islands Enterprise and Community Energy Scotland. Staff moved into the new office during March 2009.
- Oban – the SG offices in Oban were refurbished providing the opportunity for SNH to co-locate during March 2009 and the potential for FCS to join them at a later date. The building already houses SGRPID, Animal Health, Marine Scotland, the Driving Standards Agency, LEADER, and Community Energy Scotland and thus is an excellent example of wider public sector relationships.
- Aberdeen – work began on new offices for a joint SEPA/SNH building that will house 170 staff. It is likely to be completed in early 2010.

“Local staff from Argyll, SNH and SGRPID already have a strong working relationship, built by a common interest in ensuring a thriving rural community and landscape, underpinned by active farming and crofting. [Moving into shared offices in Oban] is a significant contribution towards the SEARS initiative.”

Bill Dundas, SGRPID
Case Study
The design of the new building in Golspie

The new Links Building in Golspie makes extensive use of timber throughout. Because of timber’s unique (amongst building materials) ability to ‘lock up’ atmospheric CO₂, it has been calculated that emissions from the building will be offset for the first 20 years of its life. In other words, the building is ‘carbon neutral’ until 2029.

The building also embodies many aspects of best practice in environmental and energy efficient design and construction including: biomass boiler using local pellets; underfloor heating to give an even spread of heat; enhanced insulation in floors, walls & roof; passive stack ventilation in lieu of energy consuming air conditioning systems; solar heat gain through careful orientation and use of glazing; latest technology in windows to reduce heat losses; low energy lighting and lighting management systems to reduce electricity consumption; rainwater harvesting to save on water usage; and the use of local suppliers to provide local timber for the structure, fabric and finishes in order to reduce ‘road miles’.

Case Study

Innovative use of timber

Scotland has a large resource of timber that is generally under-used in terms of construction. However, using the knowledge gained at the Forestry Commission offices at Smithton, Inverness and Huntly, Aberdeenshire, the new Golspie office demonstrates innovative uses of timber on a commercial scale. These include the use of:

- home grown Douglas fir for the building’s structure as an alternative to imported timbers.
- home grown European larch for external cladding. This timber is untreated so there are no harmful preservatives, no paint or stain coatings that require regular maintenance, and no end of life disposal issues. This shows that, contrary to common perception, home grown larch is sufficiently durable if chosen and detailed correctly.
- environmentally friendly preservatives to demonstrate how home-grown timbers, such as Scots pine, can be used externally when suitably treated.
- innovative design in the main stairs and the reception desk to demonstrate local crafts and skills.
- engineered ‘L’ beams in the construction of the walls, floors and roof. These building components are stiff, thermally advantageous, and locally produced.
Communications & Education Project

This project has a more general customer: the public. Through regular sharing of information, both online and face-to-face, we ensure that our communications are complementary, joined up where they need to be, and that we can each take advantage of what others are doing in a particular area, without duplicating it. We have initiated work on producing an Events Strategy (co-ordinating and complementing our attendance at events, to ensure better communication of our messages); a template Gaelic Language Plan (reducing the need for each partner to start from scratch to meet the requirements for public bodies with regard to the Gaelic Language [Scotland] Act 2004); guidance on the consistent use of branding (ensuring that we look more joined up, from a public and staff perspective); and co-ordination of websites (so that they each link to other relevant sites). We have also started looking at publications (to find out if there are any overlapping, and potentially to save money by using joint contracts); and have initiated a project on how to better communicate Scotland’s protected areas – more about that in Ongoing Work.

Direct Land Management Project

The SEARS Programme Board asked us to consider how the lands occupied by the partners across the Environment portfolio could best be managed. At the same time the Cabinet Secretary for Environment commissioned a review of the management arrangements and issues concerning the rural land estates held by Scottish Ministers. These two requirements were combined and a working group of representative interests across the SEARS family and beyond was formed. The “Asset Management Review of Rural Land” report was produced and submitted to Ministers in February 2009. The report contains nine recommendations and stresses the need to focus on building on the good practice which already exists. All organisations will continue to maintain their own databases in their current format; recorded land will be kept on a single map maintained by the FCS; rural land management will be made a discrete part of organisations’ business plans; procurement exercises run by any one organisation for assessing development potential will be shared across the organisations; and consideration will be given in the first instance to surplus land for allotments and new entrants to farming. All the recommendations will be progressed during 2009/10.

Staff commitment to SEARS

The challenge laid down by ministers in 2007 to develop SEARS as an ‘integrated service’ with the ‘feel of a single service’, encouraged staff to take a completely different approach to their work, and to adopt a ‘habit of joint working’.

The staff of the SEARS bodies deserve every commendation for their enthusiasm and commitment to the SEARS way of working. This has been facilitated and reinforced in several ways:

- High level organisational commitment was defined and agreed through a Memorandum of Agreement signed by the senior representatives on the SEARS Programme Board.
- Staff communications – regular updates on the progress of the SEARS Programme have been distributed to the staff of the SEARS partners, in the most appropriate way for their organisation.
- Staff awareness-raising events were held throughout all SEARS organisations.
in late spring 2008, using a PowerPoint presentation agreed by the Communications and Delivery Design groups (in total - 78 events, 1400 staff).

- Staff within the SEARS Programme attended four workshop events which allowed and encouraged ‘bottom-up’ input to the design and delivery process.

- Staff working in the Frontline Delivery Project were encouraged to take ownership of the opportunities and this bottom-up approach was facilitated by the ‘buddying’ system.

- But by far the most important evidence of staff commitment has been input ‘on the ground’. Without the enthusiasm and dedication of locally based operational staff making it all happen, there would be many fewer improvements in customer experience to record in this review.

“Farmers’ leaders at the Royal Highland Show confided that during the development of SEARS they had noticed a ‘dramatic culture change’ in the bodies involved.”

Scottish Farmer, 28 June 2008
What we didn’t do, and why

When the SEARS proposal was being developed over the summer of 2007 many potential opportunities were identified, but on further investigation these had limited or no customer benefit. These were:

Animal By-Product Premises

This opportunity considered whether or not SEPA could carry out inspections of animal remains incinerators on behalf of Animal Health when visiting PPC-(Pollution, Prevention & Control) permitted intensive agriculture sites. These visits collect animal welfare intelligence on the operation of larger agricultural sites, something which is seen as very high value in the preparations against possible outbreaks of exotic notifiable diseases. Without this intelligence there is a risk that it could take longer to control disease outbreaks, thus costing both industry and the public purse significantly more. Although this opportunity was not developed, a new opportunity to develop Disease Outbreak Contingency plans for PPC sites was put forward by the sector and is currently being developed.

SEPA carrying out NVZ audits at Intensive Agriculture PPC sites

This opportunity considered whether or not SEPA could carry out Nitrate Vulnerable Zone audits on behalf of SGRPID during scheduled visits for PPC permit compliance. However, detailed examination of the match between PPC sites and the designated NVZ area revealed that the opportunity would apply to very few sites.

In some other situations, unforeseen developments reduced the effectiveness of additional opportunities. For example:

Integrated Crofting Visits

There was a suggestion that some inspections undertaken by Crofter’s Commission staff to the locations of Commission bulls could be done by SGRPID staff, by integrating with other visits to crofters and townships. However due to the uncertainty as to the long-term future of the bull scheme inspections have been slow to become established.

Common Inspections Calendar

The initial idea was to produce a list of visits by each organisation for each customer. However, the need to share inspection data across the family has to satisfy the requirements of the Data Protection Act (DPA) and the Information Commissioner for Scotland. The opportunity may be revisited pending agreement on a protocol for sharing data.

Single Customer Identifier

A common customer ID across the SEARS family seemed a good idea. However a very significant amount of customer-facing information sharing has since been worked out in arrangements for the Scotland Rural Development Programme. Data Protection Act compliance also reduces both the scope and therefore the potential customer benefit. Attention will therefore shift to building business cases to justify specific instances where customers will benefit by data-sharing by SEARS bodies, facilitated by a common ID, most probably the ‘Business Reference Number’.
Ongoing Work

We are undertaking a research project on how to better communicate Scotland’s Protected Areas. This aims to find a more straightforward way of communicating our various designations and the value and use of those to the public: it will cover both the language we use, and imagery.

We continue to hold stakeholder events, so that our land manager customers can tell us what they think needs tackled, and we can discuss with them the opportunities that exist and how they might be taken forward.

While construction work continues at Aberdeen, business cases are being developed for a number of other co-locations projects across the country – see Next Steps below.

Under the Direct Land Management project, all nine recommendations contained in the Asset Management Review of Rural Land report will be taken forward in 2009/10 with specific attention to being proactive about making surplus land available for allotments and to new entrants.

A potential area for further exploration in reducing bureaucracy is the production of ‘A Year in the Life’ business planning tools that set out predictable and recurrent regulatory burdens on particular types of rural land management business. We hope to work up these with detailed customer and stakeholder input. One output may result in a reduction in the size or number of forms, or if that is not possible, an attempt to make them more customer friendly, presented in context and in Plain English.

There will also be a particular focus on bio-security, with a protocol covering what precautions customers can expect a member of a SEARS organisation to take when visiting a site. There will also be work to support intensive producers in preparing disease outbreak contingency plans. Both these pieces of work have the potential to have their scope extended.
Next Steps

The progress reported above describes the initial outputs and benefits from the SEARS Programme, and the ongoing work. In addition to these, and to further support the Government’s purpose, helping to simplify the ‘delivery landscape’, ease the regulatory burden and respond to the economic recession, SEARS is exploring the following candidate areas for further development:

Reducing bureaucracy

Reflecting closely the priorities set through our customer research and stakeholder engagement, we are exploring the potential for fewer and shorter forms, further sharing and co-ordination of visits and inspections, single record checks and other process improvements. For example, a project has been initiated to eliminate any duplication of data collected separately from farmers using the Single Application Form (SAF) and June Agricultural Census.

Exploring further co-locations

Dumfries (FCS, SGRPID, SEPA, SNH & Animal Health)
Galashiels (SEPA, SNH, SGRPID, Animal Health, FCS).
Lochgilphead (FCS, SNH, SEPA, and drop-in facilities for SGRPID).
Newton Stewart (FCS, SEPA, and possibly SNH and Animal Health)
Orkney - refurbishment of SG offices (SGRPID, SNH).
Shetland (SEPA, SGRPID, SNH, CC).
Speyside (CNPA, SNH, SEPA).
Stirling (SEPA, SNH, FCS, and possibly SGRPID)

Sharing services

Building on our initial achievements in establishing some co-located offices, we are exploring further opportunities to share effective use of our assets. In addition to further co-locations, we shall explore a co-ordinated approach to IT development and shared use of specialist assets such as laboratory facilities.

Linking the natural and built environment

Outcome 12 of the Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework aims to value and enjoy our built and natural environment and protect it and enhance it for future generations. This link emphasises the common interest between the SEARS bodies and a range of built heritage interests, such as Historic Scotland. We shall explore jointly how best to maintain and enhance our heritage assets, which not only underpin economic activity in the tourism and leisure sectors but also build the wider image of Scotland as a country.

Other possible candidates

Several other areas present possible opportunities for SEARS developments. We may build on existing joint efforts on staff training, so as to further develop the habit of joint working in our staff teams. We shall further explore the benefits of local service integration, through establishing joint staff teams for particular purposes while maintaining the distinct expertise and professionalism of the partner bodies. Finally, we shall identify opportunities to provide assurance that publicly-funded advice to land managers is coherent and aligned to policy priorities.
On the Ground – a new challenge

As part of a wider consideration of the delivery of the new Government’s five strategic objectives, earlier this week the Cabinet agreed to the development of a proposal aimed at bringing the delivery organisations in our portfolio into a single, more efficient partnership for greener delivery. In short, this would be a single environment and rural delivery service making full use of existing flexibilities in roles and responsibilities. It would need to be perceived by people as a single body, while continuing to operate in formal terms within the current statutory framework.

I commend the efforts that your organisation has already made, through the On the Ground programme. This has provided, I am certain, an innovative and successful foundation for what we are now asking you to do. The family of organisations involved in the programme have demonstrated their willingness to co-locate and start to align services. The challenge today is to produce a model which will feel like an integrated service to the end-user. The model may well encompass shared branding, shared IT, shared science, shared land and estates management and communications activities. As well as producing a core proposal, I would like you to come forward with options that go beyond that proposal, to look at closer alignment and integration with other activities such as local authority farm visits, QMS accreditation etc.

That challenge is significant, and we want to involve you to the full in facing up to it. Accordingly, I would like to receive a proposal from the On the Ground family by September this year which, using our existing legislative frameworks, could be implemented within 12 months – in other words, by the time of the Royal Highland Show next summer.

You will appreciate that there is a degree of trust here on our part. Our Manifesto made clear our intentions to reduce the number of bodies working in the Scottish public sector. We will take a decision on whether to implement the proposal alongside the broader review of the delivery landscape that John Swinney has announced. The purpose of the current proposal is to tap the powerful source of innovative and practical ideas which is within your organisations themselves – in your boards, staff and stakeholders. We look to you to harness all the ideas there will be and come forward with a practical implementation programme.

In order to take this request forward with a proper sense of urgency I think it essential for all the chairs of the On the Ground bodies to get together with me. I know that all of us have very full diaries but given the importance of this issue I am asking each chair to prioritise a meeting on the 19th June 2007 at 2pm, at 14 The Square, Grantown on Spey. Your Chief Executive is welcome to attend to provide you with support on the executive management of your organisation.

Michael Russell MSP
Annex 2

Memorandum of Agreement

Purpose
To document the basis on which the partners in Scotland’s Environment and Rural Services will co-operate to provide a single service to land managers.

Background
In responding to the Minister for Environment’s challenge to provide a single rural service to land managers, the partner organisations presented a proposal to the Minister which was agreed. The proposal described the need for a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to be developed:

“This will provide the framework within which SEARS operates. The MOA may be supplemented with additional Memoranda of Understanding on specific activities to ensure transparency of accountability where necessary. However, such agreements should be based on the minimum necessary detail required by the complexity and risk associated with the activity.”

Financial arrangements
The guiding principle shall be that assessment of costs and benefits will be at the level of the public purse. That said, this MOA cannot cut across the statutory responsibilities of Boards and Accountable Officers - or their equivalents - in the affairs of individual partner organisations. All new arrangements will aim to achieve value for money.

This initiative is a collaborative one. Beyond the members of staff providing programme and project management support, there is no central budget. For many purposes any extra cost will be negligible. There is a desire to avoid complex accounting and charging mechanisms, which themselves involve cost. Where inspections move from being carried out by a charging to a non-charging organisation, appropriate arrangements should be made to avoid a disproportionate additional cost to the public purse, if any. This includes situations where the work attracts different VAT charges depending on the status of the bodies involved. If possible any losses at the level of the public purse should extend only to VAT charges incurred under the new arrangements.

Nevertheless, there will be some additional costs, notably to develop new arrangements. Often it will make best sense for the lead body to shoulder these costs. Sometimes an overall gain in performance may depend on one body doing a little more than before, with others doing less. Where significant sums are involved a formal budgeting mechanism will be needed to share costs - including formal budgeting transfer if appropriate, particularly where the benefits and costs do not fall on the same budgets. Business cases will identify the pattern. However a simpler arrangement will be appropriate for low cost initiatives with shared benefits. As a broad rule of thumb for such initiatives, the four largest partners, Scottish Government Rural Inspections and Payments Directorate, Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, will be prepared to incur costs for initiatives and/or additional
running costs within the SEARS Programme on behalf of the partners up to a level of £100,000 per annum per family member (one-off or recurring). This is subject to greater efficiencies being delivered by the partners during the Spending Review period. As a general rule, such efficiency savings will be scored to individual organisations. For example, in the case of co-locations, savings will be scored to the organisation leading the project or providing the services. Larger sums, smaller sums where a lead partner cannot be agreed, and major (for example IT) projects will be referred to the SEARS Programme Board to seek a resolution.

Staff Resources

Partner organisations, in particular the four largest partners, Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate, Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, will be prepared to allocate staff directly, and where appropriate through interchange, to support work under the SEARS Programme. This may in practice mean that in start-up and initiation overall costs may exceed £100,000 per annum.

Training

Where training is needed for partners to take on functions or duties previously carried out by another organisation, the competent authority will be responsible for the provision and direct costs of that training (in addition to costs described in paragraph 6).

Interchange

Partners will work towards the establishment of a common protocol to facilitate inter-organisation interchange, in consultation with the appropriate trade unions.

Quality Assurance

Partners will take collective responsibility for quality assurance arrangements. For example if one organisation is accepting responsibility for carrying out a function, or part of a function, previously carried out by another partner, the organisation passing on the function will lead on the establishment of suitable quality assurance for the new delivery arrangements until there is mutual agreement for the receiving organisation to take full responsibility. Quality assurance might take the form of an initial 10% check, decreasing over time.

Customer Focus

The partners will agree a common standard in line with best practice and guidance from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (in the case of Animal Health, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration) on customer care, complaints and, where possible, appeals procedures. The partners will work internally and together to make the default culture ‘no hand offs’ in our interactions with shared customers.

Information and Data Sharing

The partners will make every effort to share information and data, unless there are compelling and demonstrable legal reasons for not doing so. Personal data will be handled in accordance with the Data Sharing Legal Guidance for the Scottish
Public Sector (2004) and subject to the Data Protection Act, 1998. The partners will ensure that their notifications under the Data Protection Act, 1998 are consistent with delivery of the single service. Commercially confidential data will be identified and subject to appropriate restrictions. Information subject to National Security requirements will be managed, stored, accessed and destroyed in accordance with the requirements of both the Manual of Protective Security and the Government Protective Marking Scheme. Compliance with both the Manual of Protective Security and the Government Protective Marking scheme will require partners to adopt the Cabinet Office Baseline Personnel Security Standard in their recruiting mechanism.

It is critical to the success of the SEARS approach that benefits are captured. The partners agree to establish baselines to measure benefits realisation and cooperate with the researchers appointed by the Frontline Delivery Project Board in establishing baselines of customer satisfaction.

Communications

The partners will work to share strategic communications within the Greener Scotland agenda and look for opportunities for shared education programmes, events (such as the Royal Highland Show) outreach and publications. The Frontline Delivery Project Board will lead on the content of communications, both internal and external, regarding the new single service to be launched in June 2008. The Communications & Education Project will lead on strategic communications and educational activities covering the shared purpose of SEARS Programme activity.

Governance

Management of the SEARS Programme is as described in the SEARS proposal and SEARS Programme brief.

This agreement can be terminated by any partner by formal notice of one month to the SEARS Programme Board.

The SEARS Programme Board shall periodically review the effectiveness and observance of this MOA and may propose amendments accordingly.

In the first instance it is proposed that this agreement will run for 3 years from the date of formal adoption by the SEARS Programme Board.

The partner organisations:

- Animal Health*
- Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)
- Crofters Commission (CC)
- Deer Commission for Scotland (DCS)
- Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS)
- Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA)
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)
- Scottish Government, Rural Payments & Inspections Directorate (SGRPID)
- Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)

*It is recognised that the GB governance structure of Animal Health may constrain full implementation of these provisions and require ratification to a different timescale from the other 8 partners.
For Further Information

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