Drystance dyke
near Ythanbank,
Grampian Area.
© Lorne Gill/SNH
Looking back over the three years since the launch of SEARS at the 2008 Royal Highland Show, it’s encouraging to see how far the partnership has come.

The eight SEARS organisations continue to work together to provide joined-up services to Scotland’s land managers, steadily reducing inspections and simplifying the forms and surveys that land managers need to complete.

Collaboration between SEARS partners has enabled producers to plan for potential disease outbreaks, and has led to the creation of a simple bio-security protocol for staff to help prevent the spread of plant and animal disease on rural land.

Within its partner organisations, SEARS has brought about important cultural change. It has broken down barriers and encouraged greater collaboration and skills sharing between partners. I am especially encouraged by what I am told of the tenacious efforts of SEARS colleagues and their leaders, who work with land managers and stakeholders to explore new opportunities to improve services.

But we are not complacent, and we recognise that more could be done. The Scottish Government remains committed to listening to the needs of rural people and strengthening the SEARS partnership even more in the years ahead. Our farming manifesto said that we would create a new joint industry and agency working group to develop proposals for further reducing on-farm inspections and bureaucracy. I look forward to seeing the outputs of the group and its suggestions for how we might deliver further benefits for SEARS customers.

My predecessors, Michael Russell and Roseanna Cunningham, have delivered an impressive programme of improvements. I look forward to building on their legacy, working with the SEARS partners to deliver further improvements for Scotland’s land managers.

Stewart Stevenson
Minister for Environment and Climate Change
Contents

Introduction .................................................. Page 3
SEARS Highlights ........................................ 4
Reducing Burdens ........................................ 5
Biosecurity .................................................. 9
Evidence-Based Policy Development .............. 12
A Joint Approach to Training and Development .. 15
Improving Access to Services ......................... 18
Communicating the SEARS Approach ............. 21
What We Didn’t Do, and Why ......................... 23
Conclusion .................................................. 24
For Further Information ................................. 25
Introduction

Scotland’s Environmental and Rural Services (SEARS) is a partnership of eight organisations that provide rural and environmental services to Scotland’s rural communities.

The SEARS partners

- Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA)
- Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)
- Crofters Commission
- Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS)
- Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA)
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)
- Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (SGRPID)
- Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)

By working together, these organisations aim to provide their shared customers - Scotland’s rural land managers - with a more efficient and effective service by:

- coordinating when they need to contact and visit land managers
- providing easy access to information and advice
- providing a consistent and responsive service
- delivering a service which encompasses the needs of land managers.

This review reflects on the progress made by the SEARS partnership since its launch at the Royal Highland Show in the summer of 2008, with a particular focus on developments in 2010–11.

It will be of interest to a wide range of audiences, from staff, stakeholders and land managers to researchers, students and specialist media.
SEARS Highlights

Rationalised inspection activity

- Number of inspections reduced by 3,016 in 2010-11, bringing the total reduction to 8,012 in the three years since the launch of SEARS in 2008.

Streamlined bureaucracy

- Continued improvements to forms sent to rural land managers, including making the June and December agricultural censuses more user friendly.

Enhanced biosecurity

- Biosecurity protocol for SEARS staff revised and extended its use to over 50 stakeholder organisations.
- Formally launched a contingency planning template for disease outbreaks in intensive pig and poultry premises, and held workshops to help farmers and other land managers to plan ahead.
- A new contingency planning template developed for the wider agricultural sector.

Rural Hubs

- Rural Hubs pilot launched in north-east Scotland to make it easier for land managers to access services from the whole SEARS family.

Co-locations

- Two or more SEARS partners co-located in twenty buildings across Scotland.
- Inverdee House in Aberdeen officially opened in May 2010 to accommodate staff from SEPA and SNH as well as the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

Listening to customers

- Partners engaged with around one in six rural land managers since 2008 through surveys, focus groups, workshops or informal meetings to help shape SEARS opportunities and measure the success of the programme.

Reduced charges

- Partners collaborated with SEPA to reduce charges to the sheep farming industry by approximately £400,000 since 2008.

Carbon savings

- CO₂ emissions reduced by SEARS partners with joint inspections contributing around 50 tonnes since 2008.
Reducing Burdens

Cutting down on inspections

The ambition to provide joined-up services to Scotland’s rural land managers has been at the heart of the SEARS partnership since the programme started three years ago. This includes a commitment to rationalise the inspections carried out by the SEARS partners.

In the last year alone, SEARS partners have worked together to reduce separate service-generated inspections and visits to rural land managers by 3,016, exceeding the target of 3,000. This brings the total reduction in inspections and visits to 8,012 since the programme’s launch in 2008. Although the number of inspections carried out fluctuates from year to year depending on factors such as the age of grant schemes and compliance rates, the partners estimate that this represents a reduction of around one in six inspections since 2008.

Examples include:

- SGRPID undertaking SEPA’s Controlled Activities Regulation (CAR) and General Binding Rules (GBR) Inspections during land-based inspections
- SGRPID carrying out SEPA’s groundwater authorisation inspections during sheep inspections
- SEPA conducting International Catering Waste inspections on behalf of AHVLA when routinely visiting landfill sites
SGRPID carrying out AHVLA welfare checks during regular poultry farm inspections

SGRPID combining animal tuberculosis tests with checks for ear tags with AHVLA colleagues

SNH and SEPA looking out for diseased blaeberry plants on behalf of SGRPID and FCS while they work on remote heathland, to help prevent the spread of phytophthora

Joint inspections have helped to strengthen relationships between each of the SEARS partners. SEARS staff remain committed to minimising inspections and visits, and will continue to seek similar opportunities in future.

SEARS in action

“SGRPID employees, who already inspect poultry farms for food and feed hygiene, now measure the enriched cages used to house hens. In so many respects this is an example of SEARS in action. It allows us to reassure the Scottish people about the welfare of their egg-producing poultry without placing a further regulatory burden on the poultry sector. I welcome this opportunity for our two organisations to share knowledge and expertise.”

Rupert Hine
Former director of AHVLA Scotland
Reducing bureaucracy

But reducing burdens on land managers isn’t just about reducing inspections. It’s also about cutting down the amount of time land managers spend on paperwork.

In research conducted in 2008 and again in 2009, rural land managers consistently estimated that they spent around 1.83 hours a week on average completing paperwork for SEARS organisations. By 2010, respondents reported an estimated 11.4% reduction in the time they spent on paperwork generated by the SEARS partners. That estimate is the annual equivalent of 200,000 hours freed up to spend more directly on land management.

More work has been carried out this year to streamline processes, by reducing the amount of paperwork necessary to access services or respond to a legal requirement, and by simplifying paperwork so it is more customer friendly.

‘One farm, one form’

This year, SEPA helped lighten the load for land managers by introducing a ‘one farm, one form’ initiative for spreading organic waste.

Previously, land managers had to complete one application form for every fifty hectares of land if they wanted to spread organic waste. Under SEPA’s new rules, they need only complete one application form for the total area of their farm and, if they are applying to spread organic waste over more than fifty hectares, their application fee will be reduced.

Fiona Donaldson, Senior Policy Officer in SEPA’s National Operations Waste Unit, said: “Identifying ways to save land managers time and money is at the very heart of the SEARS programme.

“This initiative was made possible through new Waste Management Licensing (Scotland) Regulations which came into effect on 27 March 2011, and is expected to save some of Scotland’s land managers as much as £29,000 each year.”

Following successful collaborative projects to reduce and improve paperwork in the early years of the programme, individual SEARS organisations now have checks in place to ensure that forms and guidance are easy to understand and provide clear instructions.

For example, SGRPID has made its December census and other forms more ‘reader friendly’, and SNH now encourages people to apply for or renew licences and submit returns online at www.businesslink.gov.uk. SNH also plans to host interactive application forms on its website from summer 2011, incorporating SGRPID’s existing species licensing remit.

SEPA is also simplifying licensing, including registrations for Controlled Activity Regulations and registration of chargeable waste management licence exemptions. SEPA’s aim is to ensure all application forms are in plain English and can be completed online, and to reduce the time it takes to issue licences. SEPA also aims to reduce the total number of licences required.

In FCS, work is underway to develop a new case management system for felling licence applications, which includes a streamlined consultation process. FCS hopes
that this will give customers the option to apply for felling licences online, as well as in the traditional paper way. FCS is also looking at ways to improve guidance for forestry options within the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP).

Although simplifying paperwork started out as a collaborative SEARS initiative, it is now becoming business as usual for each of the SEARS partners.

**Simplifying forms**

The Scottish Government’s efforts to simplify forms and guidance has already borne fruit. Responding to a request from the Agricultural Statistics Branch for information in the December 2010 agricultural census, one farmer wrote: “I would like to take the opportunity of complimenting you on the good mannered and encouraging way the request to return the form is made out. The legal requirement is quite clearly stated, but included within a courteous letter, so it is a pleasure to respond by returning the form promptly!”

**Bracken**

Interest in the control of bracken by aerial spraying herbicide has increased rapidly in recent years. The number of applications processed by SEPA has trebled over the life of the SEARS programme, with over 200 processed in 2010–11. In response, SEPA has developed a new online service to allow land managers to apply electronically, saving valuable time.

Ian Innes of PGD Helicopters at Inverness said: “This is an excellent system. In terms of time saved it equates to around half an hour per application by not having to print and duplicate submissions to both SEPA and SNH.”
Biosecurity

Another key element of SEARS' role is to help Scotland’s land managers and others who work on rural land to protect themselves against plant, animal, fish and forestry pests and diseases through effective biosecurity practice.

Work to promote biosecurity during 2010-11 focused on two main activities:-

1. publicising a new biosecurity protocol for staff in each of the eight SEARS organisations
2. helping farmers to develop contingency plans for a potential outbreak of a notifiable disease

Biosecurity protocol

The SEARS biosecurity protocol was first published on the SEARS website in June 2009 to provide practical advice for staff on how to be ‘biosecure’ when out and about on rural land. It has since been shared with staff in each SEARS organisation, with a strong recommendation for them to follow its simple rules to help prevent the spread of disease.

The protocol was designed to be useful to a wide variety of staff from different disciplines across the eight partner organisations, from woodland officers and vets to agricultural officers and environmental protection officers. As a result, an early review was planned to make sure the protocol was fit for purpose. The review was carried out between February and June 2010, and involved representatives from SEARS organisations as well as selected external groups including NFU Scotland, Historic Scotland, the Scottish Agricultural College (SAC), the Confederation of Forestry Industries (ConFor) and Quality Meat Scotland.

Playing our part

“More than ever, farmers recognise the importance of keeping their livestock and crops healthy and know that many steps must be taken if they are to avoid the plethora of pests and diseases that have the potential to undermine their business. Inspections and farm visits are part and parcel of farming life and each visit – whether official or informal – brings an element of risk. Knowing that any SEARS inspector coming on to a farm is following a well-defined list of protocols designed to deliver sound biosecurity gives farmers a great deal of reassurance that everyone is playing their part in preventing the spread of pests and diseases, and avoiding the devastating impact that any outbreak might bring.”

Scott Walker
NFU Scotland’s Policy Director

To help raise awareness of biosecurity amongst people outside of the SEARS family who regularly visit farms and other rural land, SEARS staff wrote to over fifty organisations enclosing a summary version of the guidance and a link to the full protocol on the SEARS website.
Furthermore, to demonstrate how simple it is to follow good biosecurity practice, a short training film is being developed by SEARS partners for their staff. This highlights four levels of biosecurity practice, from ensuring footwear and vehicles are clean, to using disinfectants and wearing protective clothing. The film will be available on the SEARS website.

### A useful protocol

“Information that raises awareness of biosecurity risks and provides practical guidance on biosecurity is important, and the SEARS protocol should be useful to a wide range of organisations involved in field work.”

Rob Raynard  
Aquaculture and Fish Health team at Marine Scotland Science, and one of over fifty stakeholders who were sent the SEARS biosecurity protocol.

### Our biosecurity film

SEPA’s Wendy Forsyth was one of a small team of SEARS staff who got involved in the biosecurity filming. She said: “Once SEPA found out a film was being developed about the biosecurity protocol, we were keen to get involved. We used our own camera to do the filming, and now we’re working on the editing in-house. It’s been a really good joint effort, and I think the film will show just how easy it is to follow good biosecurity practice.”

Louise Lang from the SGRPID Area Office in Hamilton took the leading role in the production. She said: “It was a great opportunity to get involved in the SEARS biosecurity film, despite the wind and rain on the filming day! It will show SEARS colleagues who work out in the field – whether they’re visiting farms, crofts, estates, woodlands, plant nurseries, aquaculture units, lochs or rivers – that there's no excuse not to follow good biosecurity practice.”

Work is now underway to evaluate whether staff use biosecurity practices in their everyday work. For example, SNH has surveyed its staff to check their awareness of the protocol, biosecurity practice and risks, the equipment they need to use, health and safety measures and where they can go for advice. This has yielded encouraging indications of awareness and provided useful pointers to priorities for further improvement.

Through extending use of the biosecurity protocol, the SEARS partnership hopes to reduce the risk of plant, animal, fish and forestry pests and diseases, also saving costs for rural land managers.
Disease contingency planning

As well as developing the protocol, SEARS colleagues have developed a template for the livestock industry – and in particular managers of intensive pig and poultry farms - to help them make contingency plans for the potential outbreak of a notifiable disease. This support was intended to minimise the potential environmental impact caused by a notifiable disease outbreak on farmers’ premises.

The planning template was formally launched in February 2010 on the SEARS and SEPA websites, as well as through a direct e-mail to managers of intensive pig and poultry farms. Farm managers and SEARS representatives were invited to comment on the template and to attend a workshop in November 2010. This workshop, which was also attended by representatives from the pig and poultry sector, allowed farmers and stakeholders to discuss with AHVLA and SEPA staff how to use the planning template.

SEARS was keen to continue the good work following the success of the planning template, and has now developed a document to support the wider extensive agriculture sector to plan for a notifiable disease outbreak. The aim of this document is two-fold:

1. To increase livestock keepers’ awareness of the importance of farm biosecurity in preventing animal disease at an individual and national level
2. To provide a form for livestock keepers to collate the details that agencies would require when dealing with a notifiable disease outbreak

SEARS colleagues are currently consulting stakeholders on the content of the template and developing plans for its distribution to ensure as many livestock keepers as possible use it. Once the results of the consultation have been considered and incorporated into the template, it will be made available on the SEARS and Scottish Government websites, with links to AHVLA and SEPA.

Phytophthora

Phytophthora are a large group of pathogens that can cause fatal diseases to trees and shrubs. The Greek-derived name means ‘plant destroyer’ from phyto (plant) and phthora (destroyer).

When a species of phytophthora was recently found in some areas of south-west England and in a Scottish woodland site, SEARS partners joined forces to help prevent it from spreading. SNH staff now look out for diseased blueberry plants on behalf of SGRPID and FCS while they go about their work in remote heathland. Samples are sent to Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA) for examination, and records from all partners are collated to assess which areas are affected and prevent the problem from spreading.
Evidence-Based Policy Development

Listening to our customers

An understanding of the expectations of Scotland’s land managers and what they value most has been fundamental to planning the SEARS programme, and to its subsequent achievements.

SEARS has undertaken several research surveys to help inform planning, but has also made use of more informal contact with customers through conferences and agricultural shows, as well as feedback from staff on issues discussed when visiting farms and other businesses.

Research evidence base

Over the last three years, three questionnaire-based customer surveys have been carried out for SEARS by George Street Research. These were supplemented by focus groups across Scotland to further improve understanding of the issues and discuss suggestions to improve services provided by SEARS partners.

Around one in six rural land managers has taken the opportunity to shape SEARS opportunities through participation in surveys, focus groups, or workshops at some point throughout the life of the programme.

Findings

Three phases of research have provided a wealth of information about customers’ perceptions of SEARS organisations. However, the following results could be considered ‘key findings’:

- Satisfaction with the services provided by SEARS organisations has improved since 2008 – in 2010, around 80% of respondents who were likely to have had an inspection noticed changes in the way it was carried out
- The overall level of satisfaction amongst customers who had come into contact with the SEARS partners has continued to increase over the life of the programme, with a mean score of 7.57 out of 10 in 2010 – up from 7.47 in 2009 and 7.21 in 2008
- In 2010 there was substantial support for the concept of SEARS, and the integrated approach of the partnership was seen as appropriate for Scotland’s rural areas
- Since the beginning of the SEARS programme, rural land managers spend 11.4% less time on average completing forms for SEARS partners

This research has been invaluable in guiding the work of SEARS, both at the outset of the programme and as the approach has been reviewed and revised. Initial research established benchmark levels of satisfaction with the SEARS family, individual experiences of difficulties faced and how efficiently opportunities were handled, all of which has been essential in setting the direction and objectives of the programme and measuring its success.

Full details of the SEARS research can be found at http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/06/22115440/0
Listening to stakeholders

Since its inception, the SEARS programme has been driven not only by customer needs, but by the views of stakeholders. SEARS has sought input from the rural land management community through meetings with representative organisations, in particular NFU Scotland, the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association (SRPBA), ConFor, the Scottish Crofting Foundation, the Association of Deer Management Groups, the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association (STFA) and the Scottish Countryside Alliance.

For example, at the Royal Highland Show in June 2010, staff from the SEARS partnership engaged with several stakeholders to listen to their views on how SEARS was doing. As a consequence, more focused engagement took place with stakeholders, proving invaluable in checking that SEARS remained on the right track and in providing a fresh focus to help map recurrent administrative requests and milestones.

Furthermore, in 2009 and 2010 two events were held for stakeholders to discuss SEARS proposals. Senior stakeholders’ views were also sought as part of an ‘opinion formers’ component of the third phase of the customer research work.
In these discussions, stakeholders indicated that customers both noticed and appreciated reduced inspections and the growing culture of ‘a single service’ led by SEARS. However, stakeholders also said that more effort to reduce burdens is needed.

For example, stakeholders would like SEARS to collaborate with other bodies currently outside the SEARS family to examine further opportunities to work together on inspections and visits. They also want SEARS to encourage other bodies to adopt the biosecurity protocol during visits to farms and other land.

Addressing these issues with non-SEARS bodies has been a challenge, as there is no requirement for them to take the SEARS approach. Nevertheless, SEARS partners remain willing to work with other organisations if they choose to review their inspection activity and want to make use of the lessons learned through the programme.

Evaporating preconceptions

One interviewee in the 2010 ‘opinion formers’ research reported: “I have to say I was wrong initially. My biggest fear with SEARS was that it was going to be a branding exercise. Not only would you get a letter with an SNH logo on the top, it’ll have a SEARS logo at the top. End of the world, I thought – this is going to be a total failure. And I was wrong I am happy to say.”

Red Squirrel Sciurus Vulgaris climbing down the trunk of a Scots Pine tree. © Lorne Gill/SNH
A Joint Approach to Training and Development

As well as making life easier for rural land managers, the SEARS partnership has paved the way for better working within each of the partner organisations.

Shared training opportunities and the exchange of information between partners have been amongst the useful products of SEARS. Not only has this ensured that staff are equipped with the skills to carry out inspections on behalf of other SEARS partners – it has also reduced pressure on the public purse.

Sharing training

Working in close partnership has encouraged the SEARS family to look for better ways to pool its resources.

As part of the Scottish Government Agencies Training Network, several SEARS organisations have prepared brief ‘organisation CVs’ with training they can offer to other members on subjects such as health and safety, communication and people management, as well as highlighting what they need from partner organisations. Talks have also been underway between SGRPID, SEPA, SNH and FCS about providing shared training and development opportunities for SEARS staff who work in remote areas and cannot regularly attend courses in the cities.

FCS has shared its woodland officer training on how to prepare for court appearances with other SEARS colleagues, including SGRPID and SNH. The training is part of a wider course on unlicensed woodland felling, and takes people through preparations for court, from collating and presenting evidence to appearing as a witness.

Court training

An FCS spokesman said: “Illegal felling of trees, woods and forests could lead to the permanent loss of our sustainable and natural woodlands. We take reports of unlicensed felling seriously and always investigate the circumstances. If the case is brought to court our staff need to be fully prepared. But court training is not only useful to forestry staff. RPID and SNH staff can also be involved in prosecutions, so it made sense to open the course up to them. It’s a sensible partnership working approach and it will ensure that the right people get this important training at minimal cost.”

Since the start of the SEARS programme, SEPA has trained large numbers of colleagues in SGRPID, FCS, Forestry Enterprise Scotland (FES) and SNH to assess compliance with the CAR Engineering regime and diffuse pollution GBRs. In total, 156 FCS and FES staff have received training on diffuse pollution GBRs, along with 21 of Tilhill UPM’s contractors and harvest and planting managers.

SEPA has also trained SGRPID staff to inspect CAR Groundwater Licence disposal sites, silage pits and slurry stores for compliance with the Control of Pollution, Silage, Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil Regulation 2003. A recent audit of inspections found that the training was successful.
Successful collaboration

“SEPA staff provided an excellent training service during recent Controlled Activity Regulations courses held this year in Scotland. The small team of trainers were able to deliver specific training needs to large numbers of Forestry Commission personnel at locations all over the country within a few months. The training was effective, well presented and professional and demonstrated the importance of specialist expertise. I was particularly impressed by the team’s ability, again at short notice, to provide additional courses to pick up staff who had missed the original rollout. I would welcome further collaboration of this type and a general recognition of the large skills resource held within these separate departments. This training only has value when it is backed up by this kind of relevant professional experience.”

Mick Bottomly
Forest Enterprise Scotland

Positive engagement

SEPA also trained planting and felling managers at forestry and timber harvesting company UPM Tillhill on CAR engineering and diffuse pollution GBRs. According to John Gallacher at UPM Tillhill, “… the seminar was excellent, and was very well received by all those attending. A reflection of this was the positive engagement of our staff during the course of the day, which hopefully led to the best kind of training which is a two way process … I’m sure many left the course with new intentions of a fuller engagement with SEPA in the future.”

Information exchange

As well as delivering training to SEARS partners, SEPA is working with other stakeholders under the SEARS banner on an ambitious five year project to engage with rural land managers within 14 “priority catchments”.

SEPA selected these catchments due to the impact local land management activities have on diffuse water pollution, and the need to restore rivers to good ecological status to comply with the Water Framework Directive. Adopting a better regulation approach, SEPA staff walked the 14 catchments and identified the key areas where activities are likely to contribute to diffuse pollution.

The next stage involved more detailed engagement with land managers operating within the catchments. A pilot was developed in Ayrshire, where SEPA took advice from NFU Scotland, the SRPBA and the STFA to help run two on-farm workshops to raise awareness of diffuse pollution causes. Stakeholders were clear that the approach would be more successful if they took the lead role, instead of SEPA. As a result, the workshops were jointly facilitated by local stakeholders including NFU Scotland, SRPBA and SEARS partners, with the SEARS logo preferred as the most appropriate banner to advertise the events.
Feedback demonstrated that the two events in Ayrshire were very successful, with 124 farmers and advisers attending. Furthermore, organisers gathered excellent ideas about how to engage with farmers on a one-to-one basis on matters such as diffuse pollution and nutrient budgeting. This model has since been developed and used in other priority catchments, including Ugie, Tay and River South Esk.

**Good use of time**

Land manager David Cranstoun, who attended one of the diffuse pollution workshops in Ayrshire, reported that it was “... excellent, with a strong focus on the real issues affecting farmers. Having a vet there really helped to highlight the additional business benefits of fencing off water courses, for example to help prevent spread of disease. The workshop was also a really good way to educate farmers about funding for diffuse pollution measures, and highlight the positive benefits. All round, a brilliantly produced and informative session, and a really good use of my time.”
Improving Access to Services

Co-locations

Another way in which the SEARS approach is bringing partner organisations closer together is through the co-location of offices.

Co-location, in simple terms means sharing office space to make support services more efficient and improve communication and understanding between partners. The ultimate aim is to work more closely to deliver a more effective service to customers.

SEARS partners meet regularly to discuss their property requirements with other family members. As a result, decisions are taken with the requirements of SEARS in mind rather than the needs of individual organisations. This ensures that opportunities to improve services and deliver efficiencies are properly explored, and that decisions are taken with a longer-term view.

Two or more SEARS partners are now co-located in twenty buildings across the country, from Kirkwall in the north to Dumfries in the south, and from Inverurie in the east to Portree in the west. The co-locations take two basic forms:

1. new-build facilities, where partners in a particular area relocate to a purpose built office, and
2. re-location of one partner into spare capacity within the existing offices of another partner

Although a number of co-locations occupy modern offices, only two have been purpose built as shared offices from the outset - The Links Building at Golspie, and Inverdee House in Aberdeen.

The Links building was completed in early 2009 to accommodate SNH, SGRPID and FCS colleagues along with staff from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Community Energy Scotland. Inverdee House was completed about a year later, and was officially opened by then Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment in May 2010. Inverdee House accommodates staff from two of the SEARS partners - SEPA and SNH - as well as from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

Both these building projects were guided by a set of principles that cover the procurement, management and use of co-location offices. These principles set out how larger offices should be run, ways in which the space can be used most efficiently, how office services should be delivered, and how offices should be designed and managed in order to make them sustainable.
Considerable care was taken during the design and construction phases of these buildings to minimise their impact on the environment. This care is reflected in both buildings having achieved BREEAM\(^1\) (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) Excellent, and Energy Performance Certificate\(^2\) (EPC) class A ratings.

The measures taken at Inverdee House to deliver this level of performance include maximising use of natural daylight, ensuring high levels of insulation, heat recovery and rainwater harvesting, as well as installing a biomass boiler, a wind turbine, photovoltaic roof panels and a sustainable urban drainage system. Upon completion, Inverdee House became only the second building in Aberdeen to achieve an EPC class A rating and the fifth to achieve BREEAM Excellent.

The Links building is also notable for its extensive and innovative use of timber, which actually “locks-up” carbon from the atmosphere while it is growing. Because of the volume of timber used, The Links building’s net carbon emissions will be very significantly reduced.

Elsewhere, SEARS has created co-locations by making more efficient use of existing accommodation. This year staff from SEPA joined colleagues from SNH in their Dingwall office, and SGRPID at their Thurso office. These co-locations follow similar efficiency-driven co-locations at Inverness (SNH joined by Crofters Commission), Oban (SGRPID and AHVLA joined by SNH) and Balloch (Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park joined by SEPA), among others.

In late 2010, SEARS colleagues undertook a post-occupancy survey at the Golspie office to gather the views of staff on their new building and any differences that sharing accommodation with SEARS partners had made to the way they operate. 38% of respondents thought that co-location had improved the service they were able to deliver to their customers, 45% of respondents thought joint working had improved, 58% thought their understanding of the work of other partners had improved and 71% thought access to colleagues or information in partner organisations had improved.

---

1. The Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) is the leading and most widely used environmental assessment method for buildings. It sets the standard for best-practice in sustainable design and has become the de facto measure used to describe a building’s environmental performance.

2. Energy Performance Certificates state the energy efficiency of a building based on the standardised way in which the building is used, and provides the owner with a number of ways to improve efficiency.
Rural Hubs

The 2010 Royal Highland Show was an opportunity to announce another initiative to improve access to services - a pilot exercise in North East Scotland to test the concept of ‘Rural Hubs’.

The motivation behind Rural Hubs was to bring the delivery of services nearer to customers by allowing them access to the services of one partner from the offices of another. As well as the perceived customer benefit, this approach could be seen as making the SEARS offices more flexible and thereby improve efficiency. In some respects Rural Hubs were intended to provide the customer-focused benefits of co-location without having to plan for a new building.

SEARS customer research provided useful guidance on the form that Rural Hubs could take. However, it also showed that support for the concept was mixed. Therefore, it was decided to trial the concept at the existing offices of partners at Ballater, Elgin, Fraserburgh, Grantown-on-Spey, Huntly and Thainstone.

As well as the announcement at the Royal Highland Show, the launch of Rural Hubs was promoted through The Scottish Farmer and on the SEARS web portal.

Since the launch it has become clear that there is very limited customer demand for Rural Hubs, and consequently the focus may well shift to the benefits the Hubs might possibly deliver to SEARS partners, by allowing staff to work more flexibly across a variety of locations. The pilot will conclude in summer 2011, at which point SEARS will carry out a full evaluation.
Communicating the SEARS Approach

Communication is vital to the success of the SEARS programme, and the third year of the programme brought with it an opportunity to give the communication strategy a fresh focus.

Informing rural land managers and stakeholders about the benefits and successes of SEARS remains a key objective. However, further efforts have been made this year to communicate with staff in each of the eight SEARS partner organisations about the benefits of working in partnership, to help the ‘SEARS approach’ to become business as usual.

This refreshed focus has been evident in the content of monthly news updates published on the SEARS web portal, which continues to provide the main channel for communicating with staff and land managers about SEARS work. Items in 2010-11 included SEARS’ presence at the Royal Highland Show, progress on Rural Hubs, joint phytophthora inspections, staff health and safety guidance, and the launch of the revised biosecurity protocol.

Other methods of communicating with colleagues included a workshop, held in SNH’s Battleby office in March 2011. This proved an ideal opportunity to communicate face to face with staff and gather their views about the future direction of the partnership. Colleagues from across the SEARS family were asked to identify and discuss the most promising strategic options for SEARS in the future, and how their organisations could best ensure that the good work continues. The results showed considerable appetite for working in partnership in the future, and will help to set the direction for the partnership in coming years.

Joint working

Cairngorms National Park Authority and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park are a good example of partnership joint working. The organisations are now sharing many services and posts, providing efficiencies for both organisations and developing a closer working relationship. The parks now share a Corporate Services Director, a procurement manager and education post as well as providing ongoing arrangements for senior officers to represent both organisations at meetings and events. They have also undertaken joint procurement on a number of service contracts and the organisations have developed consistent HR policies and procedures. The parks are now in the early development stages of a joint IT strategy and are considering other possible areas for working together.

But the focus hasn’t all been on internal work. This year, SEARS has responded to a call from stakeholders for an easy way to find out about the key dates and deadlines for application forms, licences etc that land managers need to observe for each of the eight partners. A new ‘dates for your diary’ article, developed in partnership with NFU Scotland, is published each month in the NFU Scotland Scottish Farming Leader magazine and the SRPBA’s Land Business magazine, as well as on the SEARS portal. Stakeholder feedback has been positive, and efforts are being made to secure coverage in a wider range of publications.
Magazine column

“Farmers are bombarded with information on the many rules and schemes that can affect their business and keeping track of all relevant information can be a struggle. In conjunction with SEARS, we now produce a regular column in our monthly Scottish Farming Leader magazine that goes to all of our 9000 members. The column lists all the key dates and deadlines for the coming weeks and months, any new changes to scheme rules and key actions that farmers should be considering for their business that month. This information is delivered in a clear and concise format and is an excellent tool for helping farmers keep their calendars up to date.”

Bob Carruth
NFU Scotland’s Communications Director

The SEARS Communication and Education Project Board has drawn up a new events strategy to ensure that all SEARS organisations seek opportunities to work together when attending events, including the Royal Highland Show and Scone Game Fair. A publications protocol was developed to ensure partners explore opportunities to produce joint documents, for example the SEARS biosecurity protocol, and encouraging partners to promote publications from the other SEARS bodies.

Finally, the SEARS Programme also received national recognition in the corridors of Whitehall this year for its services to the public. The Delivery Design team was ‘highly commended’ in the Public Service Award category in this year’s Civil Service Awards, narrowly missing out on a place on the shortlist. The awards panel judged only 22 teams out of 823 nominations to be highly commended across the 14 award categories, and the commendation recognises the team’s vital role in improving services offered by the SEARS family and reducing the burden of bureaucracy on rural land managers.
What We Didn’t Do, and Why

In keeping with the candid approach to previous SEARS annual reviews, a list of the opportunities explored by SEARS colleagues which did not come to fruition is provided below. Thankfully, as with last year, there is little to report.

CAR registration in designated sites

Originally SEARS hoped to streamline, or even eliminate, the need for consultation between SNH and SEPA by agreeing a shared approach to Controlled Activity Regulations (CAR) registrations for designated sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). However, progress on work around this was slow, due in part to the need for any new procedures to satisfy two separate legal frameworks. SEPA and SNH will continue to work together in 2011 to review the registration conditions and develop the rules built into a GIS Screening Tool to ensure SAC features are protected.

Integrated ranger service

The delivery of an integrated Ranger Service for Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park was explored. This idea was met with wide-ranging support, but the timescales involved will not allow for delivery in the immediate future.

Climate change signposting

It was hoped that some clarity could be brought to the complex area of providing scientific advice on climate change through the SEARS Frontline Delivery Project. There are a number of bodies offering such advice, some of them SEARS partners. However when this issue was explored it became apparent that it went very much wider than SEARS, was wider than the programme’s current scope, and would be more effectively advanced elsewhere.

Extending the use of SEARS principles

The SEARS Frontline Delivery Project invited Historic Scotland to get involved with SEARS, and in particular to share in SEARS’ consultation principles, which were felt to be readily transferable to interactions between SEARS partners and a number of other organisations. Historic Scotland is still considering how best to engage with the SEARS partnership.

Abstraction regimes

We explored the possibility for SGRPID to carry out abstraction inspections on behalf of SEPA as part of their existing inspection regimes, while SGRPID staff are on-site anyway. However, limited cross-over was found between the abstraction regime requirements and any existing SGRPID inspection regime. There would therefore have been negligible customer benefit so the opportunity was not progressed.
Conclusion

Over the lifetime of the Scottish Parliament from 2007-11, SEARS has been regarded in many quarters as a success story.

That success is, for the most part, due to the visible ways in which customer experience has been improved by reducing burdens, simplifying processes and improving access to services. However, there have also been significant benefits for the SEARS partners themselves. The most important has been the improved relationship with stakeholders and customers, but there is also improved inter-agency understanding, trust and dialogue. SEARS staff now have a better idea of each others’ roles and there is increased capability across the family to tackle challenges together.

The challenge is now to make the SEARS approach ‘business as usual’. Partners need to continue to put customers at the heart of service design and delivery, and must not stop looking for opportunities to reduce burdens and improve customer experience. Working in partnership must become the norm. SEARS should continue to base changes to service delivery on solid evidence. And the partnership must be willing to share the learning from evolving the SEARS approach with other organisations and institutions.

Our next step is to set up a joint industry and agency working group, involving the Food Standards Agency for Scotland, local authorities and Government bodies, to develop proposals to reduce on-farm inspections and bureaucracy.

We look forward to exploring any opportunities identified by the group which have potential to secure further benefits for land managers across Scotland.
For Further Information

Scotland’s Environmental and Rural Services (SEARS)
t: 08452 30 20 50
w: www.sears.scotland.gov.uk
e: info@sears.scotland.gov.uk

Animal Health & Veterinary Laboratories Agency
Block C, Government Buildings
Whittington Road, Worcester
WR5 2LQ
t: 01905 763355
f: 01905 768851
e: Ah.corporate_centre@ahvla.gsi.gov.uk

Cairngorms National Park Authority
14 The Square
Grantown on Spey
PH26 3HG
t: 01479 873535
f: 01479 873527
e: enquiries@cairngorms.co.uk

Crofters Commission
Great Glen House
Leachkin Road
Inverness
IV3 8NW
t: 01463 663450
f: 01463 725067
e: info@crofterscommission.org.uk

Forestry Commission for Scotland
Silvan House
231 Corstorphine Road
Edinburgh
EH12 7AT
t: 0845 3673787
f: 0131 314 6152
e: fcscotland@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority
Carrochan
Carrochan Road
Balloch
G83 8EG
t: 01389 722600
f: 01389 722633
e: info@lochlomond-trossachs.org

Scottish Environment Protection Agency
Corporate Office
Erskine Court
Castle Business Park
Stirling
FK9 4TR
t: 01786 457700
f: 01786 446885

Scottish Government, Rural Payments & Inspections Directorate
Pentland House
47 Robb’s Loan
Edinburgh
EH1 4 1TY
t: 0131 556 8400
f: 01397 795001
e: ceu@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Scottish Natural Heritage
Great Glen House
Leachkin Road
Inverness
IV3 8NW
t: 01463 725000
f: 01463 725067
e: enquiries@snh.gov.uk