

Community Ownership of Woodlands

Introduction

Community woodlands are growing and thriving in Scotland, with over 200 communities across the country engaged in owning or managing woodlands. The community woodland sector is extremely diverse, in terms of:

- The communities themselves, which vary in scale, capacity and experience
- The woodlands, which range from 1ha to nearly 1000ha, include conifer plantations and ancient semi-natural woods and can be found everywhere from the middle of our largest cities to the Highlands and Islands
- The tenure arrangements under which they operate, which include ownership, lease and a range of management agreements
- The activities of the community, which cover a range of economic, social, environmental objectives, which evolve and develop over time.

There are a number of possible triggers for community interest in woodlands:

- A desire to generate economic activity: community forests can become a hub for rural development
- Concern about neglect of a valued local resource: windblow, lack of path maintenance
- Ideas for activity in a woodland: forest school or a community woodfuel business.
- The announcement of the sale of a woodland e.g. by Forest Enterprise Scotland
- Desire to create a woodland where the community has none.

Whatever the start point or circumstances, the common principle for all community woodland groups is that they are all seeking to manage their woodlands for the benefit of their local communities.

If you are considering setting up a community woodland there is a well-established process and much support available. You'll need to identify, or create, an appropriate community organisation to take the project forward, well-developed, feasible and sustainable proposals for the use of the land and you'll need to be able to demonstrate community support.

Establishing a Community Woodland

Community woodland groups generally go through a three-stage process. During the **development** stage, which can take anything from 6 months to a couple of years, the initial idea is clarified, formalised and consulted on until it becomes a fully-fledged proposal. Depending on the objectives of the group and the status and inclination of the existing landowner, the acquisition stage may involve using legal mechanisms to acquire the land, and/or fundraising to meet the costs of purchase. Once the woodland is acquired the group moves into the management stage, delivering a range of social, environmental and economic benefits for their community. This note focuses mainly on the development stage, but it is important to understand the requirements of the acquisition process and the implications of long-term management because they shape the development process.

Development

In the development stage you need to answer some fundamental questions:

- What is the community body and what community does it represent?
- What are you seeking to achieve?
- How do you propose to achieve these objectives?
- Who will do the work and where will the money come from?
- Will you buy or lease or manage the woodland in partnership?
- Does the community support the project?

To some extent these questions are inter-linked, and the answers can take a while to emerge. Most groups seek advice and assistance from the [Community Woodlands Association](#) at this stage. Projects looking to buy or lease woodland will usually need to engage external consultants to carry out feasibility work and/or community consultation and then draw up a business plan which becomes the key supporting document for asset transfer request, applications to funders etc.

Defining the community

Most community woodland groups are communities of geography: that is, membership is open to all those who live in a defined area, or more precisely, all those registered to vote in local elections. There is no rule as to how big your community area should be, but it is helpful if it corresponds to a coherent community or area that people recognise, and it should be appropriate and proportionate to the asset. Some groups are primarily communities of interest: e.g. mountain bikers or green woodworkers, but these organisations do not have access to the same range of funds.

The community body

Sometimes community woodlands are developed by well-established community bodies (e.g. Development Trusts) with a track record in other activities, but many begin life as an informal steering group; sometimes standalone, sometimes as a working group of an existing community group or the community council. As the project develops and grants are sought a constituted group with a bank account must be established. If you want to buy or lease land through one of the formal mechanisms, or seek funding from e.g. the [Scottish Land Fund](#), this body will need to become incorporated and meet a number of criteria (open, democratic, geographically defined community membership, non-profit-distributing and with sustainable development objectives). A formal structure gives the group an identity, continuity, credibility and a means of establishing and agreeing common objectives.

CWA info note 2 describes the various organisational structures and company forms which are available to Community Woodland Groups and outlines the eligibility requirements of the Forest Enterprise Scotland Community Asset transfer Scheme and the Scottish Land Fund

What are you seeking to achieve?

Community ownership or management is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve your objectives and deliver benefits to your community and the wider world. For example one of the main funders, The Big Lottery Fund, will expect you to express this in terms of aims and outcomes, where:

- Your aim is the purpose of your project (e.g. “to engage young people positively in the community”)
- Your outcomes are the specific changes that you want to result from your project. (e.g. “fewer young people involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour as a result of participating in a range of positive activities”)

The public benefits your project will deliver are sometimes categorised as social, environmental and/or economic to demonstrate the project’s contribution to sustainable development. In practice these may overlap: enhancing recreational facilities (“social”) might also boost tourism (“economic”), creating a woodfuel business (“economic”) could help reduce carbon emissions (“environmental”).

You should try to phrase your outcomes positively, describing the changes that you want to bring about by community management. It may well be that some people are motivated simply by saving a much loved local amenity but most funders will want to contribute towards positive change rather than maintaining the status quo. In particular if you are perceived as motivated solely by the prevention of development then it may be difficult to attract external support.

Tenure options

During the development stage you need to decide whether purchasing the woodland is the right option to achieve your objectives and aspirations. Ownership has advantages (not least that the Scottish Land Fund only supports purchase) but is not necessary for all objectives or the best option in all circumstances. A lease or management agreement may be a better option if:

- Your objectives are limited and short-term, e.g. you want to carry out some volunteer activities,
- The site has significant unquantified liabilities, e.g. the woodland is on a former landfill site,
- Your project has a very specific non-woodland focus e.g. a hydro scheme

For small or new groups who are concerned about their capacity to take on full responsibility for woodland management it may be easier to start with a management agreement or lease and then purchase the woodland in the future.

Your proposals

If one of your aims is to increase the opportunities for local children to experience and learn about the local environment, then you should say how you intend to deliver this, who will do the work, how much will it cost and how will it be paid for. Likewise, if you aim to set up a woodfuel business, you will need to demonstrate that this is feasible, that you know how much timber you will produce, what the local demand might be, and how you will organise the logistics.

Whilst it’s unlikely at this stage that you will have secured the money to deliver your future projects, or to meet the long-term costs of owning and managing a woodland (such as insurance, path and fence maintenance) and running a company (accountancy, office bills, etc), you should be able to say how much your plans will cost and where you expect to get the money from. If you intend applying for grants then you need to show that you are eligible to apply.

It’s also important that you demonstrate that your organisation has the skills and capacity to deliver your project (or know where you can buy in these skills), and that you understand the liabilities and responsibilities you will be taking on. For woodlands this will include outlining how you will manage health and safety issues arising from public recreation, harvesting programmes, etc.

During the development stage it’s likely that discussion and consultation will produce a wide range of possible projects for your woodland. It’s not necessary to work through the details of every potential project, some of which might require significant additional feasibility work, planning consent etc., but you should be able to lay out your initial proposals for the management of the woodland and give an outline of your longer term plans too.

Community consultation and support

Community woodland proposals are typically nurtured by a small steering group and, post-acquisition, often managed by a core group of directors and volunteers, however, regulators and funders will want to know that your proposals have broad-based support within your defined community. Evidence of this support can take a variety of forms, including:

- Letters of support from community organisations and locally representative bodies such as community councils
- Petition signatures
- Attendance at public meetings (and indications of approval of proposals)
- A ballot (this is only formally required for the Community Right to Buy, and would be a costly and time consuming exercise, but might be worthwhile for large and/or controversial projects)
- Responses to consultations on your proposals

The consultation process needs to inform community members, and present a realistic view of the proposals, but not be closed off: it's important not to present the steering group's plans as a fait accompli, and to leave space to accommodate good ideas which might arise from the consultation process.

In small communities it may be possible to connect with everyone personally, but elsewhere this is challenging, and groups typically use a range of methods: mailshots, public meetings, social media, etc., to ensure that everyone who wants to has the opportunity to comment. Public support for community projects is rarely if ever unanimous, but you will need to demonstrate that you have addressed any significant concerns that community members may have about your proposals.

Business plan

All this information is drawn together into a business plan, which is usually compiled by external contractors working to the community group's specifications. The plan will demonstrate the feasibility of your proposals, prioritising and sequencing them: you can't do everything at once! The business plan will be a key document to support your asset transfer request and funding applications, so it's important that it is written with these in mind and answers all the questions your prospective funders might ask.

A business plan for a community woodland will usually incorporate a draft woodland management

plan: once you own (or lease) the wood you will need to formalise this plan with Forestry Commission Scotland if you wish to access the funding available through the Forestry Grant Scheme. Plan requirements vary according to the size and nature of the woodland and the grant funds sought.

CWA info note 5 covers the process of compiling a Woodland Management Plan, describes the format and contents, and signposts to sources of more detailed information – appended to this publication.

Acquisition

The acquisition process you will follow will depend on the current landowner. If this is a Scottish public body, such as a Local Authority, Forestry Commission Scotland etc, then the Community Empowerment Act 2015 Asset Transfer gives eligible community bodies the right to request to buy, lease or occupy the land, and lays out the criteria by which public bodies must assess such requests. Forest Enterprise Scotland, which anticipates a significant number of requests a year, has developed a bespoke [Community Asset Transfer Scheme](#), whilst other public bodies may have a more ad-hoc approach.

If the landowner is a private individual or company, or a UK-wide public body like the Ministry of Defence or the Crown Estates, the Asset Transfer provisions do not apply and you will need to negotiate a sale (or lease, or management agreement). If the landowner is unwilling to negotiate, you could register an interest in the land using the Community Right to Buy provisions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003: your community will have the opportunity to buy the land should it ever come on the market. More recent legislation, which has not yet come into force, will give communities the right to buy land which is abandoned or neglected, detrimental to the community or for the purposes of sustainable development.

> [Community Rights](#)

CWA info note 3 outlines the statutory rights provided by the Community Empowerment and Land Reform Acts and describes the requirements and process of the Forest Enterprise Scotland Community Asset Transfer Scheme

Management

Once you have acquired your woodland you can finalise your Woodland Management Plan and get it approved by Forestry Commission Scotland. The type of plan will vary according to the size and location of the woodland: they typically present a 25-year vision and a shorter term workplan detailing planned activities in the first five or ten years, and are reviewed on a five year cycle.

If you own or lease the woodland you will be responsible for the safety of visitors and volunteers, and will need to obtain public liability and employer's liability insurance, as well as insuring any tools and equipment you own. Woodlands can also be insured against fire, storms, etc. Contractors (e.g. for harvesting) would usually be expected to carry their own insurances, but you will need to confirm this and check their documents.

You should carry out risk assessments for all activities and events, identifying hazards associated with an activity, estimating the degree of risk associated and specifying precautions to be taken to avoid the hazard or reduce the risk. If your wood has high levels of public access and/or considerable infrastructure (paths, boardwalks, bridges, etc.) it would be good practice to establish a system of regular safety inspections to ensure that any faults are recognised and rectified timeously.

Most community woodlands have a range of social, environmental and economic objectives: the various types of activities or development projects have different financial profiles and characteristics and thus have different management and investment requirements.

- Woodland management to produce timber & woodfuel: these operations may require investment in equipment but should generate a surplus.
- Recreation and Biodiversity: usually grant dependent but provide valuable opportunities for volunteer input. Public access is important to foster a sense of ownership in the community.
- Education, health projects: often managed through contracts and service level agreements with public bodies, these require long term development and investment in facilities and skilled staff.
- Built development: projects such as renewables, housing, woodland burials, etc., need detailed feasibility studies, external contractors and capital investment, but offer potential long term returns.

Many aspects of woodland management, especially on a small scale, can be carried out by volunteers (who must still be adequately trained, equipped and supervised), however, larger scale and more specialised operations like timber harvesting will usually be undertaken by private sector contractors. These works can be tendered individually, or the community woodland group may enter into a longer term relationship with a private sector forest management company.

For groups with multiple objectives and aspirations, effective planning and management is critical. Many larger groups have employed development officers to take a management role, relieving the burden on volunteer directors and providing skills not available within the organisation.

[>Staff Recruitment](#)

CWA info note 8 discusses the options for community woodlands to employ or contract staff in management roles

Funding

There is a range of funding sources available to support aspects of the work of community woodland groups, some of the most commonly accessed are listed below. This is not an exhaustive list and the brief profiles provided are for illustration: you should always check the eligibility criteria and guidance provided before applying. Note: funding schemes are liable to change at short notice. The information in this note is believed correct at 1 August 2017

Funding for project development:

The Forestry Commission Scotland [Community Fund](#) supports community groups and organisations that encourage people to use woods more.

The Scottish Community Alliance [Community Learning Exchange](#) funds visits by members of one community to another community project.

Funding for acquisition

The [Scottish Land Fund](#) supports acquisition of land by community organisations and can also support pre-acquisition feasibility and provide post-acquisition revenue funding.

Communities have been successful in securing additional funding from a range of sources, notably charitable trusts and windfarm community benefit distributors. Most communities will raise some of the funds required through events, donations and subscriptions. The Community Ownership Support Service has produced a very useful factsheet on fundraising "[Beyond the usual suspects](#)".

Where communities have bought larger scale commercial forests they have in some cases used part of the timber value to leverage the buyout; there are a variety of possible models for this, including taking out a loan and preselling the timber to forest management companies.

Funding for woodland management

The [Forestry Grant Scheme](#), part of the Scottish Rural Development Programme, supports a range of woodland management operations, and support public recreation proposals in Woods in and Around Towns (WIAT = within 1km of settlements with a population >2,000). Public recreation projects in woodlands outwith the WIAT zone can be funded through the [Improving Public Access](#) options of the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme.

Funding for development projects

A range of funders for specific projects, including:

- Big Lottery Fund: [Awards for All](#) supports small community projects with grants of between £300 and £10,000
- Big Lottery Fund: [Community Assets](#) supports community projects to develop land and buildings with grants from £10,000 to £1M
- The [Heritage Lottery Fund](#) has a range of heritage programmes with different scales and focus.
- [LEADER](#) provides rural development funding distributed by 21 local action groups
- Community woodland groups have received support from a number of charitable trusts, including the [Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#) and the [Robertson Trust](#)
- Several supermarket chains have established local grant programmes to distribute funds from the carrier bag levy, e.g. [Tesco Bags of Help](#) and the Coop have a [local community fund](#)
- [Foundation Scotland](#) has a range of funds for community projects
- The [Climate Challenge Fund](#) provides grants for community-led organisations to tackle climate change
- The [Coastal Communities Fund](#) supports projects promoting sustainable economic growth and jobs in coastal communities

Funding for specific projects may also be available from Scottish Government bodies such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage, or from Local Authorities.

Resources

The [Community Woodlands Association](#) supports community woodland groups to achieve their aspirations, providing direct support, information, training and facilitating networking amongst Scotland's 200 community woodland groups.

The [Community Ownership Support Service](#) helps community-based groups in Scotland to take on land or building assets and support public bodies wishing to transfer assets.

Examples of community-owned or managed woodlands.

Abriachan Forest Trust

www.abriachan.org.uk



Abriachan Forest Trust (AFT) is a charitable company limited by guarantee which purchased 534 ha of forest and open hill ground from Forest Enterprise in 1998. The Trust has created a network of paths and mountain bike trails, restored riparian (close to water sources) zones, increased native woodland cover and has an ongoing harvesting programme which produces timber and woodfuel. AFT has been a pioneer in forest education and skills training, providing innovative education opportunities for a range of young and adult client groups. The Trust has a purpose built forest classroom providing year round teaching whatever the weather and a number of sites throughout the forest which offer exciting teaching and learning opportunities for all groups.

Findhorn Hinterland Trust

www.findhornhinterland.org



The Findhorn Hinterland Trust (FHT) is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) which works with landowners and other stakeholders in the

local area to help integrate land management across woodland, gorse and heath, and grassland. FHT carries out a range of conservation and educational activities, with monthly volunteer work parties and gatherings for special events. The Trust has a small apiary, which produces honey and other bee products, and a demonstration Edible Woodland Garden has been developed. A small green burial ground in the middle of a 12ha woodland provides a local community resource that helps fund the work of the Trust.

Kilfinan Community Forest Company

www.kilfinancommunityforest.co.uk



Kilfinan Community Forest Company is a charitable company limited by guarantee which owns 560ha of Acharossan Forest purchased from Forestry Commission Scotland in 2010 and 2015. In addition to timber harvesting, forest school and improved recreation provision KCFC has carried out a wide range of developments, including allotments and community composting, sawmill and firewood processing facility and a 75kW hydro scheme. A forest centre is under construction and KCFC is developing affordable housing proposals: the first plots have just been made available to self-builders.