

Argyll and Bute Council: Duchess Wood Local Nature Reserve Committee

Queries about the financial position in relation to work in the Wood

Paper by the Friends of Duchess Wood (FODW)

Introduction

1. This paper is the result of FODW's continuing uncertainty about the current financial arrangements for Duchess Wood (DW). This issue has been discussed on a number of occasions, but some issues remains unclear, and this uncertainty is inhibiting action. We would be grateful for further discussion and clarification.

2. We have re-examined the management documents for DW and the minutes of the DWLNRC since its inception. There are three main financial elements:

- a. The Argyll and Bute Council notional fund (at the last information, £13,500) earmarked by Argyll and Bute Council (A&BC) for Duchess Wood and transferred between financial years.
- b. Grants to support the 5-year Management Plan, in two categories: major grants sought and managed by A&BC through its agent LCG, and minor grants obtained by FODW.
- c. Day to day support by A&BC from normal running costs, and from FODW from its own funds

Some background

3. The Management Agreement (signed 10.12.10)

It is worth recalling that the current Management Agreement requires the Authority to undertake, at its own expense, the works specified in Part II of the Schedule. These include (in summary) the maintenance of the car park, various works of woodland management, maintenance of the footpaths; enhancement of facilities, and inspecting trees for signs of disease or damage.

4. The Management Plan (approved 9.10.12)

The Management Plan sets out a wide range of work to be undertaken to deliver the broad requirements of the Management Agreement.

5. The Funding, Implementation and Delivery Plan (never formally approved?)

This sets out in detail the major projects and subsidiary works that will help deliver the Management Plan.

6. Suggested Work Activities (rev 18.2.14)

This paper detailed specific actions which could be undertaken by the different groups active in the Wood.

Maintenance

7. Work in the Wood mainly falls into the categories of maintenance and enhancement, and they frequently overlap. Considering maintenance first -

8. Over the last year or so, A&BC has

- a. Continued to uplift from the rubbish bins
- b. Filled potholes in the car park
- c. Dealt with a partly collapsed tree root plate beside the northern path
- d. Dealt with pine trees in the NE corner of the "hammerhead", at the corner of Duchess Drive and MacLeod Drive; a part fallen tree half way up the east path; a tree which fell onto the Thurgood bridge; and with a tree which fell across the southern path leading to Rhu Road Higher.
- e. Worked towards eradication of Japanese Knotweed
- f. Through Lower Clyde Greenspace initiated two TCV Green Gym events.

9. Before the signing of the new Management Agreement in December 2010, the late Cllr Al Reay reached an agreement within the Council that in addition to more routine work, a sum of £14,000 would be set aside to support maintenance work in the Wood. This was to be a one-off sum but could be carried across financial years. This sum was then supplemented by £3,500 transferred from LCG.

10. At the DWLNRC meeting on 6 August 2012, the Chair reported that this fund was now "notional money" which could be drawn on as needed to meet management requirements for the Wood. A register of expenditure was being maintained and would be circulated. FODW expressed concern over the nature of this fund and the continued lack of clarity over how it should be managed. The DWLNRC meeting on 8 November 2013 considered a report from the Service Development Officer outlining the fund "which was created to allow for maintenance required on an exceptional basis", and setting out clearly the sums which has already been spent (on culvert work and contractors for storm damage work). The paper confirmed that the overall budget then stood at £13,500. The paper also summarised some of the work which it was anticipated would be undertaken, and the meeting agreed that further clarity should be sought on what constituted "exceptional". In addition the meeting agreed that the maintenance of the culvert and the all-abilities path should be paid for by the Council.

11. FODW pointed out other commitments which had been made in the past and a further joint visit to the Wood took place in September 2014 when four priorities were identified:

- a. The trees overhanging the Strathclyde Court garages (both sides)
- b. The three large ash trees (and possibly others) beside the back garden fence of No 22 Duchess Park
- c. The dead sycamore beside the bench at the top of the east side main path (topping and taking off branches)
- d. The erosion of the downstream roadway over the culvert leading north from the car park

None of this work has yet been undertaken, and it would be useful to have a further update on any proposed work and any difficulties which have emerged in the management of the budgets. Other longer term issues were also discussed such as general boundary issues, including the stability of the pine group in the NE corner of the hammerhead area, and some of the pines in the main pine area north of Rhu Road Higher, especially those close to Strathclyde Court; and clearing some of the sycamore-dominant areas (although this work includes elements of enhancement).

12. The question of the all-abilities path has exercised FODW a great deal, and although a commitment appears to have been made at the November 2013 meeting that this would be taken on by the Council, nothing appears to have happened. Because this is maintenance of an existing facility it has been difficult to identify other funding sources although FODW has recently secured a part contribution to the reinstatement of the path and is still actively searching for others. The all-abilities path is important for all wheelchair/baby carriage users and those with restricted mobility; the flower walk which FODW has devised and marked also mostly follows this route.

13. The replacement of the SW bridge has also been the subject of much discussion and in the autumn it seemed that a new bridge might be the best solution. However further site visits to evaluate the topography and consideration of the needs of horse riders has convinced FODW and Community Payback staff (who could carry out the work) that a culvert here would be the best option. When a bridge was being considered, Council staff agreed to share the material costs with FODW. Now that a culvert is seen as the best solution, the costs of infill material and stone for the facing are the main barriers to progress, and again it would be helpful to know if this cost could be met from Council funds. This issue is important if the Wood is to be used for a light display and would also improve access for an outdoor nursery.

14. More generally, FODW has been concerned that it has funded what is effectively maintenance work from its own funds or small grants – for example the reinstatement of the steps on either side of the Thurgood Bridge and the fencing beside the car park. Most of these tasks could not have been undertaken without the assistance of the Community Payback team. Perhaps if the mechanisms for securing Council support were clearer, this would not have been necessary.

15. In summary then it would be helpful to understand the position in relation to whether the Council fund can support the following action (it is assumed that Knotweed eradication will continue):

- a. Deal with all the priorities in para 11 above**
- b. Reinstate the surface of the all-abilities path**
- c. Provide the materials for the construction of a new culvert over the burn in the SW corner**
- d. Deal with other sensitive boundary issues.**
- e. Although the car park surface was improved last year, it continues to deteriorate and a more permanent solution is needed (and this is a specific condition in the Management Agreement).**

Enhancement

16. Although enhancement is an integral part of the Management Agreement, A&BC has always said that any major enhancements can only be done with external financial support, and the excellent network of paths which exist in the Wood and around Helensburgh are testament to the success of this policy in past years. However many of the earlier sources of funding appear to have dried up and other potential sources such as the National Lottery appear not to be available because the Wood is privately owned (though publicly managed). It has also been accepted that major grants would be sought by LCG acting on behalf of A&BC.

17. The Management Plan recognises the need for professional forestry advice in establishing the best action to improve the Wood, and FODW believes that this would still be a valuable input. This has been emphasised by the most recent high winds which have brought down more trees in the Wood, and the cumulative effect of the many storms since May 2011 is that parts of the Wood look increasingly unkempt and unmanaged. In one small area (one of those identified as a possible glade) 15 quite substantial trees are now lying fully or partly down, and just to the south another 15 have fallen. The Wood is well in excess of the three fallen trees per hectare minimum suggested to help promote biodiversity.

18. The Management Plan, the Funding, Implementation and Delivery Plan, and the Suggested Work Activities paper all recognise and support the major objective of returning the Wood to a more native composition through selective felling and replanting, and areas for the creation of glades have been clearly identified. But this work cannot be undertaken without significant financial support (indicative costs were obtained earlier). **It is not clear to FODW whether any major sources of funding are available. It would be helpful if LCG or Council officers could confirm if any such sources currently exist or are about to become available again, and if any do exist, what action is being taken, or needs to be taken, to try to secure funding for a major woodland management and enhancement initiative.** FODW would support any such initiative; much of the work that FODW undertakes is effectively day-to-day management of the Wood and enhancement of its facilities.

19. We would be grateful for further discussion and clarification.

Stewart Campbell, Chair FODW

5 February 2015