

Duchess Wood Local Nature Reserve

Opportunities for Management

This report is intended to address the future management of the LNR in terms of the actions outlined in the current Management Plan. Previously submitted papers by the Friends of Duchess Wood (FODW) have indicated a perceived lack of clarity in terms of how to move certain objectives forward, and it is hoped to address some of these concerns. Additionally, the current Management Plan has been held somewhat in abeyance awaiting the launch of the new Forestry Commission Grant Scheme, which has only recently become active.

It is written within the context of the current management hierarchy of Duchess Wood LNR, in terms of its document hierarchy (as opposed to its decision making hierarchy)

That Hierarchy is

1. Management Agreement
2. Management Plan
3. Implementation Plan
4. Grant sources

1. The Management Agreement

The Management Agreement is a legal document between the woodland owners, Luss estates, and Argyll and Bute Council, who have been willing to date to fulfil a management role. No other signatories were involved. It sets out the legal status for management, and also references some specific management outcomes that the Council had been keen to obtain.

The agreement, running until 2019, was written and signed on 10th December 2010, at a time when the LNR Management Plan 2006/11 was still active. With regards to the specific management outcomes detailed, the Management Agreement clearly references this work as being that specified in the Management Plan 2006/11. This Management Plan 2006/11 is explicitly referenced in the Agreement and indeed it is listed as an appendix to the Legal Agreement itself.

This work formed the basis for the programme tackled through a WIAT Grant from the Forestry Commission, which was completed in 2011. Thus the work referenced within the Management Agreement has already been largely achieved, in terms of the car park having been improved (the creation of the parking bays being a significant improvement on the previous casual arrangement), footpaths improved, benches, interpretation and certain woodland management activities undertaken.

Luss Estates have confirmed that they are happy with the current condition of the woodland in terms of the Management Agreement.

Therefore it is important to realise that the Management Agreement, which references past management plans, is not a commitment to implement works suggested in the current Management Plan, which, although perhaps desirable, would be heavily dependent on external funding. This need for external funding to achieve the specified aims is an overarching statement in the current Management Plan.

2. The Management Plan

The Management Plan 2006/11, which formed the basis of the work programme referenced within the Legal Agreement, was replaced in 2012 by the current Management Plan. This sets out the aims and objectives for the LNR over a 5 year period, including woodland management, access provision, interpretation and community involvement.

This Management Plan, approved in 2012, is the main guiding document for the woodland and places the woodland objectives into a series of policies. It has been much discussed before, has been approved by the LNR Committee and hence there is no further need for justification in this paper.

3. Funding, implementation and delivery plan

This plan sought to extract the main policies for the woodland from the Management Plan, and place them into a framework that clearly showed the physical and developmental works necessary to achieve them.

The central purposes of this plan are to identify

- what needs to be implemented
- by whom it should be implemented
- when it needs to be implemented
- where resources might be obtained

This document adopted a themed approach and placed actions required by the Management Plan into those themes. The reasoning behind this was to show a multi-disciplinary approach to the woodland development, which was likely to be attractive to a range of funders who are now increasingly keen to demonstrate additional outcomes from their support. Estimated costs were applied where possible.

There is a need to revisit this document for several reasons;

1. Some elements of the work will either have changed or been achieved already
2. Costs will need to be updated to reflect the passage of time
3. The prioritisation of activities suggested in the document may have changed
4. The document will be an extremely useful tool in accessing the new Forestry Commission Grant Scheme. However, this scheme is heavily prescriptive and we may wish to adapt the document to best fit with the FC guidelines.

4.a Sources of Grant funding – Forestry Commission

The major source of funding for the various actions emerging from the Management Plan has always seemed likely to be the Forestry Commission and their Woodland In and Around Towns fund (WIAT). At the time of writing the Management Plan, and in the subsequent 3 years, the old WIAT fund has been closed to applications while a new grant programme was being developed. This pause in the major likely funder for actions in the Duchess Wood LNR has been the major contributor to the lack of progress to date on the implementation of actions.

In March 2015, the Forestry Commission launched its new grant programme which featured a restructured WIAT programme. This fund is now open for applications, and will support a range of woodland enhancement activities.

Support will be provided for applications that can:

- bring neglected woodlands into management
- develop opportunities to use and enjoy existing and newly created woodlands
- enhance woodland sites supported under previous programmes

It is a requirement that any such works are guided by an approved (by the FC) management plan. An online template is provided for this, and grant support is available for the writing of the approved Management Plan. For Duchess Wood this would probably involve simply redrafting the existing Management Plan to fit the FC template. There are advantages in this as the timescale of grant awarded will be governed by the timescale of the management plan submitted. By having a new, redrafted 5 year plan, we can be eligible for 5 years funding.

The new WIAT programme is prescriptive in its approach, offering flat rates of payment for specific activities and specifying defined methods for each activity. So, for example, to fell a large tree to waste on site (i.e. not to extract the timber) attracts a grant of £290. It then offers the further method statement;

This is for felling an individual tree (greater than 40 centimetres diameter at breast height).

Your Woods In and Around Towns Operational Plan map must clearly identify where the tree to be felled is located and a rationale (including safety survey data for the tree if appropriate) for felling must be detailed in the plan. You may require [felling licence](#) approval for this operation prior to starting work.

Fell tree to a low stump and chip branch wood. Stems to be sectioned and stacked safely.

Cut main stems into sections not greater than three metres in length. Stack timber to a height not exceeding three metres, and away from paths and watercourses

This is for felling an individual tree (greater than 40 centimetres diameter at breast height).

For some activities to be undertaken in the Duchess Wood LNR, it is unlikely that the grant rates shown will meet the full costs of contractor led work. The rates for tree felling above are an indication of this. However, a rough estimate of the grant attracted for the resurfacing of the all-abilities path is up to £8,000, although this figure will be influenced by the current condition of the path which may be viewed as currently good. Thus it can be seen that some activities may have a shortfall in funding while others have not. The key indicator of success will be how the whole programme stacks up as a package.

An additional complication will be that payments from the WIAT fund will be retrospective, thus any works undertaken by the LNR Committee will require the ability to run with a budget deficit for some period of time (as contractors will already have been paid, and paid invoices and bank account transactions are likely to be required before grant payment is made). This would suggest the Argyll and Bute Council are possibly best placed to do this, which will bring any proposed works into their financial and procurement procedures. There may, however, be ways round this should other partners want to lead the contract, perhaps by negotiating phased payments to contractors.

4.b Sources of Grant Funding – other

Beyond the Forestry Commission, current sources of significant grant funding are sparse.

SNH no longer offer direct project funding to local authorities, but will fund voluntary groups. However, they will not fund alongside WIAT as this would represent double funding from the Scottish Government. It may be possible to cherry pick specific items from the Implementation Plan and target SNH funding directly for these. This is likely to be “softer” targets, for example visitor surveys, species recording, community liaison.

The various Scottish Government grants will all be viewed as double funding should an application be made to WIAT, and are therefore inappropriate.

Heritage Lottery Fund will offer grants to projects which encourage people to explore the heritage of their area. There may be aspects of this which could feed into a programme of research on the history of the woodland.

The ASDA Carrier Bag Community Grants offer up to £2,000 for local charitable causes.

In addition to these, there are likely to be numerous other small grants available which, with care, could amount to a significant amount.

5. Potential for Change

There are some future decisions that have a potential to affect funding of activities in Duchess Wood LNR. They are changes which have the potential to radically alter any programme of works within the LNR and which would therefore be prudent and responsible to mention in this report.

Luss Estates and potential community ownership

With a growing national trend towards community ownership of woodlands, Luss Estates have indicated that they would be supportive of such a scenario and keen to work with the local community to explore whether to, and how to, allow Duchess Wood to pass into community stewardship. Community ownership can allow woodlands to benefit from a more local control and are often examples of the more valued type of community resource. They would still be eligible for WIAT funding but are also more likely to be attractive to many of the smaller funding organisations nationwide, for whom community benefit is often a key objective.

Such a change would obviously be very significant for Duchess Wood LNR, offering both potential enhance community involvement but also challenges. This potential for change should be considered when discussing potential funding bids.

Argyll and Bute Council – Service Choices

In common with all local authorities, Argyll and Bute Council has experienced very significant budget pressures over the last few years, and indications nationally are that this trend will continue. Looking forward, Argyll and Bute Council are facing making savings across all their budgets of £25M by 2018. All services are likely to be affected by this, and the Service most relevant to Duchess Wood, Amenity Services, is facing budget reductions of between 20 – 25%.

It is important to realise that no decisions have yet been made, however there is obviously potential for change that could affect Duchess Wood. This could have an effect on the woodland in several ways;

- The ability to maintain the woodland over an extended time-frame may be compromised
- The ability to provide officer support for the development of the LNR may be similarly compromised
- Small grants currently available to groups who may wish to support the LNR may be reduced

Given this increasingly competitive market for resources, coupled with the lapsing of the current management agreement in 2019, it is perhaps wise to consider longer term management frameworks for the woodland when discussing funding bids.

6. Recommendations

1. That specific members of the LNR Committee have a meeting to discuss the appropriateness of a WIAT application, and further to consider rewriting of the Management Plan to fit the FC template. The Chair and funding officer of FODW will be key to this, as will Charlie Cairns and Stuart McCracken.

2. That the same group identifies elements of the Management Plan and the associated Implementation Plan that would be appropriate for inclusion in a WIAT bid.
3. Given that the current Management Agreement between Luss Estates and Argyll and Bute Council uses the previous management plan 2006/11 as a context for much of the detail, it is recommended before carrying out any further major works, funded through WIAT, that written approval of the outcomes is obtained from Luss Estates.
4. That the Committee support the concept of Luss Estates further exploring the potential for community ownership of Duchess Wood, bearing this potential change in mind in relation to potential funding bids.
5. That the Committee note the potential for change in regards to the Council's Service Choices programme

Charlie Cairns

May 2015