

Forestry Commission Scotland Power to the people: community forest ownership



A community on the Isle of Mull has taken over a plantation previously run by the Scottish Forestry Commission. A charitable company set up by local people has turned the forest into a valuable resource for the community, and is using the proceeds from commercial timber harvesting to fund a range of sustainable development opportunities.

Background

Scotland's National Forest Land Scheme gives communities the opportunity to acquire state forests to help meet local development aspirations. To do so, they need to demonstrate that community ownership will bring an overall increase in public benefits, whether social, economic or environmental.

One of the first and largest transfers of state plantation forests into community ownership took place on the Isle of Mull, off the west coast, in 2006. The community wanted to maximize the local benefits from the forest through improving recreational opportunities, developing a firewood business, and investing the income from commercial timber harvesting into projects directly meeting local needs – for example, providing affordable housing.

The North West Mull Community Woodland Company (NWMCWC), a charitable community company, was set up in 2005 to purchase 670 hectares of mainly conifer plantation from Forestry Commission Scotland, Scotland's state forest service. The cost including legal fees was £343,000, with funding coming from grants, local fundraising and a small interest-free loan.

The company is run by an elected board of directors from within the community, and employs a full-time development manager and a part-time administrator. The Forestry Commission remains involved in a support and advisory role covering long-term forest plans, timber transport issues and forestry grant funding.



Community forest ownership has brought benefits including wood fuel and educational opportunities.

Photography © NWMCWC

MAXIMISING THE LOCAL BENEFITS FROM THE FOREST

IMPROVING
RECREATIONAL
OPPORTUNITIES



DEVELOPING A
FIREWOOD BUSINESS



PROVIDING
AFFORDABLE HOUSING



“The purchase has given us the opportunity to use the woodlands for the overall benefit of the community and to undertake many varied projects, many of which would have been out of our reach previously.”

Ian Hepburn, Development Manager, North West Mull Community Woodland Company

The project

NWMCWC has a 20-year forest plan, and will continue to use the plantation for commercial forestry, with the potential to harvest 125,000 tonnes of timber. A recently completed 16.5km timber-haul road connecting the community forest to the wider network of forest roads used by Forestry Commission Scotland will allow mature trees to be harvested and taken to market.

Sitka spruce trees dominate but after harvesting the company plans to significantly increase the area of broadleaf woodland and open space, linking with existing remnants of ancient woodland. The forest is certified through the UK Woodland Assurance Scheme, which is recognised by the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) and PEFC processes.

The company part-owns and manages a mobile sawmill, and 24 locals (20 volunteers and 4 employees of a local harvesting business) have been trained in using a chainsaw. Plans have been drawn up for a permanent community sawmill in a wooden building.

At the same time, NWMCWC aims to improve recreational access to the woodlands and increase its value as a community amenity. Volunteers are helping to maintain and create new routes for walkers, bikes and horses, and to protect and record a number of areas of archaeological interest.

As a direct result of community ownership, a local school teacher has trained to be a “Forest School” leader and two local primary schools take part in weekly Forest School sessions. The company has created a dedicated teaching and campfire area with shelter and storage facilities, and an outdoor venue is also planned, providing a space for education and entertainment.

NWMCWC is pursuing other sustainable development opportunities. A multipurpose building is planned (using local timber as much as possible) to house the company, which could also provide workshop and office space. Nine forest crofts (smallholdings) have been allocated, with three tenancy agreements with local residents signed so far.

Benefits

An evaluation by government agency Forest Research in 2009 concluded that “NWMCWC’s ownership and management of the woods has acted as a powerful catalyst for local development”. It praised the wide-ranging engagement and consultation with the local community, which has helped the project maintain momentum, as it is viewed to be firmly based on the needs of the whole community.

Promoting the cultural heritage of the forest and linking with the schools has increased the local community’s ownership of the project. Research elsewhere has shown that Forest Schools can improve children’s confidence, self-esteem and social integration, and have a positive impact on their academic performance.

During the current 20-year forest plan, commercial forestry operations are expected to cover costs. But with the next rotation, timber harvesting should bring significant surplus income that will be used to underpin wider community development plans.

Next steps

NWMCWC and local partners are planning a renewable energy scheme using micro-hydro generation from a stream within the forest. This initiative is expected to cover the company’s overhead costs.

Affordable housing is a key need within the North West Mull area and NWMCWC plans to address this by providing building plots for affordable rented housing to those in need. The community company is a registered rural housing body, which gives it the power to ensure any housing sold remains in the affordable sector in perpetuity to best meet local needs.

INCOME FROM HARVESTING UP TO
125,000 TONNES
OF TIMBER OVER 20 YEARS WILL FUND
COMMUNITY PROJECTS

