

# Friends of Sirhowy Woodlands



## Basic woodland opportunities assessment

### Introduction:

Following an initial site visit, this report intends to highlight a number of issues and opportunities presented by community involvement in the management of Sirhowy woods. Woodlands can be managed for numerous objectives and woodland groups can take many forms and often the nature of the woodland will influence the structure and priorities of the group. The issues and opportunities should be considered by the group to help shape what their aims are and what they wish to achieve through the management of the site. This is just a rough overview and once certain topics have been selected, more detailed action can be worked up. Direct involvement of the landowners will also be required to help clarify roles and responsibilities.

### Access:

Access for the public is a key feature and the infrastructure of paths, including layout and condition is important.

- Providing suitable access to the public
- Providing access for wheelchairs and pushchairs
- Issues with unauthorized motor vehicle access
- Issue with mountain bike access
- Vehicle access to various parts of the woodland for management work

Access should be a priority for work. Getting the access right enables all other work. There is already a network of established paths that are well used.

Some areas to address

- Determine whether all the existing paths are in the correct place.
- Repairs and resurfacing including drainage works
- Access for wheelchairs
- Identifying appropriate vehicle routes to access parts of the site for management work e.g, tree felling
- Identify problem areas for off-roading and block access points.
- General condition and suitability of access points
- General condition and repair of gates and steps
- Lack of waymarking or set routes
- Consider scope for mountain bikes or general cycling

A number of basic improvements could be made with little cost. These include, clearing/cutting back vegetation, repairs to surface, minor drainage works, repairs to gates/steps.

### Structures

There are numerous stone walls present across the woodland and some may require some repair. Numerous benches and seating areas have been created and these should be assessed for condition and function. Overhead lines run across the top of the hill and will limit what work can be done in that vicinity. There are considerable lengths of stock fencing associated with the tree planting areas. Some of this is now in poor repair and now that trees have matured, may be redundant. Several interpretation boards have been installed around the site and are in generally good repair.

## Habitats

The woodland includes three broad habitat types:

- Mixed planted woodland of broadleaved and conifer species
- Unimproved grassland/heath and scrub
- Established ponds.

All habitats require some intervention to maintain and improve habitat condition.

**Woodlands** – primarily would benefit from selective felling and thinning. Trees are planted tight together as this helps support good growth and survival in young trees. However, as they mature they begin to crowd each other fighting for light and space and this often results in poor growth shape making trees more prone to wind-blow, which is important on the exposed slopes. This is an ideal task for either volunteers or contractors. Set up costs for volunteer work are quite low and would include appropriate insurance, safety gear and hand tools. Some parts would require a chainsaw operator which could be a contractor, offered in support by other organisations or a volunteer could be suitably trained and equipped. Potential difficulties with vehicle access could limit or influence which areas would be managed directly. The woodlands are of varied character as they have been planted and trees are now self-seeding. Predominantly the planting is mixed but has resulted in some areas that are conifer dominated and some areas of only broadleaved trees.

**Grass/heath habitats** – the habitats present are quite scarce as much of this has been lost to agricultural improvement and development. As such the ecological report has identified them of being of value. Management will often require some grazing or mechanical cutting, which might be problematic on this site. The wet areas are also prone to drying out, especially due to the spread of trees like willow. Hand removal of scrub and then herbicide treatment is required to keep these habitats open. Specialist advice will be required as to how best manage these habitats. There may be limited capacity within the group to deliver the work, as it either requires livestock or specialist cutting equipment due to wet ground.

## Ponds

Over time ponds naturally fill-in due to leaf-fall and soil being washed in. While this is a natural process, retaining established ponds is important for the wildlife they support. Shallow, part filled-in messy ponds are often the most valuable! However, minor excavation at intervals will help in keeping established ponds open, and some habitat improvement can be made by reducing shading from trees, creating log and stone piles (frogs, toads and newts will use these for winter hibernation) and improving stability of the banks.

## Other habitat features

Some quarries and borrow-pits can form important habitats due to the mixed habitats of scrub, grass, bare ground and rock. Additional old quarries are potentially present within planted woodland areas. Some active management to limit spread of scrub and brambles can help keep these areas open and sunlit which is beneficial to a number of insects.

## Outline Action Plan

### Access

- Audit condition and suitability of paths
- Audit condition of all benches, fences, stonewalls, gates and steps.
- Audit condition of boundaries looking for issues and overhanging or fallen trees
- Determine which areas can be accessed by vehicles for management work
- Determine condition of entrances included those used by unauthorized bike access.
- Undertake site risk assessment.
- After audits determine areas of priority for work
- Consider needs for signage and waymarking
- Consider need for events area and determine location and access

### Woodland

- Determine what interest exists within the group to undertake direct active management of woodland areas.
- For group to operate it requires the following:
- Appropriate insurance (recommend Keep Wales Tidy)
- Grant to provide safety kit and tools (c. £700)
- Determine areas to be managed and objectives.
- Undertake Risk Assessments for work
- Group to source training in practical work and operating safely
- Group to source training in woodland management processes
- Group to determine what to do with timber harvested from the thinning works.

### Grass/heathland habitats

- Group to consider whether it has the capacity to take on and deliver appropriate management of these habitats.
- Some areas are suffering from encroaching trees that will turn grassland to woodland. On some low value areas this could be encouraged, tolerated or increased through new planting.
- Removal of scrub and trees will require the cut stumps to be treated with a suitable herbicide, undertake by a qualified person. Group need to consider whether this is something they would support.

### Ponds

- Assess ponds for level and nature of work required

Gareth Ellis - The Green Valleys CIC

On behalf of Renew Wales

Dec 2015

[Gareth.ellis@thegreenvalleys.org](mailto:Gareth.ellis@thegreenvalleys.org)