

**Name:** Birse Community Trust (BCT)

<http://www.birsecommunitytrust.org.uk/Community%20Woodlands/communitywood.html>

**Place:** Birse Parish, Deeside, Aberdeenshire

**Headline:** 1 000ha of community-owned and managed forestry as a community asset and financial enabler of a wide range of undertakings for local and wider public benefit.

**Keywords:** community-owned; asset;

**Context:** The three communities in Birse Parish established BCT in 1998 to improve their capacity to tackle local issues and opportunities. BCT develops and implements projects to promote the common good of the communities and deliver wider public benefits. It acts as a community business within the local democratic infrastructure of the parish's Community Associations and Community Councils. BCT's key asset is its three forests covering nearly 1,000ha. BCT also manages eleven other sites of community value including three water-powered wood mills (sawmill, bucket mill, turning mill) that reflect the area's rich forest heritage.

#### **What was the initial aim?**

The Trust aimed to use woodland as a tool for community development, building community strength and empowerment, and meeting a variety of local and wider public needs.

#### **What actually happened and what has been achieved?**

BCT was based on local knowledge and an understanding of community development, linked to a clear, strategic approach to its development as a local community development trust. Central to the establishment of BCT was securing ancient rights over the native pinewoods in the Forest of Birse Common (c.550ha). BCT subsequently purchased two local 40-45-year-old Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) plantations (totalling 415ha). This included the first ever NFLS acquisition.

The only differences from original aims are the length of time taken to buy the FES woods and the number of additional involvements that BCT has developed since it started.

The forestry activities of the Trust have been the crucial means of underwriting the very positive changes taking place in the community over the last 20 years, creating local democratic and physical community infrastructure, building social capital, supporting the local economy. Every aspect of the operation is geared to local and wider benefit, whether conservation and expansion of the native pine forest or miles of footpaths, or a range of historical / wildlife / environmental projects. BCT has no employees, with the work required to manage the forests and BCT's other activities undertaken by a wide range of local contractors.

BCT's management of the forests is designed to deliver income on a long term sustainable basis. The income underpins BCT's wider community development activities. The forests also deliver a wide range of other local benefits, including greater involvement in the wider

local landscape.

BCT's expenditure is analysed each year for its geographic distribution - 75% is spent in the parish and immediate surround area. BCT raises no funds locally to avoid competing with other community groups in the parish. The elected representatives on BCT, Community Associations and Councils include individuals from c.15% of the households in the parish. There are also high levels of participation at AGMs, other meetings, events and ballots.

### **Evidence of outcomes**

The above outcomes have depended on a wide range of factors – all of which have played a part in what has been achieved. The community development outcomes have been very largely underpinned by the income from the woodlands. These forests and BCT's other amenity woodlands are managed to high standards; BCT's community woodlands have won the Finest Woods Award for woods <150ha. The trust's average net income from relatively frequent and small scale timber harvesting in the forests meets about two thirds of its core costs on overheads, administration and other activities that cannot be funded by grants.

### **What were the factors that contributed to those outcomes?**

Birse (pop 900) was well placed to embark on this course: the community has a relatively high level of social capital in terms of local kinship ties, has a rich past and present forest heritage, and key individuals with the knowledge and skills to lead the initiative.

### **How replicable is this experience; what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?**

Every situation is different, depending on local circumstances, but the principles of this project are universal. Woodland is an ideal asset on which to base community development. As such it is an extension of the principle of a public forest estate represented nationally by FES, but Birse demonstrates that community ownership can deliver more local public benefits than would ever be possible by FES.

### **What might the indicators / metrics be that help to tell this story at a wider level?**

- proportion of the community's development costs which can be met from its forest income;
- range of local benefit initiatives thus enabled;
- evidence of local livelihoods supported;
- participation rates in local decision-making forums;
- response rates to ballots.

### **Key messages:**

- increasingly, community-owned forestry should be the norm. It offers the best potential for public benefit from the nation's forest resource. It needs to be encouraged, with policy measures discriminating in favour of this level of engagement in forestry and providing extension services to support ongoing efforts.
- this is a demonstration of the potential of community-owned woodland as an asset on which to base community development, and the necessity of really well-developed local democratic infrastructure to ensure maximum participation and consent in decisions

over the management of the woodland and the use of the proceeds for community benefit.

- BCT has undoubtedly benefited greatly from the contribution during its development of one key individual. However, the Trust takes great care to manage its knowledge resources and organize its procedures and structures in ways intended to make it resilient to the ongoing changes in the individuals involved.