

Name: Kilfinan Community Forestry Company
<http://www.kilfinancommunityforest.co.uk/>

Place: Tighnabruaich, Cowal, Argyll

Headline: Community acquisition of conifer plantation with the aim of generating local benefits.

Keywords: acquisition, community ownership, plantation management, local benefits, housing shortage, job creation

What is the context?

Historical: KCFC started off as a community led project to exercise the “right to buy” of an undermanaged Forestry Commission woodland on the edge of a community at the end of Cowal. The whole Lower Acharossan forest was initially bid for in 2007, without success. A smaller section was then identified and acquired in 2010, with another block acquired in 2015.

Current: KCFC is now running as any normal small business and dealing with standard small business issues, including cashflow issues (e.g. variations in the price of softwood - an international commodity), red tape, and dealing with planning issues. Communities have the additional issue of poor liquidity (the conventional landowner issue: asset rich, cash poor). Intractable delays in local authority regulatory approvals are holding up revenue generation from house building. A social enterprise has to make sure that its’ business pays, over and above delivering on community expectations.

What was the initial aim?

The idea was to take a woodland providing almost no community benefit and turn it into a resource that provides jobs housing and amenity. There was an identified need for these benefits, which emerged from public consultations.

What actually happened and what has been achieved?

KCFC acquire a forest giving community control of an asset. The original aims have been worked on:

Local employment/economic activity

- 5 fte jobs is a useful addition to local job pool
- community composting facility run on behalf of Argyll and Bute Council (over 80 tonnes per annum)
- allotment group supported (services and land).
- sawmill and firewood processing enterprises established.
- 75kW Hydro scheme now up and running.
- 2 large scale felling tranches.

KCFC’s future plans include more felling, developing housing and crofts, eco burial site, an event space and bunkhouse.

Amenity includes

- education (summer youth skills development programme attended by almost all eligible teenagers except for the one with a job!, forest school, and Branching Out);
- access provision (footpath network, Nordic walking group, dogs n horses, aiming to restore link into Kilfinan Way (4 mile loop));
- commenced control of extensive population of invasive rhododendron control.

A local tree nursery is in the pipeline.

Housing is at final building control stage. It will include use of local timber, innovative green building techniques, and training for local apprentices in building skills. Houses will be for sale (to maximise added value), however “affordability” will be protected in perpetuity by a rural housing burden. Forest crofts are just getting established, and the first crofter has now moved on to site.

Evidence for these outcomes

- 5 fte jobs (8 people)
- Area managed is 531ha, of which c380ha conifer plantation
- 100t pa of sawn timber produced
- 100t pa firewood and rising
- Youth skills development has engaged 13 locals in 3 years, including 2 apprentices.
- 3kms of paths have been restored or built
- 5 affordable homes are about to get on site

What factors contributed to those outcomes?

- The drive and ambition of directors and other volunteers.
- Funders are critical and have included Leader, HIE, SLF, Robinson Trust, Climate Challenge Fund, FCS.

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

It is very replicable, and KCFC will always seek to share its experiences with other community groups to avoid the risk that they would suffer from the same pitfalls and setbacks that have been inflicted on KCFC, and to ensure that they can benefit from the delights of community forestry.

It can be a significant element of a better approach to forestry, an important part of a process of changing the approach to large scale forestry in Scotland. KCFC continues to deliver quantities of industrial softwood for Scotland, whilst also delivering significant added value for the local community. Other industrial conifer plantations should pay a “social benefit fee” to local communities for the costs that they impose on local communities (eg road damage and congestion, landscape impact).

Key messages:

- Community woods can and do work. However people should not see woodland ownership as an easy way to access funds for community benefit, as by becoming a softwood plantation owner you become a commodity speculator. Management of the resource is a burden.

- Get the right people involved. You need people with a combination of skills, vision and perseverance. A social enterprise can benefit from professional expertise at below market rates (people volunteer for a good cause).
- Key to success is keeping costs under control. Social enterprises need best value culture to last in the long term, however there is a risk that grant funding streams can divert attention from this essential requirement.
- Focus on outcomes completely, or processes can take over. Process should deliver an outcome, not become an outcome itself.
- Delivers good value for money for your tax dollar!