



Aulnaskiach Dell SCIO

Sept 2022

Owner name	Aulnaskiach Dell SCIO
Agent name	
Management Plan Name	Aulnaskiach Dell SCIO
Business Reference Number	
Main Location Code	
Management Plan area (hectares)	1.97
Grid Reference (e.g. NH 550 022)	NJ744281 (at centre point)
Agreed by: (e.g. FCS, SNH)	
Date of Plan	September 2022

Section 1 – Description of woodlands

1.1 Maps

See Appendix A

1.2 History of management

It is believed that the woodland was originally part of the policies of Aulnaskiach House, probably developed in the early 1800s. The woodland was purchased by Mr. John Barron for his wife Mrs Aithne Barron to prevent any clear felling or inappropriate development of the woodland following the sale and development of Aulnaskiach House. In May 2010 a meeting was organised to explore whether the local community might be interested in taking on ownership. Over two years later and after a full consultation, professional feasibility study and public meeting, a group came together to take forward the idea and Aulnaskiach Dell SCIO was formed. Whilst the full costs and implications of community ownership were further explored and necessary funds raised, the charity managed the woodland under a lease from Mrs. Barron. The Dell was purchased from Mrs. Barron for £1 in February 2019 and continues to be cared for by the trustees of Aulnaskiach Dell SCIO, our members and volunteer supporters.

1.3 Site species and age

Description of wood.

The woodland evokes a unique, almost rural sense of place within an otherwise strongly urban environment. It lies between Drummond Road and Island Bank Road and is around a 20 minute walk from the city centre. The woodland is part of a much larger escarpment of mainly beech trees and is thus an important part of the character of Inverness. In 2010 it comprised predominantly mature or over mature broad leaves of varying age with many being well over 100 years old. Species were mainly beech, elm and sycamore with occasional cherry, oak, maple, Scots pine and holly. The woodland occupies a steep valley with a burn running through it down to the River Ness and there is only one access from a public road, all of which presents a major constraint on timber extraction. The woodland had become significantly over stocked, resulting in a dense canopy with little ground flora and very little natural regeneration (except some regeneration of shade tolerant beech). Dutch Elm Disease had found its way into the Dell and is continuing to spread throughout the woodland. With a

combination of public funds, private donations, membership fees, sales of timber and substantial voluntary effort our group has made a considerable difference to the condition of the woodland. An early professional tree survey of the perimeter and main path identified over 100 trees posing some risk. Some 55 trees were felled, or had lesser work carried out to them between 2011 and 2016. 97 new trees and shrubs were planted at that time including oak, hazel, goat willow, alder, rowan, birch, blackthorn, hazel, gean, walnut, chestnut and scots pine with underplanting of blackthorn and wild rose. Not all of these trees thrived, especially on the shadier side of the burn beneath the beech trees, however a significant number did, especially where elm trees taken down provided more light. A further 25 trees have had surgery, been felled or come down in storms, largely because of DED. A further 130 trees of mixed native species have been planted. The reduction in canopy as a result of the felling and tree surgery has led to an explosion of ground level vegetation and significant increase in naturally regenerating seedlings presenting new challenges. Non-native species such as rhododendron ponticum and 'escapees' from nearby gardens are present and require careful control.

The burn has been heavily shaded along its length and this has detracted from its overall quality as a watercourse for aquatic wildlife and adjacent woodland biodiversity. Sections of the burnbanks have in the past been reinforced by gabions and other hard landscaping to stabilise the banks. To date, our focus has been on removing litter and clearing debris where it presented a flooding threat.

The more active management of the woodland in recent years has seen a flourishing of flora and fauna. Surveys completed since the group took over management in November 2013 have discovered a thriving population of woodland birds including owls and over 34 different flowering plants. Bats have been discovered, though it is not clear exactly where their roosts are. Sightings of a pine marten have been reported. There are red squirrels and roe deer too in the wood.

Other improvements include a new boundary fence, a community notice board and a public waste bin to encourage dog owners to clear up waste.

1.4 Constraints and designations

The woodland falls within the Godsman Brae TPO and therefore consents from Highland Council are required for tree management works within the Dell. Part of the woodland is within a designated Conservation Area. The Highland Council has responsibility under the Flood Prevention Act and Flood Risk Management Act to ensure that no properties are threatened by flooding from watercourses. The Council requires access at all times to inspect the burn for any risk and to maintain as appropriate. The burn is stated to be a low risk watercourse due to the nature of the topography being a steep sided gully. Highland Council owns the culvert and associated infrastructure that the burn passes through under Drummond Rd. and requires access to inspect and maintain this structure and the bridge itself. A surface sewer pipe crosses the Burn towards the western end of the wood and there are further domestic sewer pipes in various areas of the wood. (See attached map from Scottish Water). As a result, Scottish Water has accepted responsibility for maintenance of the gabions which help protect the sewer network. There are 2 main sewers running parallel from Drummond Road to Island bank Road buried on the North side of the burn.

1.5 Access Issues

The area is not subject to any formally designated public rights of way and does not have a proposed 'Core Path' on the land. The Council's draft Core Path Plan does show a track through the wood as part of the 'Wider Access Network'. In line with the original public consultation and taking into consideration the steep sided terrain, the charity's aims do not include promoting access. The woodland does fall within the provision of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 whereby the public have a right of 'responsible' access as defined in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. The sole point of public access is from Drummond Rd. Some local residents have created their own access point from surrounding gardens and it is also possible to enter the wood from the private road of Aultnaskiach. There is very light touch management of access currently, with signs at the entrance and on the noticeboard further into the woodland encouraging responsible use of the wood and only the public entrance.

Management of garden waste from neighbouring properties can be a problem. The woodland is fairly regularly used by dog walkers and fouling can be an issue especially at the public entrance to the woodland. Several incidents of wildlife being chased by dogs have been reported and a sign now requests dogs to be kept under control during the bird nesting season. Local children and young people use the woodland for play and socialising which is welcome but can raise safety issues with risks from fires, rope swings etc. Whilst there have been a small number of incidents requiring a response, the current strategy is a combination of education through partnerships with local schools, on-going monitoring by trustees walking the Dell and encouraging residents to call emergency services when an incident occurs.

Section 2 – Management Strategy and Objectives

2.1 Management objectives (provide 3 to 4 main objectives for your woodlands)

The overall vision for the woodland is for future generations to enjoy a flourishing, healthy, bio-diverse woodland and burn managed by a thriving organisation.

Our long-term aims are:

- A. to regenerate and subsequently maintain the Dell into good and sustainable condition, through sound forest management and environmental good practice
- B. to establish a strong sense of appreciation of the amenity the woodland provides amongst local residents and the wider community
- C. to fulfil the potential of the woodland to enhance health and well-being and encourage active citizenship through the involvement of local residents and the wider community.
- D. to provide opportunities for learning in an outdoor environment.

The past ten years have been a period of intense activity for our trustees and volunteers and for the wood itself. The pandemic also had a significant impact on the charity and its operations, resulting in less face-to-face engagement of the membership in management of the woodland. This plan is based upon a thorough review of the current condition of the wood, a survey of members and local residents and advice from the Highland Council Tree Preservation Officer and Community Woodlands Association. The overall approach in the next five years is based around essential safety works, care and maintenance of planting already undertaken, greater engagement with the membership and wood users through practical and educational activities all with a view to laying the foundations for the long term sustainability of the charity and the wood.

Therefore, over the next 5 years our objectives for each of our aims are as follows:

A.1 To address only the highest risks to neighbouring properties and public safety through a minimal programme of tree surgery, focusing primarily on elms with DED present.

A.2 To continue to create a more varied age and species structure through controlled natural regeneration and a planting programme of primarily native species

A.3 To continue a programme of low impact timber extraction.

A.4 To continue to undertake a planned programme of control of invasive vegetation.

A.5 Essential maintenance of infrastructure such as paths and gabions

A.6 Improving the water quality of the burn to sustain a more diverse habitat

B. Encourage responsible use of the wood

C. Increase the number and diversity of people actively involved in the woodland.

D To provide opportunities for active outdoor learning.

2.3 Main management operations envisaged over the next 5-10 years

The trustees undertake an annual risk assessment of the woodland and identify proportionate mitigating action. In addition, individual operational activities are risk assessed and guidance prepared for volunteers.

Objective A.1 Tree Surgery

The trustees consider a number of factors when deciding whether tree surgery is required. Our overall approach is one of reasonable and proportionate tree management with decisions reflecting the actual risks to users of the wood (statistically this is very low) and neighbouring properties. This approach is in line with advice from the National Tree Safety Group. (A number of organisations with an interest in common sense tree risk management including the Forestry Commission and the Institute of Chartered Foresters www.ntsgroup.org.uk) The trustees monitor the trees in the Dell and issues are also brought to our attention by the public and neighbours. Specialist advice is sought if needed and all felling requires the permission of the Highland Council Tree Preservation Officer. Trees may require to be felled or crowned according to advice given. These decisions will take into account safety, aesthetics, the complex ecology of the Dell, and how advanced the disease is in an individual tree.

As a result of the significant work that has been completed in the Dell since 2012 we consider that only essential work addressing high risk trees should be undertaken for the next five years. Following careful assessment by the trustees and having taken expert advice we have identified x trees likely to require work. In addition, where trees come down in storms and present risks these will be dealt with.

Health and Safety Executive guidance from the National Tree Safety Group

For trees in a frequently visited zone a system of periodic proactive checks is appropriate. A large tree presents a negligible risk regardless of whether or not it is hazardous if it is in an area where few people go.

Responsible management should seldom result in large-scale tree removal for safety reasons. No tree can be guaranteed to be safe. We cannot achieve zero risk.

Objective A.2 Planting Programme

We have already planted 227 shrubs and trees of a wide variety of native species and have discovered that the Aulnaskiach side of the Dell has much more favourable conditions for survival rates as it has a sunnier aspect. Some trees on the Glenburn Drive side have also done well on the perimeter where there is more light, but down by the burn there has been a high failure rate due to the heavy shading from the mature beech trees. Planting is done in the bare root season and the young trees need protection from the deer that visit the wood. Regular removal of vegetation is necessary during the growing season and increasingly drought can be an issue. Over the next five years our priorities are:

- to continue to clear vegetation from around the younger trees, including thinning of naturally occurring seedlings in areas of new planting
- replacement planting where any felling takes place or where new trees have not survived
- continuing to diversify the species in the woodland by planting evergreen species including Scots Pine and oak which supports a wide variety of wildlife
- a trial of planting ground cover under the beech trees on the Glenburn Drive side of the burn

Objective A.3 Timber Extraction

Timber extraction from the Dell is challenging due to the terrain and access issues but has a range of possible benefits including fund-raising, health improvement, community involvement and reduced carbon emissions. Some felled timber will always be left in situ to encourage greater biodiversity in the wood. However, there is currently a large surplus of timber over what is needed for this purpose which creates certain risks, particularly for children playing in the wood and for blocking the flow of water around the sewage pipe. The SCIO currently has two members trained in chain saw use for cross cutting purposes. Timber has so far been extracted from easily accessible sites using a combination of wheel-barrows and 'Bertha' our motorised wheelbarrow, chopped and bagged or sold in clogs for chopping at home. Delivery can be arranged for a small charge but this is dependent on using vehicles and trailers owned by trustees and volunteers which may not always be available. Therefore, self-collection is being encouraged through pricing incentives. This has been very time consuming but is low cost, has health benefits for participants and has minimal impact on the woodland. This activity has largely been undertaken during a series of wood fuel events led by trustees and supported by volunteers, following safety procedures drawn up after careful risk assessment. Potential buyers were originally identified through a survey of members and local residents and 'word of mouth' has also proved effective. Where possible we prefer to sell the wood very locally, due to the possibility of spreading DED. Over the years trustees have investigated various alternative methods of timber extraction both mechanical and using horses but none have proved economically viable.

Events were largely suspended during the pandemic as many activities required close working. These have recommenced and following improvements to the main path, which allows use of our motorised wheelbarrow further into the wood, there is continued scope for timber extraction despite the expectation that fewer trees will be felled over the course of this plan. Our priorities will be:

- dealing with any newly felled or storm damaged wood that may pose a safety risk, obstruct the main path or burn
- identifying any accessible older wood that is not needed for biodiversity purposes and if cleared could provide useful planting space
- undertaking a pilot project for a 'scavenger license' scheme for members

A.4 Invasive Vegetation

Three areas of invasive vegetation were tackled as our initial priority. These included two areas

of Common Laurel, totalling approximately 500 Sq Ms. and one small area of Rhododendron. Using hand tools such as Bushman saws and loppers etc. for small diameter stems, volunteer members and local residents were involved in cutting and stacking vegetation onto clear ground adjacent to the sites. Our trained chainsaw operators have tackled larger trunks. A follow up treatment with Glyphosate herbicide painted on to fresh cut stumps was required to prevent regrowth. One of our trustees qualified as a certificated operator to undertake this work. Monitoring was undertaken and re-treatment was applied the following two years. Further work was inhibited by the discovery that the charity does not own the area of woodland where rhododendron is most prevalent and by the pandemic. Our priority for this plan is to continue to control rhododendron where possible and safe to do so and to monitor the growth of the larger areas of laurel, controlling only where it is considered to be a threat to new plantings.

Three areas of holly were cut on the Glenburn side of the Dell. Latterly mature holly trees were marked to be retained and only where trees had layered and seeded around the tree were the new shoots removed. No further work has been carried out on areas of holly following advice about the possibility of erosion on the shady side of the wood where little else will grow due to heavy shading from the beech trees. It is not felt necessary to remove holly from the sunny side of the Dell at present.

The removal of the elm canopy has led to an explosion of species such as ivy, nettles and various weeds. Ivy will be cut around the base of elms where this may be beneficial. Vegetation will continue to be cleared from around the young trees and in future also along the main path. Being an urban woodland, transfer of species from neighbouring gardens is inevitable. Our approach will be to accept this on the top tier of the banking nearest neighbouring properties. Where 'garden escapees' appear further down the banking or along the burn and are proliferating they may be removed.

A.5 Essential Maintenance of Infrastructure

Consultation with residents as part of the initial feasibility study into community ownership indicated concern about the potential for nuisance should measures to promote greater usage of the Dell for leisure activities be undertaken. It is not feasible to introduce measures such as 'all ability paths' as this would be very expensive, challenging to maintain and change the essential character of the Dell. Access improvements have therefore been very low key and sustainable with minimal introduction of new materials. Over time minor improvements to the main path have been carried out, to address sections which become very muddy and/or hazardous during the winter and to address a few 'pinch points' too to allow access for timber removal. The initial solutions recommended to the trustees of a ditch and culverts proved unsuccessful and these will not be maintained. More successful have been the installation of a membrane and gravel chips in the muddiest sections combined with widening at pinch points by cutting into the bank on the Aulnaskiach side. We will continue with this approach where further work is required and funds can be raised through grant applications.

We will continue to liaise with Scottish Water regarding the condition of the sewers and gabions protecting the sewers. We will undertake an assessment of where erosion might present a risk to the main path and take proportionate action. We will minimise the introduction of any additional structures such as gabions as this presents a long term maintenance challenge.

A.6 Improving Water Quality

The character of the burn has changed significantly since the introduction of the flood scheme by Highland Council. Much less water now flows through the burn which also means less litter is washed downstream. Inevitably some wood accumulates in the burn from a variety of sources, including children building dams and crossing points. Initially the trustees attempted to remove the worst accumulations of branches and clogs to allow the water to flow freely again. However, advice from an ecologist indicated that slow moving and pooled water supports a greater variety

of species so more recently only trees that fall across the burn and are considered a safety risk are dealt with. Recently the local salmon fishing society have sought permission to undertake a survey of the burn and any results will be carefully considered. We will continue to monitor the condition of the burn and investigate options for improving the water quality.

B Encourage Responsible Use of the Wood

Litter has been accumulating over many years and is uncovered as a result of tree operations. Some is deposited by users of the wood and much has also in the past been washed down from further up the burn. When the charity began caring for the woodland a considerable amount of litter was collected and removed during volunteer litter picking events. These were supported by the Highland Council who provided gloves, etc. and removed waste collected. The Council also provided a bin at the entrance to the wood which helps encourage disposal of waste by dog walkers and the public Contact was made with the Highland Council dog warden to renew signs to promote responsible behaviour by dog owners and a sign put up on the noticeboard. Activities with local children in the Dell have included education on this topic.

It is encouraging to see that litter is not accumulating in anything like the previous quantities suggesting that walkers are indeed regularly helping with this task. Members involved in activities in the woodland such as burn clearance or wood chopping often collect litter or waste at the same time. The primary school children have also been made aware of this issue as part of their educational programme. The flood prevention scheme and changing climate have meant fewer spates and less litter being washed down.

The improved situation combined with the pandemic has meant organised litter picking has not been a recent priority. Litter picking will continue to be undertaken alongside other activities taking place in the Dell. Disposal of garden waste by local residents is an on-going issue which will continue to require letters and personal contact with local residents.

Whilst there are occasional issues such as fires, rough sleeping or noise nuisance the only other regular access issue is the behaviour of dogs who are walked off the lead in the Dell. This can disturb wildlife such as deer and nesting birds and on occasion chickens in neighbouring properties have been hurt and even killed. A small notice has been placed at the entrance to the Dell requesting dogs be kept under control during the nesting season and the noticeboard also refers to responsible usage. The noticeboard will be updated with pictures of wildlife present in the wood to highlight the issues and trustees will engage with dog walkers in the wood to encourage close control. Educational work will continue with any primary schools using the woodland about safe and responsible use of the wood.

Our member and resident survey revealed that people visit the Dell for a wide variety of reasons. Requests have been made for the creation of places to sit within the Dell to read, paint, listen to birdsong etc. We will look to develop a couple of areas for this purpose, using tree trunks already felled.

Objective C Increase the Number and Diversity of People Actively Involved in the Charity and Care of the Wood

Full, voting membership of the charity is open to everyone who lives within a boundary defined in our constitution (map at appendix x). Otherwise, anyone who supports our objectives can become an Associate member. For a number of years membership numbers have been sustained at around 60. The income from membership has been sufficient, combined with wood fuel sales, to cover annual running costs but in the long term is not sufficient to sustain the voluntary effort needed to achieve our objectives. A planned membership drive was postponed

due to the pandemic. The leaflet that was the basis for the campaign has been updated will now be distributed through a variety of local outlets including shops, community centres and churches. A snowball approach will be taken with members being asked to identify three people who may have an interest in becoming a member to distribute the leaflet to.

The membership is a source of trustees to run the charity but also the main source of the volunteer effort needed to achieve the objectives set out in this plan. Community involvement in the management of the woodland is essential to its sustainability in the long term but also brings health and well-being benefits for the individuals concerned. Pre pandemic we organised 5-6 woodland events which were generally attended by 12-15 people. These events included production of wood-fuel for sale, tackling invasive vegetation, litter picking and tree planting. In total we estimate that we have enabled well over 1500 hours of voluntary effort in management of the woodland. All events are risk assessed and follow agreed safety procedures. During the pandemic, the trustees undertook any essential tasks and the volunteer events have been restarted. The pandemic has impacted on the number of volunteers regularly attending events and addressing this will be a key task during the life of this plan.

Pre-pandemic we held various fund-raising events including a garden party attended by over a 100 people, and a barbecue in the woods which drew in 40 people of all ages from 3 to 92 and included people who lived in the wider area who had become aware of the wood through the activities of the Forest School. The barbecue had woodland activities for children. In April 2019 a ceilidh was held at Hilton church to celebrate the Aulnaskiach Dell going into community ownership. It was attended by more than 65 people and was a very successful and happy event raising additional revenue for the charity. These events are a significant undertaking for our small charity.

We have been exploring other ways for people to become involved in the charity in a more flexible way, for example taking on tasks such as strimming, that can be undertaken at a time convenient to the volunteers. We will continue with this approach, including trialling other ideas in addition to our 'events', such as having a regular monthly 'drop-in' work party led by a couple of trustees on a rota basis and identifying more tasks that can be undertaken outside of events.

We have launched a website, to complement our blogspot, to provide a digital means by which people can find out more about the charity and promote our work. We will continue to update this and introduce new features such as fillable membership forms. The noticeboard in the Dell provides basic information about the charity however we have agreed it needs to become more dynamic and a means of communicating with users of the wood about responsible access issues. (see above)

Following up a suggestion from our user survey, we will organise an annual talk about topics relevant to the life of the Dell which will be widely promoted through social media, local press etc. We will also organise one social event per year to encourage engagement between members and trustees.

Objective D Provide Opportunities for Active Outdoor Learning

Considerable progress has been made towards our initial goal of providing opportunities for children and young people to learn in an outdoor environment in line with current Scottish government educational policy. Millburn Academy have visited the Dell several times to carry out plant surveys with their Higher Biology classes, and the school of Forestry visited annually with their students. Several programmes of Forest School classes were run by Cauldeen Primary and contact also made with Hilton Primary. The teacher of the class who attended Forest School reported benefits to the children of improved physical self-confidence, better

conflict resolution strategies and, for a couple of the children, improved confidence in going into unfamiliar situations. Older children who live locally can be seen much more regularly in the wood and enjoy activities such as building dens, tepees, and bridges across the burn. Students from the School of Forestry have carried out research in the Dell. A project with the RSPB involved young people building bird boxes to place in the Dell. The pandemic halted much of this activity. We will continue to explore opportunities with primary schools especially in the life of this plan.

We extended our educational activities with adults, launching a nature photography project in collaboration with the Inverness Darkroom based in the Wasps building in the centre of Inverness. Unfortunately, this had to be paused due to the pandemic has not restarted as our member lead for the project left the area. We will continue to look for opportunities to offer educational opportunities for adults in addition to the annual talk referred to above.

All ages could benefit from greater interpretation of the species contained within the Dell. We will investigate different options that will enable people to learn more about the Dell which are low maintenance and in keeping with the character of the wood.

Section 3– FINANCE

Appendices