

## AGM 7 Oct 2019

### Report from the Chair

Thank you all for attending this year's Annual General Meeting. The AGM is a vital part of running Evanton Wood Community Company and is an opportunity for communication and feedback. I'm going to do a little communicating now, and I'll welcome any feedback questions after the end of the formal AGM.

Adrian has given a great overview of the activities taking place in the wood and the work behind the scenes which makes this possible.

I'd like to spend the first part of this speech looking at the many ways you, as members, can get more involved with the wood. I appreciate that, for most people, the wood is a small part of their very busy lives; what I'd like to suggest, is that even a small contribution of time and effort can make all the difference to the success of the wood and the wider community. It is also very satisfying.

The core, legal requirements for running a community company are carried out by the Board. By now I think you all know that this consists of up to six board members with an option for two co-opted members. We know that committee work is not for everyone, and members contribute in a range of other ways, but the board does important work, meeting monthly, ensuring that the activities of the wood are properly overseen, and that decisions are made in the best interests of the wood.

The time required, amounts to an evening a month for a board meeting, reading over any papers prepared for the meeting and reading emails forwarded to Board members. Of course, there is always a concern over mission creep, and that joining the board will lead to other work. And that other work is certainly there, but it is always optional.

What you may not know, is that we run a try before you buy system. If you think the Board might suit you, but you aren't sure, then you are welcome to attend a few board meetings. We **will** let you go, without any pressure, if it is not for you. But by then, you will have acquired a much better understanding of the issues and activities dealt with by the Board, and of the range of work undertaken in the wood. Perhaps that might lead you to something that **would** suit you.

OK, so much for the big, scary board membership. What else do we have to offer? Well, there's the Woodland Management Group, which needs people with a background in, or at least an interest in, the management of the wood. Practical skills and experience are very welcome, but some of the work involves walking the tracks regularly, checking for dangerous trees or hung up branches, and a good eye can help with that important work.

We now have a Friends of Evanton Wood group, which we hope will reinvigorate our community activity days. We would particularly welcome people from the full range of ages, so that we can tailor our events to different sections of the community.

I'm still keen to set up an ecology group, to research and make recommendations for conserving and enriching the wildlife in the wood. Given that the practical work would be done mostly by school and volunteer groups, there is a real opportunity to help shape the wood and ensure best practice is observed, for a modest input of time, thought and effort.

There is also the Friday and Last Saturday of the month Volunteer groups. These are very much

hands on, and there are opportunities to learn new skills and to deepen your connection with the wood. If you've always wanted to recognise the tree species at all ages, this is a good way to do it. The work **can** be hard, but there is always lighter work that needs done and no pressure to do more than you are comfortable with. It's **big time** gardening.

OK, so that's a **lot** of groups. But, what if you just enjoy being in the wood? Well you can be a great help there too. I **know**, from how clean the paths are, that we already have an informal litter patrol, and if you'd like to join us then an eye for plastic, a bag and a good thick washable glove are all you need. You've probably heard of the broken windows theory, which says that if a window is broken, and not repaired soon, its seen as a licence for the rest of the windows to be broken. In contrast, a place which appears well cared for will be treated with respect. Those clean tracks are helping to keep the wood safe.

And talking of safety, you don't need to be on the Woodland Management Group to report hung up branches over the tracks, or dangerous trees after high winds. Let us know at the cabin, or email a board member.

We also inspect the Playpark regularly, to check it's clean and safe, but if some of our regular walkers gave it the once over on their outings, we would find out about any problems sooner.

The wood receives many visits, from individuals and people representing groups and organisations. Some of these are **first time** visitors who we would like to show around the wood,. For many of these visits, this would require a board member, but where it doesn't, it would be helpful if we had a group of members or volunteers who we could contact to act as guides to the wood. If you would be interested in meeting some new people and introducing them to Evanton Wood, then please let us know.

For all the ways to help with the running of the wood, volunteers can set a limit to the time involved. Even to have members available to call on for the occasional big event in the wood, would be a great help.

Lastly, in this section, (oh yes there's another section!) we need guidance from the membership on how you envision the future of the wood.

The shelter at Mag's Wood is a splendid asset to the wood and a credit to our community's volunteering spirit. Those of you who were involved in the build, or attended the opening will know that it represents far more than just a structure. Practically, it will provide a forward base for groups, particularly young people, to explore the wood beyond the cabin and ponds. We hope it will be used for cultural and sporting events and also provide a sheltered meeting place.

But everything we build in the wood commits future members and volunteers to a maintenance burden.

Do we need safer crossings of the Allt Cul Na Greine stream, for example. Ad-hoc bridges and stepping stones keep appearing, so will these need replaced with safer crossings at some point, or do you value the unfussy approach we have now - and do you perhaps feel differently on days when the crossing is icy or the stream is high?

We want to engage with the community on issues like this, so that as an organisation we are taking decisions that are supported by the membership, as well as the wider community.

The next (and you'll be glad to hear) last section of this Chair's report is about the Forest

Management of Evanton Wood and it's also about light.

For anything that substantially affects the wood, we would always seek to engage with, and take account of, the views of the community. But how do we do this, beyond an Annual General Meeting and a suggestions box that we have to keep repairing? When we prepared a statement of principles for the management of the wood, we held a meeting and everyone present went through that statement, selecting, refining, agreeing and objecting as appropriate. We brought in a facilitator from Ross-Shire Voluntary Action, so that it was not the Board controlling the process. We think the principles which emerged, and which are on our web site, are good general principles for managing Evanton Wood,

Since then, we have completed a substantial Long-Term Forest Management plan, prepared by Steve Liddle and agreed with the Forestry Commission, which is consistent with the principles.

This Long Term Forestry Plan supports the system of continuous cover forestry which has led to the diverse and attractive nature of the wood. Change in the wood is perhaps slow to our eyes, but it is relentless. **Light** provides the energy for growth and change and along with climate, storm, fire, disease, animals, species introduction and human activity, shapes woodlands. As you walk through the wood, it is easy to see the pre-eminent importance of light. Areas where light penetrates to the woodland floor have an abundance of ground flora, while shaded areas under old beech for example are restricted to mostly leaf litter and fungi. Areas where high winds have taken down a stand of trees and opened up the canopy, demonstrate how the wood uses light to fuel natural regrowth.

Throughout the wood, there are trees growing in plastic tubes, the tubes providing protection from deer and a microclimate to encourage growth. There are also tubes **without** a tree growing in them any more. The original Heritage Lottery Fund project required us to plant several thousand new trees in the wood. We used this as an opportunity to add to the diversity of the wood by planting broadleaf trees. However, this process was made difficult by the fact that the wood was **already full** of trees. This meant that some of the plantings were in areas too shaded for the new trees to thrive. The volunteer group is now removing plastic tubes, where they are empty, or where the tree no longer needs them. The redundant tubes are in piles throughout the wood. If you're feeling helpful, please do feel free to move a few of these closer to the cabin when you're passing. If you do get some all the way down, we are stacking them beside the blue container next to the cabin, for future use. If nowadays you can crowdfund and crowdsource, perhaps together we can crowdshift, and get some unnecessary plastic out of the wood.

The tubes with **no** tree growing in them are part of a larger issue within the wood. Trees grow, they spread their branches and they capture light. This means that, over time, a wood gets darker, which inhibits the growth of young trees. In woods such as Evanton's which are managed using continuous cover forestry, rather than clearfell, this means that the trees have to be thinned periodically. This reduces the density of trees in the thinned area and opens up small sections of the wood for replanting or regeneration. A substantial thinning was done by Novar in 2011, prior to the community purchase of the wood, and in the next year or so, it will be time for another one. Any thinning will be done according to the Long-term Forest Management Plan and will involve felling conifers just under a foot in diameter, although some trees below or above this size may need to be removed to allow access. The wood has approximately 150,000 mature trees and the thinning will involve removal of up to 3000 trees, concentrating on the densest areas. This represents about 2% of the trees in the wood. Of course, the large, structural, cathedral trees which add so much character to the wood, will not be part of the thinning work and will be retained.

Unfortunately, there will inevitably be disruption of the wood during this work and this disruption will have a greater impact than the 2011 thinning, simply because the wood is used far more by the

community than it was before the buyout. We are still at the early stages of planning a thinning and we intend to involve the community in this and to ensure the work is carried out as sympathetically as possible.

Many of you will remember how dark and overgrown much of the wood was before the 2011 thinning. and I think most would agree that, for example, the track at the end of the ridge overlooking the village, which was like walking down a wooden corridor, is much more attractive now, while a glance at the regeneration along the ridge shows that more light is now allowing a new generation of trees to thrive.

Elsewhere in the wood, a thinning will open up small areas, which we can use to add to the diversity of the wood. Just beyond the turn-off to the gorge is an open area cleared after storm damage. It is now thick with natural regeneration and home to a thriving stand of oak saplings which the volunteer group planted. In a wood, light represents opportunity and change, and we want to manage that change responsibly and engage the community in that change. This AGM report is just the first part of a process.

Anyway, that was a long haul, and I promised feedback as well as communication, so there will be an opportunity to ask questions after the end of the formal AGM. There will also be a thank you card for signing and a collection for Simon Harry to show appreciation for his contribution to the woods over the last seven years.

Thank you for listening,

Douglas Wilson,  
Chair,  
Evanton Wood Community Company.