

# COMMUNITY\* LAND SCOTLAND

Inspiring Future Communities



## PURCHASE CASE STUDY

### FORESTRY: Aigas Community Forest



Aigas Community Forest purchased 260 Ha of commercial forestry from Forestry Commission Scotland via the National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS) in March 2015 after a six year process hindered by lack of funds for purchase. Funds are now available for forest purchases through the Scottish Land fund so other communities should find the process easier.

ACF is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status and its vision for Aigas Forest is built around 5 E's: Environment, Economy, Enjoyment, Energy and Education. We have a board of 11 voluntary Directors and a part time (0.8fte) Development Officer who is a trained forester and wilderness guide.



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## The Process

A timeline setting out key milestones in the process is set out below:

**March 2009:** On being informed by Forestry Commission Scotland that Aigas Forest was to be placed on the market the community held a public meeting to discuss community purchase. This was attended by HIE's Community Assets Team, Forestry Commission Scotland and our local Councillor. A unanimous vote for exploring community purchase led to the setting up of a Steering Group.

**Summer 2009:** To meet the National Forest Land Scheme's requirements we commissioned a feasibility study and five year business plan, held a community ballot (321 balloted, 65% response rate, 93% in favour), jointly instructed (with FCS) the District Valuer and submitted our application to the NFLS. To support this process required funding which was secured from HIE and the Highland Council.

**December 2009/ January 2010:** Our NFLS application was approved and the District Valuer set the worth of the forest at £690,000.

**Spring 2010:** ACF was set up as a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. Our website was established and we recruited some high profile 'Forest Champions'.

**Summer 2010 – Summer 2014:** Due to a lack of funding available for land purchase we examined a range of different options for managing the forest including leasing and part purchase/ part lease. When the Scottish Land Fund came into being in 2012 we worked with CLS and others to enable it to be used for forestry purchases without breaching State Aid rules. These were 4 very frustrating years but thankfully most groups will not have to face this level of delay now.

**Summer 2014-March 2015:** We progressed securing the final funding package for Aigas Forest (now revalued at £760,000) and were able to recruit our Development Officer with some advance support from our funders in August 2014. Our final funding package was approved in November 2014 with support from the Scottish Land Fund, Scottish and Southern Energy and the Aigas Trust. We faced a number of hurdles in relation to boundaries and land registration but the metaphorical keys were handed over on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2015.



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## Progress Since Purchase

Aigas Community Forest secured the land in March 2015, just six months from the writing of this case study. In that time we have been working on developing our management proposals for the site which need to be formally approved by Forestry Commission Scotland. We have been consulting the local community on recreation and access and their priorities for the site through consultation walks in the forest. We have also been consulting with Scottish Natural Heritage over deer management issues and have had an Ancient Woodland Survey carried out by the Woodland Trust Scotland. Archaeological and tree and soils surveys have also been carried out.

Although we cannot harvest or restock yet we have had volunteer work parties from the community, the Scottish School of Forestry and Lifescan carrying out a range of works including litter picking, broom and natural regeneration removal from track sides and path maintenance. Aigas Field Centre and Teanassie Primary School have been making the most of the site's educational potential.

We have also hosted a wide range of visitors not least the First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs Food and the Environment.

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## Lessons Learned

1. Make sure you fully understand the processes involved and take sound advice. We almost fell at the first hurdle as our community ballot had not been fully inclusive despite being run by Highland Council (we had to do it again!).
2. Look for support wherever you can get it. Individuals and organisations from both within and out with our community have both responded to our requests and come forward with unsolicited offers, providing expertise and saving money.
3. Never give up. It can be a long slog, and at times some opponents can be very vocal but they are usually in the minority. If you and your community believe in the project, investigate every option, go down every road and one of them will work for you.



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## Benefits Delivered

Although the benefits are hard to quantify at present as we have only owned the forest for six months there already many positive signs. Community usage of the forest has increased – although there has always been open access it is as if we have put up an invisible ‘people welcome’ sign. We have had so much interest and more offers of help, particularly on practical work to improve both the forest environment and access facilities, than we know what to do with.

Our aim over the long term is to convert the forest to a continuous cover form of management which will produce a steady flow of income with the potential to create jobs both working in the forest and through producing wood fuel. This approach will also mean that we can reduce landscape impacts of felling and will work alongside our encouragement of public access.

We recognise the educational potential of the forest and we are working with Aigas Field Centre and the local schools to create a good environmental education resource.

We are seeking to take a more sensitive approach to environmental management and have been working with Woodland Trust Scotland to understand remnants of Ancient Woodland on the site and how we can restore these. There are areas of peatland to be restored and open areas and freshwater lochans which can improve biodiversity with proper management.

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## Next Steps

Over the next 12 months ACF will be:

- Developing a Long Term Forest Plan approved by Forestry Commission.
- Submitting applications for forest management under the Forestry Grant Scheme.
- Securing additional funding for our Development Officer.
- Working with local partners to explore forming a Landscape Partnership for Strathglass and Glen Affric.
- Further developing volunteering and links with the local schools and Aigas Field Centre.

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## Information and Contact

Webpage: <http://www.aigasforest.org.uk/>

Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/aigascommunityforest>

For Further information Email: [info@aigasforest.org.uk](mailto:info@aigasforest.org.uk)

