

Friends of Ridge Wood South Gloucestershire, England



A small corporately owned woodland leased by a local authority, managed by a Friends group for public access and conservation

This case study is one of a set written as part of a Forest Research project. Some case studies are written by the community group, others by researchers who visited and interviewed group members, but they have all been validated and endorsed by the community groups.

Forest Research developed a standard method for describing the case studies, outlined in Lawrence and Ambrose-Oji, 2013 "A framework for sharing experiences of community woodland groups" Forestry Commission Research Note 15 (available from www.forestry.gov.uk/publications).

The case study comprises three parts:

1. The **Group Profile** provides essential information about the form and function of the community woodland group. Profiles were prepared following the methodology
2. The **Change Narrative** which documents key moments in the evolution of the community woodland group with a particular focus on the evolution of engagement and empowerment
3. The **Engagement and Impacts Timeline** documents milestones in the development of the community woodland group, its woodland and any assumed or evidenced impacts.

The case studies collectively provide a resource which documents the diversity and evolution of community woodland groups across Scotland, Wales and England. The method ensures that the case studies are consistent and can be compared with each other. We welcome further case studies to add to this growing resource.

For further information, and for the detailed case study method, please contact:

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1. Group profile

Woodland – Friends of Ridge Wood, Yate
Map ref: ST 724 828
Webpage: <http://www.ridge-wood.org.uk/>
Date of Profile: September 2013
Resources: <http://www.ridge-wood.org.uk/history.html>, and management plan

| 1. Institutional context (September 2013) | |
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| 1.1 Ownership of the woodland(s) | <p>Ridge Wood (may also be known by some as Barnhill Wood) is privately owned by Hanson Aggregates (a quarry company). There is a formal management agreement with South Gloucestershire Council, giving responsibility for the site to the local authority in return for allowing public access to the site. Meetings are held regularly between the chair of the Friends group and Hanson. The Friends group assist the council in implementing management and are mentioned in the management plan.</p> <p>Classification of tenure: Informal agreement (public)</p> |
| 1.2 Access and use rights to the woodland(s) | <p>There is public access on one public right of way and three permissive paths through the woodland; previously there was just a single public right of way through the site. Hanson has specified that they do not want cyclists to use the site. Horses are not allowed on site and motor vehicles are also banned.</p> |
| 1.3 Regulations/responsibilities affecting the woodland(s) | <p>The minimum legal requirements for H&S, historic monuments and pest and diseases management as outlined in the UK Forest Standard.</p> <p>Part of Ridge Wood is designated a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI); it is also a Community Forest Gateway Site, i.e. designated as such by SGC as a community led and managed woodland within the Forest of Avon catchment, and a proposed Local Nature Reserve. This means there are limitations to management</p> |

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| | <p>according to these designations. The southern section of the wood is part of the Barnhill Quarry SNCI. SNCIs are protected within the planning system under Policy L9 of the SGC Local Plan. The Forestry Commission's Woodland Improvement Grant has been used for sycamore removal. The other legal restrictions in the management plan are listed as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Wildlife and Countryside Act (WCA) 1981 (as amended). ○ Badger Act 1992. ○ Conservation (Natural Habitats etc) Regulations 1994. ○ Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. ○ Management and Access Agreement (2003) between Hanson Aggregates and South Gloucestershire Council |
| 2. Internal organisation of the group/enterprise | |
| 2.1 Group members, representation and decision making | <p>Membership of FoRW is free and open to all but it is mostly made up of local residents from the east of Yate close to the site. Currently there are about 80 people on the mailing list and about 12 who are fully active members. There is no general characterisation of members. The 'community' is perceived to be the residents in the surrounding housing estates.</p> <p>The group is formally constituted so there is a chair, vice-chair, treasurer and secretary. Decision making is structured by the objectives of the 5 year management plan. Public meetings are held every 3 months to discuss particular comments and issues. The community is invited to comment on proposals from time-to-time.</p> |
| 2.2 Communication and learning processes | <p>FoRW have an e-mail list to communicate with members and a website which is regularly updated. The group hold meetings every 2-3 months with members which helps with communication. There are currently no social media sites used. There are no specific and conscious group learning activities. Learning within the group and by individuals within it, and has largely been "learning by doing". Skills and knowledge have grown as the group has developed its management role and begun to get to grips with woodland management. Sharing information and knowledge with council has been particularly helpful, particularly as the council own a number of similar sites so have important experience to share with FoRW.</p> |
| 2.3 Structure and | <p>The group are a registered constituted volunteer group. This was done in order to allow them to apply for grants.</p> |

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| legal status | Classification of legal form: Unincorporated Association |
| 2.4 Regulations/ responsibilities affecting the group/ enterprise | Key issues are insurance and H&S, covered through association with the council. |
| 2.5 Forest management objectives and planning procedures | <p>The first Management Plan commissioned by SCG and developed by the Avon Wildlife Trust was agreed in 2000 and since then a considerable amount of work has taken place following a series of associated five year working plans. The overarching objective of management is to maintain and improve the biodiversity values (conservation interest) whilst maintaining public access. This involves projects to regenerate certain areas of the woodland in order to create light and develop ground flora coverage. It also means active management of visitors where they have an impact on the ground flora.</p> <p>Overall aim of plan: Conservation</p> |
| 2.6 Implementing the woodland management plan | South Gloucestershire Council and the Friends of Ridge Wood group implement the management plan themselves. It is reviewed annually. They have to pay for certain skills and training as they do not have all the necessary skills within the group. This is funded by grants and fundraising events, for example, Forestry Commission's Woodland Improvement Grant has been used for sycamore removal. Volunteer groups from BTCV have also contributed to management activities in association with FoRW. |
| 2.7 Business/ operating model and sustainability | The group is a non-profit organisation. Overall sources of income for the group in 2012-13 consisted almost entirely of grants. FoRW receive funding for certain projects which is then spent on what is necessary to fulfil the actions outlined in the management plan. The main costs are associated with hiring equipment, putting on events, and employing any skilled labour. Most finances come from the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund which has allowed FoRW to secure up to £150,000 since the start, this has meant that there has had to be little other funding. The group also raise money by holding events such as a Woodland Festival |

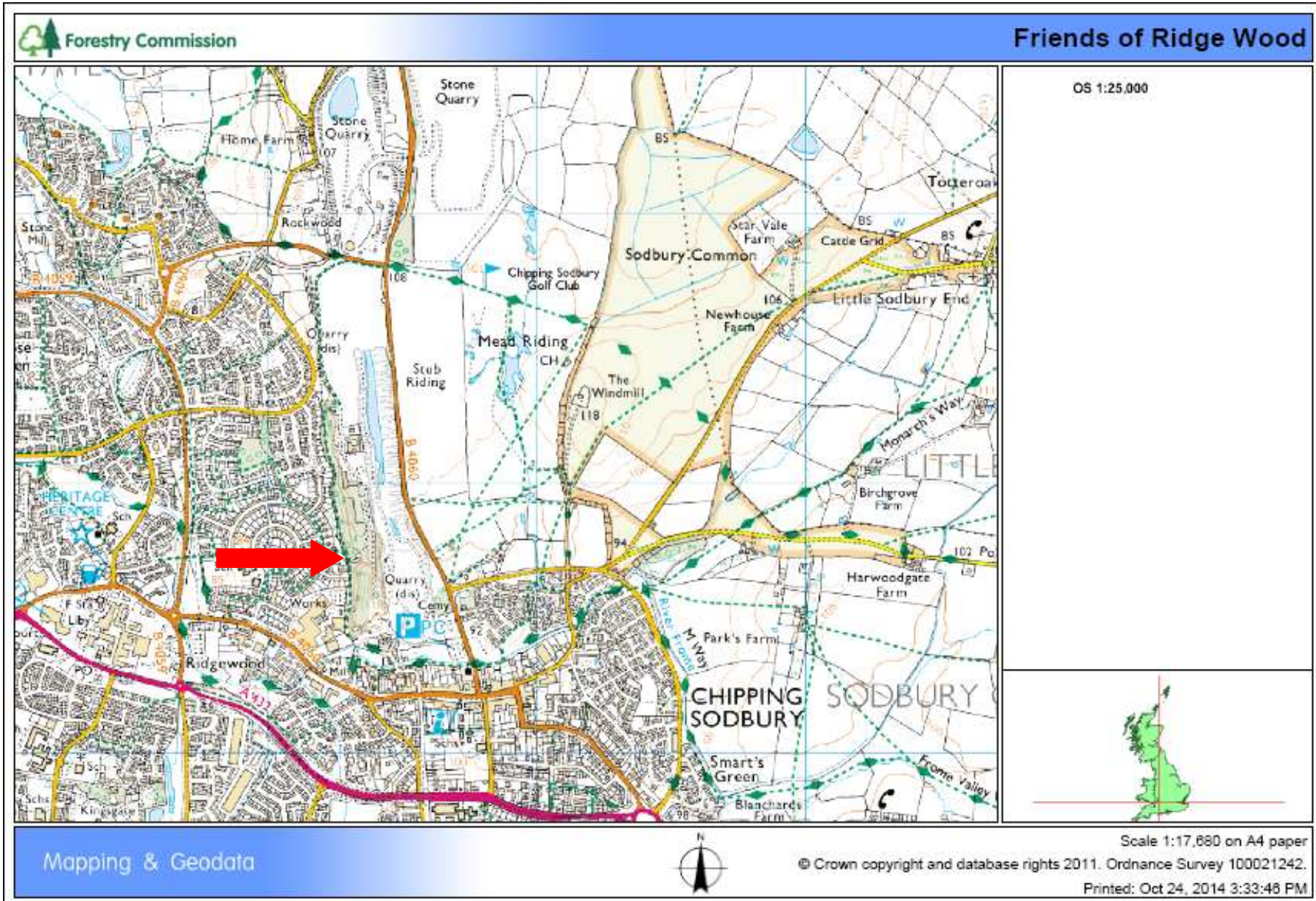
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| 2.8 Benefit distribution rules | There are no financial or other tangible benefits that need to be the subject of distribution rules. |
| 3. External linkages | |
| 3.1 Partnerships and agreements | South Gloucestershire has a network of 'environmental link groups' which is a forum for friends groups, parishes and interested individuals to share their knowledge and experience. The local authority is considering developing these into an open spaces forum for friends groups and other organisations managing green space to come together. Members of the Friends of Group have said they want better networking, an eforum, and a method of bringing people in on a seasonal basis to deal with the different tasks there are to undertake. Link groups meet three times a year, will eventually be evolved into a forum. FoRW realise the importance of sharing knowledge. |
| 3.2 Associations | Avon Wildlife Trust is very active in the area; members who are resident nearby come to meetings, help in the woodland etc. |
| 4. Resources | |
| 4.1 Forest/ woodland | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Size: 4.8 ha ○ Access: located on the southern tip of a limestone ridge which runs from Ridge Woods up to Lower Woods Nature Reserve in Hawkesbury. The site has good access by car, public transport and by foot; however, there is limited parking by the site. The site is located next to a now disused quarry site; however, just to the north there is a quarry site which is still in use. There are a number of large housing states surrounding the site ○ Soil type and site potential: soils are likely to be quite thin and chalky lying on limestones, mudstones and sandstones of Carboniferous age ○ Species mix: ash, sycamore, sessile oak with field maple ○ Age of stands and major operations (date of last felling, planting, thinning): No information ○ General mix of management compartments: parts of the wood show characteristics of semi-natural woodland with a varied ground flora, while other sections have been influenced by the landscaped gardens |

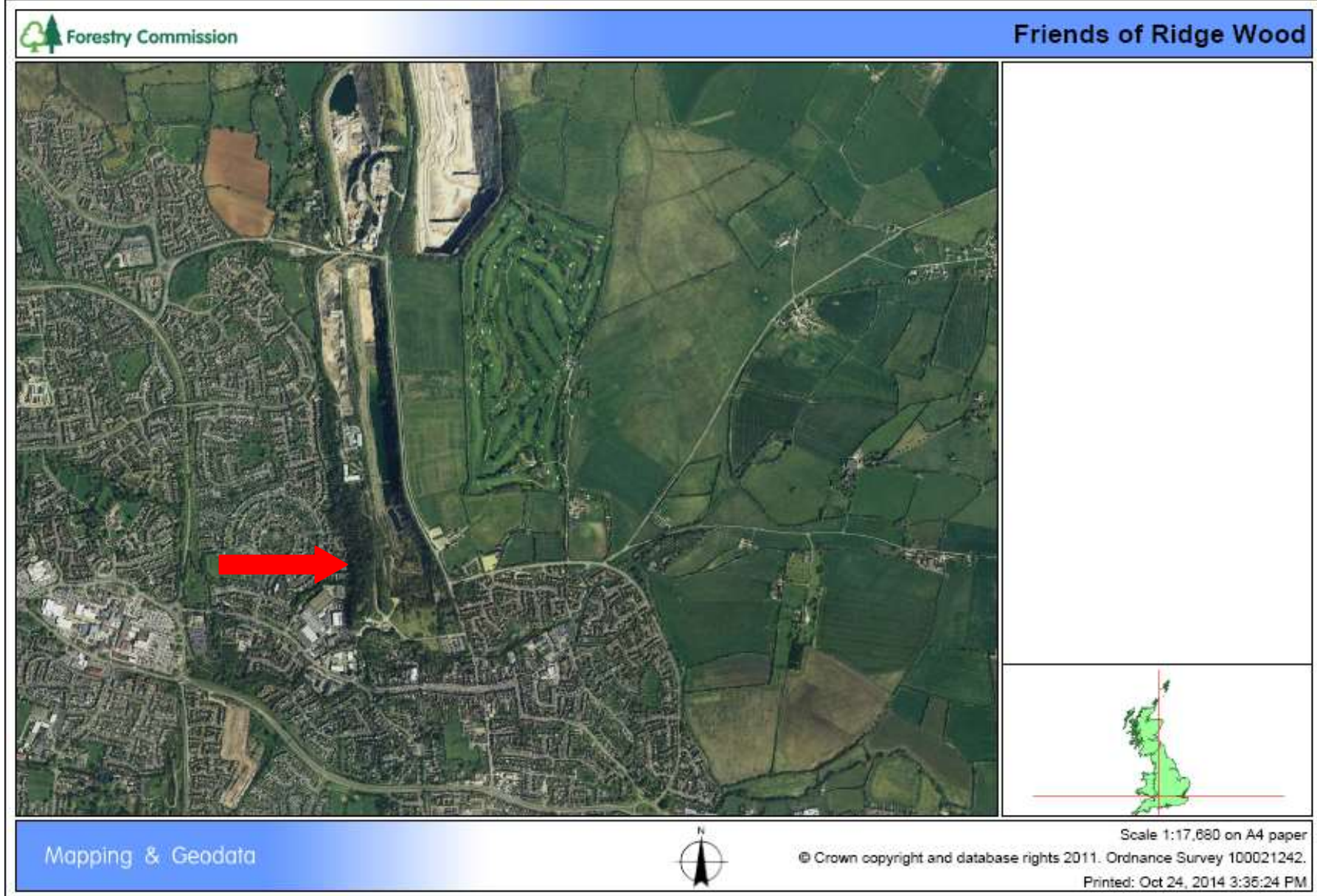
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| | <p>of Ridge House a 19th Century property demolished in the 1920s. The north of the woodland is composed of semi-ancient natural woodland and has really interesting ground flora; the middle of the woodland is the remains of the formal gardens of the old mansion house, the northern section is secondary woodland which was tipped and quarried in the 1950s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Features: distinctive Wellingtonias which tower above the canopy are likely to have been planted during the 1800s, they have grown to a great height and have been measured/monitored as some of the tallest trees in the area ○ NFI classification = semi-natural Broadleaf woodland with some featured exotics ○ General condition of woodland: healthy. There has been thinning and felling within this area to allow light, thus making way for ground flora to grow ○ Biodiversity information: the management plan lists a host of flora and fauna in the woodland and calcareous grassland. Fifteen species of Birds of Conservation Concern have been recorded. Ecological survey data is held at Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC) and at SGC |
| <p>4.2 Woodland and group funding sources</p> | <p>The Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund is a tax on quarrying companies and the site has benefited from up to £150,000. This has been spent on work in the woodlands, management plan, woodland works, clearing rubbish, community events. The fund has also paid for a website, education packs and path improvement. Group have secured money from a number of additional sources including The Cooperative Bank community grant fund, the South Gloucestershire Council environment grant, the Yate Council and Area Forum small grant fund Some parish councils have supplied small amounts of funding. There have also been donations of stone from the quarry company to help build more accessible paths.</p> |
| <p>4.3 Knowledge, skills, human and social capital</p> | <p>Members of the Friends of Group have some conservation management skills through contact with Avon Wildlife Trust, and group management skills as well as site management skills have been developed whilst taking part in the Link Group and Area Forums.</p> |

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2. Change Narrative

1. Group History. Moments of change, motivations and engagement

Ridge Wood has a history of being a popular local amenity. So, initial engagement was through **informal enjoyment**. The council got involved with the site in 1999 after they were approached by the town council and local residents who feared that the quarry company who own the woodland were about to fence off the woodland to avoid the responsibility of managing visitors to the site. South Gloucestershire Council (SGC) approached the company and negotiated a formal lease of the site through a management agreement. As a result the local residents formed themselves into a fully constituted group in 2000. This provided them with the legal basis to apply for funding and find a substantive means for volunteers to contribute to the upkeep of the woodland through **volunteering**. It meant that a main control group there still remained, in the form of a board of directors, but that the engagement of volunteers could still be maintained. A key motivation was maintaining access public to the site, but the opportunity to improve woodland management has increased the focus on conservation values. The Friends of Ridge Wood (FoRW) have developed their skills and knowledge towards more **active engagement** of the site as this accords with the latest woodland management plan and the workplan. There is no desire to develop the group beyond the form and role it currently fulfils.

2. Challenges, barriers and opportunities for change: Key issues in evolution

Facilitating factors

- **Securing adequate funding** from the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. If the quarry continues to be productive in the future funding is unlikely to be an issue. Thus the running costs of the woodland are not a particular barrier or challenge to the site.

Barriers and Challenges

- The section of the council which works with FoRW is part of the landscape and environmental team, which in turn is part of the SGC's community spaces team. Owing to redundancies within the public sector, there are now fewer staff available to work on projects such as Ridge Wood. Consequently, a significant challenge at the moment is for the group to **maintain support for the site from the Council enabling the group to continue managing the site.**
- In terms of social barriers to development, **groups of mountain bikers** within the wood have caused concern by coming with heavy machinery to make jumps and create tracks. This raises safety issues as well as affecting the aesthetics of the woodland and has created extra work getting the wood back into condition.
- **Antisocial behaviour** is an occasional issue on site. Issues include starting fires, and littering. However, the impact has been lessened by police visits to the woods on their general beat.
- **Maintaining an active membership** challenges long-term sustainability. A couple of years ago there was a very large and active friends group; however, a number of the key members left, for various reasons, and this has meant that the friends group has taken a slightly less active role in recent years. Although there are about 180 volunteers on the mailing list very few get involved with the management of the site and although events, such as woodland festivals, have been popular, getting people to sign up and help out has been particularly difficult.

2. Evolution of income streams

The group's income is almost 100% grant and has been since inception. There are no plans to change this model.

3. Woodland history and change: Benefits and impacts before group involvement

The site has a long and interesting history of development. In ancient days the site is likely to have been home to a hill fort in around 1000BC. It was also an active site during Roman times, which is evident from the remains of pottery and coins which have been found around the site. Later on, it was home to an old manor house, thought to have been established in the 18th-19th Century. This significantly shaped the landscape of the site, with the inclusion of the formal gardens, which make up the

central part of the woodland and the introduction of species such as the Wellingtonias. It is thought the wood would have been less extensive than it is currently; however, some of the southern part of the wood which stands today is thought to date back to ancient times.

The quarry became well established in the 20th century but due to noise and dust the house was abandoned, although the garden continued to be managed for some time.

The quarry site was then taken over J Arnold & Son and the house was used as an office premises. This was then acquired by ARC quarry company however the offices had to be abandoned as blasts occurred too close to the building; this left the house boarded up for some time. The building eventually became derelict and was rebuilt later on to manage the current quarry.

4. Woodland history and change: Benefits and impacts since group involvement

When the council first got involved with the site the woodland was *'a bit of a mess'*. There was a lot of rubbish left on site; cars, fridges, bedsteads etc. This has now mostly been cleared. Litter is still a bit of an issue, however, it is more food waste and packaging rather than fly tipping. At the entrance to the site there used to be a large blackthorn thicket which was not very welcoming. This has been cleared to open out the space and give a safe and welcoming entrance to the woodland.

One of the major concerns of the quarry company was allowing people to have access to the whole of the site. To try and limit the erosion this created, particularly by recreational activities, permissive paths have been created. These have been reasonably successful in controlling where people walk on site. Since the woodland was taken over it has become a popular spot for recreational activities. It is regularly used by dog walkers and as a safe route to walk for school.

The biodiversity has also been well developed; there was an issue of dwarf bamboo in the past, which pretty much covered the site. This has now been managed to make way for a more traditional woodland and particularly interesting ground flora which is being encouraged.

5. Future plans

The Friends of Ridge Wood team are aware of the challenges facing the wood, particularly given the current economic climate. The biggest concern from their point of view is the pressure put on Council staff and other resources. If the Council feel they are unable to support the group by maintaining a mediating presence allowing the group access and manage the site, the fear is the quarry company will be asked to take the management back, and the relationship with the group may be severed. There are a lot of uncertainties for the group to deal with moving forward. They have plans to continue to manage the woodland and maintain public access on it following the five year management plan. They hope that solutions to the challenges they face may be found along the way.

3. Engagement and impacts timeline

| Year | Event | ENGAGEMENT | Reasons Barriers and challenges | Changes/ Impacts and outcomes Social (evidence) | Changes/ Impacts and outcomes Woodland (evidence) | Changes/ Impacts and outcomes Financial/ Economic (evidence) |
|-------------------|--|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1960's onwards | Ridgewood in Council ownership | INFORMAL ENJOYMENT | | | | |
| 2000 | FoRW constituted | GROUP FORMATION | | | | |
| 2001 | Management of woodland by SGC agreed. FoRW provide support | VOLUNTEERING | | Increasing public access | Site cleared of litter and invasive species | |
| 2005 | FoRW included as named partners in management plan | ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT | | Declining ASB | Increased biodiversity as site brought into active management | |