

CWA Achievements and Performance 2020/21

The year to March 2021 was an extraordinary one, dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic which profoundly affected everyone's lives in many ways. Most community woods stayed open for appropriately socially distanced recreation, but many management operations, events and activities were postponed or moved online. The pandemic has heightened awareness of the importance of accessible woodlands and greenspace for health and well-being, and many members report a significant increase in footfall, although this has not been without issues, especially where neighbouring landowners closed facilities.

The pandemic inspired a range of projects and initiatives from community groups: Broadford and Strath Community Company established a food share project with produce from the local Co-op which would otherwise have gone to waste, supplemented with fresh produce from the community allotment within the company's woodland site. Mull and Iona Community Trust's Ulva Ferry Community Transport turned to delivering groceries and prescriptions, whilst South West Mull and Iona Development set up a phone call service with volunteers calling vulnerable, elderly, self-isolating members of the community. These projects demonstrated the value of community-owned land and assets for community resilience and underlined the importance of continued support for the expansion and development of the sector.



Tiroran Forest sign (Image from South West Mull and Iona Development)



The Castlemilk Park Volunteers were highly commended in the Nature of Scotland Awards (Image from Cassiltoun Housing Association)

COVID also had an impact on CWA, however we have remained open for business throughout and indeed have added to our capacity and our ability to support our members. CWA staff have always worked from home, and over the year we have largely moved our training and networking events and advice services online, whilst making greater use of social media to promote the sector. Whilst we miss aspects of face-to-face contact, there's no doubt that online events have advantages for accessibility and inclusion, and it seems certain our future approach will be more blended. Inevitably a large part of our work has been advising groups on the interpretation and implications of government guidelines and signposting members to sources of information, e.g. on the various funds which have been made available to support businesses, charities and the community sector.

Policy

CWA engages in various relevant policy debates and forums to ensure that the benefits of community woodlands and their role in delivering community empowerment and tackling the climate and biodiversity emergencies are recognised, understood and supported by government. In particular, responses to the coronavirus pandemic have highlighted the need for an inclusive and equitable green recovery as part of a just transition to an environmentally and socially sustainable economy.

Brexit continues to bring uncertainty: the EU-co-funded Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) has for many years been the primary support mechanism for woodland management and establishment, and also for community rural development through LEADER. CWA represents the community sector on the Rural Operational Development Committee which provides stakeholder input to the SRDP and we have been working to ensure that any successor programme recognises, values and funds the activities of community woodlands.

Support for member groups

CWA is very grateful for financial support from Scottish Forestry, who fund us to provide an advice and support service for new and existing community woodland groups to acquire, manage and develop woodland and other assets for public benefit. In addition to this core funding, CWA relies on project funding, membership subscriptions and earned income from consultancy to ensure continuity of services and help us support our members.

We have continued to develop our website, expanding our suite of information notes, whilst our e-bulletin, with relevant news, funding announcements, training events and job opportunities, goes out monthly to over 380 members and supporters. We've refreshed our members' e-group which is a valuable source of knowledge and information for community woodlands, and have been developing the use of our Facebook page (>2,000 followers) and Twitter feed (>2,200 followers) as important means of communicating with the wider network.

During the year we provided direct advice and support to 64¹ groups, this included:

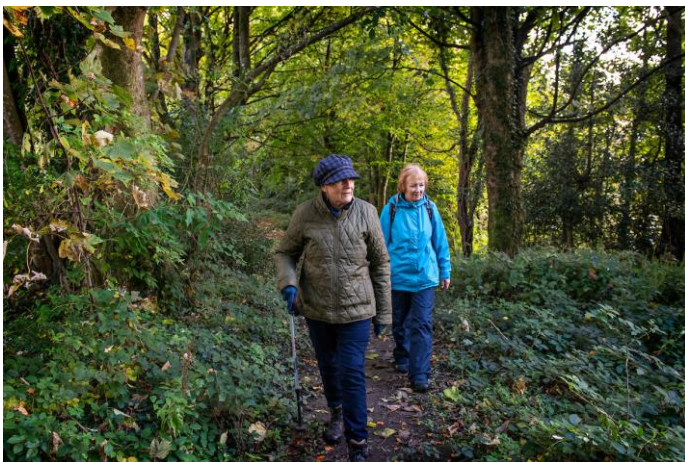
- 21 groups advised on woodland acquisitions: 7 through the FLS CATS process (includes 1 lease), 2 from other public sector bodies and 12 (including 1 lease) from private sector landowners. Advice has covered the requirements of the Asset Transfer and CR2B mechanisms (including the new Part 5 right to buy land to further sustainable development), the processes of the CATS scheme, valuation, potential funding routes (SLF and other grants, crowd-funding, timber sales), Land & Buildings Transaction Tax, leasing, tendering of feasibility studies, business planning, community consultation, and post-acquisition management structures and development projects.
- 21 groups supported with projects to enhance the delivery of social benefits from woods; these have included a number of trail building and other recreation infrastructure projects (e.g. car parking, MTB trails), the development of trail promotion strategies, using QR codes etc for interpretation and waymarking, volunteer development and funding for equipment, and delivering community engagement events in woodlands. A major theme through the year has been the need to ensure that all activities are COVID-safe and operate within Government guidance.
- 12 groups helped with business development and social enterprise initiatives, including woodfuel processing, supply and accreditation, woodchip boilers, marketing for woodland and recycled wood products, potential renewable projects (wind, solar & hydro) and associated compensatory planting requirements, machinery sales, Permitted Development Rights, accommodation for contractors, woodland crofts, a children's nursery and a potential private sector partnership for recreation provision.
- 24 groups assisted with capacity and governance issues. Topics covered include constitutions, organisational forms and the incorporation process, charitable status, establishing trading subsidiaries,

¹ Note some groups were assisted under more than one heading, so the figures for themes add to more than 64

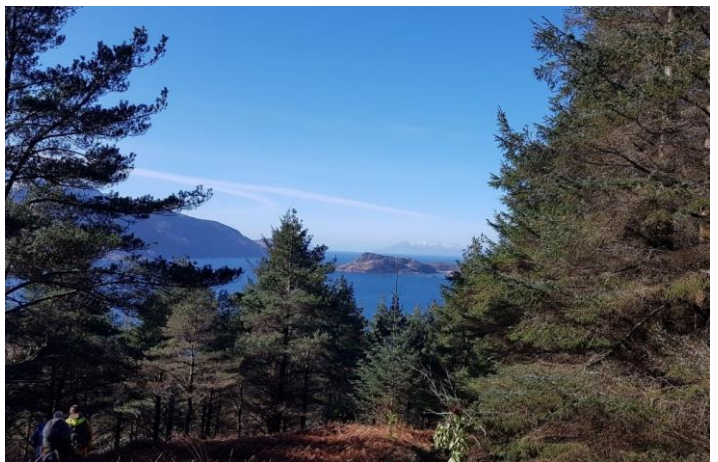
RPID business and land registration, staff recruitment, risk assessment, health and safety policies, liability and insurance, training policies and funding, and partnership working with neighbouring landowners.

- 23 groups supported with woodland management and planning, including general woodland management advice, woodland creation, the woodland carbon code, development and review of Long Term Forest Plans and urban woodland management plans, felling permissions, restocking, certification, roading, timber harvesting, extraction, transport and marketing, Low Impact Silviculture, and control of invasive species.

Our work illustrates the breadth of activity of our members: we never ceased to be amazed and inspired at the ways that community groups use their woodlands to address important local issues. During the year a number of groups, including Applecross Community Company, Carsphairn Community Woodlands, Dunnet Forestry Trust and Viewpark Conservation Group were able to celebrate bringing their woods into community ownership and there are several more acquisitions in progress.



Helensburgh Community Woodlands (Image by OpenAye)



Heading home after a day's work rhodie-bashing in Knoydart (Image from Knoydart Community Woodlands)

Projects

During the year we concluded our LEADER-funded Multi-trails transnational cooperation project, which, working with partners in Sweden, supported five community woodland groups in Scotland to develop, manage and promote multi-user trail networks. Path works at three of the participating groups had been completed previously; works at Abriachan Forest and the Blackwood (Laggan Forest Trust) were subject to considerable COVID-related delays but were eventually completed satisfactorily.

Our planned exchange visits with Swedish partners were sadly cancelled, but some innovative thinking allowed us to adapt, with a number of Scottish delegates joining the end of project conference virtually, and the travel budget redirected towards the production of three short films, on Sustainable Visitor Management, Trails for All, Trails and the Rural Economy. Our final training event, focussing on trail promotion, was also held online. The three films and the reports from all the Multi-trails training events are available online at <https://www.communitywoods.org/multi-trails>, along with a library of resources for communities interested trail building, management and promotion.

CWA secured funding for a further round of “Pockets and Prospects” programme, using Scottish Government funds to support community woodlands to deliver projects intended to help mitigate the impacts of welfare reform. Projects include expanding volunteer involvement at Castlemilk Park, Glasgow and creating an accessible living labyrinth at Beechbrae, West Lothian.

Events

Our annual conference was held online, via Zoom, over two days in October and attracted 112 bookings from across the UK, representing 44 community groups and 15 other organisations plus some individual

CWA members and academic researchers. The conference incorporated six main sessions (recordings at <https://www.youtube.com/user/CWAcommunitywoods/videos>) including three workshops, focussing on Biodiversity, Fundraising, and Learning from Lockdown, each featuring four expert presenters and a facilitated discussion / Q&A session; a “breakout” session featuring four parallel themed groups: Woodland Crofts, Land Rights and Responsibilities, Small Woodland Certification, Saving Scotland’s Rainforest; a showing of our Multi-trails films with a panel Q&A session and the CWA AGM.

We also delivered a number of events online: this included an Argyll “AWOO” (A Wood of Our Own) meeting with updates from Mull and Iona Community Trust, Kilfinan Community Forest Company and Bute Community Land Company, and seven training events on a range of topics from charcoal production and red squirrel conservation to FSC certification and managing ash dieback.



Making mosaics at Abriachan Forest (Image from Abriachan Forest Trust)



Adrian Clark at the Evanton Wood shelter (Image: still from the Multi-trails ‘Sustainable Visitor Management’ film)

Membership and staff

We were very pleased to welcome ten new community group members during the year, as well as five new individual members. The CWA membership includes ~155 community woodland groups directly, with a further 30 groups represented by “Umbrellas”, as well as individual and associate members. The AGM was held online in conjunction with the annual conference.

We had some staff changes this year: Piers Voysey and Amanda Calvert joined us as Senior Woodland Officers advising community woodland groups and delivering training events, whilst Fiona Chalmers completed her role managing the Multi-trails project: we’re very grateful for her work in the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.

Future Plans

CWA's priorities remain to maintain and enhance the provision and delivery of services to member groups, and in particular to expand our capacity to support groups with woodland creation projects and the management and development of urban woodlands. We will continue to advocate for the interests of community woodlands, particularly with respect to new Land Reform legislation, the development of funding programmes and the revision of the UK Forestry Standard.

We expect our work in 2021-22 to be shaped by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, and we anticipate a focus on supporting groups to maintain their services to local communities and further enhance their contribution to the green recovery. We expect to deliver a range of training events and our AWOO and Central Scotland networking events online this year, but we are still hopefully that at least part of our annual conference - provisionally planned for October 1st & 2nd – can be held physically.