

Ashford Community Woodland Group

Kent, England



A voluntary community group creating and managing a medium sized (15 hectare) peri-urban woodland on Local Authority land to maintain local landscape and conservation values

Ashford Community Woodland Group

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: Ashford Community Woodland, Kent, England
Map ref: TQ 986 413
Webpage: <http://www.tcv.org.uk/singleton/ashford-community-woodland>
Date of profile: September 2013
Resources: management plan

1. Institutional context (in September 2013)

1.1 Ownership of the woodland(s)	<p>The woodland, Ashford Community Woodland, is owned by Ashford Borough Council (ABC) and is composed of 16 management blocks. Two areas of the woodland site are bisected by Buxford Lane. Housing developments border the site to north and east, agricultural land to southwest and a designated traveller site to the south. Singleton Environment Centre is located to the southeast.</p> <p>The Ashford Community Woodland Group (ACWG) has an informal agreement to manage the site for ABC.</p> <p>Classification of tenure: Informal agreement (public)</p>
1.2 Access and use rights to the woodland(s)	<p>Ashford Community Woodland is open access and free for people to use and enjoy.</p>
1.3 Regulations/responsibilities affecting the woodland(s)	<p>The minimal legal requirements for H&S etc as outlined in the UKFS. The management plan also lists the Laws and regulations that should be taken into consideration, including Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010, The Weeds Act 1959, The Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986, Hedgerows Regulations 1997, The Forestry (Felling of Trees) Regulations 1979 as amended and the Forestry Act 1967.</p>

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2. Internal organisation of the group/enterprise	
2.1 Group members, representation and decision making	<p>The group is open to anybody who wishes to join. The steering group (ACWSG) of interested members makes decisions about the group and about the woodland. Anyone who takes part in a task day or comes to the AGM is entitled then to join the steering group, currently with 7-8 members. It meets about six times a year. The local community is kept informed as often as the group are able to pass on information about what they are doing by word-of-mouth and through advertising events and activities.</p> <p>Volunteer input is guided by the management plan, working the first Saturday of every month. The size of the volunteering group varies, from a few people to a maximum of 15.</p>
2.2 Communication and learning processes	<p>Communication is through email and phone, and by word of mouth during the monthly meet-ups. There is also a communication strategy which looks to increase ACWG visibility on web-based media as the most effective route to recruiting new volunteers. Much of the group learning is focused on learning about the woodland and this is carried out as formal training. It was noted that at periods when the regular meetings have not been held, the communication and motivation of the volunteers dips significantly.</p>
2.3 Structure and legal status	<p>The group has an informal constitution.</p> <p>Classification of legal form: Unincorporated Association</p>
2.4 Regulations/ responsibilities affecting the group/ enterprise	<p>None</p>
2.5 Forest management objectives and planning procedures	<p>Management plans have been in place since 2000. British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (now The Conservation Volunteers (TCV)) wrote the original management plan, later amended, and ACWG and ABC also developed their own plans. All three were amalgamated and agreed between the parties to form the collaborative management plan 2012-2016 which is now being used. The management plan identifies the managers as ACWSG (volunteers and ABC). There are specific objectives for each of the management blocks. As a whole the woodland management principles are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance the site for wildlife and allow natural processes to direct management.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give due regard to wildlife on site. • Encourage responsible public use of woodlands. • Monitor site, record changes and evaluate management regularly. • Work collaboratively and support like-minded groups. • Encourage volunteering and education on site and empower volunteers <p>Management at the woodland so far has focused on habitat creation and low level management with hand tools. The woodland is now well established, tree planting having been completed 2000-3. Now more focused management is needed to control, maintain and enhance the value of the habitats on site for wildlife, and ensure the site is visitor friendly. Contractors have also been involved in larger tasks e.g. hedge cutting</p> <p>Overall aim of plan: Conservation</p>
2.6. Implementing the woodland management plan	There are no employees. All work is carried out by volunteers through ACWG, and TCV. The management plan indicates the tasks required, which are carried out by the community volunteers through their regular volunteering programme. Those which ACWG cannot cover are supported by volunteers organised by TCV as part of their Green Gym or other initiatives.
2.7. Business/operating model and sustainability	<p>This is a group of conservation volunteers who aim to maintain and enhance the conservation value of ACW. The only threats to sustainability that were identified relate to maintaining volunteer numbers and finding funding to support volunteering activities in a resource poor environment.</p> <p>ACWG activities are supported by grants and matched funding. Other partners ABC, Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership and TCV have helped to secure the larger funds and have sometimes held the grant income.</p>
2.8 Benefit distribution rules	The benefits are all public benefits connected with increased landscape and biodiversity value at the site.
3. External linkages	
3.1 Partnerships and agreements	ABC, TCV, Kent Stour Countryside Partnership have an informal but strong association with each other as partner managers of ACW. The Woodland Trust and the Probation Service have provided support to ACWG at various points in the past. ACWG interacts with the Ashford Environment and Nature Conservation Forum.

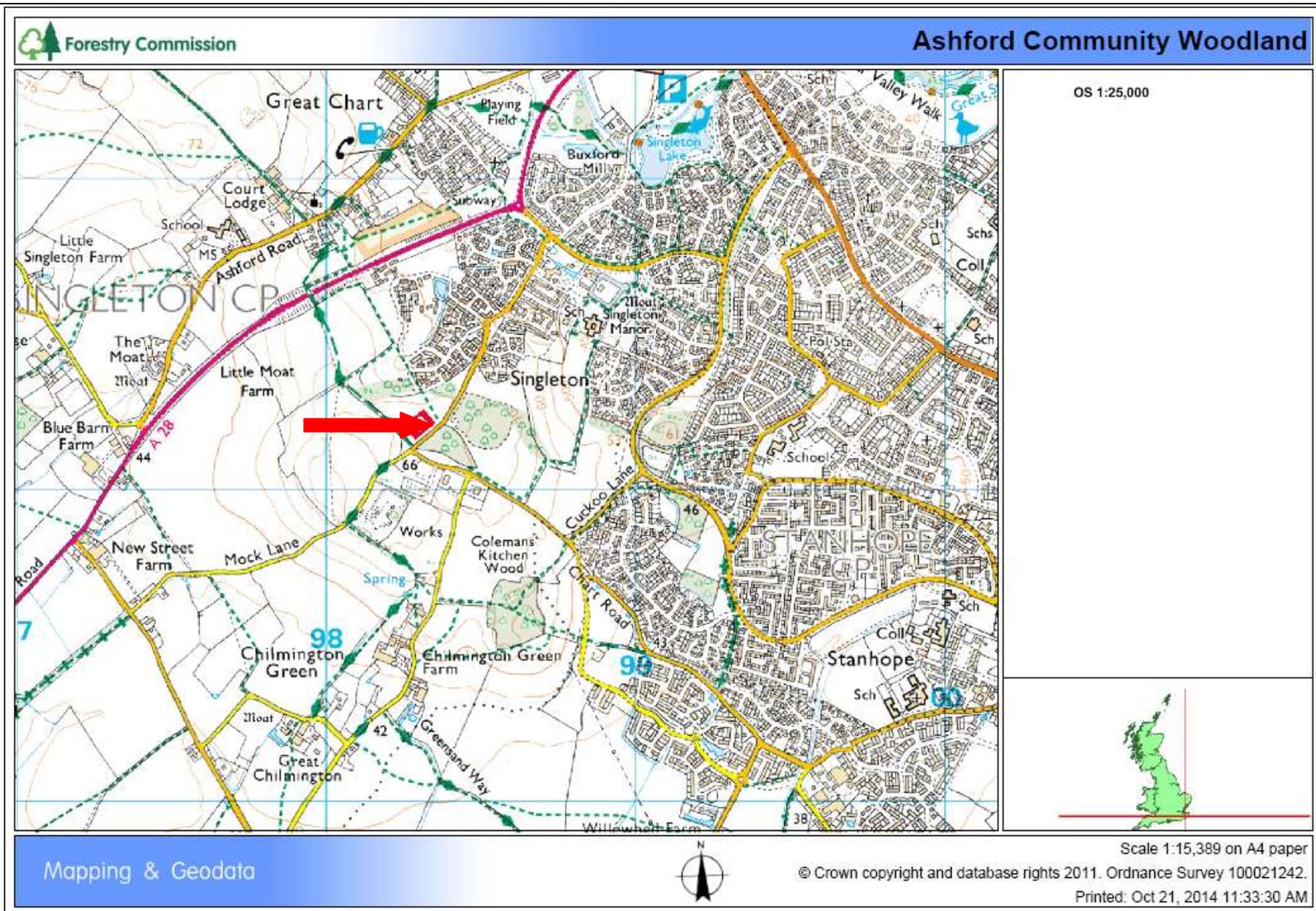
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3.2 Associations	ACWG is not a member of any associations but is affiliated to TCV.
4. Resources	
4.1 Forest/woodland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size: 14.7 hectares (35 acres) • Location: ACW is located 2.2km South West of Ashford, on Singleton Hill (Bucksford Lane). It sits within the Bethersden Farmlands Landscape area within Low Weald Character Area. • Access: There are five main access points, with the main entrance situated at Singleton Environment Centre. The site is accessible by public transport, and cycle paths. • Soil type and site potential: base-rich loamy and clayey soils • Species mix: This is a young, quickly developing woodland established between 2000-2003 on arable land. • Age of stands: Tree planting commenced in 2000 with Kestrel Wood, followed by Slow-worm, Lizard and Fox Wood in 2001-2002, and the Triangle in Feb 2003. Approx 5ha of native broadleaf woodland was successfully planted to add to the 2.5ha approx currently existing as shelterbelt. Tree species planted included: oak, ash, hornbeam, field maple, goat willow, holly, beech, hawthorn, wild cherry and guelder rose. Blackthorn, spindle, holly and bramble were also planted. Trees were of local provenance. A mixed hedgerow was planted in Lark Meadow, the Triangle and Fox Wood next to the bordering housing. • Major operations: Planting has been the major operation. Other than that Of the existing shelterbelt Robin Wood has received some thinning in 2005, and hazel coppiced in 2006. Approx. 1/3 of Dragonfly Wood was thinned in 2010/11, and the remaining in 2012. Approximately half of Faraway Wood was thinned in 2011/12. • Features: Open spaces, woodland and deadwood are all features of the woodland. A species rich wild flower meadow has evolved through grassland management • Classification of woodland type: Broadleaved • Outline management history: Other than habitat creation, due to its suitability ACW was selected as a receptor site for reptile translocation. Lizard Wood, together with Slow-Worm Wood and Butterfly

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	<p>Meadow, were used as receptor sites for reptile translocation from the old Templar Barracks (now Repton Park development) and the old Ashford Hospital in 2004 and 2005-7, and hibernacula were built by the (former) BTCV to accommodate them in 2008. Lark Meadow was also the site for reptile translocation following a small residential development at Hopkins Field in central Ashford.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• General condition of woodland: This is described by the management plan as well maintained.
4.2 Woodland and group funding sources	Grants vary in value from a few thousand (from the ABC Communities Fund), to e.g. the Living Spaces grant of £25,000 with £25,000 match funded by ABC. ABC funds the basic group operating costs e.g. insurance through TCV.
4.3 Knowledge, skills, human and social capital	Some members of the group and the steering committee come with expert conservation and woodland management knowledge. Funding from various bodies has supported group and steering group training, including leaders' courses with TCV, reptile monitoring, bird ID, plant ID, winter tree ID, meadow management etc.

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Title: **Ashford Community Woodland**

Date: 21 October 2014

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Scale @ A4: 1:25,000



2. Change Narrative

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

Ashford Community Woodland and Great Chart Field were both set aside as community-led conservation projects by Ashford Borough Council to celebrate the Millennium. **Consultation** events as part of ABC's establishment of the community project included travelling road shows where the community was asked about the kind of woodland they wanted to see on the site. The consultation was run by ABC and TCV. The consultation process opened up the possibility of the community managing the site for themselves. As one person put it:

"I went along just to plant a tree. I thought that it would be a lovely idea to plant a tree for the Millennium. Then I realised that I could actually have a much bigger part in the planning and implementation of the woodland. I thought that this would be a great project to be involved in. To create a green space which would benefit both people and wildlife"

Informal **group formation** began when ABC and TCV initially took the project forward, and a general plan for the site was established. ACW took over as an independent group in 2003. The group were concerned that too much of the local landscape and wildlife rich areas had disappeared or were under threat. ACW at that time was a series of arable fields with a minimal amount of tree cover in the form of a shelter belt planting that was planted to provide shelter for the crops that were previously grown in this area. Additional community consultation confirmed that *"people wanted trees, they wanted habitat for wildlife"*. Working with ABC and TCV a general plan for the site was established. The main activities of the group moved to organising **volunteer** work parties, planting up woodland, and opening up new areas of biodiversity rich habitats within and around the woodland. Initially there were about twenty core members, but this has declined as people have moved on or passed away. The involvement of other groups such as the Scouts, local charity groups and schools has also declined since the effort to plant trees over the site has been realised.

Involvement in tree planting activities ran between 2000-2005. From this point forward the group has been involved in **active management**; they are mentioned as managers in ACW management plan, and take an active part in the governance of the woodland and its development as the ACW Steering Group. For example, ACWSG contributed to the plans for the Singleton Environment Centre which opened in 2008, the base for TCV Kent, including consideration of how the Centre would support management of the site. TCV and Green Gym at the Singleton Environment Centre continue to have a close association with

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ACWSG. The Environment Centre provides a venue for ACW site management meetings, and a focus for events. ACWSG shares tools and a storage shed with TCV.

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

Facilitating factors

A major aspect of the success of ACW and ACWG has been the **support from ABC**. The Council wanted ACW to be community managed and community driven so it has provided everything needed to facilitate this ambition. As well as moral support, there has been support in terms of training, advice, help in directing the group towards potential funding sources and financial help for items such as insurance (from TCV) and group running costs. ABC identified the establishment of ACW as part of local area planning and development of the Ashford green corridor through Great Chart (section B6).

Barriers and Challenges

One of the main challenges has been the management of relations with the adjacent Chilmington site **Traveller community**, this periodically involves issues to do with the management of litter, fly tipping and fly grazing. At certain points these problems have passed through periods of open conflict, communication and resolution through the mediation of respected Traveller community elders, and stakeholder compromise. Various initiatives have been tried to overcome the challenges, such as installing a fence and gate, building a ditch and bund barrier, fencing, providing alternative grazing, community education, and providing an additional footpath from "Romany gate" to the local primary school. When relations with the Traveller community have been more difficult, issues such as horse grazing of newly planted trees, dumping of scrap metal and passage of vehicles into the woodland have affected ACWG's motivation and enthusiasm, as well as placing additional management burdens on the volunteer group.

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3. Evolution of income

No information available.

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

The land was initially in private ownership, and this transferred to the local authority as major expansion and development of Ashford got underway in the late 1990's. The land previously had low intensity agricultural objectives. Until the late 1990's, the fields adjacent to the West of the site formed Kent County Council Chilmington Green landfill, which has now been capped and restored to grass cover.

Time Period	Owner/Manager	Objectives / Benefits (and evidence)	Major operations	Access and use rights
Up to c.1999	Private land owner then Ashford Borough Council	Arable production on ACW fields and Great Chart Field	Agricultural operations and animal grazing	None

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

There was no woodland before group involvement.

Time Period	Owner/Manager	Objectives / Benefits (and evidence)	Major operations	Access and use rights
1999 - 2004	Ashford Borough Council / ACWG, TCVC, KSCP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create millennium wood • Restore wildlife habitats • Encourage public use of local greenspace • Support urban GI 	Site restoration Tree planting	Open public access for quiet enjoyment

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2004 - 2013	Ashford Borough Council / ACWG, TCVC, KSCP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance the site for wildlife and allow natural processes to direct management. • Give due regard to wildlife on site. • Encourage responsible public use of woodlands. • Monitor site, record changes and evaluate management regularly. • Encourage volunteering and education on site and empower volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of the existing shelterbelt Robin Wood was thinned in 2005 • Hazel coppiced in 2006 • Approx. 1/3 of Dragonfly Wood was thinned in 2010/11 and the remainder in 2012 • Half of Faraway Wood was thinned in 2011/12. • Establishment of meadow mowing regime • ACW commissioned a number of oak sculptures which were installed at the community woodland between 2004 and 2007 • The site was used as a site for relocating reptiles moved on from other areas of Ashford 	Open public access for quiet enjoyment
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6. Future plans

The most important plan at the time of visiting was realising the Local Nature Reserve (LNR) status of the woodland. This would be a great achievement for the group who have turned arable fields into a biodiverse woodland in a little over a decade.

Other than that the group plans to continue fund raising so that volunteer site management can continue. There is also a discussion about how best the group might be able to use the survey data they are collecting. Planning conditions linked to monitoring of some species come to an end in 2015.

3. Engagement and impacts timeline

Year	Event	ENGAGEMENT	Reasons	Changes/ Impacts and outcomes Social (evidence)	Changes/ Impacts and outcomes Woodland (evidence)	Changes/Impacts and outcomes Financial/ Economic (evidence)
1999	ACW and partners undertake community consultation	CONSULTATION to GROUP FORMATION	ACW desire to establish community woodland	Involvement of volunteers and local groups		Not known
2000-2004	Work to establish woodland on-going	GROUP FORMATION to VOLUNTEERING	ACW supported establishment and on-going management of the community woodland by the volunteer group	Increased use of site by visitors and local schools (Singleton Environment Centre records) Changing relationships with Travellers	Presence of woodland! Bird surveys Reptile surveys Butterfly and moth surveys	Not known
2003 onwards	ACWG involved in woodland management planning and delivery	VOLUNTEERING to ACTIVE MANAGEMENT	On-going management of new woodland required, ACWSG established and named as woodland managers	As above	ACW given LNR status in 2013	Not known