

## Dunnet Forestry Trust Long Term Forest Plan

### Annex I: Scoping Report

**Property Name:** Dunnet Forest

**FGS number:** 19FGS40643

**Forest Plan area:** 104.61ha

**Type of scoping:** Correspondence

Dunnet Forestry Trust, assisted by Jon Hollingdale of the Community Woodlands Association carried out a scoping exercise for their Long Term Forest Plan for Dunnet Forest.

A list of stakeholders was produced and agreed with Scottish Forestry as follows:

Scottish Natural Heritage	<a href="mailto:north@nature.scot">north@nature.scot</a>
Scottish Environmental Protection Agency	<a href="mailto:Planning.Dingwall@sepa.org.uk">Planning.Dingwall@sepa.org.uk</a>
Historic Environment Scotland	<a href="mailto:HMConsultations@hes.scot">HMConsultations@hes.scot</a>
Highland Council Forestry	<a href="mailto:nick.richards@highland.gov.uk">nick.richards@highland.gov.uk</a>
Highland Council Planning	<a href="mailto:FPC@highland.gov.uk">FPC@highland.gov.uk</a>
Highland Council Archaeology	<a href="mailto:archaeology@highland.gov.uk">archaeology@highland.gov.uk</a>
Highland Council Ranger Service	<a href="mailto:Paul.Castle@highlifehighland.com">Paul.Castle@highlifehighland.com</a>
Dunnet and Canisbay Community Council	<a href="mailto:info@dunnetandcanisbaycc.org">info@dunnetandcanisbaycc.org</a>
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	<a href="mailto:Bea.Ayling@rspb.org.uk">Bea.Ayling@rspb.org.uk</a>
Caravan and Motorhome Club	<a href="mailto:adam.johnson@camc.com">adam.johnson@camc.com</a>
Castletown Heritage Society	<a href="mailto:castletown.heritage@talk21.com">castletown.heritage@talk21.com</a>
Caithness Archaeological Trust	<a href="mailto:email@caithnessarchaeology.org.uk">email@caithnessarchaeology.org.uk</a>
Castletown Primary School	<a href="mailto:castletown.primary@highland.gov.uk">castletown.primary@highland.gov.uk</a>
Thurso High School	<a href="mailto:thurso.high@highland.gov.uk">thurso.high@highland.gov.uk</a>
Neighbours	

Each was sent (by email) a scoping information document (attached as an appendix) outlining the Trust's objectives and policies for the forest and a suite of four maps (concept, zoning, current species and felling proposals).

These files were also made publicly available on the DFT website, and the scoping process (and a link to the files) was advertised on the DFT Facebook page.

Five responses were received by the deadline of Friday 16 November. (There have been no late submissions, and there were no requests for extensions).

Of the five responses, two, from Historic Environment Scotland and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, were to say that they did not intend to make any comments.

Three of the responses, from Scottish Natural Heritage, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and a neighbour contained a range of comments and suggestions which are tabulated below.

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Raised by</b>	<b>Key impact(s)</b>	<b>Actions to be taken</b>	<b>Location in Forest Plan</b>
Management of grassland habitats	SNH	Natural regeneration encroaching on & thus reducing area of dune grassland habitats.	Control of natural regeneration in open grassland habitats	C.2.11
Management of grassland habitats	SNH, neighbour	Rank vegetation leading to decline in species diversity within the sward.	Grassland management (cutting, removal of cuttings) to maintain species-rich sward	C.2.11
Management of grassland habitats	RSPB, neighbour	Great yellow bumblebee	DFT to follow Bumblebee Conservation Trust recommendations for habitat management for this species (annual cut and removal of material at end of flight season – late September / early October)	C.2.11
Management of grassland habitats	neighbour	Kidney vetch / Small blue butterfly	Species appropriate management (maintenance of cut sward)	C.2.11
Management of grassland habitats	neighbour	Scottish primrose	Species appropriate management (maintenance of cut sward)	C.2.11
Disturbance of over-wintering geese & swans	SNH, RSPB	Disturbance by forestry operations	A minimum stand-off distance of 300m to be observed from geese and whooper swans during the wintering/migratory season (1 October – 30 March).	C.2.1, C.2.2, C.2.3
Breeding birds	SNH	Disturbance by forestry operations	Adherence to Scottish Forestry's guidance notes on wildlife and forestry operations during all operations. For felling during the bird breeding season, guidance and processes as set out in Forest Operations and Bird in Scottish Forests will be adhered to.	C.2.1, C.2.2, C.2.3
Species choice when restocking	RSPB, neighbour	Preference for native species & low density planting / against sycamore.	Broad range of species, including significant proportion of natives, to be utilised to meet the range of DFT objectives; restocking mixtures to be agreed with Scottish Forestry.	C.2.5
Public access	neighbour	Limitations on access for those with special requirements	Continued enhancement of access provision to widen opportunities for all users.	C.2.9

## Appendix: Dunnet Forest Scoping

### Introduction

Dunnet Forest is located in north Caithness, approx. 6km south of Dunnet Head (the most northerly point on the GB mainland), the western edge of the forest is just 200m inland from Dunnet Bay. The A836 Thurso – John O’Groats road (part of the North Coast 500 route) runs along the SW edge of forest, which is otherwise bounded by grazing land. The nearest significant area of woodland is at Castletown, ~3km away.

The forest covers 104.5 ha and was established in 1954 by the Forestry Commission using a range of conifer species<sup>1</sup>, often as monocultures but sometimes in mixture. Difficult conditions, including drought and rabbits, ensured that the plantings required repeated beating up: this and differential growth rates resulted in a forest with more structural diversity than might have been expected.

The forest, which lies within the Dunnet Links SSSI, was sold to the then Nature Conservancy Council in 1984. Since 2003 the forest has been managed by Dunnet Forestry Trust (DFT) under a 25 year lease from the current owners, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). DFT has begun the process of restructuring the forest, clearing windblow and introducing a range of broadleaves.

The forest welcomes over 60,000 visitors each year and is used regularly for educational visits from schools and the local countryside ranger service, which has a base at the adjacent Seadrift Visitor Centre. The carpark at ND221698 has been surfaced and expanded, the path network (now >15km) has been improved and upgraded to cater for a wide variety of abilities and features of interest including a sculpture trail and log cabin have been created.

DFT, a company limited by guarantee (SC 231402) with charitable status (SC 033096) and a community membership of ~600, is currently investigating purchase of the forest using the Asset Transfer provisions of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. The aims and objectives of the Trust’s forest management plans, detailed below, will remain the same whether or not the Trust takes ownership of the forest

Heathsfield Wood was gifted to Dunnet Forestry Trust in 2007 and is situated on old croft land and common grazing in the village of Brough, close to Dunnet. Heathsfield was planted between 1986 and 1992 with a variety of species, largely as an amenity wood. DFT manages the wood for quiet recreation, conservation and to produce a small quantity of Christmas trees for sale to the local community. No significant operations are planned at Heathsfield, and a note on this site will be included as an appendix to the final plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Approx composition in 2003 (i.e. before community management): Lodgepole pine 52ha, Mountain pine 16ha, Sitka spruce 14ha, Corsican pine 12ha, Scots Pine and other conifer species 1.2ha, Sycamore 0.3ha, open ground 9ha.

## **Vision, Objectives and Management Policies**

### ***Vision***

20 years from now Dunnet Forest will be owned and managed by the community to provide a place for recreational use, volunteering opportunities and habitat protection, within the natural environment.

### ***Objectives***

- Local control for community benefit of a significant natural resource
- Greater community involvement through volunteering, leading to mental and physical health benefits
- Enhanced access provision for all to a community woodland that provides a pleasant, sheltered and interesting natural environment
- Enhanced educational opportunities
- Improvements for habitats and species of conservation importance
- Increased woodland biodiversity
- Sustainable fuel wood supply, substituting for fossil fuels and reducing local carbon footprint

### ***Policies***

DFT's work in pursuit of the vision, and to deliver their objectives, will be guided by a number of management policies, as follows:

- Informal zoning will be used to allow spatial differentiation of objectives.
- Harvesting will prioritise windthrow clearance, with felling rates matched to local demand for firewood and other products.
- Restructuring will employ a wide range of broadleaf and conifer species to improve the social, environmental and economic value of the forest.
- All management operations will prioritise protection of features of environmental and historical importance.

Greater detail on these policies is given in the sections below.

## **Zoning**

Key challenges for DFT in managing the forest are the need to cater for a wide range of users and user-groups and to integrate recreation provision and biodiversity enhancement with a number of other forest management objectives and constraints. Informal zoning will help structure future management, recognising that certain management objectives will have a higher priority in certain areas of the forest.

It must be stressed that zoning is not intended to provide hard and fast rules but to guide DFT thinking and planning (and investment decisions) as to which areas are best suited for particular types of activity, infrastructure provision and management. The proposal is to define three zones as per the “DFT Cpts and zones” map: note that the boundaries of the zones shown are indicative and may be amended as a result of the scoping process.

### **Zone A (Cpts 6, 7, much of 8 and small parts of 1 & 2 – mapped in yellow)**

This zone, in the SW of the forest, includes the car park and main amenity features, including the log building, bird hide and sculpture trail, and sees the most intensive recreational use. Management emphasis will remain on family and all-abilities access, with paths constructed to an appropriate standard, and, particularly in Compartment 6, continued maintenance and investment in “forest furniture” – picnic tables, benches, interpretation. Horse access from the main carpark will be discouraged in favour of use of the northern entrance. Forest management intervention will be limited to windblow clearance, especially around paths, with restocking using broadleaves in tubes. In areas with little light only shade tolerant species will be planted.

### **Zone B (Cpts 3 & 4 and most of 1 & 2 – mapped in green)**

This zone, which includes much of the northern part of the forest, has seen the bulk of restructuring work: clearfelling, thinning and replanting since 2003. These operations provided an opportunity to redesign compartments, and considerable new provision in this zone was made for walkers and runners, and also for new user groups: horse riders and sport cyclists. This provision will be maintained and enhanced where possible, but to a standard suitable for more active forest users (this zone is at least 500m from the main carpark). This is the part of the forest where the majority of harvesting and restocking work will take place in the first five years of the plan period, continuing the task of felling and clearing lodgepole pine stands, and restocking with a mix of conifer and broadleaved species.

### **Zone C (Cpts 5, 9 and 10, and part of 8 – mapped in lilac)**

The eastern end of the forest has a very limited path network, these being mainly confined to the compartment boundaries, and consequently sees very limited public access. Significant areas of compartments 5 & 9 were deeply ploughed and planted with Mountain Pine, and are largely impenetrable, whilst initial plantings of much of compartment 10 failed, leaving a large area of open space habitat. Existing public access will be maintained but not extended or upgraded. Forestry operations will be limited. There will be some small scale felling in the mountain pine stands, creating or extending small glades which will be restocked with mixed broadleaves and conifers. The currently inaccessible sub-cpt 10a has been almost flattened by windblow, recovery is unlikely to be cost effective, so it will be left for nature to take its course.

## **Harvesting**

After an initial clearfell operation undertaken in 2003/4, where timber was transported to Norbord at Ardersier and James Jones's mill at Mosstodloch, DFT has carried out harvesting operations in-house, with the majority of produce sold as firewood and smaller volumes as woodchip and round poles for a variety of uses (pergolas, jumping poles, fence posts).

DFT's policy is to prioritise windblow clearance to maintain public amenity, and to match harvesting rates to local sales demand: this is currently ~500m<sup>3</sup> per year.

A total of 12 ha has been identified for felling in the next ten years: this includes windblow clearance in Cpt 6 and 7, the clearfelling of several predominantly Lodgepole pine stands in Cpts 1, 3 & 4 and two small areas of sitka in Cpt 2, all of which have significant windblow.

DFT will continue to restructure the Mountain pine stands in Cpts 5 & 9, cutting ~10 small coupes totalling ~2ha over the next decade.

Additional windblow clearance will take place as the need arises.

## **Species choice for restocking and other enrichment planting**

DFT inherited a forest that was dominated by conifer species, often as monocultures but sometimes in a range of mixtures (some of which have developed into monocultures as one species suppressed the other). Broadleaves were restricted to small areas of sycamore from the original planting plan and some very limited enrichment planting from the late 1990s. Since 2003, restructuring work and enrichment planting has significantly diversified the species mix, and in particular has increased the broadleaved component of the forest: see the DFT Species map for the current species makeup of the forest.

Conifer restocking has largely been by sitka and lodgepole, with very limited noble fir and larch (there is also some sitka regeneration apparent in some areas), with a much wider range of broadleaves employed, notably alder, rowan, willow, sycamore and birch, with smaller proportions of oak, hazel, hawthorn, ash, elder, Swedish whitebeam and others.

DFT will continue to seek to diversify the forest, increasing the broadleaf proportion but retaining a significant conifer component for timber and shelter. Future restocking and enrichment mixtures will be more selective in terms of species choice and protection, learning from experience to ensure higher survival rates.

Sitka will remain the primary conifer species (for reasons of productivity, cost and unpalatability for deer), however, more use will be made of alternative conifers, including Scots pine, larch, noble and grand fir, douglas fir, western red cedar and western hemlock, to be planted in discrete small groups (potentially in temporary fencing enclosures to facilitate establishment). Where restocking stands adjacent to the forest perimeter it may be more practical / successful to use conifers (sitka, lodgepole) in the most exposed sites to provide shelter for broadleaves further into the forest.

For broadleaves, greater use of 120cm treeshelters will be made for the mostly highly palatable species (oak, hazel, gean, whitebeam, etc), whilst temporary fencing enclosures will be trialled, using timber from the forest as posts to reduce costs. Elsewhere there will be a greater focus on the species that are proven to have a relatively high success rate, notably alder and sycamore, also hawthorn, blackthorn and, where soil remains damp all year, willow, with other species only used where adequate protection can be provided.

Ground preparation needs are limited, with screening usually sufficient, although weeding is necessary in grassy areas. In clearfelled areas machine raking of harvesting debris into windrows has proved an effective means of ground preparation (and provide some shelter for young trees). There may also be merit in planting bigger trees – either buying larger trees or buying small plants from commercial nursery and growing on for a year.

### **Features of environmental and historical importance**

All management operations will prioritise protection of features of environmental and historical importance.

Dunnet Forest lies within the Dunnet Links SSSI<sup>2</sup>; as the site management statement notes: “The forest still maintains an interesting grassland flora in some of the more open glades, particularly along the forest rides.” Key species are kidney vetch, Scottish primrose, small blue butterfly and great yellow bumblebee.

Juniper is found at several locations within the forest: DFT will protect existing plants and seek to propagate from them. If otters, bats or other European species are present they will be protected as per Scottish Forestry guidance.

Water bodies and watercourses will be protected as per the Forest and Water Guidelines, these include a large pond created in ~2001, several smaller fireponds assumed to date from the forest establishment and minor watercourses which drain the forest in a generally east to west direction.

Historic Environment Scotland’s Canmore database records four sites within the forest: A hut circle at ND 22349 70022, two mounds at ND 22427 69997 and ND 22503 69902 and a stone wall at ND 22461 70238. The hut circle and adjacent area will be maintained as open space with invasive vegetation controlled, other historic environment features will be protected during operations.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/572> for more information

## **Assessment of Impact**

DFT have undertaken an initial assessment of the impact of their forestry proposals on the local community and local interests as below, and where appropriate, outlined any steps to be taken to mitigate such impacts.

Neighbours: DFT maintains good relations with neighbouring farmers, who will be included in the scoping process. It is not anticipated that there will be any impact from these proposals.

Water supplies: there are no water supplies affected by the proposals

Wayleaves: power line runs N-S through western edge of forest, this area is not impacted by DFT's proposals

Public recreation: proposals will maintain and enhance public recreation in what is already a very well used site. Public access to small areas of the forest will be restricted for health and safety reasons whilst felling operations are in progress – these restrictions will be well-advertised and signposted on the ground.

Access: tracks and existing bridges over the Burn of Helisgrow may be upgraded / reinforced to facilitate timber extraction – this is anticipated to be undertaken by small machinery as at present so will have limited impact.

Visual impact: felling of stands on northern edge of the forest (which are already significantly windblown) will have a positive impact on view of forest from the north-west, removing the unnatural geometric and monocultural edge to the forest and, following restocking with a mix of broadleaves and conifers, replacing it with a more natural shape and a range of heights.

Timber transport: felling rates will be matched to local markets, primarily for firewood, so it is not anticipated that there will be any additional timber lorry movements as a result of the proposals