

Gunton Woodland Community Project, Suffolk, England



Management by community group of a small 3.5 ha urban woodland with high recreation and conservation value

GUNTON WOODLAND COMMUNITY PROJECT

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: Gunton Woodland, Foxburrow Woodland and Gunton Meadow Nature Reserve
Map ref: TM 542 958
Webpage: <http://guntonwoodland.onesuffolk.net/>
Date of profile: June/July 2013
Resources: additional documents i.e. constitution, management plan, newsletters, survey results.

1. Institutional context (in July 2013)	
1.1 Ownership of the woodland(s)	<p>Gunton woodland is owned jointly by the Local Authority, Waveney District Council (2.5ha) and Gunton St Peters Church PCC (1ha).</p> <p>The group also manages and helps with two other sites:</p> <p>1) Foxburrow wood (TM 536 956): again jointly owned by Waveney District Council and a private individual Mr WM Tubby.</p> <p>2) The Gunton Meadow Nature Reserve (TM 538 961) owned by Suffolk Wildlife Trust.</p> <p>Classification of tenure: Formal agreement (public) Informal agreement (public) Formal agreement (private) Informal agreement (private)</p>
1.2 Access and use rights to the woodland(s)	<p>All three sites have free, open access from all sides for pedestrians.</p> <p>Gates prevent unauthorised vehicular access at the main entrance to Gunton Wood in Gunton Church Lane.</p> <p>One of the paths through Gunton wood is a public right of way, the others are informal paths that the group has created.</p>
1.3 Regulations/	Waveney District Council has the legal responsibility to remove any dangerous trees and fell any trees over the size

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responsibilities affecting the woodland(s)	<p>that the group can manage. The arboricultural manager from Waveney Norse comes to the woodland once a year to do a safety inspection to maintain site safety and public liability obligations. The Council also empties the rubbish bins weekly.</p> <p>In Gunton, Meadow Nature Reserve Suffolk Wildlife Trust mows the paths and maintain responsibility for overall management strategy.</p>
2. Internal organisation of the group/enterprise	
2.1 Group members, representation and decision making	<p>The group is open to all, though membership is based largely on residential location or knowing someone already in the group. Although the group uses the term 'members', there is no formal process for membership or any joining fee. There are around 20-40 'working members' who attend the weekly work parties, other members might take part in social events on a more ad hoc basis. The newsletter is circulated to 200 households who form the supporting community. Location is a key uniting factor as most of the group live in the few streets surrounding the woodland area. These streets form an 'estate' of houses all built in the 1960's and there is a strong sense of community among residents. The members who do not live in this estate all have some personal connection with existing members.</p> <p>The local church which borders the woodland provides another key community link and the woodland group participates actively in wider church events, such as the very successful annual Teddy Bears Picnic.</p> <p>Decision-making takes place through the AGM and the Management Committee. The 2013 AGM was attended by 69 members. The initiator of the project has been the Chairman from 1998 to 2013, when a new Chairman took over. The changes in management committee post holders was put to the vote at the AGM and carried unanimously. As the group is very familiar with each other they thought that management committee meetings are less regular than they used to be and much communication is now done by email.</p>
2.2 Communication and learning processes	<p>A two-page or four page Newsletter is produced every 2 or 3 months. Almost half of the members now receive their Newsletter by email, resulting in a significant saving in printing and distribution costs.</p> <p>Each week at the work party the Chairman announces what the work plan for the following week shall be and also</p>

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	<p>any details of other forthcoming events. Learning in the group comes through on-the job experience and group reflection based on discussions during work parties and at social events.</p> <p>The group excursions take place several times a year and are well attended. These excursions provide both a social occasion and an opportunity to learn something more about conservation or habitat management.</p>
<p>2.3 Structure and legal status</p>	<p>The group has a constitution and a bank account but no more formal structure than this.</p> <p>Classification of legal form: Unincorporated Association</p>
<p>2.4 Regulations/responsibilities affecting the group/enterprise</p>	<p>The group have insurance to cover any personal injury during work parties and third party cover.</p>
<p>2.5 Forest management objectives and planning procedures</p>	<p>A formal management plan for the wood was written in 1997 by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust before the group were active, and it was revised by the group in 2003. The objectives of the plan cover all aspects of the woodland, including improving diversity, improving access, and encouraging the use of the wood for educational purposes.</p> <p>Overall aim of plan: Public access and recreation</p>
<p>2.6 Implementing the woodland management plan</p>	<p>The woodland management plan is entirely implemented through the volunteer work of the community group. The only exception to this is the removal of large trees which the Council takes responsibility for. This role has decreased in recent years as a few members of the group went on a chainsaw course, paid for by group funds, so that they are equipped to fell larger trees (up to 8-10 inches in diameter) than can simply be done with hand tools.</p> <p>The group only have an informal management agreement with Waveney District Council for Gunton Woodland, but have a signed agreement regarding Foxburrow wood. In their own words, they are: "virtually left to their own devices". To date, the group have not employed any contractors: Fencing, culvert clearing and digging, and path creation was all done by group members. A pond was created by using a digger loaned by a local contractor in</p>

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	exchange for the fuel used.
2.7 Business/ operating model and sustainability	The group's fund raising activities include a very successful range of activities and products. In 2012 this included selling 'Gunton wood' t-shirts, hats and calendars, organising a Sea Front Air Festival and a Queens Jubilee party, donations and local sponsorship. Together this brought in over £3,000 in 2012. Current assets stand at around £6,000.
2.8 Benefit distribution rules	<p>All the money raised is spent on activities, equipment and materials related to the woodland project. As the group runs a surplus and trust is high within the group, there does not seem to be much disagreement over how the money is spent.</p> <p>Workers in the woodland are permitted to take some dead wood for use as fuel, though this caused some disagreement when it was felt that a couple of people were taking more than their fair share.</p>
3. External linkages	
3.1 Partnerships and agreements	<p>The Group has a formal agreement with Gunton St Peters PCC under which the Group undertakes the management of that part of Gunton Wood which is owned by the Church.</p> <p>The group are affiliated to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) (now renamed The Conservation Volunteers - TCV), which also provides the groups insurance.</p> <p>The website of the group is hosted by Suffolk County Council.</p>
3.2 Associations	<p>Key members of the group have advised several other local groups who wish to do similar projects.</p> <p>In 2003, the group was awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Award for: "providing, maintaining and regenerating a safe, accessible and pleasant woodland environment for the public".</p> <p>In 2004, detailed discussions between the Group and English Nature led to the formal declaration by Waveney District Council of Gunton Wood as a Local Nature Reserve, thus rewarding the efforts of the Group's volunteers.</p>

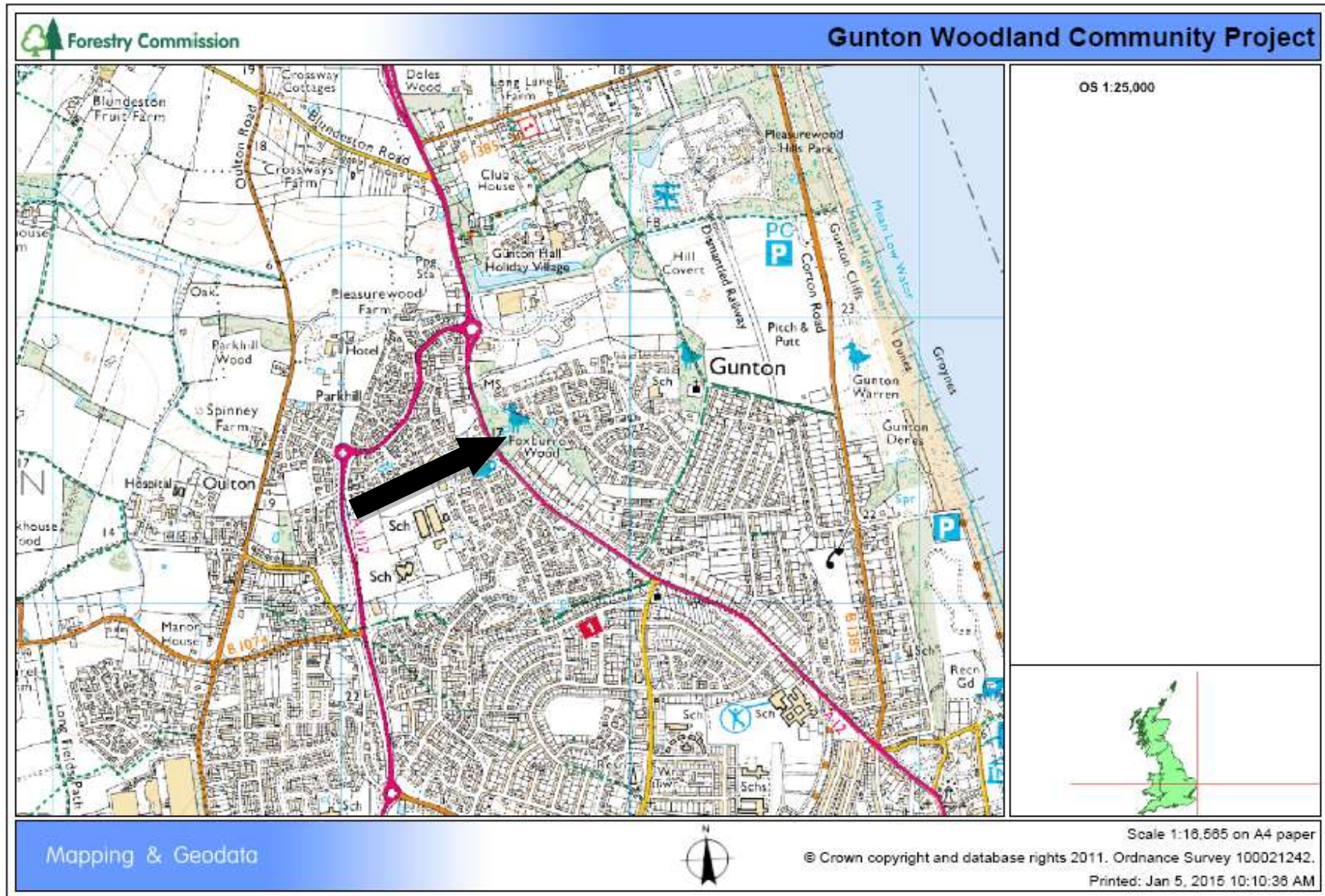
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4. Resources	
<p>4.1 Forest/woodland</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size: Gunton Wood is 3.5ha • Location: In the northern area of Lowestoft, only one mile to the sea, Gunton woodland sits adjacent to Gunton church and a residential area. • Access: Open access to all walkers. There is a gate at the main entrance in Gunton Church Lane to prevent vehicular access. There is a visitor car park. • Soil type and site potential: Sandy soil with some clay deposits. • Species mix: Oak, beech, Copper beech, ash, Horse chestnut, yew, holly, elm, hazel, hawthorn, black poplar and limes. • Age of stands and major operations: Some of the oldest trees were planted over 100 years ago as part of the Gunton Old Hall estate. Since the group have taken over there has been felling of sycamore and planting of native species to create more variety. Since 1998 nearly 4500 trees have been planted. • Features: A pond has been created, deadwood piles have been created as an alternative habitat for wildlife, a species rich wild flower meadow has been created along one edge of the woodland. • Classification of woodland type: Broadleaved • Outline management history: Sycamore cleared, native species planted. Brambles and nettles cleared. Paths created. Patch of Japanese Knotweed removed, wildlife pond created. • General condition of woodland: well maintained with good age variation of trees. • Biodiversity information: 103 Flora species have been recorded (surveys in 1997 and 2003). 14 fungi species recorded in 2002. Frequently seen wildlife include: squirrel, muntjac deer and fox. Great crested newts are found in the pond. 55 bird species were recorded by the RSPB. 76 Bird boxes were put up and 39 of these were found used. <p>Foxburrow wood, which the group also manages, is an area of ancient woodland described by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust as: "the best ancient woodland flora in the Lowestoft area." (Lowestoft Wildlife Audit 2007)</p>
<p>4.2 Woodland and group funding sources</p>	<p>In general, group income is largely dependent on grant funding (80%), and their own revenue from fundraising activities (20%). There is little variation from this overall pattern.</p> <p>The group have been successful with every grant application that they have submitted, and feel that money has never been a problem. The group has also benefited from donations: A local bank contributed £300 towards</p>

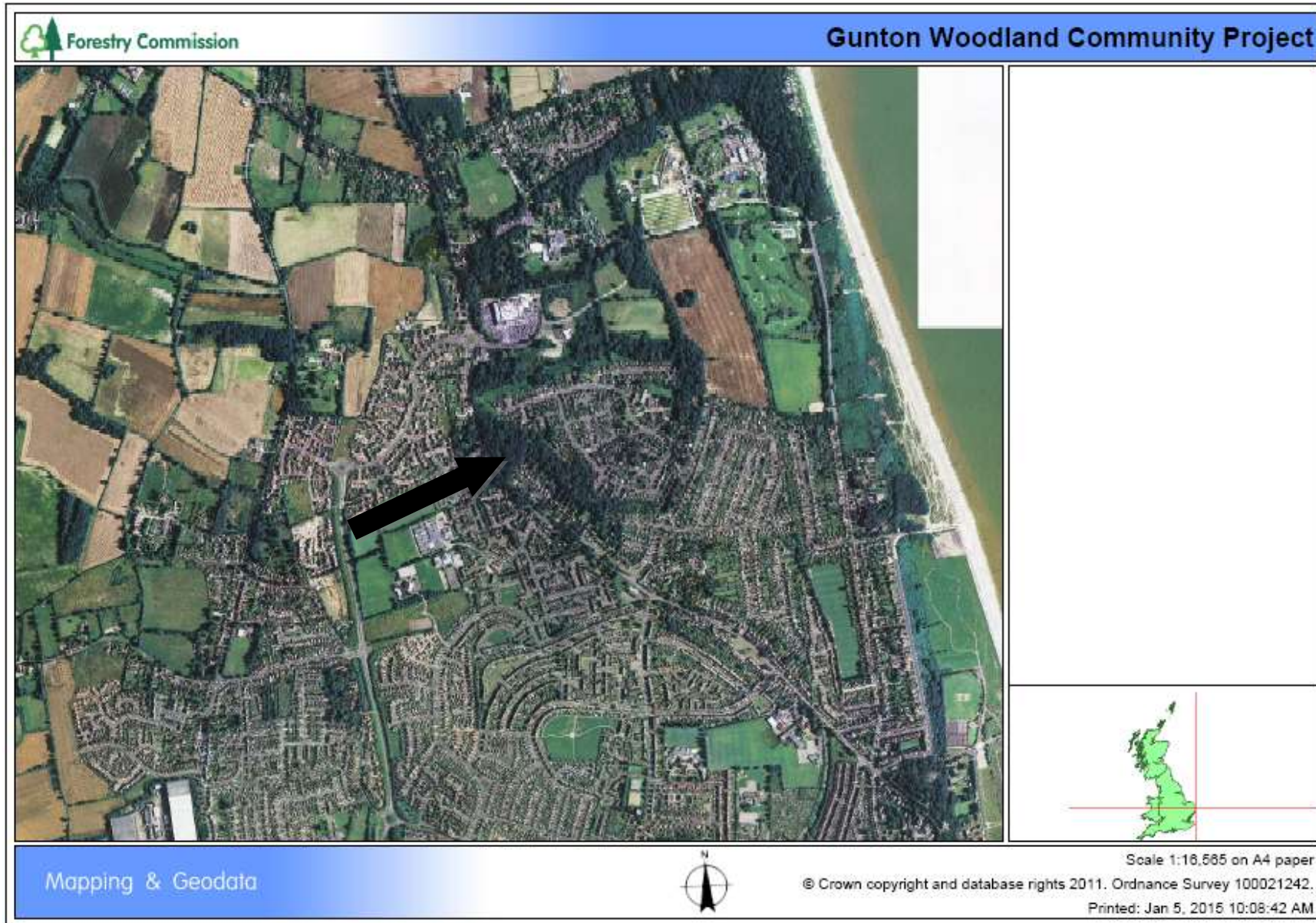
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	<p>constructing a platform over the pond. Other contributions come in the form of services or activities in kind such as use of the digger for pond digging.</p>
4.3 Knowledge, skills, human and social capital	<p>Occasionally, visiting instructors have given volunteers training in hedge laying and coppicing. The group has some expertise on woodland management matters. Some of this comes from learning from others, particularly the support of Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the annual visit from the arboricultural manager at Waveney District Council. Further, funds have allowed some individuals from the group to attend a short course in Woodland Management, and chainsaw skills.</p> <p>The group maintains work party records, which show that volunteers have contributed over 30,000 person hours of labour to the Gunton wood site to date.</p> <p>The 100% success rate in applying for funding from outside bodies such as the Lottery is the result of Committee members taking great care in preparing the submissions. They did not have any prior experience in fund raising. But the Group has benefitted a great deal from having individual members who are expert at wood and metal working, machinery maintenance and other DIY skills.</p>

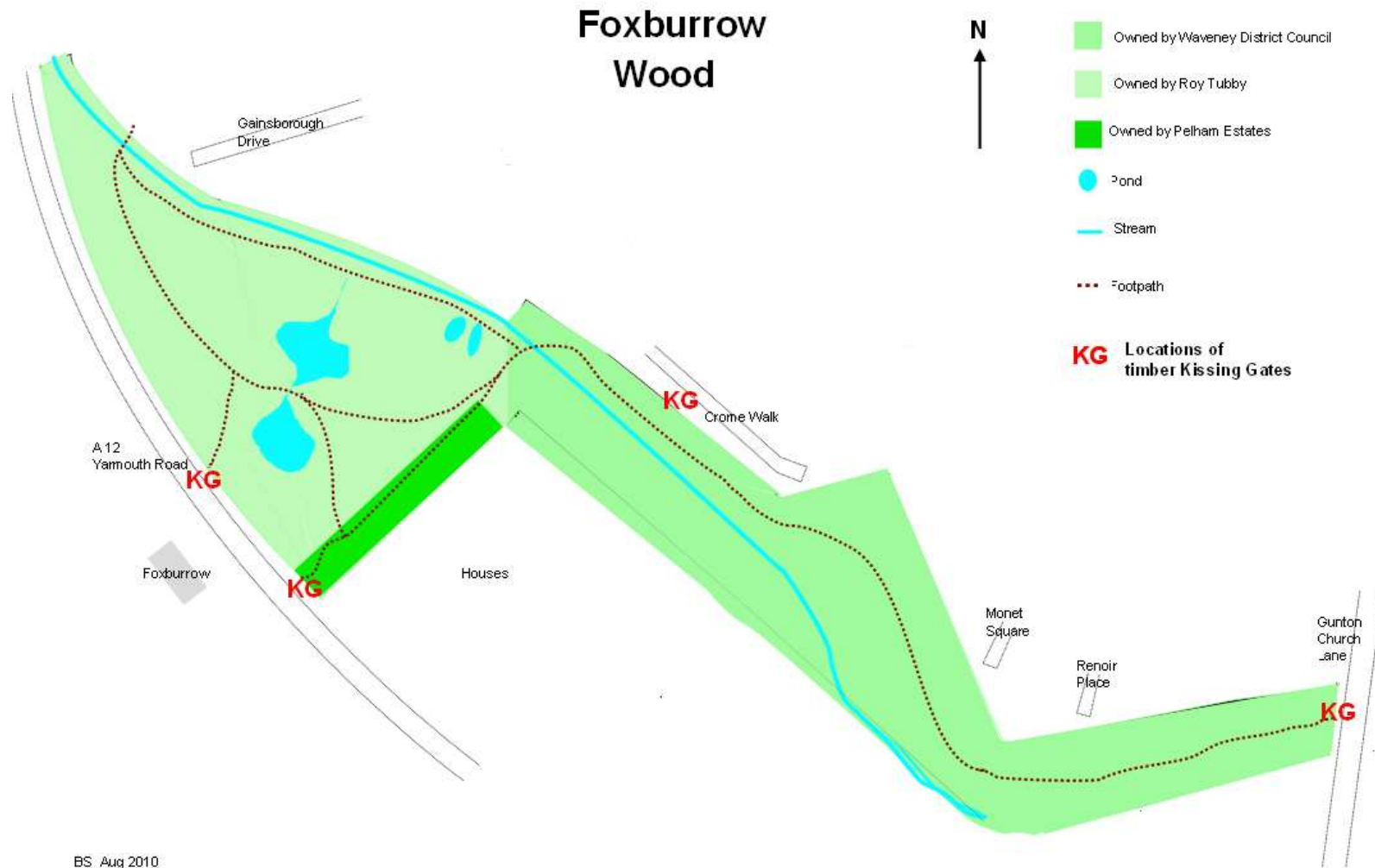
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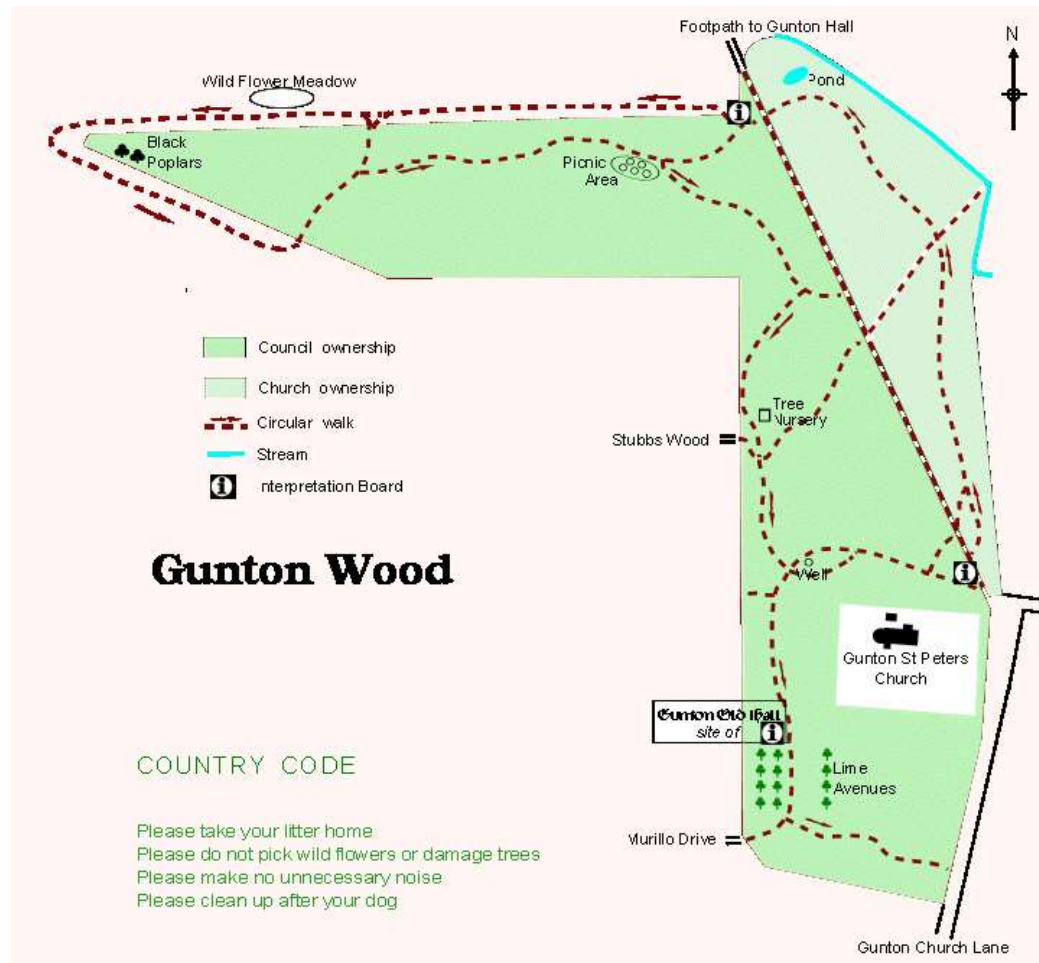
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2. Change Narrative

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

Gunton Woodland Community Project came into being when one local resident raised the issue of the neglected woodland at a residents meeting in 1997. The residents association was a well-supported group. Turning their attention to the woodland the residents association's call for action brought 40 people to the first meeting. The concerned residents continued to meet and discuss what they could do about the woodland. There is a clear geographical focus for the group, most of whom live in the streets around the woodland. This area, called "the estate" by residents, was built in the 1960s and is mostly detached properties with private gardens. The land was formerly part of the Gunton Hall Estate surrounding Gunton Old Hall. This estate fell into deprivation and was taken over by the local Council who passed planning permission for a local builder to build the housing area. The area of Gunton woodland was left wild and unmanaged although it had a well-used footpath running through it.

About a year after the initial residents meeting the group formalised itself by adopting a constitution and opening a bank account. , though it remains an unincorporated association. The key turning point was **group formation**, proved to be a key turning point. At this stage group members clarified their intention to reclaim the woodland from its unmanaged state. Working with the first management plan written by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, the group began **active engagement** in woodland management and ensured **consultation** with the local community kept people informed of what was happening as well as providing them with a chance to comment on developments. The aims of the woodland management plan were achieved within 3 years. At this point the group felt sufficiently equipped to engage in their own **decision-making** regarding the woodland and assumed **full management** responsibility. The initiator and Chairman of the group was pivotal in steering the initiative. Others, particularly the former Secretary, have also been highly engaged with the group.

The strong social network that was forming around the work parties was highly valued by members. For example, tea and cake breaks during the work parties provide a natural opportunity for sharing group news and social interaction. This has also led to the organisation of group outings throughout the year, visiting gardens, stately homes, a Christmas show, and in the past few years the group have also made four longer trips together to the continent. In 2012 they visited the World Horticultural Expo at Venlo, The Netherlands.

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The objectives of the group continue to be habitat creation, path maintenance and improving Gunton Woods as a pleasant place for recreation.

The degree of knowledge and skills development the group achieved means that they have progressed to take on management responsibility for two further sites, a nature reserve bordering the woodland, and second area of woodland within the close vicinity. The group were actually instrumental in the creation of Gunton Meadow Nature Reserve. The community group campaigned and pressured Tesco, who had bought the site for the purposes of building a hotel and petrol station. As a result of the community action Tesco donated the nature reserve site and offered a sum of money for its annual upkeep. The Community Group did not feel they were in a position to own land directly and manage such a sum of money so were happy that Suffolk Wildlife Trust were able to take on the ownership, whilst the group undertook management.

A few members of the group started their own initiative working on a strip of land adjacent to Gunton Wood. This piece of land is "loaned" to the group from the local amusement park Pleasurewood Hills, and has been turned into a wildflower meadow.

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

Facilitating Factors

- A strong residents association enabled the establishment of community woodland group
- The community of locality provided a clear focus and objective for the groups actions
- Large volunteer base from which to draw support and large supportive local population from which to raise funds
- Strong relationship with the Local Authority, Church and local Wildlife Trust

Barriers and Challenges

- The increasingly high age of Committee members makes the organisation of fund raising events more challenging.

3. Evolution of income streams

The Group has been very successful in fund raising. During its start-up phase £4,000 was donated by a range of donors including Suffolk ACRE, Shell, Co-Op and Waveney District Council. As the Group flourished there was a consistent in-flow of funds from annual Summer fetes held initially in the Chairman's garden and subsequently on the school playing field, each one raising £1,000 or more. Assisting the Sea-front air shows provided another £600 pa, ARCO donated a further £3,000 over a

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period of years through their employee participation scheme, bequests from three deceased members yielded another £4,000, two successful Lottery applications and a grant from the Suffolk Foundation totalled £8,000. The Group has produced a very successful calendar every year with an average profit of £300, while other fund raising merchandise has included home made preserves, a clothing range, bird boxes, wood carvings, notelets, tree sponsorship. There has always been a strong response from local businesses to requests for raffle prizes and sponsorship. For example, high quality Interpretation Boards, each costing £1,000, have been externally funded. In addition to this the large membership of 200 households has resulted in a steady in-flow of personal donations with several individuals making regular donations of £50 pa or more.

The group has explored the idea of becoming a Charity, but felt that the increase in bureaucracy was an obstacle that outweighed the benefits of generating a higher income. The group have never found money to be an obstacle, with them being successful in all the grant applications that they have submitted. In addition, the strong numbers of members provide a ready source of fundraising opportunities. There are no plans to trade or become a social enterprise beyond the fund raising type of activities they already undertake.

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

The land used to be part of the estate around Gunton Hall which dates back to Elizabethan times. As estate land it was largely parkland, grassy with some large trees. There was also an orchard, but most of this area was developed as housing in the 1960s. The avenues of lime trees from the estate period are still standing, and a few mature black poplars, though two were lost in recent years. As the owners of the estate hit financial difficulties, the land was progressively unmanaged and in 1966 the Council assumed control of the land except for an area still owned by Gunton Church. The Hall was demolished. Between 1966 and 1997 the land was entirely unmanaged and became dominated by sycamore and brambles. The gale of 1987 blew many older trees over and this blocked existing footpaths.

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Time Period	Owner/Manager	Objectives / Benefits (and evidence)	Major operations	Access and use rights
1966 to 1997	Council assumed control of the Gunton estate which dates back to Elizabethan times Some part of land remains in Church ownership	No clear objectives No clear benefits other than woodland ecosystem services	No active management, area dominated by sycamore and brambles	PROW

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

As the woodland was in an unmanaged state when the group began work there have been significant improvements in visual appearance of the wood and its accessibility. The dominance of sycamore has been tackled, and planting of around 4,500 new native species has increased diversity. A wildlife pond and paths have been created and are maintained. Information boards have also been installed guiding people around the woodland and providing information on the flora and fauna of the wood. A survey of flora was made in 1997 by Suffolk Wildlife Trust and in 2002 by the Lowestoft Field Club. In total 103 species were recorded but the two surveys themselves do not provide clear evidence of an increase in biodiversity as roughly the same number of species were recorded in the two surveys. However, the species composition has changed considerably between the two surveys. The creation of the pond has attracted a population of great crested newts.

The work of the group has brought benefits to the surrounding community. The neighbouring community have a strong feeling that the woodland 'is their woodland'. The woodland is well used with 20-30 cars parked by the entrance at a weekend. The paths are wheelchair and pushchair accessible. The pond in particular has been an attraction for local schools that bring groups in for pond dipping.

There are clear benefits to group members in particular. The group has been described as: "a focal point for the community life in Gunton". Several members described how significant the group had been in their retirement years, both socially and in keeping them active. The former Chairman who is now in his 80s said: "*I wouldn't be here if it weren't for Gunton*". Similarly the new Chairman says: "*It's almost a full time job, its wonderful. It's my life, it's gorgeous, it's really worthwhile doing*". The oldest

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member of the group is now 88 and was still helping on work parties until a couple of years ago. The day of the field visit she had managed to walk with a frame down the path to join the group for tea and cake.

Time Period	Owner/Manager	Objectives / Benefits (and evidence)	Major operations	Access and use rights
1997 - 2014	Gunton Woodland community project group	Conservation woodland management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biodiversity (surveys) • Public access (footfall counters) • Social capital and cohesion 	Conservation thinning and felling, planting and restocking, creation and management of ponds and water courses	PROW
2014	New project established adjacent to Gunton Wood on Church owned land	Creation of new woodland		

6. Future plans

The Chairman recently stepped down after 15 years in office. This was because of work he had been doing to initiate a new project called the *Gunton Woodland Burial Park* which aims to turn the field adjacent to Gunton Wood into a green burial site with wild flower glades. A Charitable Trust has been registered and planning permission has been granted for the first phase of the project. The land is owned by Gunton St Peters Church PCC and leased to the Burial Trust. A Woodland Creation Grant has been awarded by the Forestry Commission and more than 4000 trees will be planted in the 2014/15 season. Although the management and maintenance of this project will be in the hands of the Church and hence kept completely separate it is likely that some members of the Gunton Woodland Group may also volunteer for occasional specific tasks in the Burial Park associated with the new trees and wild flower glades. The Burial Park will always be open to the public and it will become an important additional asset to the wildlife and ecology of North Lowestoft.

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The transition to a new Chair is unlikely to see any significant changes to the group's objectives of continuing to manage for conservation and recreation. Although the group is primarily made up of retirees there appeared to be a lot of energy within the group and succession of the group was not something that was a concern going forward.

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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)
1997	Issue of neglected woodland raised at residents meeting	INFORMAL ENJOYMENT to GROUP FORMATION	Neglected state of woodland a concern to locals as an amenity resource.	Community interest raised		
1998	Weekly work parties	GROUP FORMATION to DECISION MAKING	Management agreement with the council and church remains informal.	Gradual accumulation of skills among group members. Social side of group becomes well developed	Improved maintenance and accessibility	Group fundraising successful
2003	Group was awarded Queen's Golden Jubilee Award for Volunteer Groups. This provided a big boost to Group morale					

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2004	Gunton Woodland was declared a Local Nature Reserve by English Nature and Waveney District Council			Local recognition of the group was raised within community and LA		
2013	Group was declared "runner-up" in the BBC Countryfile and National Trust Octavia Hill Green Guardians Award competition			National profile of group was raised		
2014	New project established adjacent to Gunton Wood on Church owned land		Chair leaves to direct new project			