

Warwick District Council

**Consultation Report – Management of Oakley
Wood**



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1 Introduction

Warwick District Council purchased Oakley in early 2008 and in 2009 commissioned forestry consultants Lockhart Garratt to assess the woodland and prepare a draft management plan. A consultation on this management plan was launched at a public meeting on 14 July 2009 and ran to 24 September 2009. A number of stakeholder groups were specifically contacted to solicit their views, including Barford and Bishops Tachbrook Parish Councils, the Friends of Oakley Wood, Warwickshire County Council, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust, the Forestry Commission, the Woodland Trust and neighbouring councils of Stratford, Coventry and Solihull.

The consultation consisted primarily of closed questions with responses collected via a website form. The option to respond by post was available and a small number of respondents chose to do this.

As part of the process a site visit was undertaken to Packington Estate with members of the Friends of Oakley Wood. The visit was accompanied by Justin Mumford from Lockhart Garratt and looked at a similar wood that had been subject to extensive thinning about 18 months earlier.

2 Summary of respondents

A total of 50 responses were received to the closed questions. 43 indicated that they were individuals, 5 that they were organisations, and two did not indicate. In addition a small number of open responses were received.

2.1 Organisations

Of the five organisations, three can be verified: Friends of Oakley Wood, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and Warwickshire County Council Ecology Unit.

Two responses claiming to be from Friends of the Earth and Earth First could not be verified. That claiming to be from Friends of Earth appears to be in conflict with FoE's stated policy on forestry. That claiming to be from Earth First is identical to a response from an individual posted from the same IP address a day earlier. Accordingly limited weight has been given to these as organisational responses.

An open response was received from the Forestry Commission, who also attended the launch meeting.

2.2 Individuals

2.2.1 *Distance from the woods*

The vast majority of individual respondents live within 4 miles, with 39% of those indicating a distance less than 2 miles away, and 34.1% between 2 and 4 miles.

2.2.2 *Frequency of visits*

Frequency of visits was relatively evenly spread amongst respondents, with 15% visiting daily, 15% more than twice per week, 25% 1-2 times per week and 12.5% 1-4 times per month. Only one respondent indicated that they had never visited the wood.

2.2.3 *Means of transport*

By far the most common means of reaching the woodland was by car or van, with 82.5% of respondents having used this means of transport. Walking (17.5%) and cycling (10%) were also reported. Only one respondent had used public transport.

2.2.4 *Age*

The majority of respondents indicating their age were between 45 and 64, with 30.0% between 45 and 54 and 32.5% between 55 and 64. No responses were received from people of 21 and under.

3 Summary of individual responses

3.1 Overview

Support for the broad management principles was very high, with a clear acceptance of the Council's vision and objectives for the woodland.

Questions relating to visitor provision drew a more mixed response. Whilst some favoured additional provisions there is a clear strand of thought that Oakley Wood should remain a place for informal recreation with minimal provisions.

Although not directly asked, a number of respondents did make reference to the proposals to carry out thinning in a single operation. Whilst comments have both supported and opposed this plan opposition is the more dominant view expressed.

3.2 Vision and objectives

There was overwhelming support for the identified vision and objectives for the woodland, with 38 out of 39 individuals who answered the question "Do you agree with our vision for the future of Oakley Wood" answering 'yes'. 87.8% of respondents supported the proposed management objectives.

3.3 Long term strategy

Support for the long term management strategy was also overwhelming, with 92.5% of respondents answering 'yes' to the question "Do you think the long term outline strategy is the right one for Oakley Wood".

3.4 Initial thinning

The direct, closed question concerning initial thinning related to the timing of the operation, and 89.5% of respondents answering the question agreed that August – October is the most appropriate time of year.

No direct question was asked regarding whether initial thinning should be carried out in a single operation or phased. This was because phasing the operation is not considered to be feasible as a contractor cannot be found prepared to work in this area for the smaller quantities of timber involved. Nevertheless, a number of comments were received relating to this point. Two comments to this question supported the proposal to carry out thinning in a single operation, whilst three favoured phasing the operation. In comments to other questions a further one can be identified supporting a single operation whilst around four oppose it.

3.5 Ride management

80% of respondents supported the proposals for ride management.

3.6 Ancient monument

There was broad support for the idea of creating a glade around the ancient monument, with 84.6% of respondents favouring this. 74.4% felt that an interpretation board would be a good idea.

3.7 Visitor provisions

Responses were more mixed with regard to visitor provisions, with many people commenting that they did not want to see more formal recreational facilities within the woodland.

59% favoured the provision of seats or rest posts, with many of those qualifying their response with comments about these being 'rustic' or informal. Several people suggested leaving logs for people to sit on.

61% of people opposed surfacing paths, and a similar number were opposed to the provision of further car parking.

58.5% were in favour of providing some kind of interpretation board, though several comments qualified this view by stressing that the number should be small and only at entrances.

3.8 Multi-use conflicts

There was strong support for allowing dogs in the woodland under proper control, with 78.6% choosing this option. 16.7% opted for allowing dogs on the lead only, with only two respondents suggesting that dogs should be banned.

Views on horse riding were broadly split, with the greatest number of respondents (43.9%) favouring allowing horse riding along the public footpath only. 34.1% favoured unrestricted horse riding whilst 22% felt horse riding should not be allowed.

4 Organisational responses

4.1 Warwickshire Wildlife Trust

Warwickshire Wildlife Trust's detailed response was broadly in agreement with both the Council's assessment of the current woodland condition and with the management proposals. They comment that the site appears reminiscent of an ancient W10 (Oak-bracken-bramble) National Vegetation Classification community and stress the importance of adhering to legislation relating to protected species.

Whilst broadly supporting all management prescriptions they comment that the presence of muntjac, grey squirrel and rabbits may limit the potential for natural regeneration and may require some supplementary planting with local provenance stock.

The Trust expressed some concerns that the proposal to carry out a 30% thin in one operation is, ecologically, less desirable than phased operations. However, they accept that practical constraints have to be considered, commenting that "Long term management of the woodland will depend on a healthy ecosystem that can support sustainable economic strategies".

The Trust is not opposed to additional visitor facilities, but caution that these need to be provided in a sensitive way.

The Trust believe that dogs should be kept on leads and constrained to the footpaths to reduce the disturbance to nesting and roosting woodland species.

4.2 Friends of Oakley Wood

In compiling their response the Friends of Oakley Wood canvassed their 133 members and received a 10% response.

They are broadly in agreement with the vision and objectives, although commenting that informal recreation should be given a higher priority than education.

Many FoOW members have expressed misgivings about thinning in a single operation, fearing that the wood will be slow to recover and that the access road needed (50-75m) will be 'out of scale'. They request that WDC hold off making a decision on this and research the feasibility of 'small scale thinning methods'.

FoOW have expressed concerns about the perceived width of the proposed rides (20m) and wish them to be narrower and become 'pathways through the wood rather than thoroughfares'.

FoOW do not wish to see additional visitor provision, other than a single interpretation board. They do comment that logs or stumps could make suitable informal rest points.

They wish to see dogs allowed under control and horse riding restricted to the public footpath.

4.3 Warwickshire County Council Ecology Unit

WCC Ecology broadly support all the management proposals, but comment that August is too early to begin thinning as some birds are still nesting.

They comment that yew, hornbeam and grey willow, listed at table 1 of the plan, do not appear in the list of recommended species for this landscape character area in the Warwickshire Landscape Guidelines.

They suggest that additional visitor provision should be minimal, keeping the woodland as natural and informal as possible.

4.4 Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission indicated that they will support the progressive management of the woodland in ways which are consistent with the UK Forestry Standard and UK Woodland Assurance Scheme.

5 Conclusions

There is very clear support from both individuals and stakeholder organisations for WDC's broad vision, management objectives and management strategy. A number of useful comments have been made on some of the issues, in particular the management of rides, which will be incorporated into a revised management plan.

Views on visitor provision are less clear, but the general message is that any additional facilities should be low key and informal.

There is strong support from visitors and users for allowing dogs throughout the woodland under control, with the only significant opposition to this coming from ecology professionals. A general view that horse riding should be allowed along the public footpath is emerging.

There is significant concern about the proposals to carry out the initial thinning in a single operation. Although this was not directly consulted on because it is not felt to be an area where there are options, a number of "open comments" from individuals have expressed misgivings about this proposal, as have the Friends of Oakley Wood.

6 The questions with summarised results from individuals

6.1 Introduction

Below is reproduced the text from the consultation web page, with a summary of responses received from individuals given for each question.

6.2 Background

Warwick District Council purchased Oakley Wood in 2008 and has recently commissioned forestry consultants Lockhart Garratt to assess the woodland and make management proposals.

Lockhart Garratt undertook a Phase I habitat survey and have produced a draft management plan. The management plan is not the final management plan for the woods, but a working document which WDC are using as the basis of a consultation on the future management of Oakley Wood. Both the habitat survey and draft management plan are available from the foot of this page.

Oakley Wood is a plantation on ancient woodland site. It consists principally of conifer plantation and presently has a low to intermediate ecological value. However, because it is an ancient woodland site it has the potential to have a high ecological value if managed appropriately.

6.3 Vision and objectives

Our draft vision for the management of Oakley Wood is:

“Oakley Wood is to be perpetuated for future generations as a prominent and attractive woodland feature within the local landscape, whilst over time becoming increasingly naturalistic in its composition and structure and thereby heightening its biodiversity value. The woodland is to be made available as a local resource for informal low impact recreational and educational use and management is to recognise and reflect the woodland as a renewable natural resource”

Do you agree with our vision for the future of Oakley Wood?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	97.4%	38
No	2.6%	1
Comments		9
	<i>answered question</i>	39
	<i>skipped question</i>	4

In order to achieve this vision, four objectives have been identified as follows:

- To maintain and enhance the visual amenity of the woodland as a feature within the local landscape
- To safeguard and enhance the biodiversity value of the woodland and associated habitats
- To provide facilities for informal public access and environmental education and work with local interest groups
- To maintain the woodland as a renewable natural resource to be sustainably harvested in support of social and economic activities, maximising the economic value of the wood in so far as this does not conflict with other objectives

Do you agree with our management objectives for Oakley Wood?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	87.8%	36
No	12.2%	5
Comments		15
answered question		41
skipped question		2

6.4 Long term strategy

The long term strategy for the wood aims to restructure the woodland over a period of around 50 years. The aim is to return the woodland to native species and to introduce diversity in both the species mix and the structure of the woodland. That is, it should contain several species of native trees and shrubs, there should be both a high canopy, a well developed shrubby understorey and good ground flora. Trees and shrubs should be of many different ages.

To achieve this we propose to use 'Continuous Cover' techniques. This involves felling small clearings at regular intervals to create the space for native trees to grow, either planted or through natural regeneration. Continuous cover avoids large scale felling, often called clear felling, and maintains the landscape value of a woodland uninterrupted. There is further information on continuous cover forestry in the background papers at the foot of this page.

Do you think the long term outline strategy is the right one for Oakley Wood?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	92.5%	37
No	7.5%	3
Comments		8
answered question		40
skipped question		3

6.5 Initial thinning

There has been very little management of Oakley Wood for some time, and as a result the wood is overcrowded. This is impeding the healthy development of existing trees and casting dense shade, suppressing the shrub and ground layer.

In order to bring the wood back into good management it needs to be thinned by the removal of about 30% by volume of the current timber. This work is needed as a matter of some urgency.

Whilst it was initially thought that this could be phased over three operations spanning five years, it is now clear that it is impractical to do other than in a single operation. This is because the cost of transporting the necessary machinery makes it uneconomic for a contractor to undertake the work unless a substantial volume of timber is involved.

The proposals would involve the removal of around 2,500m³ of timber over about 4-5 weeks. Public access to the woods would be maintained throughout the period, although clearly there would need to be restrictions on where the public could go in order to ensure their safety. In order to facilitate moving the timber off site it will be necessary to construct a length of forest road of around 75m to allow safe lorry access.

We propose to undertake this thinning between August and October 2010. The reasons for picking this time of year are:

- It is outside of bird nesting season and so limits the potential disturbance to birds
- Ground conditions are generally drier which will minimise the amount of ground damage caused by machinery
- Spring flora, in particular bluebells, are dormant so damage to them is minimised
- The Crematorium conducts fewer services during the summer, making it easier to arrange work in a way that will not disturb those attending services there

Is August-October the most appropriate time to carry out a major harvesting operation in Oakley Wood		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	89.5%	34
No	10.5%	4
Comments		11
<i>answered question</i>		38
<i>skipped question</i>		5

6.6 Ride management

Rides, or paths, are an important element of woodlands. As well as providing access for visitors and for management operations, they have considerable value to wildlife and provide important structural diversity.

We propose to widen the ride network and manage it using a 'three zone' system. In this system, the central path is hard surface, or is grass mown annually or perhaps two or three times a year. Either side of this is an area of tall grass mown once every two years. Beyond the tall grass is an area of shrubs, coppiced on a 5 – 8 year cycle. The total distance between canopy trees across the ride could be up to 20m. A diagram can be found in appendix 5 of the management plan, available from the background papers section at the bottom of this page.

As well as providing a rich mosaic of habitats, this opening up of the ride allows rides to dry out more, improving accessibility.

Are our proposals for ride management appropriate?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	80.0%	32
No	20.0%	8
Comments		15
<i>answered question</i>		40
<i>skipped question</i>		3

6.7 Oakley Wood Camp

Oakley Wood Camp, sometimes known as Oakley Wood Fort, is an enclosure of raised banks within the woodland. The area is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, although there is some dispute about exactly what it is. Whilst some have suggested it is an iron age fort, others believe it consists of remnants of a medieval woodland management system.

In the short term great care will be taken ensure that no further damage is done to the monument. Any forestry operations in this area will be carefully controlled and sensitively managed.

Longer term it is proposed that the area is gradually thinned out and that it is not replanted, nor is natural regeneration allowed to take. This will eventually create an open glade in the area.

Do you agree that in the long term the area around the Scheduled Ancient Monument should be converted to a glade?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	84.6%	33
No	15.4%	6
Comments		10
<i>answered question</i>		39
<i>skipped question</i>		4

Should we erect an interpretation board near the Scheduled Ancient Monument explaining what it is?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	74.4%	29
No	25.6%	10
Comments		13
<i>answered question</i>		39
<i>skipped question</i>		4

6.8 Visitor provision

At present the recreation within the woodland is entirely informal and there is very little provision for visitors. We are seeking your views on whether or not we should provide some more formal, yet still low key provision for visitors

Should we provide seats or rest posts within the woodland?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	59.0%	23
No	41.0%	16
Comments		18
<i>answered question</i>		39
<i>skipped question</i>		4

Should we consider improving the surfacing of existing paths?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	39.0%	16
No	61.0%	25
Comments		19
<i>answered question</i>		41
<i>skipped question</i>		2

Should we consider providing additional car parking for visitors to the woodland?		
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Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	39.5%	15
No	60.5%	23
Comments		24
answered question		38
skipped question		5

Should we provide interpretation boards?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	58.5%	24
No	41.5%	17
Comments		16
answered question		41
skipped question		2

6.9 Multi-use conflicts

When a woodland is managed to meet multiple objectives, inevitably there are conflicts. We are seeking views on how to address two specific issues at present:

Oakley Wood is a popular dog walking area. However, dog walking can have a detrimental impact on wildlife. A recent study found that the number of birds in areas frequented by dog walkers was significantly less than in areas with restricted dog walking. Although dogs rarely succeed in catching birds, it is thought that birds do regard them as a significant predator and are wary of them.

Should dog walking in Oakley Wood be		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Allowed as long as they are under control	78.6%	33
Restricted to dogs on the lead only	16.7%	7
Forbidden	4.8%	2
Comments		25
answered question		42
skipped question		1

Horse riding can also cause significant conflicts with other uses. It can cause the churning up of paths making them inaccessible to walkers and damaging ground flora and can cause conflicts with visitors on foot.

Should horse riding be		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Allowed throughout the wood	34.1%	14
Allowed along the public footpath only	43.9%	18
Forbidden	22.0%	9
Comments		18
answered question		41
skipped question		2