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## **Comments on asset transfer of Coilhallan Wood 22/11/2019**

I live adjacent to Coilhallan Wood and walk there frequently, so understandably, I have taken great interest in this application; how it will affect the long-term future of the woods and the surrounding environment and how the process is being conducted. I have attended most of the meetings and I am submitting my comments and concerns after careful reading of the application and all the associated documents.

The woodland is a beautiful serene place, teeming with wildlife and well maintained by Forestry and Land Scotland (F&LS). Nominated representatives from the Callander community signed off the FCS Callander Land Management plan 2015-2024 and FCS, now F&LS, have been managing the woodland to that plan. Roads and drainage ditches have been improved in recent years, brush is been cut back from the sides of the tracks as required and arboretums have been planted and fenced. Following felling of large areas of coniferous trees the woodland has been allowed to regenerate naturally which is an ideal environment for supporting many species of wildlife. All of this illustrates good management of the woodland.

A report commissioned by SKS Community Interest Company on behalf of CCDT August 2017 (referred to in Appendix 2 of Coilhallan Woodland FS which is an appendix to the application), namely The Woodland management plan 2016-2022 by Victore Clements, states that “*Overall the standard of the woodlands is very good.*”

So I dispute the statement, in the CATS application, that “*there is a general view amongst Callander’s residents that Coilhallan Wood has been deteriorating gradually over recent years and would thus benefit from a comprehensive approach to its upkeep and future development.*”

In addition, when I have had occasion to contact FCS about, for example, trees with broken boughs overhanging paths, their response has been extremely prompt and comprehensive. There are no details or SLA in any of the supporting documents, about how and in what timeframes CCDT will carry out the routine tasks let alone deal with emergencies, when they are reliant on a volunteer workforce.

The woodland is well used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders, who co-exist with the wildlife living there. I am concerned that there are no figures in the proposal for the expected increase in numbers of visitors, nor any studies done about the effects of increased usage on the woodland, the wildlife or the surrounding area. The increase, especially in mountain bikers, could have a negative effect on the species that live in the wood - and this is not addressed anywhere in the proposal.

Invertrossachs Road is a small country road, with a poor road surface, untreated in the winter with unmarked, rough passing places. It is increasingly busy with cars, camper vans, lorries, cyclists and walkers and is also used for many events each year e.g. car rallies, cycling races or charity runs. There is traffic for the scout camp events, the boat club, the Ripple retreat, the FABB centre, various holiday homes and B&Bs and all this is competing for space with walkers. Any additional usage must increase the risk of an accident to people, dogs and wildlife. This is not addressed in the proposal.

The main car park is along Invertrossachs Rd, opposite the Trossachs Trout Farm. This car park is also the proposed new base for Trossachs Mobility, the cafe and for wood sales. This is of concern for a number of reasons: additional visitors to the woods will necessitate the requirement for toilets and water (there is no mains water in this area) and could lead to increased litter and there are no details in the proposal about how this will be dealt with.

F&LS currently manages any unauthorised overnight parking. In the past this has been a problem with significant numbers arriving on a pre-arranged date and pitching tents and vans in the car park, but since F&LS installed a gate, put up notices and patrol the area, this has deterred overnight campers.

Under this proposal will this continue to be the case or will overnight parking be allowed and if so how will it be managed - again there is no detail?

These practical issues are not dealt with as part of the application to buy and maintain the woodland.

There have been several feasibility studies (FS) over the last few years, each with a different emphasis on the uses of the woodland, with Mountain Bike Trails (MBT) sponsoring the first FS in 2015. This is a contentious issue. CCDT directors have said at various times, "*MBT will not happen*", "*it is not a priority*" and "*it is not the reason for purchasing*" but now they appear to be citing MBT as a main driver. If MBT is important to the application to purchase, then this should be made very clear as this activity will have the biggest impact on the wildlife and other visitors to the woodland and the impact needs to be fully assessed. As I understand it

there is no funding for these trails right now so how can they be sure they will be successful and then have funds to maintain them thereafter? Will a full environmental study be carried out before tracks are laid and if necessary will there use be limited during the breeding season? Will they be separated out from walking paths?

I am concerned by the claims that there is overwhelming support for this proposal and that CCDT believe they have a mandate from the community to proceed with this application. I have spoken to a number of locals who either know nothing about the proposal or are unhappy with it. It is true that there have been a number of surveys dating back to 2014 and these have been used as evidence in the various feasibility study reports and the CATs application as demonstrating a *“high level of general [community] support”* for the application.

However, the results are difficult to interpret and summarise since they asked different questions, participation was self-selecting, in some cases only positive responses were recorded and residents who are strongly interested in the project will have completed more than 1 survey and attended more than one meeting.

Using the figures quoted in the application, 282 Callander residents have responded (**approx 9.5% of the voting population**), with 8% of the voting population giving a positive response.

So the statement in the Feasibility Study that *“the local community is very supportive of CCDT taking ownership”* is unsubstantiated and misleading. The surveys are inconsistent and have not reached the majority of Callander residents and there has been no attempt to conduct a ballot of the community.

NOTE: a) The CCDT itself consists of about 100 members (3% of the voting population) who elect 8 directors at their AGM and they then appoint another 8 from various organisations they choose; once co-opted all directors have full voting rights.

b) The CCC is elected by a public vote (as at the end of 2018 the population of Ward 9 (Callander) was 3475 of whom 2949 were eligible to vote). The return was 34% or approx 1000 people. To-date the CCC has not made its views known for or against this proposal.

c) When the Callander Community Hydro Scheme was proposed in 2011, a ballot was held to measure public support. All members on the electoral roll were balloted (2600) and the return was 56% i.e. 1456 people with 96% in favour. That exercise gave the project a mandate.

Looking at the business case for maintaining the woodland it relies heavily on the initial sale of timber (£60k) and then the on-going income is from unidentified grants, sponsorship, catering, car park fees and timber sales - these are all new income streams, based, for example, on people paying

for parking which is currently free (or will they just park on the road?) and a hefty amount of grants. The uncertainty of this income is not raised as a project risk and the income does not cover any of the projects that they identify as reasons to buy the woodland. The funding for these projects is unidentified.

The current proposal offers no exit strategy in the event of a failure in managing the wood, be that financial, lack of volunteers, additional disease or unforeseen circumstances. Usually this is an amount of money placed in escrow or an undertaking from another organisation that they will step in and pick up the ownership and management of the woodland, but is not dealt with.

In summary, unless there is a step change improvement in the woodland, with a robust business case that can stand on it's own feet without grants, then I do not understand how this improves Callander but rather it passes an obligation on to the future generations to look after the woodland.

A better way would be to work with FLS in partnership but leave them, as the experts, to do the woodland management and take most of the risk - this is a path other communities have successfully taken, so why not Callander?

The Woodland management plan 2016-2022 by Victore Clements, referred to above, supports this view: it says:

*"It is difficult to imagine what actual advantage ownership would bring unless the value of the woodland was required to help lever funding for other projects in the town.*


*Although grant funding for footpaths and mountain bike trails is available it is increasingly competitive and not assured. So if the income from projected activities is envisaged as helping cover overheads than that is a risk."*

*"If this is the only property owned and managed by CCDT and income from other sources is not available to cover overheads, then it may be best simply to enter into a management agreement with FES if suitable projects can be identified and shown to be viable. If CCDT have a variety of other assets then the context would be different, tilting the balance in favour of ownership. The identified risks may prove manageable but ongoing overheads are likely to be the most significant consideration."*

No dependencies on other CCDT acquisitions are listed in this proposal so one must assume there are no other assets supporting this proposal.

I hope you will carefully consider these points in making your decision. Please let me know that this email has been received and if you need a hard copy. As I am unsure if when assessing this proposal you will consider

the wider implications, for example increased road traffic, I will also contact Stirling Council and the National Park regarding this.

  
local resident.