

Asset Transfer Request made by Ettrick & Yarrow Community Development Company for the purchase of 173 ha of Gamescleuch Forest and the Ettrick Marshes

Response received by email on 3 September 2017 from Ettrick & Yarrow Community Development Company to representation of 7 August 2017

The board of Ettrick and Yarrow Community Development Company was pleased that this householder was broadly in favour of the plan and responded positively to the initial approach by one of our board members last summer. We were also pleased that [REDACTED]

We feel that their concerns as expressed in their letter of 7th August can be mitigated and that some will prove to be unfounded as the project develops. We very much hope that this householder will work with us in helping to shape plans for the forest in future.

The board of EYCDC recognises that this householder [REDACTED]. We understand this and do not intend to encourage any visitors to either enter or exit the forest at this point. Moreover, we can take steps to discourage what is at present an occasional occurrence, by improving the signage, the path back [REDACTED] and adding better fencing at this possible point of exit. We anticipate that by working together with the householder that we can improve on the current situation.

Visitor numbers in Ettrick have been low this year and we hope our project will bring more visitors to the area to appreciate the considerable heritage and nature of the area. However, we certainly would not want to spoil the ambience and experience of getting back to nature that Ettrick offers with its wild landscape and sparse population. There is a balance to be struck between increasing visitor numbers to a point that makes the continuation of local businesses viable thereby retaining vital services within the valley, and not creating too much tourism and the disruption that this could bring.

We do not see this project as rivalling Glentress in this respect. We are proposing ranger-led walks, opening up access to local horse riders from the Honey Cottage end of the forest, preparing cycle maps utilising public roads as well as forest roads across both valleys, a dark sky viewing point on the hill behind Honey Cottage, some forest schools which will be supervised, and better promotion of the area. Our three main selling points will be walking, recreational cycling and nature/wildlife.

Our projected income to EYCDC from visitor revenue within the business plan is actually very modest as we tried to be realistic in terms of the location and the type of visitor who will be attracted to a quiet, outdoor holiday in the valleys. The main beneficiaries of improving the visitor offer at Ettrick Marshes will be the surrounding businesses and accommodation providers. This is in line with our main aim as an organisation of sustaining life in the valleys through providing opportunities to keep people living and working here.

There are currently very few bookable activities within the valleys which can be marketed to visitors. We will provide a range of guided walks and demonstrations led by our ranger, some forest schools and woodcraft courses managed and supervised by our ranger as well as our forest manager, and electric bike hires and guided rides from a base at Ettrick School. The modest projected income from these activities by Year 10 is as follows: Donations and charge for guided walks and demonstrations (£1200); Forest schools and woodcraft courses (£4000); Electric bike hire and

guided rides (£3000). We do not foresee mass tourism or coach parties stopping at Ettrick Marshes although we will hope to reach and possibly exceed our modest projections.

The board is confident that concerns regarding over-development will prove groundless. Opening up access with a new track to reach the higher forest road from the Honey Cottage area of the valley will be a benefit to the residents and visitors who are currently restricted to the lower path through the Marshes. Creating access to the forest roads will mean that recreational cyclists, horse riders and some walkers will have safe off-road routes that can be extended (with other forest owners permission) into all the surrounding forests.

Gamescleuch is surrounded by hill farms which have been planted with mainly sitka spruce: it adjoins Annelshope forest on one side, Meerlees and Craik forests on the other and is on the opposite side of the valley from Wardlaw forest and Berrybush forest. Re-opening access and familiarity with these surrounding hills can hardly be regarded as over-development; it could be argued that the 'over development' happened some time ago with so much of the valley now covered with blanket sitka spruce.

EYCDC plan to upgrade the lower path with its boardwalk through the Marshes. If the EYCDC is not successful in purchasing the forest then the owners, Forest Enterprise, have publicly stated that they will remove the boardwalk. They have already removed the few signs and map boards which directed visitors along this route. This would mean that with access to the high forest road blocked and the lower path removed it would effectively close the forest and the Marshes to all but the most able-bodied and would certainly prevent it from being promoted as a visitor attraction. Upgrading the boardwalk and paths cannot be seen as over-development, it is rather restoring and opening access to what is already there.

Regarding the comments on the proposed felling plan for the first ten years: We needed to prepare a business plan and cashflow for the purchase and this in turn required identifying what income would be taken from timber sales over this period. We therefore engaged a professional forest management team to identify what could be felled annually over this period taking into consideration normal forest management practises, the fact that the remaining forest will be more than 40 years old by the time we are in a position to sell timber, the need to minimise windblow if not clear felling, and the desire to restructure parts of the forest to create more open space and native planting. In particular, the first suggested area of felling will clear an area of considerable windblow where access down to walks along the very lovely Gamescleuch burn can be created by making a less steep gradient of path down from the forest road.

However, a new design plan will have to be submitted to the Forestry Commission before any felling can take place if there is a change of ownership. This process provides for more community consultation and the felling plan is not set in stone. It has however been presented at two public meetings so far and has found general favour.

Finally, regarding consultation with the local community; all ten members of the board of EYCDC live in the valley and the current coordinator and her family have lived in Ettrick for generations. It should be recognised therefore that a lot of conversation takes place on a daily basis with the wider community. The plan to buy the forest was publicly launched last September at the local agricultural show. Prior to this, every adjacent land owner was contacted by a member of the board and the suggestion discussed. Concern regarding the future of the boardwalk had been a topic of discussion for several years at the community council, the tourism business group and in the local newspapers. The proposal to purchase did not therefore come out of the blue without local

involvement. We have doubled our membership since this time last year and now have more than 160 members, largely based on one-to-one discussions about the forest purchase. Four public meetings have been held in the last year, a newsletter has been sent or delivered to every household, local newspapers have carried the story, a 'drive-thru' of the forest was held for local residents and 7 local members attended a conference on community woodlands.

More importantly perhaps, in order to evidence community support for the purchase, we collected signatures in favour of the community buy-out within the Ettrick area. This took place during the month of July with every household in the upper Ettrick area being visited or contacted by local volunteers from EYCDC. There are 140 voters who are registered to vote at the Boston Hall in Ettrick which includes most people within a 5 mile radius of the Gamescleuch Forest. We had a hugely supportive response to this petition with 112 people signing to show their support. This also meant that almost every resident available during the month of July had a chance to have the purchase explained personally to them and any questions answered. The suggestion that EYCDC has not consulted with the local community is simply not true and we refute any suggestion that we have been secretive or lacking in transparency. The board of EYCDC are all active members of the community and have taken every opportunity to discuss and engage others in the progression of the plans.

We appreciate that not every resident will agree with every part of the proposition and we welcome informed comments and suggestions. We also appreciate that this householder has taken time to set out a measured and sincere statement of their concerns. This is a project which we feel will bring considerable community benefit with no negative downside but we will work hard to persuade and reassure every resident that this is the case as it progresses.

In conclusion, we hope that this householder will work with us in shaping our plans for the future and recognise that they could provide considerable expertise and support in carrying out some of the ground work. Their support, if we can gain it, will be very much appreciated.

ENDS