Annual General Meeting of Malvern Community Forest, 20th June 2018
Chair's Report for 2017-18

Introduction

The Draft Minutes of the last Annual General Meeting (AGM), held on the 19th March 2017, are posted separately on our web-site https://malverncommunityforest.org.uk. The minutes were approved as accurate by the Trustees at their meeting in April 2017, but any amendments non-Trustees would like to raise should be communicated to the Chair by June 5th 2018.

The main outcomes of the AGM were changes in the Objects of the charity, and changes in the Trustees and Management Teams. Changes in the Objects allow the charity's engagement in wider issues and partnerships to additionally support awareness of woodlands and trees, woodland skills and crafts.

One of the new Chair's first actions was to implement the Trustees' wish to change the financial and reporting year from 1st January-31st December to 1st April-31st March. This was to allow our AGM to be held in June, in better weather for what we would like to be an outdoor event whenever possible. This report therefore covers January 2017-March 2018.

The new Chair's look-forward at the AGM mentioned four particular events: adopting the grounds of the Birmingham-side of Malvern Link station, with the support of the Friends of Malvern Stations, sponsored by London Midland, to provide woodland, orchard and hedge habitats for a 'mini-nature reserve'; a citizen survey of horse chestnut trees – the Conker Hunt – and a Conker Championship; running a woodland day with Malvern Hills Trust at Townsend Community Wood in November; and the launch of the Charter for Trees, Woods and People, also in November. These are discussed below.

Report for January 2017-March 2018

No Trustees meetings were held between November 2016 and April 2017 for a number of reasons, including significant health issues of the Chair. The main activities during this period were preparing for the AGM and the anticipated changes in Chair, Treasurer, and Vice-Chair roles.

Following the changes in role after the AGM, a number of processes and structures were reviewed and developed to meet the Charity Commission's increasing emphasis on good governance and transparency. There was also a hiatus in a number of activities as the new Teams reviewed and reallocated work; continued developing strategy – which included a consultation of members and the public through our website; and considering a training strategy for members and volunteers.

The Trustees have decided that the overarching development strategy was to continue to grow organically, responding to opportunities for involvement in projects whilst working within our time and resource limitations. The Conker Hunt and Championship mentioned at last year's AGM was an initiative to broaden appeal, rather than an organic opportunity, which was put on hold due to the demands of the other projects. However, we need to build resources, now and for the future, in order to respond to opportunities when they arise.

An opportunity arose when in Autumn 2017 the owner of a small wood below the St Anne's Well approached us with the offer of helping her with increasing public access to her wood. We judged it as well placed and having potential to involve families with young children in woodland activities, thereby broadening what we offer. At the same time, we were approached by a nearby retirement village project, who had the potential to provide a group of volunteers with time on their hands, so put some effort into recruiting there. This two-fold development is continuing, with some exciting prospects for next year's Report!

The separate Malvern Link Station Project has turned out to be very positive, raising our profile in a number of ways as well as widening partnerships and providing a number of different habitats, as detailed in the separate report. It has come about through a weekly, week-day working party, which means its impact is more obvious to passers-by. The same approach was taken with the new project in Townsend Community Wood from September 2017, again leading to significant progress. This contributed to the Woodland Day with Malvern Hills Trust being a successful event, whilst also strengthening our partnership with MHT.

These two projects progressed through recruiting volunteers who are available on a week-day: the retired, semi-retired, and people not in paid employment. The volunteers are predominately older men, and we are looking for ways to appeal to those who are younger and/or female. These groups have different experiences and expectations of woodlands and wildlife, of volunteering and participation, as we found at a consultation event we held in February 2018. However, we came away from the event with lots of ideas for different sorts of events in our projects, from training in woodland crafts and skills to seasonal celebrations of trees and woodlands.

In October 2017, the Trustees took the decision to respond to the Three Counties Agricultural Society's (TCAS's) planning application to build 50 holiday lodges on part of their land at Langdale Wood. We submitted a comment on the application, opposing the reduction in woodland and removal of public access to it and the surrounding woodland. All but one Trustee backed this move, with the dissenting Trustee holding strongly that we should have consulted the membership before doing so, and who resigned as Trustee and Joint Vice-Chair as a result.

We strove to maintain our neutrality as a charity by offering to mediate between the two sides of the Langdale planning controversy. At the request of the Save Langdale Woods Group, we submitted an application for the woodland to be listed as an Asset of Community Value, which can only be done by a recognised body. The listing application had to wait until the planning application was turned down by the Planning Committee, and was subsequently refused in March 2017. As a result, in April, the Chair and new Joint Vice-Chair were invited by the District Council to a meeting with the Three Counties Agricultural Society Chairman and Chief Executive, to consider a compromise approach to the Society's new application for 40 lodges on the same site, with increased public access to alternative walks and woodland. However, the Save Langdale Woods Group was not prepared to compromise in this way.

In the meeting, we raised the need for a local woodland strategy, to implement the enhancement and protection of woodlands and trees. As a result, we will now be contributing to the review of the South Worcestershire Development Plan, and working with others to develop such a strategy.

Our participation in the planning process led to a community group contacting us to help them in managing a small, urban woodland should their opposition to a separate planning application prove successful. It did, and we look forward to working with them over the next year.

What about the Charter for Trees, Woods and People? It was difficult to get people interested in or motivated by the Charter campaign, locally. Nationally, 30,000 signatures were collected, quite a bit short of the aim to capture the interest of the 1.1 million who signed petitions when the Cameron government tried to sell off the forests. However, we are beginning to tap into local support in different ways, as we've seen, and as demonstrated by local Co-op customers: read on.

Fundraising

We have continued to receive a steady stream of donations from a variety of sources, some of them mentioned under individual Project reports.

Just before the last AGM, the then Chair applied for a Co-op Local Community Fund grant and we were accepted as one of the three local funds to receive money. The new Chair followed up with promotion at the three Malvern stores aimed at raising awareness of MCF and asking people to nominate us to receive the money for charities generated by their spending on Co-op own products. Funding also came from the 5p plastic bag charges. In November, we were presented with over £5000, having led the amount of donations from the start of the six-month cycle. This money is being used to fund resources and training for members, volunteers and public, whilst making Prospect Community Wood the public's gateway to MCF and its activities (see Prospect Community Wood Report).

Conclusion

MCF is continuing to experiment and evolve in how it raises people's awareness of, interest in, and direct involvement with woodland, woodland crafts and trees. We are building relationships and partnerships with other organisations. Members and volunteers, Trustees and Management Team can look forward to an interesting year of further activity.

Ken Timms
Chair
26th May 2018