



# **Storr Woodlands – A Community Asset Transfer Appraisal for Staffin Community Trust**

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## **Brief**

To re-assess the potential opportunities, responsibilities and liabilities associated with a community acquisition of Storr Woodland by Staffin Community Trust.

## **Background**

In March 2017, Staffin Community Trust (SCT) formally lodged an Asset Transfer Request (ATR) with The Highland Council (THC) to purchase a section of local authority-owned roadside ground currently serving as the main public reception area (arrival, parking, orientation & access) to the Old Man of Storr footpaths. SCT's ambitions are to construct a new fee-paying car park with toilets and enhanced interpretation facilities to better accommodate visitor numbers that have, in recent years, inundated the safe carrying capacity of this locality. It is hoped that these facilities will, in turn, sustain new local employment whilst improving visitors' threshold experience of the Old Man. Additionally, the SCT envisage the site acting as a strategic 'gateway' location for promoting the entire Trotternish region, instilling in visitors a desire to explore further the uniquely varied Trotternish landscapes and communities beyond - bringing economic benefit in their wake.

A consultant-led '*An Stór Gateway Site Options Appraisal & Feasibility Study*' - commissioned by SCT during 2016 - ultimately defined the scale and footprint of the ATR. In reaching its recommendations, this Study considered but discounted the possibility of acquiring the entire woodland area (82 hectare) on account of a lack of tangible community attachment to the woodland as well as potentially significant financial risk associated with securing successful establishment of re-planted woodland on the site.

In May 2017, SCT was encouraged by THC members to consider expanding the scope and scale of the currently-lodged ATR to include the entirety of local authority landholding (i.e. to include the Storr Woodland) citing examples of other Highland communities where control and ownership of local woodland has brought wider socio-economic benefits. SCT was clear that the advice it had received during the Options Appraisal by the experienced consultant team was not to take on the woodland because of the liabilities. However, SCT's board of directors agreed to review woodland acquisition and, upon consent and supplementary funding from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, commissioned the Community Woodlands Association to re-examine the issue.

# Asset Transfer Appraisal

1. **Desktop Review of Storr Woodland** – forest management and planning context to date
  2. **Site Walkover survey** – assessment of ongoing performance against site objectives
  3. **Local Interest & Opportunities** – appetite for community involvement/social benefit & the woodland's complementary ATR role
  4. **Responsibilities & Liabilities** – residual, contractual & access management obligations
  5. **Summary & Recommendations**
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## Sources consulted:-

- Hugh Ross *Local Development Officer, Staffin Community Trust*
- Donald MacLeod *Woodland Officer, FCS Highland Conservancy*
- Alastair Stewart *Project Officer, HC Infrastructure & Development Services*
- Nick Richards *Forestry Officer, HC Infrastructure & Development Services*
- Donald Kennedy *Access Officer, HC Skye, Lochalsh & Lochaber*
- Adam Lewis *Harvesting Manager (felling operations 2011), Scottish Woodlands Ltd*
- Stuart Blackhall *Forest Manager (restocking 2011/12), Scottish Woodlands Ltd*
- Kevin Sutton *HC-appointed Skye-based woodland contractor.*

## Key Reference documents:-

- Storr Woodlands - Long Term Forest Plan (*Scottish Woodlands Ltd, 2010*)
  - The Storr - Social Enterprise Plan (*Athena Solutions, 2016*)
  - An Stór Gateway Site Options Appraisal & Feasibility Study (*Athena Solutions, 2016*)
  - Storr Woodlands Archaeological Walkover Survey (*M. Wildgoose, 1994*)
  - Skye & Lochalsh Core Paths Plan (*Highland Council*)
  - Trotternish Ridge SSSI Site Management Statement (*Scottish Natural Heritage, 2011*)
  - HC Asset Transfer Request Approach (*Staffin Community Trust, 2017*)
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## 1. Desktop Review of Storr Woodland

Storr Woodland lies approximately 7 miles north of Portree on the north-east coast of the Isle of Skye. It was purchased by Skye and Lochalsh District Council from the Forestry Commission in 1994, with financial assistance from SNH. Since acquisition the District Council and subsequently Highland Council have carried out a number of improvements to the footpath network, car park and interpretive facilities. The site is part of the iconic landscape associated with the Old Man of Storr and Trotternish Ridge and contains the footpath access to the Old Man of Storr which receives in excess of 150,000 visitors per annum - making it of high economic importance not only to the region, but the island as a whole.

The area of original 1970's woodland planting extended to approximately 82 ha and was deer fenced and established with mainly coniferous tree species (Sitka spruce, larch and Lodgepole pine) on former agricultural ground. Subsequent tree growth was extremely variable: very limited in areas where underlying ground conditions are poor (waterlogged and low fertility peaty soils with often significant exposure) but in other areas growth was excellent (freer draining, south-facing slopes on mineral soils). By the turn of the millennium however, the areas exhibiting better growth were becoming susceptible to wind throw.

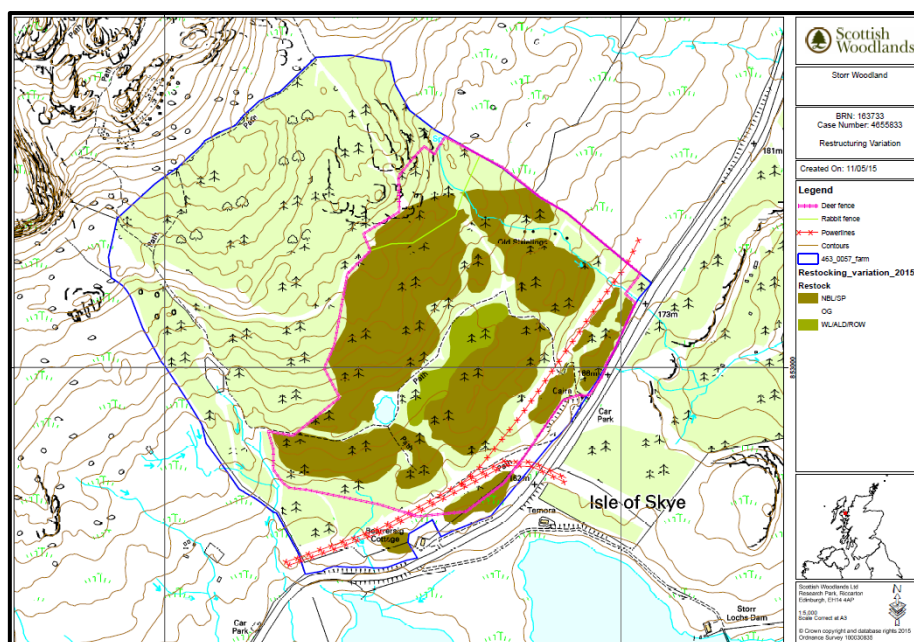
In 2010, with windthrow becoming increasingly endemic, THC engaged forest management company Scottish Woodlands Limited to produce a Long Term Forest Plan with the aim of clearfelling the maturing conifer crop and restructuring the wood with native deciduous tree species. A more naturalised (lower density, lower altitude, deciduous, native broadleaved) woodland restocking was prescribed as sympathetic to both the conservation importance of the locale (within the Trotternish Ridge SSSI) and the overall visual aesthetic (as a highly visible and integral component of one of Skye's most iconic natural landscapes).

The Forest Plan was approved in September 2011. Felling and restocking proposals were submitted for SRDP grant aid as a matter of course thereafter (Restructuring & Regeneration payments). This forestry grant aid – no longer available under the current round of the SRDP – is formalised by a contract between the landowner and Forestry Commission Scotland and stipulates a requirement (and agreement) to achieve restocking tree densities, species mixtures and distributions in accordance with maps and prescriptions outlined in the Forest Plan.

A complex clear felling operation was carried out during winter and spring 2011/12. Commercial timber was extracted and hauled/ marketed to mainland mills. Checked, dead and non-commercial trees were felled and mechanically mulched to hasten decay in sensitive (highly visible) locations or raked into brush mounds where less obtrusive and where ground clearance was required to facilitate re-stocking. As the woodland lies within the Scottish Water catchment of Storr Lochs (the public water supply for Portree), no pesticides or fertilisers were applied to the follow-on tree crop during the restocking exercise of spring/early summer 2012.

A new perimeter deer fence with rabbit netting (with some supplementary internal rabbit fence in the NW corner) was erected to protect new transplants from deer present in the region, from adjacent agricultural livestock and a localised rabbit population.

In 2016 THC engaged a Skye-based woodland contractor to inspect woodland progress, to carry out “beat up” (replanting where young trees have failed/died) and undertake quarterly inspections of fencing and establishing trees going forward. An initial inspection in summer 2016, led to a beat up in February 2017 of approximately 65% of the entire woodland (20,000 new transplants of an approximate total of 32,000 trees). The most recent walkover inspection (June 2017) has resulted in a recommendation for a further 3,000 replacement birch trees to be planted through the winter of 2017/18.





## 2. Site Walkover Survey

A single-day walkover was undertaken on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2017 - primarily to ascertain the progress of the native woodland restock against Forest Plan objectives, but also to survey the current state of fixed woodland infrastructure (fences, gates, tree tubes, paths and drains). Within the time permitted, survey effort was concentrated within the bounds of the new native woodland restock area (25 ha) as opposed to the wider (upland) regions of the 82 hectare site. However a cursory inspection of this uphill harvested ground did not reveal any significant legacy of conifer regrowth from either stumps or seedling regeneration. The area appears to be beginning to naturally revegetate from the broad complement of native grasses, rushes and heath species - albeit in a rather localised/opportunistic distributions on account of harvesting residues and the previous fragmentary effects that the standing conifer plantation imposed. It may be many decades before completely naturalised and stabilised ecological communities persist here. Nutrient enrichment offered by decaying harvesting residues may also adversely influence the typical composition/distribution of this flora – only time will tell. Nevertheless it is unlikely that any significant management effort will be needed within the next decade or so to ensure current open ground restoration continues in a positive direction.

At the time of survey walkover, it was not known that almost two-thirds of the site had only recently been replanted after early-years transplant failure. It was therefore surprising to walk over a five-year-old restock site and not see more advanced signs of formative growth - if not yet full establishment. With this later knowledge and confirmation too that the initial restock received no supplementary fertiliser at planting, it will certainly be at least another five (or more) years before the majority of planted trees are at least “welly boot” height – rooted and growing well enough to be considered a robust and successfully establishing native woodland.

Within the lower regions of the restocked native woodland area (below the overhead powerline wayleave corridors), it was initially fairly difficult to ascertain the exact zones where restocking had taken place as areas of planting (and mounding) on the ground did not correlate exactly with areas marked as such on the Restock Map. This appears to be in response to the surfeit of mulched timber materials resulting from the harvesting operation – carpeting the ground to the exclusion of practical ground preparation and planting. Once identified however, it was possible to discern that restock ‘compartments’ are roughly equivalent in scale to those indicated on the map and mounded to achieve an approximate facsimile of the restock map. This area did however contain the greatest area of ‘vacant’ mounds i.e. transplants missing or presumed to have died and disintegrated. In some mounded areas less than half the mounds have transplants. This is the flattest and wettest part of the site (save for localised hollows and bog plateaus) and infertility and hostile rooting conditions may account for failure rates here. The beat up contractor reported seeing significant numbers of voles on site during beat up. Certainly there are tell-tale vole holes in the accumulating grass thatch here. These mammals will continue to present a primary risk of tree mortality in young and smaller transplants through ring barking.

Two non-native species are also present within this lower zone: in the vicinity of the car park and lower slopes, sycamore is regenerating on disturbed, harvested ground (from a few retained & seed-bearing adult trees); and, in the most southerly corner of the enclosure fuchsia is now expanding and proliferating – as an ‘escape’ from neighbouring garden ground at Bearraig Cottage. Both species are not native to the British Isles and – within the bounds of the (botanically-designated) SSSI - are unwelcome species. Left unchecked these species (in particular, fuchsia) will become difficult to control and eradicate easily (i.e. cheaply) especially



as woodland vegetation develops with unfettered and dense bracken, bramble, shrub and tree growth.

Some tree planting has been undertaken outside the deer fencing using one-metre high tree tubes to protect individual transplants. This prescription has been an almost complete (and unsightly) failure with the majority of trees within tubes now dead or else their tubes having buckled, been blown over/away or their stakes snapped.

Reasons speculated for the very high incidence of transplant mortality (65%) across the entire site by the beat up contractor (and this surveyor) are the inevitably high levels of pine weevil on site in the years immediately following harvesting - a common pest population response on conifer clearfell sites. This is normally mitigated by chemically treating transplants and 'top up' spraying of young trees in the field but discounted in this instance on account of public water supply contamination concerns. Moisture stress on young transplants may also account for many immediate failures: the restock was undertaken in late Spring 2012 when transplants were quickly in full leaf and a prolonged, dry weather period will have resulted in very dry mounds/rooting conditions.

Within the central and upper regions of the restock zone (predominantly south-east facing, sloping ground), living tree/mound densities are fairly good but again it is apparent that most of these trees are new beat up trees and consequently these areas too have several years to go before they can be considered Established Woodland. Grassy vegetation is also recovering now from the years of conifer plantation suppression. Increased weed growth (mechanical /die back suppression and moisture competition) on very young stock as well as opportunities for vole population increase and winter ring barking may result in continuing high tree mortality rates.



*Vole damage to young birch stem*



*Trees in tubes outside the enclosure*

The deer fencing continues to be structurally sound (i.e. non-porous) with only the high volume of pedestrian traffic utilising the deer gates occasionally causing the gates to fail or stand open. This has yet to lead to any reported incursion by (or evidence of) deer however. Likewise, the rabbit fencing – although simply lapped and pinned onto the external ground (as opposed to dug in or turfed over) - has repelled any rabbit incursion (although none have been seen in the proximity in recent years anyway).

In addition to the native woodland restock and its ancillary fencing, gates and tree tubes, are the pedestrian footpaths that cross and bisect the site, Within the bounds of the woodland, these paths have been designed and built to a comparatively high construction standard for such a remote upland locality. This has been done primarily to facilitate access by as broad a section of the public as the topography will allow. Path surfacing is firm, smooth and even being

constituted from well-bound 'quarry fines' materials which – considering the popularity of the route – is proving fairly durable to pedestrian erosion. At less than five years old, these paths are clearly still within a 'honeymoon period' and there will in time be more discernible structural deterioration where the erosive effects of such high levels of pedestrian use are compounded by significant weathering impacts (dusty materials dislocated by summer winds, fine materials washed away by >2-metre annual rainfall).



*Competing Rowan & Fuchsia with mounded brush*



*Upgraded path showing slight surface wear*

### **3. Local Interest & Opportunities**

#### ***A Community Woodland?***

The evidence of (and for) successful Community Woodlands has been building across Scotland for over twenty five years now. Typically the route to success has a basis in a pre-existing (beneficial) relationship that the community - or sub-set of that community - has with local woodland and that they wish to better secure or develop into the future. In other instances, it may be an *appetite* for such a relationship that has kindled and motivated efforts to secure inherent benefits. Finally there are communities that have been able to imagine and ultimately realise new benefits (and novel relationships) when an opportunity for greater control or acquisition has presented itself.

Invariably, there are ups and downs in the journey towards community control or ownership and then to the realisation of the many envisaged (sometimes previously unimagined) benefits. Lack of time, funds and skills are universal constraints, inter-personal issues and community dynamics/politics can hamper and frustrate progress and the unity of vision, and an intransigent or dismissive local regulatory 'climate' (e.g. planning, education, health, tourism sector buy-in) can weaken and even overwhelm morale. In all instances of successful community ownership, success has ultimately derived from deep-rooted personal and community commitment and a fundamental belief that the Shared Goals are worth the compromises and sacrifices required.

At present there is no evidence of latent ambition within the immediate community to derive greater local benefit from Storr Woodland (investigated and summarised succinctly in the *An Stor Gateway – Options Appraisal and Feasibility report*). Portree represents the nearest significant population centre that might or could harbour such aspirations. However they are already well-served within the settlement for woodland-based and -related opportunities for access trails, outdoor classroom use and nature conservation and appreciation (e.g. Sluggans community woodland & the Leasgary riparian woodland and walkways). Furthermore, the

Portree and Braes Community Council - within whose catchment Storr Woodland lies - have been fully appraised of SCT ambitions since the earliest evolution of the ATR and at no time indicated any concern for missed opportunity or alternative/supplementary objectives at the site.

The remoter, sparsely populated and widely distributed townships of the Trotternish peninsular have their social, economic and cultural centre in Staffin. This would seem a more obvious location for any potential new community woodland venture – where proximity to the school and other retail, tourism and 'population retention' initiatives coalesce. Similarly, the historic Kilmuir basket-making industry probably has the strongest caché in terms of a bygone community association with woodland and might instinctively represent a more obvious theme upon which to foster new community woodland interest encompassing land use, wildlife, cultural, economic and tourism benefit.

Finally, with Storr Woodland at some distance from any residential population and its use so overwhelmingly determined by its being situated at one of Scotland's most iconic walking and sight-seeing locations, it is difficult to envisage the local community (or group thereof) wishing to assert new - more locally-oriented - activity there.

### **A Complementary Woodland?**

It is commendable that, under local authority ownership and management, Storr Woodlands has been taken from a marginally economic and depreciating, non-native, geometric 'eyesore' with increasing public access liabilities towards a future self-perpetuating, visually appealing, environmentally sympathetic woodland with well-conceived and maintained access thoroughfare. Whether it is the local authority or community trust that develops facilities to ameliorate the woefully insufficient threshold infrastructure, the restored open ground and low level native woodland 'back drop' can only serve to improve the integrity of the site/setting as a whole and in turn the experience and enjoyment of the visitor.

Interestingly, the annually-increasing popularity of the site since 2008 (evidenced by HC people counters) has been during a period of huge (and unsightly) landscape-scale upheaval on account of woodland restructuring operations. It is irrefutable that the site's popularity results from the promotion and global awareness of its wider landscape - through film, television, tourism promotion and now social media. Developing new (fairly capital intensive) recreational and interpretive projects within the main body of the woodland (an option considered in the An Stor Gateway report) *could* augment visitor experience - possibly even complementing broader cultural tourism ambition of the SCT and others in the area – but is unlikely to bring any tangible direct increase in visitors (and thus income) in its own right.

As the ruts, mounds and shattered timber residues of forest restructuring begin to be overgrown by natural grasses, flora and woodland, then the provision of seating (pic-nic, rest and contemplation points) along pathways would enhance visitor well-being and at a relatively modest outlay of capital – although with consequent maintenance responsibility (e.g. control of littering, fire setting, trampling and habitat disturbance, safety inspection regime).

It would not therefore be inconceivable that the community consider ownership of Storr Woodlands in the fullness of time as there are complementary access/recreation opportunities that the wider (established) woodland area will one day offer. However such opportunities will not directly result in a proportionate increase in income at the threshold but rather require even greater capital outlay, design and delivery expertise and volunteer/SCT staff effort to bring forward new component projects that might be sympathetically developed there.



#### 4. Responsibilities & Liabilities

The main responsibilities and liabilities inherent in community ownership of Storr Woodlands *at this time* relate to:-

##### Short Term (0 - 5 years)

- risks and remedial actions inherent in managing woodland restock through to establishment (indicative costs below)- to discharge SRDP contractual obligations;
- eradicating early invasive non-native species (sycamore & fuchsia);
- routine management of access trails within the gross woodland area (monitoring, safety inspections, maintenance/repairs: gates, drains, path structure & surfacing);
- public liability insurance
- fire insurance

The current SRDP Restructuring and Regeneration contract between the Highland Council and the Forestry Commission requires that a native woodland of average 1,600 stems/hectare be established by 2021 across the 25-hectare deer- and rabbit-fenced enclosure on the lower slopes of the Storr Woodland site. A 65% restocking exercise was undertaken in Feb 2017 so the majority of the woodland overall is still very young and will have at least 5 years of growth to reach acceptable establishment (note: restock is NPK fertilised so should grow more quickly than early restock). A further 3,000 birch restock (10%) is recommended for winter 2017/18 and it is realistic to assume that – assuming no other significant detrimental impacts - another couple of 10% beat ups might be scheduled in subsequent years with the use of increasingly larger (more expensive) transplant stock and possibly individual vole guards. Trees planted in unsuitable tubes (largely dead) outwith the main enclosure need wholesale replacement with new stock in wider open mesh tubes with hardwood stakes next winter and probably at a higher density than that prescribed originally. Quarterly fence and tree mortality inspections should be maintained over the next five years. Application to sign off the contract might realistically be made in spring 2022.

Annual cost of quarterly inspection of fence, trees, tubes and pest impact: **£700 p.a.**

Annual 10% beat up (trees, labour, fert, guards): **£1,500, £2,000 & £2,500** over successive winters 2017/18 to 2019/20.

Replacement of c500 trees & tubes: **£1,200** (winter 2017/18).

Fuchsia & sycamore eradication (uprooting/stump treatment): **£850** (spring/summer 2018).

Any more-catastrophic impacts (drought, unmonitored fence failure or major vole/rabbit impacts) could lead to higher tree mortality and correspondingly higher remedial costs (including fence repair). If such a situation arose, a worst case scenario might be 30-35% failure of restock, resulting in a beat up bill of **£11-12k** for trees, fertiliser and labour/overheads and – if relevant - additional fence repair, deer and/or other pest control measures (**c£1-2k**).

Access maintenance work (paths, gates, drains etc) as well as safety inspections and litter clearance are perennial burden. This coming winter, some replacement deer gates and a few days of contract path repairs are scheduled at c£3,500 + HC administration and site supervision (c£5k gross). Maintenance of an ageing path network with an annually-increasing foot fall will realistically require a similar scale of investment/resourcing made annually over the first five year period.



Threshold deer gate infrastructure



Contoured lower trail (roadside parking beyond)

Perhaps as important to consider as the potential financial outlay on remedial works required is the staff resource and expertise that the landowner (SCT?) must possess to orchestrate and oversee these work programmes. With a currently limited staff resource, modest volunteer and Board support available (and limited experience in relevant disciplines) such additional responsibilities would require an increase in both capacity and skills of the organisation to competently deliver. Discussion with the SCT Local Development Officer in review of SCT's current suite of projects and interests, it is clear that there is little appetite to broaden their responsibilities to take on woodland management and woodland access maintenance in the immediate future. SCT's projects, including the Storr threshold, have all been identified as part of a major community consultation and Staffin Growth Plan. Purchasing and/or managing woodland was not proposed during the consultation process and consequently not an identified SCT remit.

### **Medium to Long Term** (6 years onwards)

- woodland & open ground management to meet SSSI Management Agreement (control/exclusion of grazing animals, non-native species eradication etc);
- more significant programme of trails maintenance (structural & phased renovation work);
- maintain boundary stock fence (dismantle & dispose of redundant deer/rabbit fencing at c.10 years)
- public liability insurance
- fire insurance
- enhance trails with seating/rest areas, new trail loops, waymarkers, environmental & heritage interpretation (*aspirational*).

With woodland established to contract-stipulated species composition and stocking densities, the responsibilities of woodland management will revert to simply maintaining fences to exclude livestock and deer (for at least another ten years), removing tree tubes/vole guards as necessary and controlling incidental non-native plant incursions. Other woodland work might revolve around recreational objectives: controlling rank and unsightly vegetation growth along access corridors or the creation of social spaces or heritage interpretation projects (e.g. the 'Shielings' loop path). As outlined previously, a diligent path inspection regime and timely maintenance will keep expenditure on access provision frequent but modest and any renovation work programmes simple and manageable. It is likely that more significant path repair and reconstruction works will be required more frequently once the path is over ten years old and such interventions and costs may be significant (many thousands of pounds per annum).

## 5. Summary & Recommendations

In assessing the potential opportunities, responsibilities and liabilities associated with possible community acquisition of Storr Woodland by Staffin Community Trust, CWA offers the following summary:-

### Summary

- There is no discernible economic benefit to SCT in expanding the current ATR to include the gross Storr Woodland area – only increased cost, obligations and financial risk.
- There is no accruing timber value in the restocked native woodland that might provide a timber (even non-timber product) income in future years.
- It is unlikely that any perceptible increase in income could be realised directly from new capital expenditure on recreational/interpretive features within the woods – any significant development ambition being constrained in any case by SSSI and landscape sensitivities.
- There does not appear to be any existing or perceptible community/wider social benefit being overlooked or lost by passing up the opportunity of taking ownership or more direct control of Storr Woodlands at this time.
- There is already a list of other community ambitions/projects that the SCT would wish to take forward should the organisation access additional funding and capacity. Responsibility for management of Storr woodland through its establishment phase would challenge existing capacity still further.
- If the native woodland restock is successfully carried through to establishment (and the SRDP contract discharged), the resulting woodland will be a complementary and positive aesthetic foreground to the Old Man of Storr and backdrop to the Storr threshold infrastructure.

In light of recent approaches by The Highland Council to Staffin Community Trust for expansion of their current ATR to include the Storr Woodland area, CWA offers the following recommendations:-

### Recommendations

- SCT could wait until the Council's SRDP Restructuring & Regeneration contract with FCS has been discharged before considering acquisition in any greater depth. This period will also allow SCT to focus on threshold development and gaining necessary competence and capacity in visitor management there before (possibly) expanding this role to encompass the broader woodland and trails network.
- Should the Trust wish to consider woodland acquisition at a future date – and declare such an ambition at this stage - it would be pertinent to encourage HC to adopt an 'open book' transparency with regard to the ongoing administrative and operational costs of maintaining public access through Storr Woods (e.g. materials, contract work and staff time whether operational, supervisory, administrative or managerial). Such an arrangement would put the Trust in a more informed and confident position to contemplate acquisition at a future date.