

Observatree Project

1. Purpose

To update Commissioners on the progress of the Observatree project and outline possible options for its continuation, post LIFE funding.

2. Background/Introduction

Observatree is a four year collaborative project, led by Forest Research, with the Forestry Commission (GB and countries), Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Fera Science Ltd., the Woodland Trust, the National Trust, Animal and Plant Health Agency (AHPA) and Defra as partners. The project is 50% funded by the EU LIFE programme.

The main purpose of the project is to establish a Tree Health Early Warning System (THEWS) using a network of volunteers who receive extensive training in the identification and reporting of tree pests and diseases. The volunteer network contains over 230 individuals located across the UK.

The volunteers have two main roles within the project. Firstly, they undertake surveys of tree health within their local area and report their findings, including sites free of pests and diseases. This provides highly valuable information in terms of understanding the extent of outbreaks and sets the project apart from other citizen science based tree health studies.

The second role is that of the tree health verifier. When reports are submitted via the Tree Alert, there may be incomplete data which make the interpretation of the report by the Forest Research Tree Health Diagnostic Advisory Service (THDAS) team difficult. These incomplete records can be passed on to the verifiers to contact the initial reporter and seek the missing information to complete the record. This has the benefit of saving the THDAS staff time and ensures they receive complete, quality reports.

In the past 12 months, volunteers have placed over 1100 survey reports and logged over 8000 hours of time since the start of the project. An Observatree volunteer reported the second sighting of the Oriental chestnut gall wasp and other volunteers provided supplementary reports to those of plant health inspectors who investigated the outbreak. In February 2016, Observatree co-hosted a two day international conference at Kew for 150 delegates on tree health early warning systems. There is a lot of interest in how/what Observatree is achieving and it is recognised as a pioneering project due to the investment of extensive training for a network of recruited volunteers.

The Woodland Trust manages the day-to-day running of the volunteer network and co-ordinates its activities. This currently requires a full-time Engagement Officer. The

Woodland Trust also leads on the project communications, producing newsletters, press releases and maintaining the website. Fera assists with volunteer training and will contribute to knowledge exchange with wider stakeholders and similar tree health projects both within the UK and abroad. FCS and Defra provide a financial contribution to the project and FCS allows staff time to attend training events in Scotland. FCE, APHA and NRW provide staff time to assist with training events. FR provides project management and the majority of the training materials for the face-to-face events and the supplementary materials such as webinars and the field ID guides. Additionally, FR contributes via engagement with Tree Alert and the verification portal used by the verification volunteers.

Despite the differing strategic directions, priorities and methods of working of the Observatree partners, the strong project management by FR has made this a very successful enterprise. Feedback from the project's EU LIFE monitor has been complimentary of the Observatree partnership because it is strong and has a shared belief in the project.

The overall budget for the four year Observatree project is €2.2m (£1.9m). The [LIFE+ programme](#) has provided 50% of the costs with matched funding provided by partner organisations.

3. Progress to date

The project is 75% of the way through its timeframe and is receiving significant support both from within the partnership and with wider stakeholders. Because the volunteer network was built from scratch, requiring training and systems development, the network is only now starting to work effectively. As LIFE funding expires at the end of September 2017, the project is scheduled to end just as the network is maturing and delivering results. A workshop was therefore held in July with representatives from the partner organisations to review the project and explore whether it should continue and if so, how it could be implemented and funded.

The workshop considered a selection of possible scenarios ranging from closure of the project, through continuation in the current format, to expansion of the volunteer network and partnership. Appendix 1 provides an outline of the initial options considered. A summary of the discussions is presented below.

- Without exception, all of the partner representatives participating in the workshop had a desire to see the project continue.
- It was accepted that the project is still in the development phase and that it is too early to get a true picture of value for money.
- Identification of an early outbreak of a new pest or disease, which facilitates a rapid eradication, could provide substantial value.
- Any significant increase in the 230 volunteers would require further staff resources.
- The spatial distribution and effectiveness of the current network should be reviewed to ensure a sensible geographic coverage and proactive reporting.
- The face-to-face aspect of the volunteer training is an important part of volunteer retention and there is a desire for that to continue.
- Increasing the size of the partnership would make it too unwieldy and difficult to manage. Nonetheless, there should be discussions about how other organisations could help in a supporting role.

- The volunteers mostly visit Woodland Trust, National Trust or Local Authority owned sites. FC sites are not visited very often due to the need to obtain permissions from each district office. Some volunteers have expressed frustration over the limited access to land. Districts should be encouraged to engage with the volunteers and work with the project team to facilitate improved access.

The preferred model for continuation of the project was to maintain the current core partnership – option 2 in the Appendix. The Woodland Trust is essential in the management of the volunteer network and the FC/FR expertise is necessary both in terms of being the UK lead on tree health and the provision of Tree Alert. Staff from Fera, APHA and NRW have assisted with the delivery of training and are keen to continue. The National Trust has mostly contributed venues for training but may be in a position to make more of a contribution in a follow-on project. Defra provided early support by funding the £250k feasibility study¹, and have indicated possible financial support for continuation.

Options for financing the project continuation are outlined in Appendix 2. These indicate reduced costs for a second phase, as it would not be necessary to develop IT systems, most ID guides and training materials will be completed and other press and media correspondence could be scaled back. Additionally, as the project becomes more routine, management requirement could also be potentially reduced. Funding option 3 is the preferred option, but would depend very much on one organisation being prepared to take the project on. Funding option 4 is potentially the most likely one if the project continues.

The FC and FR have invested a considerable amount of time and money into the project, and the results are starting to prove its worth. The Woodland Trust remains committed to the project and wishes to continue to contribute to it as the promotion of tree health awareness is a key aim of the charity in the coming years. As such, it may be in a position to contribute more.

Colleagues from Defra are very supportive of the project and also keen to see its continuation. To that end, Defra are prepared to make a financial contribution towards its future as a partner on the assumption that the other existing partners would continue to contribute to the project.

There are other potential research aspects to the project, with value in data collected and the volunteer network. If partner funding can be found to continue core project functions, bids could be made to funding bodies or other organisations for any 'bolt on' research.

4. Resource Implications

On-going resource will be required to maintain the project, but should be significantly less than the initial set up and development costs. In the remaining 12 months of the project, detailed costs for continuation can be worked up into a full business case, and commitments from partners made. The major recurring costs for FR/FC would be in project management and training provision, which are estimated at some 60% of the original project costs. Overall it may be possible to continue delivering the project for

¹ [Observa-tree Feasibility Study: exploring citizen science for tree health surveillance](#)

50% of the total original funding. However, there will be no matched LIFE funding, and what the FC/FR contribution will be will depend on what the other partners are able to contribute, and how keen the FC is to remain the project lead.

Because of the reputable Observatree brand name, once the LIFE funded part of the project is complete, there may be opportunities for selling field ID guides or similar products to provide some small income for the project to supplement core funding.

5. Risk Assessment

The main risks to the FC/FR of not continuing with the project are detailed below:

- If the project continues without FC/FR, there is a potential reputational risk, not least from within the other partner organisations. As Observatree has developed a high level of credibility, continuing success without the leading authorities in tree pests and diseases, could undermine the FC position and provide other organisations opportunities to benefit from our expertise and investment in this area.
- If project management is handed over to another organisation, there are risks associated with a loss of control over who may or may not be encouraged to use Tree Alert and how it is being promoted.
- A change in project management may also encourage deviation away from the original objectives of the project, such as reporting non-tree related Pests & Diseases (P&D) or undertaking non-P&D volunteer activities.
- TreeAlert is a key part of the on-going success of the project. If Observatree is to continue, it needs to have a reliable, maintained and adaptable Tree Alert at its heart. The future governance and ownership of Tree Alert remains to be decided.
- Should Observatree not continue, the loss of the network may increase the likelihood of a new pest or disease becoming established within the UK and going undetected for a longer period and becoming more difficult to eradicate. Recent experience indicates the significantly increased costs of protection the later an outbreak is detected.

These risks can be mitigated by extending the project life, and making Observatree part of everyday FC/FR plant health monitoring activity.

6. Communication Issues

If FR/FC does not continue to support Observatree into the future, clear lines will be required to explain why the decision has been taken, particularly if the project continues with the other partners.

There are significant good news stories and results coming from the project and these include many opportunities for good PR for both FR and the wider FC.

7. Implementation and Evaluation Proposals

As the end of the LIFE Observatree project is 12 months away, this allows time for more detail to be produced, both in terms of the format for the renewed project and commitments from the partners. However, commitment from the partners is important in the next two to three months to provide reassurance for the volunteers and key staff such as their Engagement Officer. This will also allow time for the necessary details and negotiations to be put in place to allow a seamless transition to the follow-on project.

The next stage in the process will be to produce a realistic business plan for taking the project forward and getting signed agreements from the partners for their contributions in terms of project work, staff time and any other funds or materials.

The new project will also need new guidance and careful planning as some areas may be cut back and the restrictions of LIFE rules are removed. This will require on-going evaluation of work by the Project Manager and regular reporting to the Observatree Board.

8. Conclusions

In total, the costs of continuing the work of the Project are estimated at between £0.8m and £1.2m over the next four years, across all of the partners. The FC contribution to this will be around 50% of the costs, if the FC continues to lead the project.

The decision-making process, given the cross border nature of the project, will need to include some consideration by the Forestry Governance Programme Board. This will need to be part of the formal process of establishing new governance and financial arrangements, if management/funding through FR is a leading option.

As the current Observatree project is due to conclude in September 2017, a decision by the partners will be required by the end of 2016 to allow the development of a finalised business case, and agreement on funding by the end of April 2017.

9. Recommendations

It is recommended that FR/FC support the continuation of Observatree and retains the project management and leadership. Support from Commissioners is sought in principle, subject to the development of a fully costed business case, and agreement on funding both before and after the completion of forestry devolution.

The FC Executive Board will take this matter forward in light of the Commissioners' steer.

Roger Coppock
Head of CFS
September 2016

Peter Crow
Observatree Project Manager

Project option 1 – Observatree project ends at the end of September 2017 as there is no mechanism or desire for the project to continue. This will result in the loss of the managed volunteer network. Volunteers may continue to report positive findings via Tree Alert and as a member of the public rather than a managed volunteer. There is no mechanism to report 'no P&D found' areas. Volunteer activity is likely to decrease over time due to the lack of support. There is no mechanism to call upon the network in the event of a new outbreak. There is a potential risk to the reputations of the partners. There is reduced P&D communication and joined-up working between the partner organisations. The LIFE rules require the website to be 'live' for 5 years after the end of the LIFE funding. Under this scenario, there would be no updates or new content added. This also reduces the return on investments in assets such as the verification portal. Partners would have more money to spend on other work (which may or may not be related to tree health).

Project option 2 – Project continues in its current form. Taking forward the 21 Pests & Diseases currently under observation. This should be cheaper going forward, as Tree Alert, the Verification Portal and the printed posters and ID guides will be in place. The volunteers will have received most of the training, but face-to-face refreshers / updates or networking events may still be required (and this mechanism is valued by the volunteers). These may only need to be once a year. There may be occasions when a new P&D needs to be added or an outbreak situation requires new information. Periodic webinars would still be necessary. A volunteer engagement officer and some aspect of project comms would still be required, although there may be a reduced demand on the latter. This also assumes that there is continued support from the current partners to continue supporting the project.

Project option 3 Expansion

a) Expansion of the volunteer network- The results of the project to date mean that there is a desire to add to the volunteer network either to increase the number of reports or provide better coverage in areas where there are not currently many/active volunteers. Training would need to continue, especially for new volunteers. Training materials and supporting resources would already be in place, although some additional printing of field ID guides may be required. Can we find/increase the areas of land for the volunteers to access? The main implications of this option could be the need to increase the level of support to the volunteers by providing extra help to the volunteer engagement officer and ensuring that the additional data generated can be dealt with. As an alternative to this, greater use could be made of the 'biophiles' and 'engaged public' to increase eyes on the ground. The volunteer network has shown high levels of retained interest and reporting, partly due to the face-to-face training. This may not work with a wider biophile audience where an initial peak of activity following comms activity may soon tail-off.

b) Expanded P&D list – The Priority list is expanded to increase the surveillance via this Tree Health Early Warning System. If only one or two are added each year, the volunteers can slowly increase their knowledge base. Alternatively, a larger number of P&Ds can be added simultaneously. Either method will require the production of training materials, ID guides, web resources and training delivery and therefore have cost implications. What is unclear is to what extent the volunteers would report on the increased list. Would individual volunteers 'adopt' particular P&Ds they are comfortable reporting on? Or would they continue to look out for all on the list? How do we ensure that the volunteers are remaining vigilant for those not currently thought to be in the UK if the list is doubled?

c) Increase partnership – Are there other organisations that could help in the delivery of Observatree2? Perhaps an industry partner where staff are trained and report along with the volunteers? Could we work more closely with port authorities, importers or nurseries? Could WT/NT woodland managers and staff be encouraged to report more? This is assuming that the current partnership wishes to continue. There are probably many options here and the requirements for additional training, comms or overall project management will vary. Would the volunteers be happy to continue if they were working alongside of other groups of people?

Project option 4 Reduction

a) Reduce the volunteer network – This could perhaps focus on the more proactive volunteers. Any inactive volunteers could be left to fall by the wayside and not replaced. Working with the more enthusiastic / engaged of the volunteers could possibly allow for a reduced engagement programme, a tighter self-supporting network and fewer, more targeted training sessions. However, this could leave gaps in some parts of the UK or result in a regional bias in the reporting. Depending on how volunteer numbers are reduced, this could result in bad feelings / press towards the project / partners.

b) Reduced P&D list – More emphasis is placed on a smaller number of P&Ds. Evidence from the OCGW situation suggests that volunteers respond well to more specific surveys. Little to be gained in terms of cost savings, as ID guides etc. will already have been produced. Refresher training could be reduced as there would be less content. Increased risk of one of the previous P&D going undetected.

c) Specialist networks and peer to peer training – Some volunteers are becoming very effective at surveying for specific P&Ds. Perhaps they could help to train or provide support on their specialist area for the rest of the network. Could the web 'forum' or direct email contact be used to allow the volunteers to help each other more? This could reduce the need for some partner involvement.

d) Reduced partnership – Are all of the current partners needed in the model of Observatree2? If partners are seeking reimbursement for staff time going forward, finding cheaper alternatives may help the project to continue (depending on funding option). However, the support from the current partners and the use of their logos adds credibility to the project. If partners are donating staff time, there may be little benefit from reducing the number. Observatree helps to join up Tree Health issues amongst the partners. This could suffer if the project ends or the partnership is reduced.

Project Funding option 1- Project partners individually meet the costs of their staff time and travel. Any material costs are either shared by the partners or paid for by the most relevant party. Alternatively, one partner 'adopts' the project and whilst the other partners contribute staff time and travel, any material costs are paid by the adopting partner. The adopting partner would become the project lead with other partners support it. Advantage of potential longevity and therefore long-term buy-in from volunteers. Disadvantage is that partners may become pressured to reduce costs and commitments.

Project Funding option 2 – Continue to bid to alternative funding streams such as HLF. This can have the disadvantage of a short-term project funding with an uncertain future. Time is spent on bids which may or may not be successful and report writing. There is periodic uncertainty for project staff and volunteers due to stop/start funding. Opportunities for European funding will become increasingly difficult. Applications often require a new approach or direction for a project, not a routine continuation.

Project Funding option 3 – Central project funding is secured from an organisation such as Defra to meet the costs of the project. Partner costs are fully met. Advantage of longer-term commitment to project with greater buy-in from volunteers and partners. Ability to devise longer-term plans for the project.

Project Funding option 4 – Match funding continues with partners contributing staff time and travel, but some of this is offset by a central contribution from Defra or a similar government grant.

Project Funding option 5 – Formation of a charitable body. Observatree receives charitable status. This allows forest and timber industries to make an annual donation towards the cost of the project. Their logos could be added to the project website helping them to receive good PR. This type of approach could attract energy companies or the paper industry who wish to be seen helping to protect the environment. Members of the public could also donate in the interests of protecting Britain's trees. Would WT/NT/SNH etc. members be prepared to contribute a small additional contribution to their usual subscription to support the project? Partner organisations could donate funds or staff time (or possibly receive some remuneration) as appropriate. Any profits would be reinvested in improving the network and/or making P&D education resources more widely available. A board of trustees would be established from partners and volunteers.

Project Funding option 6 – Interim funding. Funding is provided by a mechanism above (or similar) for a 2 year period to provide the time required to establish a workable charitable status.