Rathcoole Housing Development

Biodiversity

Appendix 6.6 – Woodland Management Plan

Delivering a better world

Rathcoole Woodland

Site Visit Report and Management Recommendations

Customer Name	SDCC
Townland	Rathcoole
County	Co. Dublin
Woodland Type	Semi-Natural Broadleaved Woodland
Area (Ha)	12.49 Ha
Species	Willow (dominant), D Birch, Hazel, Syc
Ecoplan Forester	Sean McGinnis
Issued Date	16/06/26



1. General

Rathcoole Woodland is one of the most unusual woodlands I have encountered during more than 25 years working as a professional forester.

While Ireland contains many excellent woodlands, it is increasingly rare to find a woodland of this size which appears to have developed and functioned largely through natural ecological processes rather than active human management. Most woodlands show obvious evidence of planting, grazing, thinning, drainage, harvesting, recreational pressure or other management interventions. Rathcoole Woodland appears different.

The site is characterised by extensive willow woodland, abundant natural regeneration, structural diversity and remarkably low levels of disturbance considering its proximity to a large urban population. During my visit I observed very little evidence of recent management activity, grazing pressure, anti-social behaviour or significant littering.

What struck me most was not any individual species present, but the apparent lack of obvious human fingerprints. The woodland appears to be governed primarily by ecological processes rather than silvicultural decisions. Natural regeneration is occurring freely, structural diversity is developing naturally, and woodland succession remains active throughout the site.

As a forester, much of my work involves attempting to create woodland systems capable of sustaining themselves over time. In many respects, Rathcoole Woodland already exhibits many of the characteristics that Native Woodland Establishment Schemes seek to achieve, including natural regeneration, habitat diversity, structural complexity and ongoing ecological succession.

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2. Historical Development

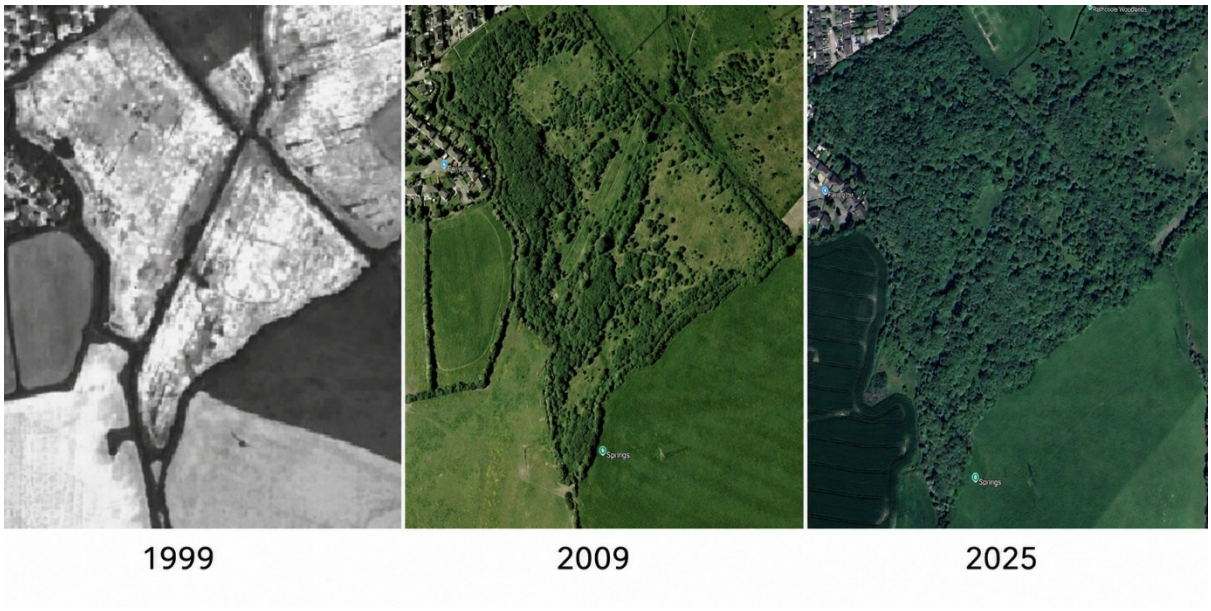
Review of historical aerial photography indicates that the majority of the site was open agricultural land as recently as 1999.

By 2009 substantial areas of scrub and young woodland had become established, while significant areas of open ground still remained.

The 2025 aerial imagery demonstrates a continued expansion of woodland cover and canopy development across much of the site.

The available evidence suggests that Rathcoole Woodlands represents an excellent example of natural woodland establishment and expansion occurring over approximately 25 years without the need for large-scale planting or intensive management.

Rathcoole Woods: Natural Woodland Establishment and Development (1999 - 2025):



The woodland therefore provides a rare opportunity to observe natural succession and self-directed woodland development occurring at a meaningful scale.

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3. Description

The woodland is dominated by willow, with occasional birch present within the canopy. Elder is abundant within parts of the shrub layer and natural regeneration is occurring throughout the site.

Species observed regenerating naturally include:

- Hazel
- Birch
- Rowan
- Ash
- Sycamore

The woodland structure is varied and contains a mixture of mature woodland, developing woodland, dense regeneration, canopy gaps, standing deadwood and fallen stems.

Bird activity was constant throughout the site visit and the woodland appears to provide excellent habitat for a wide range of woodland species. No evidence of deer activity was observed and there was little indication of grazing pressure within the woodland.

Although the woodland has some characteristics of alluvial woodland, there was little evidence during the site visit of active flooding, prolonged waterlogging or a consistently elevated water table. While the woodland species present are generally consistent with wet woodland communities, the hydrological conditions typically associated with active alluvial woodland were not apparent at the time of inspection.

The site appears healthy, resilient and ecologically functional.

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4. Ecological Processes

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Rathcoole Woodland is that it does not appear to have "decided" what it wants to become.

The site is currently dominated by willow; however regeneration of hazel, birch, rowan, ash and sycamore indicates that succession remains active throughout the woodland.

Small woodland fragments can often appear natural, but ecological processes frequently struggle to operate fully because of edge effects and external influences. At approximately 12.49Ha, this area is large enough to develop its own internal dynamics and ecological character.

What makes the woodland particularly interesting is that it exists in a state of continual change.

Natural regeneration is occurring.
Canopy gaps are forming.
Deadwood is accumulating.
Species composition continues to evolve.

Rather than progressing towards a fixed endpoint, the woodland appears to be undergoing continuous ecological development driven primarily by natural processes.

In my opinion, the principal value of the woodland lies not in any individual species or habitat feature, but in the opportunity to observe and protect these natural ecological processes operating successfully across a relatively large and contiguous woodland area.

5. Threats

At present, Rathcoole Woodlands appears to be in good condition and is not subject to any major management concerns.

Potential future threats include:

• Expansion of sycamore regeneration and future canopy dominance.
• Increased recreational pressure as surrounding development expands.
• Future littering, dumping or anti-social behaviour.
• Changes to site hydrology.
• Excessive management intervention which could disrupt natural ecological processes.

Although informal paths are present throughout the woodland, and some signs of littering and camping were observed, evidence of significant disturbance was limited during the site visit. In fact, the woodland's dense and natural character may help protect it from many of the pressures commonly associated with urban fringe woodlands.

6. Recommended Management Approach

The recommended management approach is not one of inaction, rather, it is a deliberate decision to allow the woodland's existing ecological processes and natural succession to continue operating with minimal interference.

This recommendation is based on the following observations:

• Natural regeneration is abundant and occurring successfully throughout the site.

• Woodland succession is actively progressing.

• Structural diversity is developing naturally.

• Deadwood habitat is accumulating naturally.

• The woodland appears healthy and resilient.

• Human disturbance is currently low.

• Historical aerial photography demonstrates successful woodland development over at least the last 25 years.

• Significant intervention risks damaging the qualities that make the woodland unusual.

For these reasons, I do not recommend any significant silvicultural intervention within the woodland at this time.

Recommended actions are limited to:

• Monitoring woodland development over time.
• Monitoring and controlling sycamore regeneration where necessary.
• Retaining deadwood wherever safe to do so.

• Protecting the woodland from dumping, disturbance and inappropriate development.
• Maintaining a predominantly non-intervention approach.

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7. Future Opportunities

At present, the woodland appears to be developing successfully without significant management intervention. Consequently, there is no immediate requirement to pursue grant-supported conservation or infrastructure projects.

While schemes such as the **Native Woodland Conservation Scheme** and **NeighbourWood Scheme** may offer opportunities in the future, the current condition of the woodland suggests that their benefits would be limited.

In particular, care should be taken to ensure that future efforts to increase public access do not inadvertently damage the woodland's natural character or disrupt the ecological processes that currently contribute to its value.

A more appropriate short-term objective may be the preparation of a **Forest Management Plan (iPlan)** to establish a baseline record of woodland condition and provide a framework for future monitoring.

Periodic review of the woodland's development, species composition and ecological condition is recommended to ensure that future management decisions remain informed by the woodland's continuing natural evolution.

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8. Conclusion

Rathcoole Woodlands represents an excellent example of natural woodland establishment, expansion and succession occurring on former agricultural land.

The woodland is developing successfully without significant intervention and displays many characteristics rarely encountered in modern Irish woodlands, including extensive natural regeneration, low levels of disturbance, active ecological succession and a high degree of naturalness.

In over 25 years of forestry practice, I have rarely encountered a woodland of this size that exhibits so few signs of recent management, grazing pressure or other human disturbance.

The woodland's greatest asset is not any individual species or habitat feature, but the opportunity to observe a large woodland continuing to develop largely on its own terms.

The recommended management approach is therefore one of conservation through restraint; allowing the woodland to continue its self-directed development while protecting it from avoidable disturbance and inappropriate intervention.

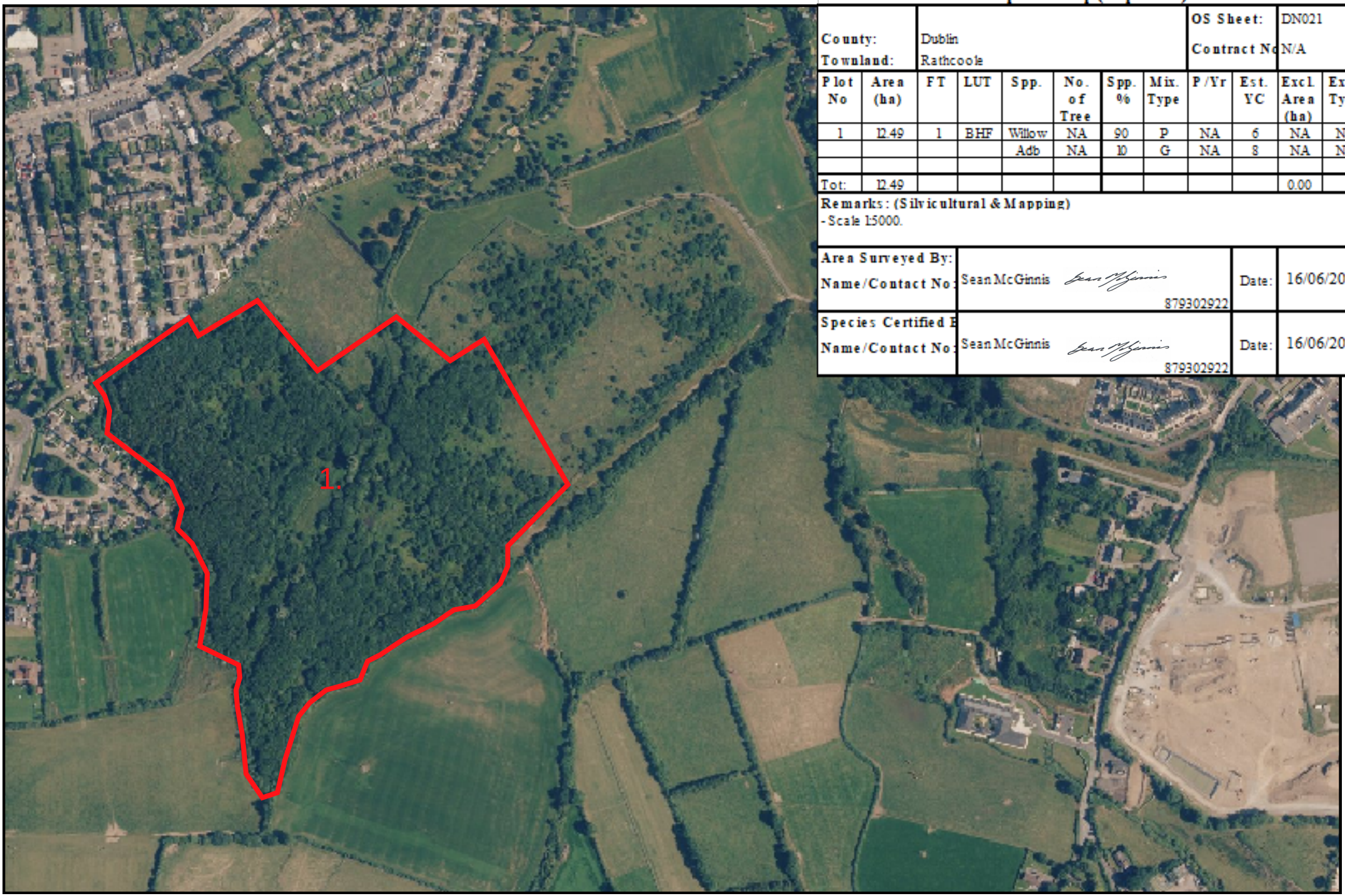
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Certified Species Map (Map 1 of 1)

County:	Dublin							OS Sheet:	DN021		
Townland:	Rathcoole							Contract No	N/A		
Plot No	Area (ha)	FT	LUT	Spp.	No. of Tree	Spp. %	Mix. Type	P/Yr	Est. YC	Excl. Area (ha)	Excl. Type
1	12.49	1	BHF	Willow	NA	90	P	NA	6	NA	NA
				Adb	NA	10	G	NA	8	NA	NA
Tot:	12.49									0.00	

Remarks: (Silvicultural & Mapping)
- Scale 1:5000.

Area Surveyed By: Name/Contact No:	Sean McGinnis 879302922	Date:	16/06/2026
Species Certified By: Name/Contact No:	Sean McGinnis 879302922	Date:	16/06/2026



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16-Jun-2026

Contract: **Rathcoole Woods** Scale 1:5000