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# MP4 WP1.3 Transnational Assessment of Practice

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Woesten land  
consolidation  
management plan

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May 2010

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**The Interreg IVB  
North Sea Region  
Programme**



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### ***Introduction and context***

The Woesten land consolidation management plan applies to areas lying within the territories of the Vleteren, Lo-Reninge, Poperinge and Ypres municipalities. Woesten is a village located in the Belgian province of West Flanders and is a submunicipality of Vleteren. The centre is located on a major connecting road between Veurne and Ypres.



The Woesten land consolidation plan was approved in 1999. The consolidation operations were completed in 2005. The land consolidation covers a surface area of 1,589 ha.

Land consolidation is a method by which the Flemish Government ensures more cost-effective and sustainable agriculture in the agrarian community. Described concisely, land consolidation comprises the regrouping of agricultural land, the construction of new roads, the improvement or removal of existing roads. The land is consolidated and rearranged within the management plan boundary area. Instead of small, fragmented parcels farmers obtain one or more large, easily accessible parcels near their farms where possible.

Land consolidation today not only concerns agriculture. In balance with agriculture – the mainstay of the rural area – protection of landscapes, nature conservation and recreation also form important parts of rural land consolidation. Most of the land remains private property. About 2% of the land is withdrawn from private property to allow the municipalities to carry out measures associated with landscape, nature conservation and recreation. Major changes to land use are difficult to achieve because their destination is determined at a broader scale through regional plans.

A management plan is drawn up by VLM – the Flemish Land Association – covering all measures to be undertaken with respect to nature, recreation and the landscape. The management itself is carried out by public, as well as private partners, mainly farmers.

### ***The project and the ‘place keeping approach’***

The landscape in the Woesten land consolidation area has its own identity. This has grown over time and been changed by human activities. The intention of the land consolidation management plan is to ensure that this identity is not lost. Besides the conservation and protection of valuable landscape elements, attention is devoted to strengthening the landscape structure by means including the planting of new landscape elements.



The structural measures proposed to address the management of nature and landscape here mainly consist of planting new growth on residual pieces of land and in particular on specially created strips of vegetation along roads and watercourses. Local native plant material is used here. Such strips of vegetation not only benefit the landscape, they are also intended as “green corridors” between habitats for biodiversity such as of animals and plants. Such a differentiated vegetation structure has also been provided along the whole course of the Poperingevaart river: this watercourse can therefore also serve as a “main green axis” as well as providing a drainage function.

In an attempt to restore the former wooded character of the region, some 21 ha will be reforested in the project area. Since reforestation is not very common in this area, it is considered to be an innovative approach to land management in Flanders. In the reforestation zone along the Poperingevaart (Wippebos), the valley grassland along the watercourse is kept open and subjected to nature-oriented grassland management.

The construction of a large number of new recreational paths for cyclists, walkers and horse riders has meant a new network of “slower” routes has emerged.

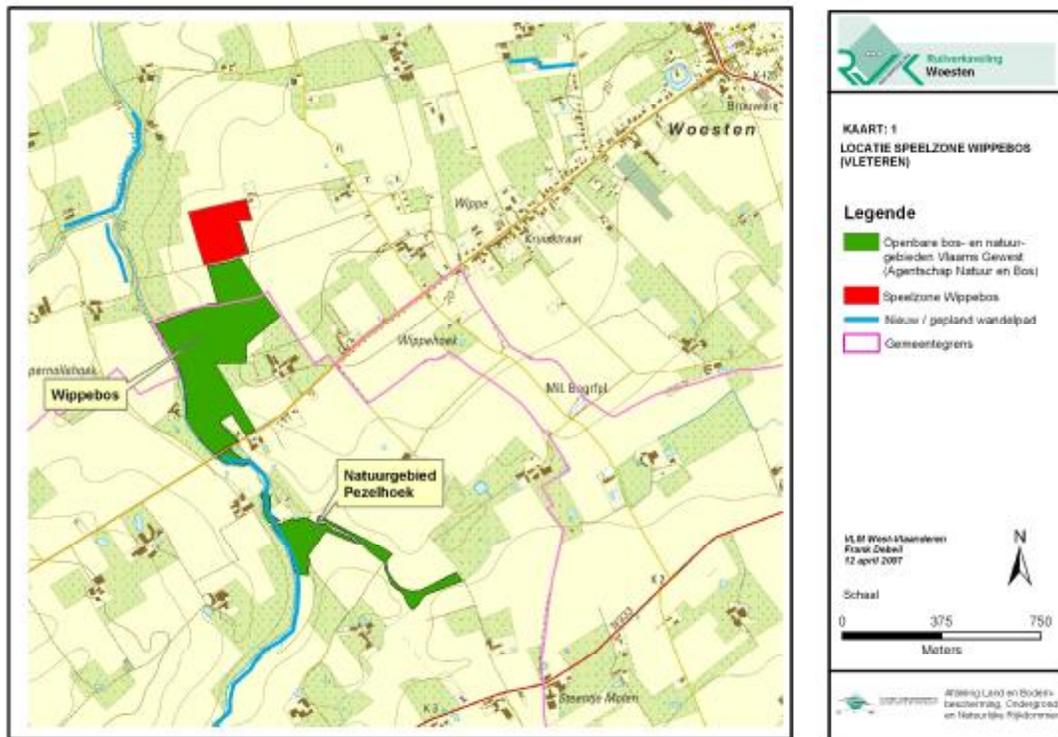
All these strips and parcels have had ownership transferred to the local authorities concerned: the province of West Flanders and The Flemish Region – ANB: Nature and Forestry Agency and VMM: Flemish Environmental Agency, Water Department.

In consultation with the partners concerned, VLM has drawn up a management plan for the measures to be carried out with respect to nature, landscape and recreation. The report includes a comprehensive description of the work carried out and the management tasks to be conducted for linear vegetation, the smaller more dispersed woods, the new recreational routes and road verges along new roads. This plan is to help the administrations concerned with the desired nature and landscape management of the allotted strips of land and parcels. The management plan also includes a description of the project (objectives, concept, species

variety etc.); after the work has been done on-site, a plan is drawn up for the future manager. The management aspect for the larger-scale forestation (incl. play area) is not included in the management plan. The Agency for Woodland and Nature itself has considerable experience with the practical management of woodland and nature land.

In the second half of 2009 a zone of some 4 ha was allocated as a play area in the new Wippehoek public woodland. The objective here is the creation of an adventurous playing wood for young people in Vleteren (particularly the villages Oostvleteren, Westvleteren and Woesten).

This site consists of a 3.9 ha arable land parcel, and within an area of landscape transition: from a gently undulating landscape to a valley with a meandering watercourse, the Poperingevaart. The play area lies in the zone of the First World War front on land with an outcrop of shallow tertiary clay, which was formerly forest. The main entrance to the play area lies directly opposite the entrance to the small Wippehoekbos car park.



The elements of water and relief were used with the development of the play area. The necessary variation was obtained with alternating open and closed zones.

In the plan concept for the play area the existing central drainage channel was developed as a main structure. This more adventurous play element was enhanced by widening the water-carrying channel in various places and adapting the bank gradient. Along this water structure winds a relief structure formed by a two metre-tall verge that leads to a higher playing hill (3 to 4 m) in three places. These hills are surrounded by water and refer to the characteristic medieval moated sites.

The whole parcel is surrounded by a channel to create a clear boundary to also keep playing children away from the adjacent arable land.

Within the vegetation structure, three large open spaces were identified. These function as assembly and play areas. The large open space at the entrance also functions as receiving area and will be subject to more intensive mowing so ball games can also be played on it. The other open spaces will be more extensively managed. Solitary indigenous trees were planted in the open spaces.



On the edge of the play area next to the channel a grassy strip was provided measuring at least 5m. This provides the legally required area of unplanted land around the forested area, which usually consists of a strip measuring 6 m unplanted. This grassy strip also functions as a footpath. Along each side bushes have been planted on the boundary to break the linearity of the space.

The play area is internally accessed by a winding network of paths which also relates to the raised verge. Paths may also spontaneously appear due to playing children crossing the grass. A number of playing pipes were placed in the verge near the play hills.

In regard to vegetation, a choice was made about providing a range of tree and bush varieties. There is considerable variety of suitable trees with a large regeneration capacity, e.g. white willow, ordinary ash, grey poplar and black alder.

With the drawing up of the design, account was taken of future management, including:

- early consultation with the future owner/manager (Nature and Forestry Agency) concerning design, execution and management;
- good accessibility of the play area from the public highway (a multiple of entrances to the parcel);
- the option to only provide small bridges and associated furniture (benches, huts, reception construction, etc.) in anticipation of the opening of the playing wood expected around 2015-2018.

## **Partnerships**

A land consolidation project requires a strong administration and the commitment of very many stakeholders and public partners.

There are the approx. 1,090 parties concerned, owners and users of land in the research area of the Woesten land consolidation. A coordination committee guides the drawing up of the land consolidation plan and the demarcation of the land consolidation area. The coordination committee is made up of representatives of the authorities involved with the project (agriculture, town and country planning, nature conservation, protection of landscapes, finance) and the provincial agricultural chamber. The chairman of this committee, and later of the land consolidation committee, is an employee of the Flemish administration. The Minister of the Environment, Nature and Culture has control over the land consolidation and decides if the plan can be carried out.

As soon as the minister decides that the land consolidation plan can be carried out, the coordination committee is dissolved and the land consolidation committee is charged with conducting all the aspects of the plan with a similar composition for the execution phase. The land consolidation committee is a legal body with the power to decide on all the aspects of how the plan is carried out. It is assisted by the advisory committee principally made up of representatives from local administrations, owners and users, other concerned parties, local experts in the field of rural affairs and nature protection organisations.

VLM supports the preparation and carrying out of the land consolidation project. The FLA has responsibility for, among other things, the secretariat of the advisory committee and the land consolidation committee. It also carries out, or commissions, studies and follows up all the work through supervisory official/work supervisor. It is also responsible for drawing up the management plan. The relative local authorities, the Province of West Flanders, the regional landscapes (West-Flemish hills and IJzer and Polders) are important partners. They provide advice with the drawing up of the plans and the work itself.

The execution and follow-up of the management plan is coordinated by the regional landscape bodies. The regional landscape bodies are not-for-profit organisations, financed by the municipal, provincial and regional authorities. One of their tasks is to ensure the maintenance of all aspects of the agrarian and natural landscape. The work on-site is done by the "landschapswacht" ("Landscape Watch") service. The partners (provinces and local authorities) contribute to the management costs.

## **Governance and engagement**

The local authorities and the parties concerned are involved with the drawing up of the land consolidation plan and the various work planning.

By way of example, a closer look is taken below at the process for drawing up the implementation plan for the play area in the Wippehoek public woodland.

Various authorities were involved with the choice of location:

- Advisory Committee and the Woesten land consolidation committee;
- Nature and Forestry Agency as owner/manager; and,
- The municipal Vleteren youth council.

The youth council must also legally be involved with the designation of official play areas in public woodlands. On 24 February 2006 the municipal youth council proposed two potential locations for the development of a newly to be constructed play area in a public woodland. The representatives of the youth council chose the Wippehoek public woodland as the location.

A brainstorming evening was organised by VLM in May 2007 for the various target groups to obtain the necessary input. Invitees included representatives of the youth associations of Vleteren, Woesten school, the Nature and Forestry Agency, the Regional Landscape West-Flemish Hills, the Association for Forestry in Flanders and its youth consultant, the environmental official, the alderman for youth and the environment of the municipality Vleteren. After a site visit to the future Wippehoekbos location a visit was paid to an existing playing wood in Ypres (Tortelbos). Then, in small groups the target groups were asked to put a number of ideas on paper in a draft plan.



Based on the input obtained, VLM drew up a preliminary design that was presented later in May 2007 to the brainstorming participants and then to the environment council. The remarks were incorporated into the final design which was then contracted out.

To maintain the engagement of the various target groups, planting work for the Wippehoekbos play area was started on “Nature Day”, Saturday 21 November 2009. Some 1,200 trees and bushes were planted. Nature Day is aimed at encouraging as many volunteers as possible to participate within the context of nature and landscape management.

### ***Policy***

After the work plans had been finalised and fully accepted, management of the landscape vegetation and new roads and paths was assigned to the new owners – i.e. the local authorities and the province. In consultation with the partners, VLM as author of the management plan coordinates the land management carried out by the regional landscapes West-Flemish Hills and IJzer and Polder.

The regional landscape bodies have the status of VZW (not-for-profit organisation). They concentrate on protecting and developing the natural treasures in their area of work. They do this by involving authorities, residents and visitors to the region in actual projects fitting in with sustainable area development. Flanders has seventeen regional landscape bodies at present. They operate via financial support from the Flemish Government - Nature and Forestry Agency, the Town and Country Planning Agency, Flanders Heritage, the provinces and local authorities.

### ***Finance***

The total cost of the Woesten land consolidation project amounts to €3 million. By way of example of costing, the landscaping part relating to the linear vegetation costed over €415,000.

The preparation and operational costs of the project are borne by:

- The Flemish Region which pays the largest part, including costs relating to the:
  - project itself and associated costs
  - land purchase required for the land restructuring measures
  - initial “opening up” work
  - technical agricultural work (including work on roads and watercourses)
  - majority of the work for the protection of nature and landscapes.

The costs of landscape protection and nature development are fully subsidised by the Flemish Region if work is done on existing or still to be transferred parcels of the Flemish Region. The Flemish Region partly contributes a subsidy for land owned by the province or municipality.

- The province is required by law to bear the remaining costs relating to non-navigable watercourses (particularly those falling into the 2nd and 3rd categories). The province can grant additional subsidies to limit the costs borne by the owners where possible.
- The local authorities grant additional subsidies to limit the costs borne by the owners where possible.
- The land owners in the final phase of the land consolidation project bear the part of the costs that is not subsidised. Their total contribution is apportioned depending on the improvement work which benefits their own land.

The final acceptance of the “work for the protection of public landscapes” file is planned for 2011. Then management is carried out by the partners involved. From then on, the financing of the maintenance happens through the regular financing of mainly local and provincial authorities. The authorities and the regional landscape bodies conclude a contract of cooperation. The intention is to have coordinated management which conforms with the management plan for the landscape vegetation and recreational paths. Coordination is ensured by the regional landscape bodies. The province and the municipality are responsible for payments to the “Landscape Watch” service; 60% is paid by the province and 40% by the municipality.



The Province is committed to financing the management for the first five years. In the meantime the Environment, Town and Country Planning and Nature Department of the Province of West Flanders has drawn up a proposal for a subsidy arrangement to support local administrations for vegetation management and the restoration of semi-paved surfaces (recreational paths). This has not yet been approved.

### ***Evaluation***

Because various partners are responsible for the management of the linear landscape elements (including vegetation and recreational structures) it is considered favourable for this to be done in a coordinated way according to the management plan and with initial co-financing by the Province of West Flanders. Annual management consultation is in place and forms an important part for all partners: VLM, regional landscape bodies, landscape watch, Westhoek development area of the Province of West Flanders, municipal parks and open spaces managers. During this annual consultation process, last year's management is discussed and evaluated, as is the management planning and financing for the coming year. If necessary, the proposed planning and implementation method for the management plan is adapted.

The following sticking points were already established at the start:

- Lack of uniformity with the drawing up of the management plans by VLM.
- Necessity of including evolutions and changes in management, such as those relating the cost, stakeholder carrying out the work, measures and monitoring.
- Avoidance of situations which impede management or render it impossible, and to ensure that with the management no damage is caused: e.g. dead ends (without turning point at the end), stair constructions and too narrow recreational paths and verges.

To rectify these issues, VLM Flanders has drawn up an aftercare and management manual so that the layout of management plans is uniform and also based on management paper templates.

The Province of West Flanders commissioned an external study with the following aims:

- the development of a system which simplifies the planning and follow-up of the management, including a link to a GIS system;

- the indication of guidelines for the arrangement of landscape vegetation and recreational infrastructures for a mowing system (mainly the creation of a standard type or profile for a mowing system); and,
- research into alternative machines for maintenance.

Partly as result of this study, in 2006 in the southern part of the Westhoek a demonstration day was organised for machines for landscape maintenance. A very wide range of machines were shown in action at this demo day. They included machines used for the processing of green residues, the management of hedgerows and wooded strips, the management of grassy verges and (walking) paths, knot and coppice wood management and mechanical and thermal weed control. The smaller types of machines suitable for the management of narrower structures (e.g. narrow paths) were particularly interesting and relevant for the land consolidation management plan.

### ***Transferable aspects of the case study***

The main aspects of this case study which might be transferable to other contexts and projects include the:

- Participation of target groups when drawing up a design which occurred in the planning process for the play area in the Wippehoek public woodland.
- Drawing up of a general management plan and the setting up of a management structure and financing for linear landscape elements within a rural context.
- Coordination of design and organisation with future management firmly in mind, with a commitment to funding beyond the place-making process.

### **Format of this report**

This report is based on the findings from a series of face-to-face in-depth interviews carried out with representatives from VLM in 2010, who granted permission for MP4 members to use their responses in this report. These interviews were semi-structured and conducted using the question schedule used in the data collection for all the case studies. In addition, the sources of secondary data which provided the contextual information are referenced in the footnotes. All photographs are reproduced with permission.

### **Glossary**

**Place-making:** creating high quality places that people want to visit, experience and enjoy. It implies a people-centred approach which emphasises designing spaces that promote health, wellbeing and happiness. Such spaces engender a sense of belonging and connection for those who use them.

**Place-keeping:** relates to maintaining the qualities and benefits – social, environmental and economic – of places through long-term management. The management required to maintain these qualities and benefits, the approach adopted and the timescale will depend on the place-making aims, the available resources and the life span of the 'place'.

**Partnership:** is defined as agreed shared responsibility between public, private and community sectors. It is a relationship which, in this context, is normally formed between governmental and non-governmental sectors – i.e. it is a manifestation of governance relationships.

**Engagement:** is a cross-cutting issue which describes successful models of working with communities and encouraging appropriate use. Engagement is an aspect of governance particularly relevant in forms of participatory governance and is intrinsic to the concept of 'governance' as defined below.

**Governance:** relates to the relationship between and within government and non-governmental forces. The term implies wider participation in decision-making than representative democracy or other forms of government, recognising a wider range of actors other than the state, and allowing for varying governance contexts and processes.

**Finance:** describes financial models for efficient long-term management.

**Policy:** is discussed within the context of embedding best practice into spatial planning and other policy.

**Valuation:** describes the economic impacts of improvements to open spaces, but also relates to wider socio-economic and environmental benefits.