

This Advisory Note is about understanding the needs of your community so that you can assess how your woodland group can respond to some of these needs. It gives an overview of experience and suggestions from community woodland groups and highlights different elements that new and established groups should consider. Every group and every setting is different but there is much that we can learn from each other.

What do we mean by community?

Community is about people who can be defined geographically, as a group of people who live within or close to a distinct *place*, or as a group of people who share a common *interest*. In both cases, it is a collection of people with a shared aim or purpose. From the point of view of community woodland groups the community is largely the former, people in a defined area associated with a specific woodland or forest. Communities of interest do form around issues

e.g. conservation of red squirrels or a mountain bike club and such groups, whose membership may be nation-wide, can become involved with specific woodlands in a practical way which, of course, will have local impact.

Knowing the community

Your group needs to be clear who your community is - i.e. who you are serving, and the area you identify with - e.g. is it everyone within two miles of your woodland, or all interested people in a specific town, county or region? There is already a lot of data out there that will help with your understanding of the history and current status of your community, for example, the census, local authority statistics and housing agencies, and this needs to be gathered to inform a picture of the community in its geographical, social, economic and cultural context. Many community needs will derive from this, for example, employment opportunities for isolated and economically inactive rural communities.

Community activity – can cover all ages



Photo: Stuart Ashley

Community and woodland needs

Woodland management can be done in isolation, by a single landowner or contractor, but community woodlands have to reflect the needs of many people and be managed accordingly. Of course, community needs are likely to be far greater and more diverse than a woodland resource and a woodland group can provide. However, it is useful to have a holistic assessment of community needs before deciding on how woodland-based activities might respond. The needs of the woodland e.g. biodiversity interventions and silviculture, can then be assessed alongside community needs and an appropriate management plan developed.

The community woodland group

You need to be clear about what your group members are signing up to and what skills they bring in relation to the skills your group will need. In many respects your group will be engaged in community development which combines social, environmental and economic activities; therefore your group will need people skilled in these three areas. Your group will be a collective of individuals, with individual perceptions, bias and conflicts and you will need to find a way to act corporately for the group dynamic to form.

The backbone of your group will be a solid core of members who manage the group, but this alone is not enough; you also need as many members and volunteers as you can muster to engage with woodland and community activities. Make sure individuals have enough time and support to participate. Try to have a realistic assessment of how much time will be needed to manage both the group and specific activities. Too often groups fail to deliver because time runs out or the energy of overburdened key group members is drained.

Community groups generally need to be formally constituted in one way or another, for example, as a charity, limited liability company, Community Interest Company or as an unincorporated association. Which form you take will depend on how your group wants to 'do business' and what your group may need from other organisations. If external funding is required, working with partnerships is anticipated, services are to be provided or you intend to own land, then some form of formal incorporation will be required along with a bank account. Your group will also need insurances and if you are acquiring property or land there will be legal issues that need to be covered.

What does your community need?

There are many ways to identify community needs. One approach is to use questionnaires applied using structured interviews, or left with people to fill in and return. Undertaking interviews can be daunting but it can be a good opportunity for community volunteers, it can also be more perception-based and less personal, easier for the interviewee, and it can make your group more visible within the community. Posting questionnaires is less scary but they also tend to be ignored and without follow up you can expect to have around 1 out of 10 of your questionnaires returned.

Generally, the more participatory the method of collecting community views the better the outcome. The community will have a greater sense of ownership and you will be able to feedback such as: 'you said you needed that, so we are doing this'. Telling everyone involved what you found out in your survey is critically important and constitutes the next step in clarifying and prioritising community needs. If you do not have community backing for your group's proposals you will store up problems for the future. These may manifest as no community buy-in, local challenges to funding applications, and negative publicity: 'we do not want that here'.

The needs or issues identified may not seem to be ones that your woodland can address, for example interviewees may state:

"I have teenage children that 'hangout' in the village, and knowing that there's drugs around it gives children the opportunity to experiment."

Taking this forward, exploring a little more, an interviewee may state:

"I believe that young people should have more things to do in the community, for the sake of the area and in order to avoid anti-social behaviour."

The woodland group can then look at how it may be able to provide 'more things to do' for young people, whether woodworking activity, events targeted at different age groups or even volunteer work opportunities.

Planting a hedge for 'Tree O'Clock' event



Photo: Blaen Brân Community Woodland

You can use both data and perception based analyses (though you may need to think about how to access these skills) to inform your proposals and funding applications. Structured analyses can provide strong evidence to provide new services or for woodland facilities such as youth theatre, woodworking and cultivation. Take care not to be too negative when reporting back on the needs analysis. There will always be descriptions of lack of services or jobs so ensure positive aspects of your proposed activities are mentioned up front.

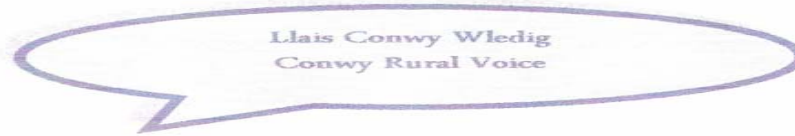
Community needs will be broad and you will find many ways of utilising your woodland resource to address them, some of which you may not have previously considered. However, take care not to overstretch your group's resources and, in particular, raise expectations within the community that you may not be able to fulfil. Keep the process of community engagement ongoing; needs and priorities change, for example, from the current public sector spending cuts. You also need to assess how well your group is doing and make modifications as needed.

Going forward

Once you have your community appraisal and reported back to the community, it is important to validate and check that messages are clear and have been understood. The *community* has to prioritise its own needs and agree on action based on the report. The *group* should then seek support for the next steps. These are likely to be:

- Identifying opportunities for the woodland group to meet needs identified
- Agreeing action plans to address priority and opportunity
- Providing a framework for action, who does what by when
- Matching action plans with available skills/experience
- Identifying resources requirements

Example information gathering form



A number of community groups located in Rural Conwy have come together to create a new network called "Conwy Rural Voice". The aim of the network is to improve communication and work together to improve life in Rural Conwy.

One of the first things that the network is taking on is a research study into Health Care and Well Being in Rural Conwy. This work is funded through the County Borough Council's Rural Community Action scheme. The purpose of the work is to find out how residents of Rural Conwy feel about their health and wellbeing, identify opportunities to improve health quality and provide an opportunity for residents to put forward ideas on how to improve well being.

Confidentiality: We will not be asking for any person to give their name or address as part of this study. We ask for you to indicate your age range and the particular community that you live but both these responses are optional.

Please indicate your age group:

- Under 18 19 - 30 31-50
 51 - 65 over 65

The communities taking part in the study are:

- | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Dolwyddelan | Betws y Coed | Cwm Penmachno |
| Penmachno | Ysbyty Ifan | Pentrefoelas |
| Cerrigydrudion | Llanfihangel GM | Capel Garmon |
| Llanrwst | Capel Curig | Gwydyr Forest |
| Trefriw | Lansannan | Llangernyw |

Please circle the community in which you live or are closest to.

Emotional Health

Emotional health is the ability people have to help them deal with problems and enjoy activities and social relationships, e.g. someone who is depressed may be less able to cope with problems activities and social relationships

I think that the Emotional Health issues in this community are...

I believe this because.....

Drugs & Alcohol

Please underline the statement you believe to be true:

- Alcohol is a problem in this area
 Alcohol is not a problem in this area

I think this because.....

Please underline the statement you believe to be true:

- Drugs are a problem in this area
 Drugs are not a problem in this area

With thanks to TJB Cymru

Regular engagement

Community engagement is not a one off activity - attitudes and priorities change. To keep in touch with people you will need a means of communication. There are many options:

newsletter, bulletins, websites, and Facebook or Twitter are all effective channels which can provide information for the community and a way for the community to engage and give feedback.

Example newsletter



The Newsletter of Blaen Brân
Community Woodland

Snow business

The woodland looked lovely over Christmas and the new year covered as it was in a blanket of snow. Many people enjoyed walking and playing in the snow - myself included!

Unfortunately, snow can also be a problem in woods as the weight of snow can cause branches to break or even whole trees to fall. This is of course a perfectly natural occurrence and rotten fallen branches are an essential part of the woodland's ecosystem. However it can be a problem if they fall on tracks or even on people or animals. Fortunately, we seem to have got off lightly. There were some broken off branches on the track just above the wood but apart from that, very little damage seems to have been done.



Blaen Brân woodlands in the recent snow

Signs of the times

You may have noticed some signs and symbols appear on trees and gates in the woodland recently. They have been put there to waymark trails. Some trails are historic, some are nature trails and some are either specifically trails for horses or for horses not to use. This is not to restrict people purely to the tracks and way-marked trails but to inform everyone where some specific sites of interest are, to make people aware that horses do use certain parts of the wood and to safeguard the surface of some of the tracks. Tell us what you think.

From the top, signs for nature trail, historic trail and the direction of the trail.

If you go down to the woods today

You're sure of a big surprise and the surprise is how much more wildlife there is now. A naturalist who visited last summer found over 120 species of plant, 14 of which were recognized as being rare or indicators of good habitat quality. There are certainly more birds in the woods now and many of us have enjoyed watching a family of buzzards who have taken up residence in the area.

So the question is, what have you seen in the woods? Let us know by emailing us at fromthewood@vfemail.net and we can compile a survey of the many different birds, insects, mammals and other wildlife we have. Photographs would be very welcome too although we don't guarantee being able to identify anything beyond the obvious - we're amateurs too!



A lizard sunning itself on a pipe last year

If you visit the area by car please park in the bus terminus, below the Siloam Chapel, and not in The Square.



Blaen Brân Community Woodland is a registered charity, no. 1120995



What's On

Every Sunday and Wednesday a working party doing two hours maintenance in the woods. Meet by Ebenezer Chapel at 10 a.m. Contact John 01633 866287 for more details.
Stonewall building 1st Sunday in the month. Contact Rob on 01633 860741 for details.

Sunday 28th March Inaugural tree planting in the arboretum. Meet by Ebenezer Chapel at 10 a.m. Contact John 01633 866287 for more details or help with transport

Sunday 11th April Walk the new trails in the wood. Meet by Ebenezer Chapel at 10 a.m. Contact David 01633 870166 for more details

Sunday May 15th A chance to find out about the industrial history of the area from local expert Roy Dixon. Meet by Ebenezer Chapel at 10 a.m. Contact Roy on 01633 766659 for more details

For all details of events

Come visit our website

www.blaenbran.org.uk

With thanks to Blaen Brân Community Woodland

There is no one model for community engagement but getting to know your community and having a clear, honest and open relationship with them is a vital aspect that helps define a *community-led woodland group*, foster participation and create a community-based identity for your woodland and activities.

The right mix: community and culture



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr

This Advisory Note has been prepared for Llais y Goedwig by Roger Davies of Golygfa Gwydyr and David Williams of Blaen Brân Community Woodland.

Llais y Goedwig is a voluntary association of community woodland groups that formed in November 2009 to provide a voice for community woodlands. We want to share experiences, support each other and enhance local woodlands to benefit the people of Wales. These are a growing series of Advisory Notes that focus on different aspects that we hope will be useful to our members and others interested in community woodlands in Wales.

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Inviting in the neighbours



Photo: Zena Wilmot