

Advisory Note 7

An Introduction to Community Woodland Groups in Wales

Woodlands of all sizes, forms, characters and histories are scattered across the landscape of Wales, from ancient gorge woodlands barely touched by man to the regimented lines of planted conifers. Many are potentially suitable for management by the local community, but how do you go about getting involved? This Advisory Note sets out some basic ideas and approaches for getting your community actively involved in managing the woodlands around you.

What are Community Woodland groups?

Community Woodland groups can take many different forms and there is really no set definition of what a community woodland group is or how it should be other than it should be fit for purpose. It is important to make the distinction between:

- The Woodland Group, how it is governed, what form it takes, how it makes decisions and how its membership functions.
- The woodland itself – what the objectives for the management are, how they will be achieved, how the woodland will be used and how its benefits will be shared.

This guidance note concentrates mostly on the former, the nature of community woodland groups. The management of woodlands themselves is well covered by Advisory Notes AN 2, AN 3 and AN 4 available from Llais y Goedwig, as well as publications from The Forestry Commission, the Woodland Trust and many others. In practice, the group and the needs of the woodland will influence each other and indeed successful woodland groups are those whose governance structure is appropriate for the woodland and its management.

It is however worth being clear on the distinction between woodland and group as two very different groups could manage similar woodlands in the same way and a single group could manage two or more woodlands in a very different manner.



Photo: GE

Principles of a community woodland group

While the form and function of Community Woodland groups can be varied, there are perhaps two fundamental shared principles that we can use to define such groups:

- The objectives for shaping the woodland through its management are made by a group of people with an interest in that woodland.
- The benefits arising from the management of the woodland are shared with the local community

It is these two factors that separate community woodlands from those managed directly by a landowner or tenant.

Determining the most suitable form for a group

A key consideration determining the function of a group is the groups status in relation to the woodland:

- *Owner* – the group owns the woodland
- *Occupier* – the group leases the land from another landowner
- *Co-manager* – the group undertakes management according to a plan drawn up by both group and landowner
- *Contractor* – the group undertakes management of the woodlands, to a plan determined by the landowner
- *Advisor* – the group provides input into management decisions made by the landowner
- *Consultee*- the group has an opportunity to comment on the landowners management plan

This relationship between group and woodland will often determine the form that the group will take. In addition, the aims and objectives of a group will determine the most appropriate structure. For example, a group primarily aiming to work with the owners to enhance public access to a woodland may only need to operate as an *association* (e.g. a 'Friends of...' group), one where the activities are purely for social benefit could become a *charity*, whereas a group aiming to create a sustainable supply of timber may favour a *cooperative* or *community interest company*. (Ref Llais y Goedwig Advisory Note – AN6 Governance & structures)

Governance structure and legal status of a group

It is beyond the scope of this advisory note to fully explore all the different types of groups that are recognized in UK law. Some different types of groups are outlined below, along with links to find out more.

Constituted Groups are groups with members that have agreed a constitution and an elected a management committee usually comprised of a Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. This is the minimum need to set up a bank account and meet the requirements of many grant providers.

www.communitygroup.co.uk

Co-operative businesses are owned and run by and for their members, whether they are customers, workers or residents. As well as giving members an equal say and share of the profits, co-operatives act together to build a better world.

www.uk.coop/what-co-operative

Community Interest Companies - (CICs) are private limited companies, with special additional features, created for the use of people who want to conduct a business or other activity for community benefit, and not purely for private advantage. This is achieved by a "community interest test" and "asset lock", which ensure that the CIC is established for community benefit and the assets and profits are dedicated to these purposes. Registration of a company as a CIC has to be approved by the Regulator who also has a continuing monitoring and enforcement role.

www.bis.gov.uk/cicregulator

Charity - Charities are voluntary organisations which benefit the public in a way the law says is charitable. They are governed by Trustees that undertake legal responsibilities in respect of how the charity operates.

www.charity-commission.gov.uk/

Other types of groups -

Residents or Tenants Associations may be involved in woodland and greenspaces around both private and council housing estates.

Community Councils may own or purchase land which they manage directly or by way of a sub-committee.

Industrial and Provident Societies An industrial and provident society is an organisation conducting an industry, business or trade, either as a co-operative or for the benefit of the community

Creating a community woodland group



Photo: GE

Just as there is no set model for a woodland group there is no fixed process for creating one. The many existing woodland groups around Wales each have a unique story about how they formed and how they may have evolved over time. However, there are two broad routes which led to the formation of groups;

- those that formed to take over management of a specific woodland
- those that formed to deliver benefits from whatever woodlands may become available

Groups formed to manage specific woodlands

Many groups have started with the specific aim of taking over management of a particular woodland. Some examples may be:

- A Natural Resources Wales site where the community wishes to be involved in management
- Private land that has come up for sale and the community group has been created to purchase the woodland.
- Woodland remaining under private or third sector (e.g. Woodland Trust) ownership with the group seeking to manage the site in partnership with the owner.

Groups focused on specific sites can form in response to threats – ‘we need to intervene to prevent ‘our’ woodland from being destroyed or access being lost’ or for perceived benefits ‘the woodland has become available– think of all the great things we could do if the community could manage it’. What motivates the initial group to form, protection or opportunity can often determine it’s form, initial objectives and subsequent development.

Groups to deliver benefits

These are groups who form to take on woodland management to provide specific benefits. Examples are:

- A group wish to provide training in woodland skills
- Community members wanting a source of wood fuel
- Those wanting to use woodlands as a venue for educational activity such as Forest Schools.
- Those seeking improved access to woodlands for recreational use for walkers, mountain bikers & horseriders.
- A cooperative who wish to harvest timber from woodlands to support their businesses

How do we start one up?

Starting a new group from scratch can seem like a big task but try to remain focused on one stage at a time. It is easy to suddenly start discussing the details of managing a particular woodland, where paths should go, is a car park needed etc – these are decisions to be made once the group is formed. *(See also Llais y Goedwig Advisory Note AN1 – Getting to know your community)*

Get people together - to assess whether there is enough appetite to create a group. Often best to bring together a few people who have indicated an interest to organize a much wider meeting or get together where the whole community can bring ideas, suggestions and knowledge into the process.

Develop aims of the group - what it will be about, who it will be for and how you will govern yourselves.

Constitution & structure – determined by what your group wants to do, its worth investigating several structures before deciding on the best one for you

Finding land to work on – this is detailed in the next section



Photo: GE

Finding Land to work on

If your group has been created around a specific woodland then this stage is easy! Otherwise you may wish to consider approaching others who may own land.

Local Authorities

Many local authorities own significant land area include some woodlands. There may be wooded parts of parks and Local Nature Reserves, woodlands around schools and council offices, woodlands around housing and industrial estates and woodland on tenanted farmland.

Wildlife Trusts, The National Trust & The Woodland Trust

All three of these charities own significant areas of woodland and they all seek to involve local communities in their work. There may be other opportunities on land owned by charitable bodies such as the Canal & River Trust.

Natural Resources Wales

This body formed in 2013 out of the Countryside Council for Wales, the Environment Agency Wales and the Forestry Commission Wales. The Welsh Government owns a significant forestry estate that was managed by the Forestry Commission and has a number of woodlands that are now managed by local communities. The Countryside Council for Wales' land holdings were mostly National Nature Reserves, including some magnificent woodlands. These sites often require quite specialized management, but there is certainly scope for communities to assist and contribute where management work is appropriate.

Private land

There is always the potential to manage land under private ownership. As well as numerous woodlands on farms, businesses, large hotels, private estates, residential homes and many others may own wooded land as part of their premises.

Finding land to buy or lease

As well as local knowledge it may be worth registering an interest with local land agents with a requirement of the type, size and cost of a woodland you may potentially be able to purchase. A search of the internet will lead you to some national agents that specialize in woodland sales, which you can check periodically or again register an interest in woodland coming on to the market in your area.



Photo: GE

What do we need to know?

Be clear about the objectives of the group

Having settled on a constitution and your governance structure your group should have a clear set of objectives regarding what you as a group wants to achieve. In the early days of the group, it is often sensible to focus on one or two objectives, determined by your priorities and achieve them well before bringing in work toward other objectives.

Be clear about the objective for the woodland (management plan)

The process of developing the woodland management plan will highlight the objectives for the woodland. These may well not be the primary objectives of the group, but it is essential to focus on making sure that the woodland priorities are tackled.

An example: A woodland group purchases a woodland with the primary objective of creating a sustainable supply of wood fuel. However, the woodland boundary fences and access tracks are in a poor condition. In the first year, it is possible that no wood fuel production will take place as the priority is to make good the boundary and improve the access. This ultimately will benefit the wood fuel production by protecting new growth from wandering livestock and creating easy routes to extract the timber.

Be clear about your resources

Your objectives are critical to keeping your group on track but they are only half the story. Without the resources to deliver your objectives they exist only as ideas.

- *People* – every community group needs people. People run the group, provide ideas, provide support and knowledge and people benefit from the work the group does. People are also members of other groups and have other interests creating a much wider community with which to engage.

- *Skills* – people also bring skills that they may be able to use for the groups benefit. While forestry skills are clearly important, groups will always benefit from a range of skills such as IT, creative writing, accounting, teaching, youth work, administration and arts. Local knowledge is often the single most important skill that your group members can possess!
- *Time* – What people bring is time to devote to the group. Having a clear idea of how much time people can put it is essential to plan how to use this valuable resource wisely.
- *Money* – Every group needs money to cover its running costs like insurance, fuel and tools, along with money to deliver specific projects.



Photo: GE

Sources of funding

There are numerous ways to generate money. Some of these include:

- *Subscription* – members of the group could pay an annual fee as with many sports or hobbies clubs.
- *Management agreements* – if managing woodland on behalf of others, an annual payment could be negotiated to contribute towards the management.
- *Glastir* – the Welsh Government's funding scheme for agriculture and forestry can pay significant sums towards management work.

- *Community shares* – can be offered by groups constituted as an Industrial & Provident Society, this is often used to fund capital investments including land purchases
- *Grant sources* – there are numerous sources of grant funding that will usually pay for specific project works. (*ref funding part of Llyg website*)
- *Trading* – selling timber and firewood can generate income
- *Charges* – a fee to use the woodland for specific activities, for example a mountain bike club

Other considerations

Insurance and permissions

Insurance is essential to any group and it needs to cover potentially both the members of the group and third parties i.e. anyone on the land the group owns or leases. Public Liability insurance should cover all activities that are permitted for the public on a site and care should be taken to ensure that any hazards are accounted for. Insurance to cover the groups working likewise needs to include cover for using chainsaws, chippers or other machinery. Contractors working on your site should be able to produce insurance that covers both the contractors and any members of the public.

Legal responsibilities

Owning and leasing land brings a whole raft of responsibilities. These need to be clearly identified and the resources found to ensure they can be successfully covered by the group. If these responsibilities are not covered it can cause problems in the future as no group can avoid statutory responsibilities as a landowner.

Environmental and heritage considerations

Wales contains outstanding natural habitats, wild species and archaeology, many of which are afforded legal protection.

The following are legal protections potentially found in Wales:

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest SSSIs
- Special Areas of Conservation SACs
- Special Protection Area SPAs
- Protected Species
- National Nature Reserves NNRs
- Local Nature Reserves LNRs
- Wildlife Sites/ Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation
- Tree Preservation Orders TPOs
- Conservation Areas
- Listed Buildings
- Scheduled Ancient Monuments SAMs



Photo: GE

While the list above may seem quite daunting, it would be rare for a single site to contain more than a few of the designations above. For groups owning land, the presence of such designation should be known before purchase, though of course historic features can still be newly found and protected species move onto sites. Fortunately it should be relatively straightforward to find out if any of these protections occur on a particular woodland. The following organisations should be able to confirm the presence of designated areas and some may well provide this information on their website:

- **Local Planning Authority** – Tree Preservation Orders, Conservation area, Local Nature Reserves, Wildlife Sites, listed buildings, Rights of Way.
- **CADW** – Scheduled Ancient Monuments
- **Natural Resources Wales and Local Biological Records Centres**– SSSIs, SACs, SPAs, protected species

How do we keep our group running?

Avoiding burnout

When many groups have started out it has often been down to the energy and enthusiasm of a few members who take on the extra responsibilities. This can become a significant commitment, so don't be afraid to take breaks over the year. It's much better to keep the group going over the long term than to rush to complete multiple projects which can take a huge amount of time and impact on people's personal lives. This is especially true when there are challenges to overcome or you experience setbacks such as an unsuccessful grant bid.

Share the work

It can often become an assumption that the committee are the only members of the group able to deliver work on the group's behalf. Most constitutions will allow the management committee to co-opt other members to help drive forward specific projects. This not only shares the load but helps others to feel part of the group and allows the group to drive forward several projects without there being too much for one person to cope with.

Business plans

This does not need to be as grand as it sounds! List all your annual costs and annual income. This forms the basis of how much you need each year to cover your costs and keep your group operating. Then list yearly project costs and one-off income. You will need to do this to prepare a Treasurers report or accounts for the group and most grant providers will want to see that you have the funds to be a secure investment for their grant aid and that you can account for it in a proper fashion. Having a good grip on your finances, planning ahead and being ready to take on new funding opportunities are essential to keep groups running.

Involving your community

While your group might start with a good number of people involved, you should continually seek to engage new members from your community.

Some people who used to be involved may not be able to maintain that over time, and others who were unable to be involved might now be able to devote more time and energy to help, new people move into the area and others might be suddenly inspired by seeing what your group has achieved. There will always be a role for new people to get involved and broaden the scope of your group with new ideas and activities.

Evolution

Change can be good and many groups evolve over time, even into quite different groups from how they were originally envisaged. Don't be afraid to move your group forward and adapt to new members and new opportunities. Funding priorities, policy frameworks and governments change and with that change comes new opportunities and sometimes sadly losses of support your group may have previously enjoyed. Successful management of woodlands must be for the long term and so successful woodland groups are ones that can adapt and grow along with the woods they manage.

Celebrate and take stock

Take the time to look back at what you have achieved and learn from any challenges you have encountered and check that you are still focused on your objectives. But above all, remember that getting involved in woodlands should be fun and rewarding, so take the time to have social events and celebrations!

This advisory note has just taken an overview of the most common questions and concerns that a developing group may have. Often the best way to find out is to talk to others who have made the same journey – they are usually very ready to share the highs and the lows!



Useful resources and reading

There is a lot of information available - and some Llais y Goedwig publications have been referenced that go into more detail on different aspects of community woodlands.

Visit www.llaisygoedwig.org.uk for other advisory notes examining different topics, as well a variety of other resources including community woodland group case studies, and briefing notes about the work of Llais y Goedwig.

There are a variety of different sources of information out there, and a few useful links are outlined below:

Weblinks

- Wildlife Trusts Wales - wildlifetrustswales.org
- Local Records Centres Wales lrcwales.org.uk
- National Resources Wales naturalresourceswales.gov.uk
- National Trust nationaltrust.org.uk
- Canal and River Trust canalrivertrust.org.uk
- Woodland Trust woodlandtrust.org.uk

Remember – note the steps on your journey as a community woodland, because there will be others who follow on who are interested in learning from your experience!

This Advisory Note has been prepared for Llais y Goedwig by Gareth Ellis from The Green Valleys Community Interest Company.

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. This resource is part of a growing series that we hope will be useful to our members, and others interested in community woodlands in Wales.

Contact us:

Llais y Goedwig
Unit 6, Dyfi Eco Park, Machynlleth, Powys
SY20 8AX
Tel: 0845 456 0342
www.llaisygoedwig.org.uk

