

## Advisory Note 9 Your Woodlands as a resource for the Arts

This Advisory Note is about putting together an arts event in your local woodlands. It is based on the experiences of Golygfa Gwydyr who have run the Caerdroia Theatre in the Gwydyr Forest for over six years. This note outlines what needs to be considered when developing an idea, approaches to community engagement, and the practicalities of running an event in the forest. An example of a typical Golygfa Gwydyr event is outlined so you can see how we produce an event.

Our natural environment can form a dramatic backdrop to any arts event. It has presence (spiritual, cultural and historical) and context (to landscape, community and time). We are part of our environment and our environment is part of us, so there is a natural affinity between our creative endeavours and our landscape. Running an arts event in the woodlands can develop this relationship. It can be challenging but there is no greater reward to be had than reconnecting people to their environment; and the arts can do this.

### First things first

Remember this should be a community event and you cannot do it alone so you need to think about sharing your ideas and getting support. In that context you should address the following:

You are thinking of holding an arts event in your woodlands. Why? The answer may be as clear as day to you but be precise so you can describe what you want to do, and what you want to achieve, to others. For example, is your motive profit to reinvest in other community activities, is your community rich in artistic skills with no means of outlet, or are you trying to build a stronger sense of community and its culture?



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr

The answers, of course, will be rooted in your community. There may be a natural outpouring of dramatic art, paintings, sculpture or a strong spiritual focus already present. If you can work with existing skills or preferences of your community then things will be much easier. If you have to manufacture an artistic event that is alien or unfamiliar to local people then you will have a much harder task ahead of you.

With the 'why' and the 'what' known you can now explore how your woodlands can be a resource for your event, and how it will enhance and facilitate what you are trying to achieve. At its simplest your woodland is a backdrop but you should be looking to exploit much more: individual and community relationship with your woodland, its sense of place, the natural environment enhancing spirituality and healing, and, of course, its outside, wild, soft and a contrast with more familiar urban environs.

## Engaging your community



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr

If you have not been developing your initial ideas with your community then you now need to do this. If you are already a Community Woodland Group then you will have established links and communication channels available for community engagement. If not you will need to locate an existing community based organisation to act as a conduit for your ideas and a mechanism to bring people together.

The basic principles of community engagement revolve around community ownership and control. Without these support can quickly fade away and problems arise later on, when you least need them. So you need to be able to pitch a loosely framed idea – using the woodland for an arts event – whilst asking for input into what you wish to do, where and when, and the all-important hands-on support you will need to pull this together.

This is an arts event so you want to avoid formal and unfriendly meetings. Think about work shopping your idea in an unthreatening location, community hall or pub. Make it fun and interesting being careful to be inclusive, some people are very shy and many artists fall into this category. You may also have people with special needs or children wishing to participate so try to enable this from the outset.

Try to avoid writing a twenty page outline proposal and giving this out. Think about visual and interactive ways of making the proposal and developing ideas. Write up suggestions and share them back, clarifying and developing ideas and deciding what to work on and what to drop with your group.

What you are aiming at is a consensus of ideas, ways and means and next steps. You will need people to organise, communicate, build, transport and maybe get funding, so try to identify who is doing what. Remember to be open and willing to change, this is a community project and there will be conflicting ideas. If your community feel able to participate, and have a sense of shared ownership, then you will have a better outcome. They are the reason you are doing this so if you are a frustrated artist looking for an audience stop right now.

## Practicalities

You have agreed the type of event and where and when it will take place. Now you have to cover some basic administration to ensure that you can do this in a safe and timely way.

- **The woodland**

Whether you own, lease or operate your woodland under a Community Management Agreement, you will need to check that you have the right to run an event in that place. There may be restrictions on noise, volume of traffic, playing live music, use of fire which may be recorded in the deeds, lease agreement, CMA or sites with SSSI and other environmental protection features.

For example, the Golygfa Gwydyr site is operated under a CMA which does not allow for the use of fire. Our site is within a plantation pine forest so you can appreciate the risk and restriction. However, fire is a potent symbolic tool and many actors want to use it as part of their performance. We have to develop alternative solutions in each case steering the actor away from physical fire without loss of performance impact (note: the Forestry Commission Wales have reviewed the use of fire so consult your local Natural Resources Wales office).

Additionally, for Welsh Government owned woodlands, the current mechanism for community engagement is outlined in the *Woodlands and You* strategy, see: [naturalresourceswales.gov.uk](http://naturalresourceswales.gov.uk)

- **The audience**

You need to do your sums. How many people do you expect to come? You have to plan for specific numbers, which can be difficult for more prolonged or open events, so you can cost the event and ticketing, and plan your site effectively. Where will they arrive, are they seated, where are the toilets?

Remember you have a duty of care for your audience and, importantly, they may be paying for entertainment so you need to look after them informing them where to be and what to expect, e.g. Golygfa Gwydyr distributes notes on suitable clothing and footwear with the tickets, preparing people for wet ground, rain, wind and darkness.

As a CWG you should already have third party indemnity insurance. Is this enough to cover the numbers proposed? How will your audience get to the site? Most woodland sites are not on public transport routes so transport may need to be laid on.

The Golygfa Gwydyr site is two miles into the Gwydyr Forest so we have our own minibus to transport people to the site. This means that we can deliver 16 people at a time so we need to plan our performances on this basis, as well as negotiate car parking spaces from surrounding land owners. Our CMA does not allow us to use the forestry track as a public highway so we cannot let private vehicles enter the forest. Vehicles requiring access for site work are allowed but their number plates have to be registered with the local forestry office.

- **The players/volunteers**

Your event may require people to participate in different ways, e.g. to act, to demonstrate, and to steward. If these people are volunteers then they will be covered by your third party insurances but if you are paying them for services then they will not.

If your event participants are required for prolonged periods then you need to think of their comforts, including food and warmth (remember we are in Wales!). During our last performance Golygfa Gwydyr volunteers clocked up over 808 volunteers hours on site management, stewarding and performing. Seven volunteers built and managed the site and 30 acted so you can see that, for this two day event, there was significant volunteer input.

- **Emergencies**

You will have to complete some sort of risk assessment (you may be required to do this under a CMA or funding arrangement) so you will need to have emergency procedures identified and understood. Where are the exits and congregation points? Who is identified as the first aid officer and where is the first aid kit? Also remember that you may consider the woodland a safe place to be but a parent of a young child may see this differently, so you need to be sympathetic to their 'line of sight' needs and assurances that their child will not wander off and be lost in the woods!

The Golygfa Gwydyr site is two miles into the forest, it takes 10 minutes to drive and there is no clear area for an air ambulance to land. To mitigate this we always have more than one first aider on site, mobile phones (check your reception) and vehicles nearby for emergency evacuation. A site grid reference and directions to the forestry access gate are also on hand to direct emergency services.



## Funding

If you are running a one-off small-scale event then you may not need much and can raise what you need locally. Otherwise you need to put together a business plan, which could include sales from ticketing, or an application for funding, or, more likely, a combination of both. This is where you will need projected audience numbers and running costs (transport, catering, staff) and your rights and permissions sorted (funders will need this).

Your local authority is a good first place to find funding support; they will often support community events and can be particularly keen if the events will attract visitors to the area.

The Arts Council Wales ([www.artswales.org.uk](http://www.artswales.org.uk)) and Noson Allan ([www.nightout.org.uk](http://www.nightout.org.uk)) aim to promote arts and entertainment in Wales and are very supportive, while Literature Wales ([www.literaturewales.org](http://www.literaturewales.org)) may be able to support literature events.

If you are in rural Wales and are building a long-term event resource, then the Rural Development Plan for your county may be supportive. There is also Awards for all Wales (Lottery, see [www.awardsforall.org.uk](http://www.awardsforall.org.uk)), Communities First/Next and the National Parks, depending on your location.

## A typical Golygfa Gwydyr event

We established the Caerdroia site in 2006 with funding from Cyd Coed. It is a one-mile labyrinth path along which the audience walks whilst the performers act at specific locations.

The Caerdroia is the largest open air labyrinth in Europe covering a two acre site. During the year volunteers maintain the site so preparing the site for performances is mainly about building specific 'stages' to the requirements of actors (although with two very wet years site maintenance and drainage has now become a big issue).

We begin with local workshops to develop themes and build a framework or context for the performance. During this time we recruit as many volunteers as possible and begin the marketing of the event.

North Wales is rich in cultural context on which to base a performance theme, e.g. Welsh princess, poetry and song, giants in the Ogwen valley, Arthurian legend, the Mabinogi. Our last performance, in November 2012, had the theme 'Conversations'. Actors chose how to interpret this in a set piece (or basis for improvisation) and how they would engage with the audience, e.g. some included the audience as part of the conversation, others acted out a scene to them, and others distributed props for a full-on interaction.

On this occasion there was no overall story binding all performances but we have taken this approach in the past, e.g. we have done 'rites of passage' performances, life-passage (birth to death but nobody actually dies!) and plays (Don Quixote).



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr

When the actors are familiar with the theme and have developed some ideas we all walk the labyrinth and performers decide where they want to position themselves depending on their scene (dark cover woodland, open space, mystical setting, acoustic resonance).

Many of our performances cover dusk and night so lighting and safety are major considerations. This may seem an additional unnecessary risk to take but consider the juxtaposition for many urban dwellers with being deep in a forest at night. The sensations that come to them (excitement, anticipation, fear, vulnerability) become a major part of the experience. We build on this and many report transformational and exhilarating experiences after our events.

With the performers settled any props are built and costumes made (everything second hand or recycled) and site safety checks made. In general we aim to have the audience go around the labyrinth one at a time as this really enhances a personal experience. Much of the time individuals are completely alone on the path and when they encounter the performers. This is when they reflect on the performances, theme and environment and generally relate these things to their own lives and experiences. At this point the individual, the woodland and the theme are connected.



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr

The audience know where to arrive for the minibus through pre-booking and ticketing. The performance usually starts when on the bus. Poetry is read, scenes are set and the audience travel into the dense forest moving further from the familiar to the unfamiliar. When they arrive at the site they are ready and willing to participate. Their adventure begins.

It can take up to an hour to walk the path. The minibus brings up 16 people at a time and at some stage it takes back 16 at a time. This is one way we monitor numbers in the forest and progress of audience that day, e.g. we can typically take around 60 people around on one evening so numbers are always low and manageable, but so is the potential income.



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr

On the journey out of the forest we ask for audience feedback. At the last event we had the local film club interview people as they were waiting for the minibus so we have feedback captured on film. It is crucial to get as much feedback as possible, your future business plan and funders will need this and you will need to learn from things that may not have gone so well.

#### **Some comments from 'Conversations'**

*'An absolutely brilliant introduction to the labyrinth'*

*'We will be happy to return. Loved the integration of music within the journey – very effective!'*

*'Amazing journey – want another one soon! :)'*

*'Bendigedig. Beautiful North Walian eve. Thanks!'*

*'Magical, very entertaining + spooky + enjoyable :)!'*

## The figures for 'Conversations'

'Conversations' was a two day event with preparatory and take-down work for weeks before and after. The audience amounted to 115 individuals. Seven volunteers help with site preparation, four with the film crew and 30 performers so 41 volunteers helped over the period clocking up 808 volunteers hours (note, at current WEFO rates of £6.08 p/h that is £4,948 of in-kind match funding).

We had funding support from Voluntary Arts Wales, Menter Iaith Conwy, Conwy County Council and Goleuo (funding via the RDP Conwy to stimulate evening entertainment enterprise). The total funding amounted to £2,500 plus £180 income from ticketing at £5 per head (we could only charge for one evening as Goleuo covered the ticket costs of the second). As you can see income from ticketing is just over 7% of the total cost which works with income and grant but would not be sufficient on a full cost recovery basis. When planning an arts event you need to be realistic with costs and potential income.

After the main event there is a big clean up taking the site back to its forest state. I cannot under estimate the effort required here. People may have already participated for a number of days/weeks and they will be tired, as will you. Many items will be beyond rescue (wet and damp conditions) so trips to the local tip may be needed and transport required (or a skip). All ticket revenues need to be accounted for and a review undertaken with audience, performers and organisers. A formal report may be required by funders but always do this anyway, it informs the future as well as your community. You may want to do it all again!



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr

This Advisory Note has been prepared for Llais y Goedwig by Roger Davies of Golygfa Gwydyr.

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](http://www.llaisygoedwig.org.uk)

