

# Sustainable local firewood: Llangattock Community Woodlands

This case study charts the development of a small community woodland group in Llangattock, in the heart of the Brecon Beacons National Park. The group is unusual in that it grew out of a desire to find a sustainable local source of quality woodfuel for the community – rather than, as is usually the case, emerging out of a need to manage an existing community woodland asset.

As a result, the group has had to think differently: with no obvious access to local woodland at the outset, their key challenge has been finding land to manage. Thanks to innovative thinking and a proactive approach, they now manage three small woodlands – 20 acres in total – for three different landowners, and are working towards becoming fully sustainable.

Their experience shows that landowners are receptive to a voluntary group with a strong community ethos and commitment to sustainable practices. It also shows that small woodlands, well managed, can become a viable source of sustainable wood fuel.

Establishing credibility, developing good communication, and adopting a professional approach to partnerships have all been important in their success. But there have been some key experiences along the way, and those relating to sourcing woodland, training and tools & equipment are related here. The case study also looks at the experience of finding funding and generating sustainable income, developing membership, and the importance of health & safety as key parts of the sustainable puzzle.

## How it all began

In early 2008 the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (BBNPA) applied for a place in NESTA's Big Green Challenge – a £1m competition designed to stimulate and support community-led responses to climate change. BBNPA came up with a raft of imaginative initiatives for reducing CO2 emissions, ranging from micro-hydro to community woodlands. Later that year they were selected as one of 10 finalists to take part in the 12-month challenge, and through a series of public meetings set about sharing their ideas with communities across the Park region. Here in Llangattock, these ideas really struck a chord

and a small number of us decided to get together to further investigate the idea of community woodlands.



## The situation in Llangattock

Llangattock is a rural Welsh community of some 420 homes spread over five distinct areas across two sides of a valley. The heart of the village is served by mains gas, with most of the outlying homes and farms using either oil or LPG for heating. That said, many people also use wood (open fires, ranges or wood-burning stoves) to supplement their heating.

The village is surrounded by small tracts of native broadleaf woodland – mostly hazel, ash, beech and oak, with some sycamore. Almost all of this is privately owned and while there is evidence of former coppicing activity, virtually all of it is now unmanaged. Some woodfuel is available locally – from farmers, hedgelayers etc – but quality is hit and miss.

Common complaints included:

- poorly seasoned
- damp from being stored outside or uncovered

- poor quality wood varieties (i.e. low calorific value for burning)
- not 'as described' – eg 'hardwood' turns out to be a mix of soft and hardwood, or '50:50 mix' turns out to be mostly softwood
- price comparison difficult as what constitutes a 'load' varies from supplier to supplier

More reliable suppliers tend to be a significant distance away, adding to the cost per load – and the carbon footprint. It's also hard to establish whether the wood is from sustainable sources.

To us, it just didn't make sense that we were surrounded by high-quality woodfuel, but that this precious resource was going to waste due to:

- landowners not understanding that woodlands benefit from active management
- perceived lack of market for woodfuel and other woodland products
- the economics of harvesting and processing not being considered viable.

## Next steps

We decided we wanted to:

- set up a volunteer group
- find a local woodland to manage primarily for woodfuel
- reward volunteers with an allocation of the woodfuel we harvest (based on volunteer hours)
- sell surplus woodfuel to the community to cover our costs and help us achieve our goal of becoming sustainable

Getting to this point was pretty easy, but the next step required some serious decisions:

Did we need a formal entity and structure?

We decided YES. There were some compelling reasons as it is essential to:

- establish our credibility – within the local community, with landowners and also with funders.
- taking out group insurance
- setting up a bank account

But as a small group with just the germ of an idea, we wanted to keep things low-key, so we set up as a simple constituted group with a designated chairperson, treasurer and secretary to fulfil basic functions and provide day-to-day management.

Having a constitution allowed us to formally state our aims (again, important for establishing our credibility), and also provided us with a basic legal framework. With the exception of our aims, we decided not to reinvent the wheel and based our constitution on an off-the-peg solution we found online. This ensured we covered off important points such as equality, anti-discrimination and data protection statements. But we did still have some full and frank discussions around various points, including:

- Should members pay a joining or subscription fee? Our decision was NO – on the basis that we didn't want money to be a bar to people joining, but also, on a more pragmatic note, to keep admin to a minimum.
- Should membership be open only to Llangattock residents? Our decision was NO – anyone can join, and this has served us well. One of our regulars lives and works in Cumbria, but joins us when he visits his parents, who live locally.
- Should we allow children? Our decision was YES. Our insurers impose an age limit of 6 and require parental supervision up to 9 and adult supervision over this age, but in general allowing families has worked well. We're hoping to team up with the Scouts as well.

There were other important decisions too, namely:

- Should we set up a bank account and apply for funding to get the group going? We decided YES – based largely by our need to ensure we had proper insurance cover for our volunteers.
- Did we need expert input? We decided YES – to provide training and advice, and help us source woodland to manage.

## Finding a woodland

Many woodland groups come into being because there's a community-owned or local wood that needs managing. Our group started from the opposite premise: we had a strong desire to manage woodland, but no obvious access to local woodland. So our key challenge was finding land to manage. Our first crucial step in the process was to link up with the BBNPA's Biodiversity Officer, Gareth Ellis, who was also part of the Park's Big Green Challenge team. Gareth has a degree in woodland management, great contacts and plenty of practical knowledge and experience, and with his help we began exploring local options in spring/summer 2009.

We considered a number of woodlands:-

## Which wood?



**Bluebell Wood, Crickhowell** – a large wood above neighbouring village belonging to the Woodland Trust (WT). We heard through the grapevine that the WT was looking for a community group to take on the management. Option discarded, partly because WT was reluctant to team up with a group without an established track record, but also because the site was: too large for our small group; very popular with the public, so we felt active management (especially thinning and felling) would raise a raft of tricky PR issues; a major powerline running through site and an ancient monument on site

**Hillside wood, Llangattock** – a small private woodland, untouched for many years. We considered applying for grants/funding to try to buy this land. Option discarded, because: we couldn't trace the owners; we didn't want the responsibility of ownership at such an early stage and issues with local landowners viewing the land as commonland and using it for grazing stock

**Gypsy wood, Llangattock** – a very small strip of woodland along Hillside Road, unmanaged. Option pursued because: we understood this land was community common land, under Parks management; small, but a good public showcase for the group, plus potential for coppice planting; site was being used by flytippers; obvious activity on the site would reduce incidence of flytipping. Option subsequently discarded because the majority of the site was found to be under private ownership.

**Canalside woods, Llangattock** – owned by British Waterways; occasional felling to keep path and canal clear, but otherwise unmanaged. Option pursued because: site is fairly small (albeit overrun with rhododendron and laurel and snarled up with windblown trees when we started); site is conveniently located: the Monmouthshire & Brecon canal runs right through the centre of the village, so the site is easy for people to get to, plus a lot of

people pass by the wood, which would help publicise the group and draw in more volunteers. Gareth knew that British Waterways had no capacity to actively manage the wood but was looking for ways to actively engage local communities with the canal and to open up public access to land under their ownership. ***This presented a prime opportunity to develop a mutually beneficial relationship.***

**Dan-y-Graig woods, Gilwern** – private woodland backing on to Monmouthshire & Brecon canal, unmanaged. Owner heard about our group thanks to a chance conversation with another member of the BBNPA's Big Green Challenge team. Option pursued because: owner wanted the wood managing for biodiversity and safety<sup>1</sup> and was keen to work with a community group to achieve this; the woodland had potential to be very productive (owner has a small personal woodfuel requirement, but no ambition to develop the wood commercially); this is an interesting site with good mix of tree varieties and ages and potential for additional planting.. ***This presented a prime opportunity to develop a mutually beneficial relationship***

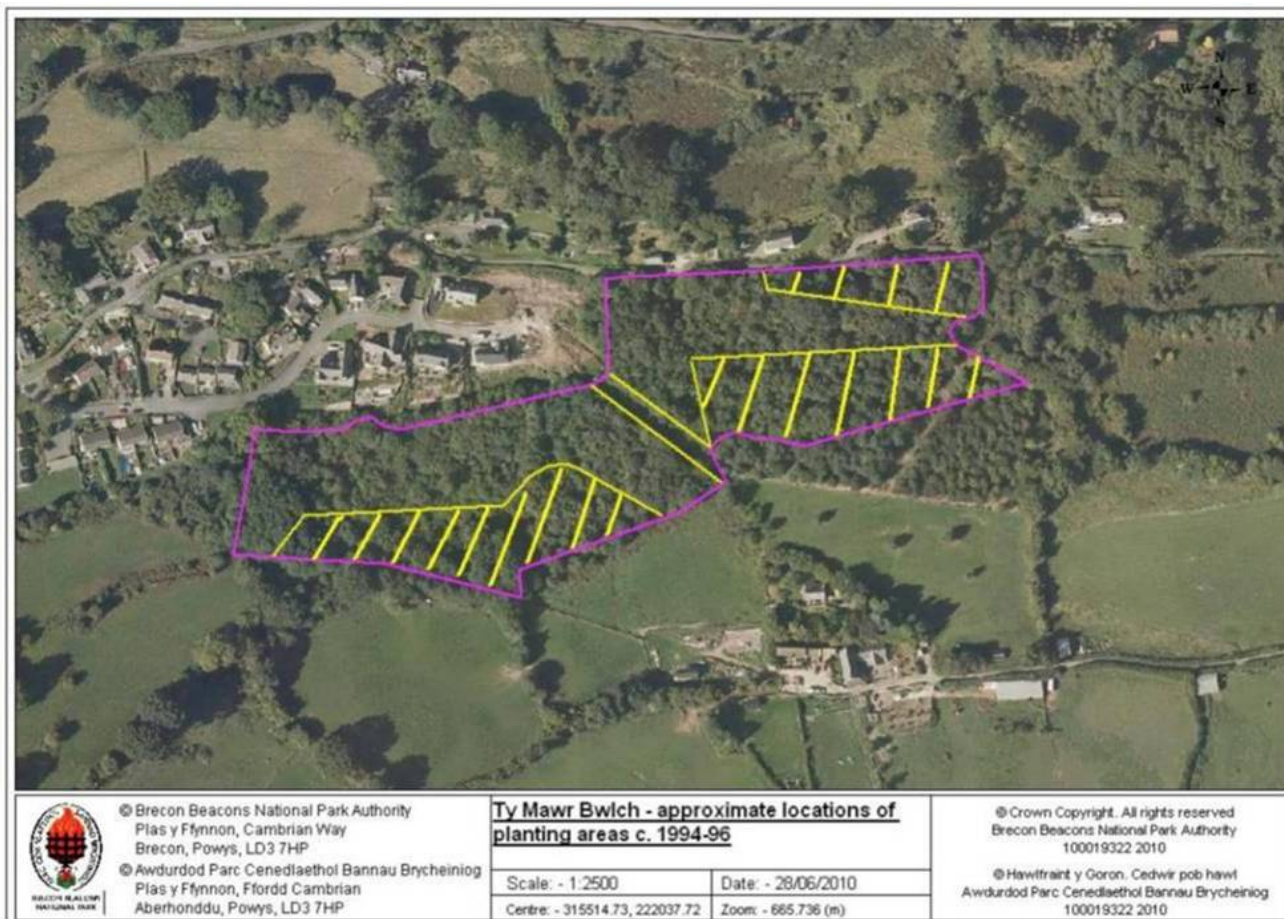
**Ty Mawr woods, Bwlch** – a private woodland previously managed by BBNPA; unmanaged for 20+ years. Owner heard about our group thanks to a chance conversation during a metal detecting session with a member of Llangattock Community Council, who championed our cause. (Two members of our woodland group also sit on the community council, so this was a great example of information sharing and positive networking). Option pursued because: owner wanted to see the wood managed and was keen to work with a community group to achieve this.; woodland had potential to be very productive, for woodfuel and other woodland products such as beanpoles, peasticks, charcoal and hazel for weaving (owner has no ambition to develop the wood commercially) - interesting site with wide mix of native tree varieties and ages. ***This presented a prime opportunity to develop a mutually beneficial relationship***

## Establishing agreements

For the purposes of this case study, we will focus on Ty Mawr woodland. Our experience in setting up agreements across all three woods was broadly similar, but with Ty Mawr there were some additional considerations and learning that make it an especially good example.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dan-y-Graig woodland backs on to the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal and while there is no public footpath through the woods, many people use it for recreation. The owners were concerned that windblown and hung up trees presented a danger to these people.



### 1. Survey

With the landowner's consent and under guidance from Gareth, we carried out a comprehensive survey of the land, noting tree varieties and locations, water courses, and potential issues, including:

- boundary and fencing issues
- stock incursion from neighbouring fields
- telephone line running through site damaged by fallen trees
- power lines running through site, effectively splitting the woodland into two parts
- water main
- cistern for neighbouring farm's spring located in woods
- water run-off/water courses affected by recent building works above woodland
- site used for fly tipping
- steep site with no proper access paths, making extraction difficult

On the plus side, the site was really interesting. One boundary is an old Roman road and the wood offers diverse tree varieties and habitats.

### 2. Management plan

Using the survey, Gareth drew up a 10-year management plan. The plan provided a detailed audit of the current state of the woodland, with a set of proposed works designed to improve the overall health, longevity and productivity of the woodland. There is no public access or right of way onto the land so the agreement was rather important to demonstrate we had the consent of the landowner.

This plan was then presented to the landowner for approval/comment and, once agreed, a brief Woodland Management Agreement document was drawn up and signed by the owner. This agreement basically gave the woodland group the right to manage the woodland and extract timber, while at the same time placing the responsibility for insurance and safety firmly on the group and putting processes in place to ensure the woodland owner was kept informed.

### 3. Informal help

The landowner had experienced ongoing boundary/fence line disputes with a new housing estate along the top boundary of his land. Residents had also been known to fell trees on his land if they felt they were obscuring their view. Gareth was able

to advise him on the best way forward to resolve these issues.

### Getting started with management



Feedback from the owner reveals that having the support of a qualified woodland management expert was crucial in his decision to grant our group management rights. He also drew confidence from our group by:

- providing regular and professional communications
- providing a comprehensive management plan with clear goals to allow him to monitor our performance
- providing a carefully thought-out management agreement
- consistently delivering on promises.

### Key lessons

- Use/develop your contacts, and make sure everyone knows what you are trying to achieve – including other community groups and organisations. This maximises your chances of finding suitable woodland – and help can come from the most surprising quarters.
- Seek support from a woodland professional. Forestry Commission Wales or Coed Cymru both provides help to community woodland groups. Coed Cymru are especially helpful as they provide free management plans.
- Adopt a professional approach – keep notes and records and respond promptly to emails etc. Develop clear communication channels.

### What would we do differently?

- Make sure we had all the relevant permits and licences in place, right from the start – eg felling licences and notifications to burn. These are relatively simple to apply for, but even Gareth

found the details around felling licences confusing (eg even if wood is given away it's still considered as being sold if it's taken by anyone other than the land owner; windblown trees and timber under a certain diameter doesn't count, and so on). Felling licences also require you to keep accurate measures of wood abstracted. This is good practice – but it does require more 'book-keeping'. One way we have been keeping tabs on quantities is by stacking wood in cubic metre 'pens' – basically 4 hazel poles hammered into the ground to form a metre square. Fill each cube to a height of one metre and you have a cubic metre of wood.

- Consider options for removing wood and other harvest from the site. This site is situated on a slope and quite difficult to access from the nearest roadside. We were warned of the impact on extraction but didn't really listen much in the excitement of getting the woodland. We need to plan extraction more carefully to ensure we have enough volunteers or just plan a day for removing the harvest.

## Training

Access to high-quality training has been a key factor in our group's success – and again, we were lucky that woodland skills training were a key part of the BBNPA's Big Green Challenge plan. In Llangattock this was invaluable as, with the exception of one member who managed his own woodland, our group were total rookies, hard pushed to tell the difference between an oak and an ash, a bow-saw and a billhook.

In the early days, with no land to call our own, training was necessarily theoretical. So early sessions took the form of woodland walks, where Gareth would take us through a potential site, giving a brief history, pointing out key features, different tree species and evidence of former management activity, while also explaining hazards and potential pitfalls and exploring each wood's potential for productivity and management. This gave us a clear understanding of management objectives and responsibilities and helped us decide whether to pursue the various options that came our way.

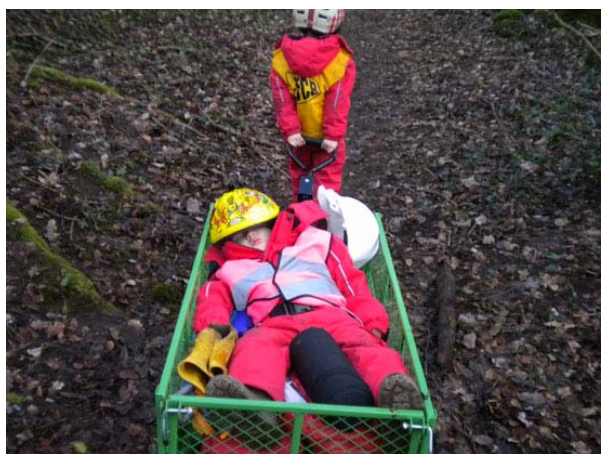
Once we secured access to woodlands, the focus shifted to practical skills training. We took the decision early on to work primarily with hand tools, on the basis that it was simpler, safer and cheaper. Gareth secured a grant for basic hand tools (sourced second hand from a local tools charity) and safety kit (hi-vis vests, hard hats, gloves and safety spex).

Another plus for us was that training sessions were carried out jointly with a neighbouring community

woodland group<sup>2</sup>. As well as making the best use of Gareth's time, these joint sessions helped us share ideas and learnings with a fellow fledgling group – and also gave us informal access to a fourth and quite different community-owned woodland.

By the end of our first year, it became apparent that we would need to use chainsaws. Gareth successfully applied for funding via Brecon Beacons National Park Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) for two of our members to become certified chainsaw users (this level of competence is essential for insurance purposes), with additional funding to purchase chainsaw safety kit (helmet, gloves, boots, trousers) for the two users plus a chainsaw (on loan to the group until we secured funding to purchase our own).

### Training is hard work



### Key lessons

- There is plenty of help available!
- Get in touch with your local authority's biodiversity officer (they may go under a different title, but there will be someone with this job description). If they can't help you directly, they should be able to point you to someone who can.
- Alternatively, contact Forestry Commission Wales or Coed Cymru for support.
- Investigate grant funding to get you started. There are some excellent opportunities for groups with an environmental remit. Tidy Towns and Environment Wales are especially supportive of new groups and can help fund training.
- Don't skimp on training – learning how to use tools well and safely is absolutely crucial for the longevity of kit and members! Chainsaw users

<sup>2</sup> Cwmdu Sustainable Energy Group developed their woodland group in a slightly different way to us: their local community council had taken over responsibility for a community-owned woodland, but had no means of managing it. CSEG successfully applied to manage the wood, bringing it back into use as a community asset.

should be properly qualified – this is essential for insurance purposes.

- Becoming a certified chainsaw user is serious business – see side panel below.

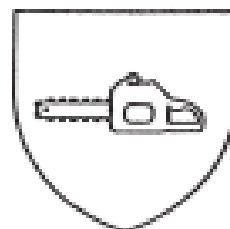
### What would we do differently?

We were so eager to learn, we didn't think about what would happen after we'd received our training – ie with a constantly growing membership, you have to consider training as an ongoing issue, not just once. We now realise that in order to become properly sustainable, we need to be able to train new members ourselves. We're still not 100% confident of our ability to do this. With 20:20 hindsight we'd suggest:

- Take notes / draw diagrams during training sessions, so you capture information and can pass it on to new members or use it for training refreshers.
- Possibly nominate a group member to be the 'expert' for each new skill – whether it's pruning, felling or tool maintenance.
- Make training notes available online. Google.docs is a great way to share information and keep documents up-to-date – and it's free and easy to use.

### The case for chainsaws

Chainsaws are an emotive subject. To most members of the public, the sound of a chainsaw means destruction of their much-loved landscape. For us they've become an essential labour-saving tool that has helped a small number of volunteers achieve a lot.



We realised at the end of our first season that the neglected woods we'd taken on were a real challenge – full of windblown and hung-up trees, overgrown coppice and brambles. To make them safe and get them back into shape in a reasonable timeframe, we needed to use chainsaws.

Two of our members were already experienced 'home' users, and they volunteered to attend a local chainsaw certification course.

Becoming a certified chainsaw user is serious business, requiring strength, stamina and a thorough commitment to learning. The course is a demanding five days, with a lengthy exam on the sixth day. It's also a big commitment for the trainee and also a big investment for the group, so you need to make sure that the people you choose are:

- a) physically fit and up to the physical and mental challenge of the training
- b) going to give you good value – i.e. able to ‘repay’ the group’s investment by being available for chainsaw duty when needed.
- c) willing to take responsibility for chainsaw kit. Chainsaw maintenance is a key part of the training, so it makes sense that the certified user also takes on this function.

It’s also worth noting that using a chainsaw is probably going to lead your group into some PR fire-fighting. We’ve spent quite a lot of time on workdays explaining to members of the public why we’re using chainsaws. Once they understand we’re not destroying habitat, and that by selectively thinning and coppicing we’re actually improving the woodland, they’re usually fine about it, but it helps to have your case prepared.

Also, go easy on your certified user. It’s physically demanding work, especially if trees get hung up (which they frequently do when you are working to thin badly overcrowded sections). For big jobs, we’ve found we can get a lot done by teaming up with our chainsaw certified friends at Cwmdu – and it works both ways, with our chainsaw guys helping them out when needed.

**Simon Walter, certified chainsaw user**

*‘Doing the chainsaw training course was a big commitment, but definitely worth it. I’m self-employed, so it meant turning down work for duration of the 5-day course, and for the exam day – but I do realise the certificate is a valuable qualification. The course itself was very good. I was already pretty competent, but the course highlighted some bad habits – and also showed me more efficient ways of working. I’m definitely much more safety conscious – and safe working is second nature now. I plan every cut before I start – it’s about reducing risks as much as possible.*

*The practical maintenance aspect was very useful too. Treated right, a good spec chainsaw should give years of life, and a smooth-running chainsaw with a good sharp blade is much easier to use. I found the course pretty intense. It’s been a while since I was in the classroom as a pupil – and after a full day of training, either in the classroom or out in the field, you were expected to do revision in the evening. So you need to be prepared for some full-on mental and physical work. I really enjoy the chainsaw work for the group. There’s nothing quite so satisfying as when you plan things just right, and a snarled-up, tangled tree comes down perfectly, just where you want it.’*

**Tools and equipment**

We started out with a basic set of reconditioned hand tools:

- 5 x bow saws (3 dry wood, 2 green wood)
- 2 x billhooks

- 3 x pruning saws
- 1 x long-handled pruning saw
- 2 x loppers
- 2 x spades
- 1 x maul

We’ve added to this recently (more bow-saws and spare blades, new loppers and two new pruning saws). The hand tools are stored by a nominated member, who also responsibility for keeping the inventory and managing maintenance, renewals.

The loan chainsaw has gone back to TGV to be passed on to another group, and we have now purchased a higher spec ‘forestry’ model, second-hand, with income raised from the Fire Wood Processor (see below). The chainsaw is stored and maintained by one of our two certified users.

Our safety kits comprises:

- hi-vis vest
- leather work gloves
- hard hat
- safety spex

These are provided free to members on joining. We decided to issue members with their own kit rather than handing out group kit at each session because

- a) we felt people would take better care of the kit if they felt it belonged to them and
- b) it meant one less thing to remember for the group organisers (although we still take spare kit along, for new members and just in case someone forgets theirs)

Members are reminded to bring their kit to each session (we send email reminders before each workday) and compliance has been very good, with minimal kit losses.

**Our firewood processor**



Thanks to Green Streets and the Beacons Trust we also now have a towable firewood processor. This machine cuts and splits logs up to 30cm diameter. It's a key asset – worth over £8,000. This is a key investment which will help us to become economically viable into the future.

### Key lessons

- Second-hand tools are not necessarily a great idea; they go blunt more quickly and are more likely to break. Our 'best buy' was the billhooks. Made by Tools For Self-Reliance's African craftsmen, they're great.
- People tend to 'test' tools like loppers to the point of destruction – i.e. 'It cuts this size, let's see how it tackles an even bigger branch'. We haven't really found a solution to this, although the new loppers seem to be holding up well.
- Buy tools with brightly coloured handles – or mark them with luminous paint or tape. It's amazing how easy it is to 'lose' tools temporarily in leaf mould. Forest green or plain wood may look nice, but put them down and they just blend into the background. Even red and yellow can be hard to spot. Go for something more obvious.
- Do your homework – prices for tools and safety kit vary hugely and there are some excellent deals available online. For safety kit, bulk buying (usually 10+ or 25+ items) really brings the price down, so if you have the funds and space to store, this can save money in the long run. Also, we've discovered that Aldi has some great seasonal deals on tools!
- Think about tool weight and size – heavyweight tools are fine for occasional use, but tiring over the course of several hours. Think about handle size as well, especially for people with smaller hands (e.g. women and children).
- Keep a tools inventory and make sure you have a nominated tools person, to ensure tools are collected at the end of each workday and kept well maintained.
- Remember tools will need replacing eventually, so you need to plan for this and think about where you'll get the money.
- Safety kit wears out too – especially gloves – and hard hats have a limited life (they may look fine, but manufacturers only guarantee them for a limited number of years), so again, you need to plan for replacement.

### What would we do differently?

- Buy new tools where possible, and choose tools with easily replaced or sharpened parts.
- Provide new members with temporary 'group' kit rather than issuing them with their own kit straightaway. We've had quite a few people join the group but turn up for only one session, so their safety kit disappears with them. In future we'll issue personal safety kit only after they've come along to a couple sessions.
- Source better-quality gloves, in men's and women's fittings – and possibly charge for these after the first free pair (by buying in bulk we can get a better deal and pass this on to our members while still covering our costs). We've found that cheap one-size work gloves are a bit of a false economy. They wear out in a single session and are too big for most women. Key things to look for are a reinforced guard on the back to prevent saw cuts, and thick enough leather to withstand brambles.

## Funding

From the start, we decided to set up our group with the aim of becoming fully financially sustainable by selling wood fuel and other woodland products (beanpoles, pea sticks, charcoal etc). We also chose not to charge members a joining or annual subscription fee (which would have brought in some money) – partly because we wanted membership open to everyone, regardless of their financial circumstances, but also simply because we didn't want the administrative hassle. But of course we needed money to kick start our plans. As mentioned above, Gareth's help was invaluable in the early stages, with funding for tools and safety equipment, and the all-important chainsaw training.

We subsequently applied for an Environment Wales start-up grant. This provides up to £1,000 for basic needs for groups – things like administration, room hire, leaflets and publicity. It's worth noting that one requirement of this grant is that any leaflets/information materials etc are produced in English and Welsh.

In addition, our group was part of a wider community bid, through Llangattock Green Valleys Community Interest Company<sup>3</sup>, to take part in the 2010 British Gas Green Streets competition. Through this we secured £4952 worth of funding, plus £6548 in match funding from the Brecon Beacons National Park SDF

<sup>3</sup> Llangattock Green Valleys (LGV) was set up in 2009 to manage Llangattock's participation in Green Streets. It became a registered community interest company (no. 7255186) in May 2010 and operates as an umbrella organisation for all the sustainable activities going on in Llangattock. Llangattock Community Woodland Group works in partnership with LGV.



and Beacons Trust towards two specific projects aimed at helping us become more sustainable:

- building a community wood store at the Llangattock Lime Kilns
- purchasing a petrol-engine, trailer-mounted firewood processor.

In 2010 we also secured an additional £1064 funding through Environment Wales and Powys Environmental Partnership for a woodland awareness-raising event during the summer holidays. The event – a family fun day – was a great success, with over 100 parents and children taking part in a range of activities put together by education officers from Forestry Commission Wales, the BBNPA and a local organisation, Arts Alive.

### Key lessons

- There are some excellent sources of funding available for woodland groups including Environment Wales, Tidy Towns, and, if you are in a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the Sustainable Development Fund. In particular, get to know your local Tidy Towns project officer. Our local officer is extremely supportive and a brilliant source of information.
- Winning funding provides an excellent opportunity for mutually beneficial publicity. Funders like to be thanked, and we've discovered that our local paper is very supportive in covering our activities.



BUT to get funding you have to be prepared:

- a) to spend a lot of time filling in forms. It's tedious, hard work and very frustrating when it goes wrong.
- b) to accept the terms of the funding, including providing feedback and evidence of performance

to the grant funder, meeting agreed requirements and deadlines and making sure you spend the money in line with your application. If you are having problems, it's best to talk to your grant funder early on to see if you can agree a solution. It's in their interests to help you, so don't be afraid.

- c) for failure – even if the funder seems initially enthusiastic. Consider clearly why you want to apply for funding and whether your group's objectives match up with the funder's objectives.
- d) to find ways to break your reliance on grant funding. In our experience, funding is a great way to get going, but it doesn't allow you to plan ahead or allow for contingencies because you have to spend all the money within the grant year.

Selling wood fuel and hiring out the firewood processor to private woodland owners and community woodland groups are two key elements of our plan to become self-sustaining, but we've also discovered a ready market for beanpoles and pea sticks at our local allotments, and we are hoping to build them some bespoke hazel screens.

These last two activities will bring in only relatively small amounts of income for our group – but they rate highly on our 'sustainability' scorecard by:

- providing an affordable, locally sourced alternative to imported bamboo canes - offering an alternative to screens with high road miles (the last lot came from a London distributor)
- working to support a group with similar sustainable objectives (with the aim of developing mutual support)
- raising local awareness of our work and aims, in a simple practical way.

We'd also suggest that money doesn't have to be a big issue. Our group's biggest annual expenditure is volunteer insurance. We currently source this through the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, but we've recently discovered that Tidy Towns offers very similar cover, including chainsaw users, for free.

### What would we do differently?

- Be much more targeted/focused with funding applications, to increase our chances of success.
- Apply to Tidy Towns for free group insurance and one of their small project grants to help with the cost of small but important projects such as wildlife surveys and putting up bird and bat boxes. (We are in the process of applying to them for a small grant)

- Work more closely with neighbouring woodland groups, to establish a culture of sharing knowledge, skills and equipment. For example, our neighbours in Cwmdy have successfully applied for funding to buy small mammal traps and moth traps, to help with wildlife monitoring. Going forward we hope to be able to borrow these – perhaps in return for time using our firewood processor.
- Charge more for beanpoles! We agreed a nominal rate with the allotments, but severely underestimated how long they take to harvest from unmanaged woodland. In the event, the allotments paid us more than we initially asked, because they were very happy with the poles, but going forward it shows that we need to do our homework on pricing!

## Towards sustainability

The firewood processor may seem like an indulgence for a relatively small group – but it forms a key part of our sustainable strategy.

1. It means a relatively small number of volunteers can cut and split a high volume of timber in a short space of time (important when volunteer time is limited)
2. In the Parks area we know of only one other hire firewood processor. This is provided on a managed-hire basis, so it's quite expensive, especially for community groups with limited funds or private woodland owners who want the wood for their own use. We hire ours out on a daily basis; with a requirement that the main user is chainsaw certified (this is a key stipulation of our insurance). While this does limit who can hire it, it also puts us in a different market to the managed-hire processor, so we're not direct competitors, and we aren't undercutting someone's livelihood.
3. By providing the processor at a reasonable price, we hope to encourage more private woodland owners to get back into actively managing their land for wood fuel. We also want to make it more cost-effective for small-scale wood fuel suppliers to produce their product.

However, we also acknowledge that the processor is a valuable asset. For this reason, we have turned ownership of the machine over to Llangattock Green Valleys Community Interest Company. This ensures the processor is 'asset locked' for community benefit.

### How it works

- A designated woodland group member is responsible for storing and maintaining the

processor. In return, he receives 20% of each paid hire.

- The woodland group is responsible for marketing the machine and managing the hire.
- Hire proceeds go to the local community via Llangattock Green Valleys Community Interest Company (LGV CIC) and the Woodland Group have first call on those funds.
- LGV CIC is responsible for insurance and eventual replacement of the machine.

So far this has worked well, but it is early days and we need to market the machine more aggressively to ensure we're getting good use out of it and developing a meaningful income stream.

## Membership / People

We're a volunteer group, so having a strong and active membership is absolutely crucial to our plans. We currently have 35 signed up members (we sign up people straightaway, so they are covered by our volunteer insurance). But we have discovered that membership does not equate to active involvement. We also know that while our active members are happy to attend work sessions, they don't necessarily want to get involved in planning and management.

### Customer feedback

*I have been delighted with my wood fuel. Having a small wood burner for additional heat means I don't use much wood so the amount I am getting for my input is great. I am also looking to purchase the extra needed with a discount which seems a very sustainable way of using my time and getting wood locally.*

Jackie Charlton

Going forward, these are both serious issues we need to address as they affect the long-term sustainability of the group. Another unexpected challenge has been allocating wood fuel in return for volunteer time – see box.

### Allocating wood fuel

*Allocating wood fuel in return for volunteer time has proved far more difficult than we thought. At the outset, we assumed we would simply translate volunteer hours into an allocation of wood fuel, based on the standard rate for volunteer time, and the average price of a cubic meter of wood fuel.*

*However, we severely underestimated how long it takes volunteers to produce a cubic meter of wood fuel from woodland that has been unmanaged for years – especially working with hand tools.*

*For example, we started out pricing volunteer time at £6.50 hour, and a cubic meter of wood at £70. So 1 m<sup>3</sup> equated to just under 11 hours volunteer time – or just over 2 full work sessions. Some quick maths revealed that at this rate, we would need to fell, extract and process more than 60 m<sup>3</sup> of timber – impossible given our productivity, and the size of our woods.*

*In the 2010 season we plumped for a simple formula: £1/volunteer hour, with wood charged at £50 m<sup>3</sup> (on the basis that it was unseasoned), but with a cap of 1 m<sup>3</sup> per volunteer (simply due to the amount we had available to distribute).*

*In general this worked well – and most members were more than happy with their allocation, but it has given rise to a raft of alternative ‘pricing’ suggestions that have taken up a lot of management time.*

*The key learning from this has been that you can’t please all of the people all of the time – but also that most volunteers are in the group for more reasons than just getting free wood fuel, so the odd complaint is no real disaster.*

### **Key lessons**

- Membership does not always equate to active involvement.
- Members join for different reasons. Many of our members joined primarily to get free wood fuel. For some members this is still the main (or only) motivator, but others say they also enjoy the social aspect, the simple physical labour and just being out in the woods as a break from everyday concerns.
- Day-long training sessions and work parties do not suit everyone. In particular, people with families find it hard to justify a whole day out of their weekend, and for some the physical effort required for a whole day is just too much. Half days, or 2-3-hour sessions on a summer evening may suit people better.
- Give plenty of notice of work dates and training events. We compile an annual calendar at the start of each year, liaising with Gareth and the Cwmdu group to try to prevent clashes. This year we’ve built the calendar around regular days – the first Saturday and the third Sunday of each month. But we’re also currently trialling some ad hoc sessions during the week: if something needs doing, we email out with suggested dates and times, then go with what suits most people best.
- Be organised – members need reminding about events. We email people a few days before each event, giving details of date, time, where to meet, what to bring etc. We usually include details of

the following work date as well. Our Secretary currently manages all of this info, along with membership details.

### **What would we do differently?**

- Make sure new members understand exactly what the group is about. We set up the group with a clear ethos and set of objectives – but we haven’t had a clear means of communicating this out to new members. Recently it’s become apparent that some people don’t understand our sustainable objectives, so we need to find a way round this. We’ve just produced a leaflet aimed mostly at volunteer recruitment, but also to explain what we do to potential funders. In addition, we’re thinking about producing a simple fact sheet to give to people during the proposed induction session.
- Have more fun! With three woodlands all requiring a lot of work, we started to feel a bit overwhelmed. This summer we’re hoping to develop a more fun and varied programme of events that will appeal to more people – e.g. wildlife monitoring, tree identification walks etc – but again, this takes time and eats into actual productivity.

## **Health & Safety**



Gareth made us very aware from the first day of training that health & safety is a crucial consideration for any woodland group. We’ve taken this advice to heart have set up clear H&S processes including:

- Membership forms requiring details of relevant medical conditions (e.g. we have one member with a bee-sting allergy, and we know she carries an epi-pen), next of kin and GP. The forms also flag up the need for people to make sure they are up-to-date with their tetanus jabs. Along with the first aid kit, these membership forms are taken to every work/training session, so they are always on hand to refer to in the event of an accident.
- Risk assessments for each site, and risk assessment briefing at the start of each session

- Sign-in/sign-out sheets. This helps us log volunteer hours, but it also ensures everyone is accounted for at the end of the day.
- We keep an informal note of any accidents too.

We've also had to make the call to cancel several work days/training sessions due to high winds and/or snow and ice making the woods unsafe. This really affected our productivity over the 2010-2011 winter season – but we know we can't compromise on our members' safety.

### Key lessons

- Sign out sheets are crucial.
- Risk assessments and safety procedures are essential. Apparently the whole area has poor mobile reception, but there were no contingency plans in place. Also, without having the volunteer's medical history to hand we had no idea whether the problem was a simple fall, or a seizure or something else.
- First Aid training is a good idea! No-one panicked during this incident and we did the best we could, but it could have been a lot more serious. Our group has now decided to prioritise getting regular volunteers First Aid trained.
- People may be reluctant to report accidents because it can make them feel foolish. We've tried to get round this by explaining that reporting accidents helps us establish if there are any patterns emerging – e.g. a lot of hand injuries could indicate we need better gloves. So far, the main problem seems to be slips and trips – largely due to the fact that the sites we work are all on steep slopes and get very slippery in wet weather.
- People tend to view H&S as a bit of a bore – but it is absolutely essential.

### The importance of good Health & Safety procedures

*The importance of woodland safety was really driven home to us during an event held by a neighbouring woodland group. It was the end of the day, and around half the volunteers had already left (the host group had no sign-out procedure, so we had no idea who was still left in the woods). I heard an odd noise above me and, looking up, saw a member of the host group sprawled on the steep slope about 50m above us. We raced up to help, and I shouted for my partner, who had his mobile, to call for an ambulance. The person on the ground was thrashing and unable to speak. I thought he was having a fit of some kind, or perhaps a heart attack. It was certainly pretty*

*worrying. There was no mobile signal in the wood, so my partner ran on up the hill to see if he could get a signal above the treeline; he ended up using the phone at a farmhouse several fields away. By this time, we'd established that the volunteer had tripped and fallen flat on his face and was severely winded and sore. He was able to stand after a while, and we got him to a car and down to the village. He refused to let us take him to hospital, but we subsequently learned it took him several weeks to recover from bruising and suspected torn muscles.*

*Di Spencer Membership Secretary*

### What would we do differently?

- Prioritise First Aid training from the start, and aim to have one trained volunteer at each work/training session. As well as giving these people key skills it would also (hopefully!) give these volunteers a natural authority as our H&S champions. Currently we find that volunteers will listen to Gareth on H&S, but are less likely to listen to other group members – eg when we give risk briefings at the start of each session.
- Implement an induction session for new members – to give them key info in H&S procedure as well as basic tools training and info about the group.
- Make sure we have back-up activities planned over winter, so bad weather doesn't affect us quite so much. For example, the days we couldn't work in the woods due to gales could have been used for firewood processing, training reviews, or meetings/discussions.

## Partnerships

Partnerships have been absolutely crucial to our success. The structure document – see Appendix 5 shows all the different ways in which we are connected to other organisations and groups.

It's hard to underestimate the benefits that have accrued from having two founder members with extremely strong local connections through their other volunteer roles, plus long experience of working with community groups, applying for grants, and managing groups and individuals.

Our partnership with the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority and, subsequently, The Green Valleys Community Interest Company has also been enormously important from the training and development perspective. Having an expert 'on tap' has been brilliant for us – and Gareth's steady guidance has helped us avoid many pitfalls.

As mentioned above, we also work in partnership with Llangatock Green Valleys Community Interest

Company, which acts as an umbrella organisation for all the sustainable initiatives going on in our community. This ensures a coordinated approach to sustainability throughout the community, so different groups aren't competing for the same pot of funding, or duplicating assets or roles. It also helps us work together to achieve wider objectives. For example, we teamed up with the Community Enhancement group for a woodland litter pick for Tidy Wales Week in 2010, and we helped the Allotments with a big tree planting project (over 800 hedging whips in 1 hour, as part of the BBC's Tree O'Clock Initiative in 2009).

And of course our partnerships with our landowners are key. We're hugely grateful to them for entrusting the management of their woodlands to us – and we believe we give them good value in return. At the core of all these partnerships is a commitment to good communication and a professional approach.

### **Key lessons**

Partnerships and gate keepers are key! Don't be afraid to use your contacts, and to get others to become your advocates.

Follow up leads. Both Ty Mawr woodland and Dan-y-Graig woodland were recommended to us as the result of chance conversations.

Develop partnerships/relationships with key organisations – e.g. Tidy Towns, local council, local schools etc, but don't overlook other local community organisations and groups – such as local litter pickers, allotments etc as sources of information, new volunteers and mutual support.

### **Building partnerships**



*Site meeting with Llangattock CWG, British Waterways, Brecon Beacon National Park and Cwmdu Sustainable Energy Group.*

### **What would we do differently?**

Use partners more – it is very easy to try to do everything yourself but partners and gate keepers in

organisations can do more for you than you think and they are often paid to help you.

## **Other points**

A lot of what we've done has worked well – but there have been a few things that haven't gone quite to plan.

First among these was our plan to build a community wood store in the old Llangattock lime kilns (part of our Green Streets plan). The disused lime kilns are now owned by British Waterways, and they had agreed our plan to use the storage arches (once used for coal) for storing wood fuel.

Further investigations revealed the building was a Grade II listed site and even though our plans involved minimal alterations (turning fixed iron railings into gated railings) and no change of use (we would still be storing fuel), the local planning authority decreed we'd need to apply for full planning permission, including a bat survey (despite no evidence of bats using the arches). The cost of doing all this, and altering the railings ended up being prohibitive. But we have since agreed with British Waterways to build a demountable 'temporary' wood store in the marina building car-park, adjacent to the lime kilns, and a member has offered additional storage space on his land, so we will still have our community wood store.

### **Lime kilns = a useful wood store?**



The other thing that has come to light over the past couple of years is that many people seem to view wood fuel as a 'free' resource, to be scavenged, scrounged or plundered at will. Of course some of these people have informal agreements with local woodland owners, but many simply see felled timber – and even standing trees – as theirs for the taking.

Two of our woodlands run parallel with the Monmouthshire & Brecon canal, and one of our

woodland owner's reports canal boat users routinely using chainsaws to take wood off his land.

This raises some interesting questions for us, especially in relation to our aim to sell wood fuel within the community. We recognise that part of our job will be educating and informing people, but we also recognise that we'll lose a certain amount of wood to opportunistic scrounging.

Thanks to the Green Streets project, which surveyed residents to discover what fuels they use, we know that we have a strong potential market locally – but in hindsight, it would have been good to have done some initial market research to discover whether our aim of selling wood fuel to the community was viable, or whether our volunteers would be our only market. It would also be good to know more about local firewood suppliers, because the last thing we want to do is take their customers. In fact we want to work with them, because we think that together we can develop the local market (and, in the process encourage greater consistency and quality of wood fuel), so everyone wins.

Finally, we have to keep reminding ourselves that when things don't go quite right, there's no point beating ourselves up about it. The important thing is to learn from mistakes, and then move on.

## The future

We feel very positive about the future of our group, although we recognise the need to be realistic about what volunteers can achieve in the relatively limited time they can give to the group.

Long term, we hope to be able to employ a woodland worker, both to increase our productivity and ensure our woodlands are managed optimally.

The firewood processor is already generating a small income for the group, and we hope to grow this over the coming years and perhaps extend our hire 'business' with other machinery, such as a wood chipper and heavy-duty brush cutter. Developing income streams is key to breaking our reliance on grant funding, so this is very important to us.

Finally, we plan to do more to understand our woodlands as a source of biodiversity, as well as wood fuel. So this year we will start a rolling programme of wildlife surveys and looking at what more we can do to improve our woodland habitats.

## In conclusion

We started out with a simple premise: volunteers could work together with landowners to develop a sustainable source of local wood fuel. Our experience

has shown that good luck and chance encounters are important for groups with no land to call their own – but also that making contacts, following up leads, developing good communication practices and taking a professional approach all pay dividends too.

**This Case study has been prepared for Llais y Goedwig by Dianne Spencer and Jackie Charlton with the help of members of Llangattock Community Woodland Group and landowners of Ty Mawr Woodlands Bwlch, Danygraig Woodland Llanelly and British Waterways.**

Email: [woodlands@llangattockgreenvalleys.org](mailto:woodlands@llangattockgreenvalleys.org)

Website: [www.llangattockgreenvalleys.org](http://www.llangattockgreenvalleys.org)

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)

