

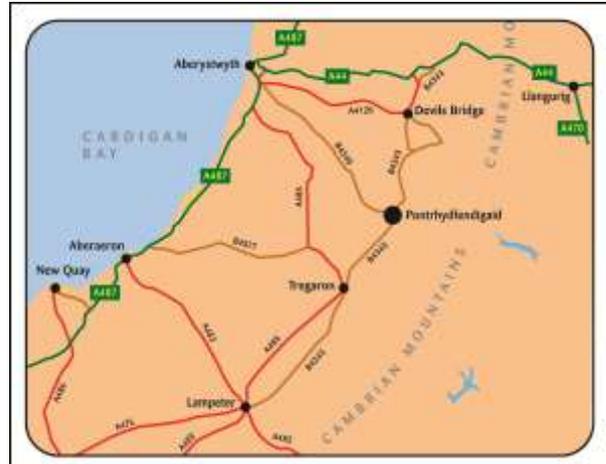
Case study Summary

This case study concerns a community woodland project in the County of Ceredigion in West Wales, near a village called Pontrhydfendigaid.

The woodland is part of the Welsh Government's woodland estate and is managed by Natural Resources Wales (NRW).

The study describes how the project started and how the community has become involved and what it has achieved. Particularly, it addresses the problems and difficulties that were faced in getting it off the ground and how these were tackled. It explains how, after a slow start and many ups and downs, the project has now built up a good head of steam. The final sections outline the lessons learnt and the next steps.

The study is written from the point of view of the core group responsible for the project, although several of the personnel in that group have changed as time has passed.



Location of Pontrhydfendigaid

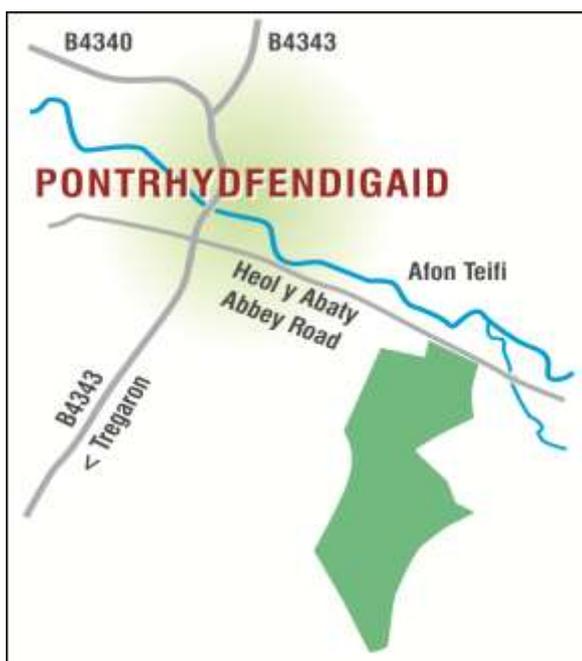
The Beginnings

Back in 2008 a few people in Pontrhydfendigaid (which is known locally as 'Bont') felt that it would be a good idea to find an area of land on which to plant trees. This was at the time when

Al Gore was trying to persuade the world to see the dangers of climate change. His film 'The Inconvenient Truth' had just been released exhorting people to "plant trees, plant lots of trees" and in a very small way it was felt that Bont could make a contribution in its own corner of the planet.

Woodland known as Coed Dolgoed, situated on the edge of Pontrhydfendigaid and near the well-known historic site of Strata Florida Abbey, was identified as a possibility, along with the adjoining stretch of ancient woodland above it called Coed Cnwch. The conifers that had been planted over Coed Dolgoed in the 1950s had been clear felled in about 2005 and the ground had begun to recolonise but it was felt that there could be scope for some active replanting with native broadleaves

As a result of preliminary enquiries with the site managers, the then Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) it was discovered that FCW had been



working in partnership with other local groups to create community woodlands elsewhere in Wales and it was felt there could be scope for something similar at Pontrhydfendigaid.

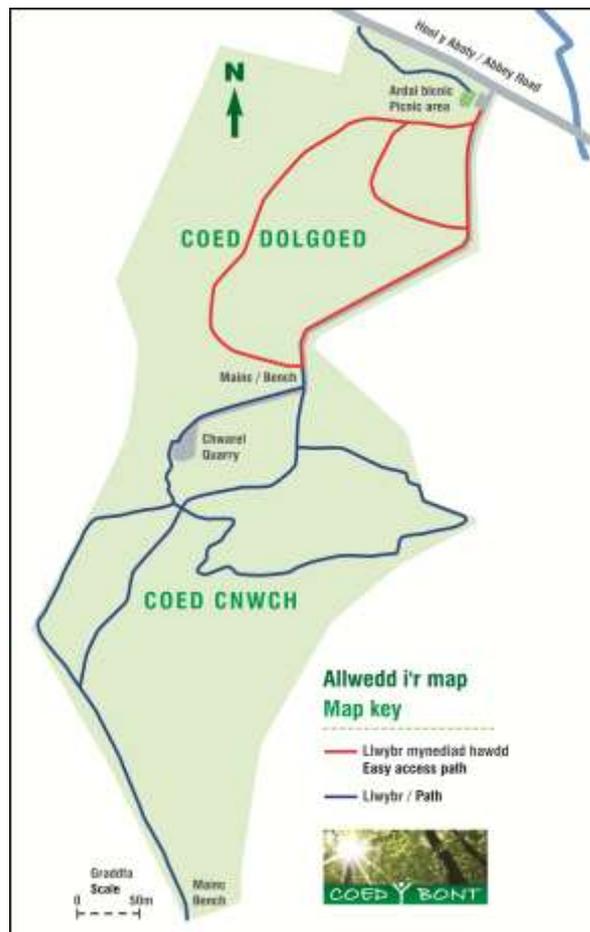
A public meeting was held in the village on 28 November 2008 that included Ceredigion's Assembly Member and representatives of FCW and Ceredigion County Council and was attended by over 50 local people. The occasion was upbeat and positive, the conclusion being that a group should be set up whose main purpose would be to formulate a plan of what it would like to do, in partnership with the Commission, to make these woodlands into community woodland. The group named itself: Cymdeithas Coedwig Cymuned Pontrhydfendigaid Community Woodland Association.

Description of the Woodland

Together, Coed Dolgoed and Coed Cnwch amount to 24.2 hectares. Coed Dolgoed was previously coniferous, but is now regenerating with native deciduous trees planted by FCW in 2009. This is a level area of mainly wet woodland with some deep peat that was formerly an extension of Tregaron Bog. There is evidence that peat was cut for fuel by the monks of Strata Florida. It is a favourite haunt of butterflies, moths and dragonflies, attracting passing hobbies. Water voles frequent the ditches and abundant insect life feeds the many breeding birds.

In contrast, the higher, sloping area of Coed Cnwch to the south is an Ancient Woodland Site with previously coppiced hazel, century's old oaks and wetter areas containing birch and alder. Along with some remaining blocks of conifers, this mosaic of mature trees is rich in lichens and fungi and especially stunning at bluebell time.

In 2010 FCW built a forest road along the side of Coed Dolgoed to aid future conifer extraction using hard-core from a small quarry created on the edge of Coed Cnwch. Prior to that, the only access was a narrow, rough, muddy track along the side of the woodland that was used by a few people for dog walking.



What did we want to do?

By the end of 2011, those in the core group had reached agreement on their vision of what this woodland should be like as a community woodland. This included:

- A woodland that is attractive and interesting and provides quiet enjoyment
- A place that local people want to visit and attracts visitors to the area
- Is accessible to everyone
- Has a range of interesting and diverse wildlife
- Informs people about the woodland environment
- A place that involves people in the community
- A woodland that becomes an exemplar community woodland

For this vision to be realised the sorts of outcomes that the group wished to see were:

- Good access with well-designed footpaths so that people can enjoy the woodland.
- Easy access routes on some of the paths suitable for wheel/push chairs
- Sensitively sited and good quality items such as benches, picnic tables and way markers
- A sound baseline record of the woodland's wildlife and its historic features
- A biodiversity management plan to identify, protect and enhance the wildlife interest
- An interpretation board and leaflets on the wildlife, historic interest and the access paths
- People supporting and taking part in events and activities
- People of all ages having an enhanced knowledge of the woodland and its wildlife
- A team of volunteers who enjoy doing hands-on work in the woodland
- A visitor attraction that indirectly brings economic benefits to the local community
- A good publicity network
- Probably most importantly, an active and committed group to drive the project forward

In considering the vision and the outcomes, the group concluded that there were four aspects on which it should focus its attentions:

- 1. Provision of better access to the woodland.**
- 2. Protection and enhancement of the wildlife.**
- 3. Educating and informing people about the woodland and its wildlife.**
- 4. Encouraging community engagement.**

What we have actually achieved is summarised in the next section. Looking back it is gratifying to see how many of our intended outcomes have been realised.



Coed Cnwch May 2014

Timeline of achievements

2011

- *Cymdeithas Coedwig Cymuned Pontrhydfendigaid Community Woodland Association* was confirmed as an Unincorporated Association in a written Constitution in September 2011.
- In December 2011 the Group agreed a plan with vision, outcomes, objectives and actions.

2012

- Early in 2012, in a project funded by Communities First, our members assisted the local primary school children to assemble about 40 bird boxes that were later installed in the woodland by FCW staff.
- In December 2012, we signed a 10- year Management Agreement with FCW confirming the commitment on both parties to develop Coed Dolgoed and Coed Cnwch as a Community Woodland.
- Also in December 2012 we joined Llais y Goedwig.



Installing a dormouse box in Coed Cnwch

2013

- Early in 2013, the Denmark Farm Conservation Centre near Lampeter funded and organised a project making dormouse boxes with the local Youth Club. The boxes were installed in March 2013 with staff of the Vincent Wildlife Trust.
- One of our main aims is to improve access on foot and in March 2013 the routes of proposed new easy access footpaths were digitally plotted by FCW staff.
- In July 2013 an application was made to the Welsh Government to join the Glastir scheme.
- In July 2013 we were represented on the Llais y Goedwig stand at the Royal Welsh Show.
- Survey boards were laid out in the woodland for toads and reptiles in August 2013.
- An application to register our project with Environment Wales was accepted at the end of September 2013. Part of that application required us to prepare policies for our organisation covering: health and safety; equality and diversity; Welsh language; environment; volunteering; children and vulnerable groups.
- During 2013 we received our first grant - £500 from Ceredigion County Council's Balchder Pentrefi Grant, for the purchase of a bench and two picnic tables.
- In September 2013 we rebranded our community woodland project as 'Coed y Bont'.
- During October 2013, we held a Coed y Bont open day in village hall, with a door-to-door survey during the following two weeks to get information on community support and to raise awareness. The survey results were presented at a public meeting in November 2013.
- In November 2013 we restructured and expanded the Pontrhydfendigaid Community Woodland Association Committee.
- In December 2013 we joined The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) as a Community Member and obtained the appropriate public liability and accident insurances.
- During 2013, site meetings were held to discuss advice and funding sources with a number of organisations, including: Natural Resources Wales, Environment Wales; Ceredigion County Council; the Amphibian and Reptile Society; West Wales Wildlife Trust; the RSPB; CAVO (Ceredigion Association of Voluntary Organisations); Mid Wales Tourism.
- In 2013, 5 bird species were using the nest boxes: blue tit, great tit, nuthatch, pied flycatcher and spotted flycatcher and 75 bird species were seen and/or heard in the woodland.

2014

- In January 2014 we received a Chestnut Fund grant of £350 from TCV for hand tools for use by our volunteers.
- In February 2014 eleven more nest boxes were installed, plus different boxes to increase the diversity of species like redstart, tree creeper and tawny owl.
- Early in 2014 we set up a Coed y Bont Face book page to promote and advertise our activities.
- The first event in the woodland in 2014 was a walk with local MP Mark Williams at the beginning of March.
- In March 2014 we started a monthly programme of volunteer work parties for carrying out various management and maintenance tasks.
- Also in March 2014, we had our first public event - a 'Bird Walk' - the first of a series of monthly events that we held during the year looking at different aspects of the woodland's fauna and flora.
- In April 2014 we received a grant of £7643 from Environment Wales for the costs of more hand tools, wildlife surveys, educational and wildlife survey equipment, publicity materials, a gazebo, a secure storage container and signage.



Public event on mammals in the woodland



Improving footpath drainage in Coed Cnwch

- To reflect the change in organisation on 1 April 2014 from Forestry Commission Wales to Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and also to satisfy the conditions of potential grant funders, the Management Agreement was revised and extended to 12 years running from April 2014.
- In May 2014, the NRW Chief Executive and other NRW staff met members of our Group on a site visit to discuss the Coed Y Bont project.
- From the spring through to the autumn of 2014, surveys of fauna and flora, funded by the Environment Wales grant, were undertaken by Radnorshire Wildlife Services.
- During the spring of 2014, detailed and structured bird surveys were undertaken by Coed y Bont's expert ornithologists.
- Over the period 2013/2014, more than 200 birds of 8 species have been ringed with the data registered with BTO Nest Record Scheme.
- Coed y Bont specialists also carried out a moth trapping programme during 2014.
- As of June 2014 there were 61 nest boxes in the woodland, used by 8 different species with redstart, marsh tit and tawny owl being new occupants since 2013; 78 bird species have now been seen or heard in the woodland.

- In July 2014 we were notified of the success of an application for a grant of £82,000 to the Welsh Government's Aggregates Levy Fund for the construction of new 'easy access' footpaths, pond excavation and for improvements to the picnic area next to the car park at the woodland entrance.
- In July 2014 we once again attended the Llais y Goedwig stand at the Royal Welsh Show.
- Several visits were made to Longwood Community Woodland during 2014.
- Over the year our publicity officers ensured good coverage of our achievements and activities in the local press, the Cambrian News.
- In August we had a stand at the annual Pontrhydfendigaid Agricultural Show for the first time, to promote the Coed y Bont project and to raise its awareness in the community.
- In mid- August 2014, with the funding in place for the construction of the easy access paths, ponds and picnic area and contractors appointed and ready to go, we discovered at the last minute that, contrary to what we had been advised, full planning permission was required for this work after all.
- The planning application was submitted by NRW in September 2014 and planning approval given on 23 November 2014, but subject to conditions some of which had to be met before work could start.
- In September 2014 we received a grant of £918 from Ceredigion County Council specifically for the improvements to the picnic area.
- In November our group agreed a set of core values to provide guidance and standards as to how we behave towards our colleagues, how we relate to others in the community and how we manage the Coed y Bont project.

- Just before Christmas 2014, the Local Planning Department raised technical issues relating to flood risk and land drainage consent that needed to be resolved. Still not able to start work on the paths.



Event on the moths of Coed y Bont

2015

- At the beginning of January 2015 we submitted a request to the Aggregates Levy Fund Panel to extend the period of our grant from 31 March 2015 to 31 March 2016.
- At the end of January 2015, having satisfied all planning issues, the work to construct the new access paths began.
- In February 2015 our Group agreed that the woodlands could be included within the buffer area for the Mid Wales Red Squirrel project.
- In February 2015 we submitted an application to the Charities Commission to register our organisation as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.
- Between 1 April 2014 and 31 January 2015, forty two different volunteers had, between them, devoted 1372 hours of work to the Coed y Bont project.
- A brochure to publicise the Coed y Bont woodland was printed at the end of February 2015.

Problems – how we tackled them

The previous section simply described the facts - the main things that we have done and what has happened since we started. In reaching this position we have encountered many problems of varying degrees of complexity that we have had to deal with. No doubt the particular circumstances of different groups with different aspirations and objectives will have different sets of problems. Rest assured, whatever the nature of the project, it will not be straightforward! Certainly, ours has not been an easy road.

This section describes the main issues that we met, in starting with an idea to have a community woodland and then trying to convert this into a viable community woodland project. To give some structure, they are split into four parts: problems associated with our own organisational structures; problems relating to the community; ownership issues; and matters to do with funding and finance.

1. Organisational problems

After the public meeting in November 2008 about a dozen people who were keen on the idea met together to discuss what to do. A committee was formed from those who attended. Many ideas were offered and discussed during subsequent meetings.

In our experience there was a strong inclination for the majority who attended to enjoy offering ideas and engaging in discussions but were less comfortable, able or keen to convert these ideas into aims, objectives, actions and outcomes that are needed to form the basis of a plan. To make progress we needed to go beyond ideas and discussions, but we found this quite a difficult hurdle to cross.

We had a shopping list of the sorts of things that we wanted, like picnic tables, benches, paths and ponds but we were not clear about how these could be achieved. We spoke about the educational value of the woodland but again not a lot on how we could actually make this happen in practice.



Looking north across Coed Dolgoed

The project seemed to stall as a consequence. Some good people who were originally enthusiastic seemed to become disheartened by the absence of much progress and they drifted away. Others who came to meetings on the odd occasion could see little in the way of actions or little in the project for them so we often didn't see them again.

We held about four meetings per year. These were open to anyone to attend and we took a lot of effort to publicise them, including door to door flyers around the village. Yet very few people came, which was disappointing both to those that did turn up and also to those who made such efforts on the publicity side. As time passed it became clear that the longer this situation persisted the more difficult it was becoming to get people to even attend a meeting, quite apart from trying to encourage them to be interested in helping or to become involved in the project. On many occasions the few stalwarts who attended would sit and wonder why people were not coming and what more could be done to attract them.



Volunteers installing a bench in Coed Cnwch

Those committed people that stayed the course deserve a lot of credit because there is a strong possibility that the project would have failed without them. We realised that most people just wanted to get on and do things rather than spend time thinking about the planning and management side, but we needed the latter to ensure we at least went some way towards an integrated approach rather than just developing the project piecemeal. We also realised that we needed to spend time on planning if we were to secure a Management Agreement with FCW and if we were to have any hope of obtaining grant funding.

It became clear that there was a lot that could be done, but the majority of the work seemed to be falling on very few shoulders, so even the keenest were finding their involvement becoming burdensome, their enthusiasm waning and were beginning to question their commitment.

All of this explains why there is nothing much to record between the public meeting in November 2008 and the end of 2011 and things only began to pick up in 2012. Something had to be done, because the alternative was to disband, give up on the idea of developing the woodland as a community woodland and simply leave the woodland to be used by the community as and how it chooses.

SO WHAT DID WE DO?

We gave ourselves a collective kick up the backside!

In November 2013 we expanded our committee from 5 to 12. We did this by the proactive, albeit undemocratic approach of identifying likely people in the community, with appropriate skills and expertise, who we thought would be interested in helping and simply asking them, face to face, if they would be interested in becoming involved and if they would like to be co-opted on to the committee. The response was very good. Increasing the numbers allowed much more delegation and sharing of workloads to ease the burden all round, shown by the large number of activities and achievements in 2014.

The new committee members were formally appointed at our AGM in April 2014, giving us a team of twelve containing expertise in the main

areas needed to run a community woodland project. Several members are experts in natural history and we delegated responsibility for taking forward the wildlife aspects of the woodland such as organising surveys and developing a public programme to a *Wildlife Sub-group*. Others took over the important tasks of publicising the Group's activities, organising volunteer work parties, for progressing the access improvements, for project management and for making grant applications.

We also agreed that henceforth we would have two types of meetings: closed committee meetings for committee members only, dealing with the business of running the project; and open meetings publicised to the general public when we have particular topics of wider interest to present and discuss. I'm sure that our struggles to get the project off the ground are not unique but they do show what we experienced. Certainly we seemed very close to folding at one time.

2. Problems related to the community

Notwithstanding all the publicity that we issued to try to encourage people to take an interest in the project, only the same few committed people would turn up to the meetings. It was as if the fanfare of the public gathering in November 2008 had not happened; as if the concept of a community woodland in Bont had never arisen or had become switched off in people's minds. We couldn't understand why at least a few others in the community didn't feel strongly enough about the idea to at least come to express their support; but no, it was as if the same few were discussing the project in complete isolation from the rest of the community.

We seemed to be lone voices trying to promote something for everyone's benefit whilst at the same time it seemed as if people didn't care one way or the other.

As well as perplexing, this situation was also depressing as we felt we were trying to enhance people's environment despite them rather than with their support. There were times when we felt, 'why bother'. Why not just leave the woodland as a place for people to walk their dogs as they had become accustomed to do and leave it at that?

SO WHAT DID WE DO?

We asked them.

Several years had passed since the public meeting in November 2008 and the encouraging start on that occasion seemed to have faded into history. We felt the only way to find out if there was any support was to dig down and try to see what the people in the community really felt about having a community woodland.

At the beginning of October 2013, two of our committee went on a course sponsored by the Ceredigion Association for Voluntary Organisations (CAVO) on how to engage the community in environmental projects.

Then in mid-October 2013, with the help CAVO, we held an open day in our village hall, followed immediately by a door to door questionnaire in the community over the following two weeks.

To share the workload of interviews we identified about 20 people in the village, including Welsh speakers, who we thought would be willing to help and asked them face to face for their assistance. Again the response from this approach was very good and by taking their share of the households to visit, they helped to make this a quick and manageable process. Some of the interviewers themselves had never been involved in the project until their contribution to the questionnaire survey and this in itself helped to generate fresh interest and to spread awareness.

As well as finding that there was a surprisingly high number of people who were actually aware the community woodland project, it was gratifying to find that the level of support was in the order of 98% of those interviewed.

There was a considerable additional benefit arising from the questionnaire survey. Most grant application forms contain at least one question asking for evidence of community support. By providing good information on the level of community support, the data from the survey proved invaluable in our subsequent applications for funding.

REPORT OF QUESTIONNAIRE DOOR-TO-DOOR SURVEY OF BONT AND DISTRICT

WHY DID WE CARRY OUT THE SURVEY?

- To raise awareness about the community woodland project
- To obtain evidence of community support – essential when applying for funding for a community project
- To obtain information on who in the community would be willing to help

HOW, WHERE AND WHEN DID WE DO THE SURVEY?

- Door-to-door survey was carried out to obtain a maximum response rate
- A number of people in the community were asked to help carry out the survey – we had 19 volunteers
- A questionnaire with four questions was designed with CAVO's help
- The survey was carried out in Pontrhydfendigaid, Swyddffynnon, Ystrad Meurig and Ffair Rhos between 10-20 October 2013

WHAT DID WE FIND?

	Number	%
People who responded	317	
People who knew about the community woodland	242	76.3
People who said they support the community woodland	308	97.1
People who said they would be willing to help	107	33.7

CONCLUSIONS

- A very high response rate because we did a door-to-door survey
- Many people already knew about the woodland
- But about 25% didn't know so awareness levels increased
- An overwhelming level of support for the project
- Large number of people willing to help

With hindsight, obtaining hard evidence about community support is something we should have done several years earlier, possibly just after the November 2008 meeting. From where we are now this seems pretty obvious. The reality is that this was a new project started from scratch and these steps, which we now see as perfectly logical, did not figure in people's thought processes at the time. It was only as ideas evolved that we realised that our small group needed to make a much greater effort to actively engage the community. We learned that to simply expect support to come to us was doomed to fail.

One of the questions in the survey sought information on whether people would be interested in actively helping with the project. Almost a third said they would, though the response was probably high as the question put people on the spot and they possibly felt it appropriate to respond positively.

The reality is that about 12% of the people who responded have subsequently made an active contribution in some capacity. While this is gratifying we are conscious that we can never relax the effort of engaging the community for a moment, otherwise interest and support could quickly fade.

In this respect the monthly programme of public events that we started in 2014, looking at different aspects of the woodland's fauna and flora has helped a lot in generating local interest. In addition, we run a series of monthly volunteer work parties devoted to management and maintenance tasks in the woodland.

We also realise the vital importance of publicity, not only to inform people about what is going on but also to keep the project in the forefront of people's minds. We are fortunate in having a professional graphic artist on the committee who has designed our Face book site, logo and brochure and produces all our posters and other publicity material, whilst other members have responsibility for disseminating the publicity, putting up posters, getting articles into the local press and notifying those on an ever expanding email distribution list. A local business supports our project by providing translation services into Welsh.

The message here is that more people were aware of the project than we thought, but most of the interest was passive. To stimulate even a small proportion of this interest into active involvement has not been easy and we constantly need to keep working at it to keep at this level. To improve upon it is a slow process.



Volunteers, parents and children from the community on a 'Family Fun' event July 2014

3. Ownership issues

The woodland is part of the Welsh Government's forest estate. When we became involved it was managed by Forestry Commission Wales, which became Natural Resources Wales in April 2014 following the merger with the Countryside Council for Wales and the Environment Agency Wales.

In December 2012 we entered into a Management Agreement with FCW. This sets out the arrangements whereby the woodland is managed for the benefit of the community. The preparation of the Management Agreement application was fairly daunting to anyone unfamiliar with official form-filling. Consequently the process took most of 2012 to complete.

A significant benefit of the Management Agreement is the advantage of ready access to expertise, advice and services in FCW/NRW in many relevant areas at no cost to us. For example, in connection with our project to create new access paths and ponds we have benefited from NRW for:

- Accompanying us on a fact finding visit to another NRW woodland, Cwm Rhaeadr near Llandovery, where a similar community recreational project was developed during 2004-2006
- Accompanying us on several site visits at Coed Dolgoed / Cnwch to discuss options
- The provision of mapping and engineering services, including site surveys
- Preparing tender documents including engineering specifications
- Issuing and receiving the tenders, assessing the quotations and liaising with and meeting the chosen contractor
- Negotiating with the contractor to get the best outcome for the grant funding available.

The importance of all of this assistance cannot be understated. Clearly NRW wish to ensure that work carried out on Welsh Government woodlands is well undertaken and is of a good quality and to have the necessary controls over it. However, without these inputs it is difficult to see how our aim of improving access in the way we envisaged could have been achieved. Certainly we do not have this expertise in-house and to buy it in would have been very costly and would have involved us in a lot more fund raising.



Ancient hazel coppicing in Coed Cnwch

The construction of new access tracks at Coed Dolgoed illustrates a perfect example of partnership working between the voluntary and public sectors: we as a Community Group have raised the grant funding to build the new paths and NRW has provided the technical expertise.

On a more general level, one of the main advantages of having a community woodland in a Welsh Government woodland is that we are not burdened with the ownership responsibilities of a woodland property such as the costs of silvicultural management and the associated health and safety and insurance obligations and legal liabilities.

On the other hand, whilst NRW retains overall property responsibility, one of the issues that we were keen to explore from the beginning of the Agreement was the scope for our own involvement in management activities in the woodland. There was a strong view amongst people in our group that for this to be a proper community woodland we needed to have some role in this respect.

To a certain extent we feel we have had to tease this information out of NRW and this has only become clearer over time, almost on a case by case basis, though after about two years we are now at a point where we have a reasonably good understanding of what we as a community can and cannot do. For example, so far we have involved volunteers in footpath improvements including the necessary drainage and brush cutting and installing items like benches and tables and bird, bat and dormouse boxes. As time goes by we expect to engage them in coppicing and other conservation management operations. A series of wildlife surveys undertaken during 2014 has provided valuable information about the woodland and will help inform future conservation management.

During this process we began to form the view that for NRW, what a community woodland means and how the local people can get involved in it has also been a learning process. We feel that, as time has passed and we have demonstrated that we can run the project in a responsible and sensible way, NRW has also become more confident in our abilities and more relaxed about the nature of our community interaction with the woodland.

Prior to every activity or event we are required to prepare risk assessments. In this way over time, we have built up a portfolio of risk assessments covering activities in which our community has been engaged in the woodland. A standard rule is that no powered tools like chain saws are to be used. We have no problems with this as the use of hand tools is better for volunteers, involves more people and is quieter for the woodland; we also avoid the issue of taking potential work away from NRW's own staff or contractors. If we wish to carry out a new type of activity we run this past the forest manager for a view or comments before commencing work, but as the range of activities is finite and as time passes the need for this sort of prior consultation becomes less.

But it has not all been a bed of roses!

We had a major setback to our plans in 2014. In preparing grant applications early in 2014 for the building of the new paths we consulted NRW as to planning requirements. We were assured that such work would be covered by the General Permitted Development Order (GPDO) regulations in the same way that permits NRW to construct new forest roads. This advice was given to us in good faith and in the full belief by NRW that planning permission would not be needed. We applied for grant funding on that basis.

Regrettably this confidence was miss-placed. In mid-August, in response to a request by NRW to the Local Planning Authority to carry out the path construction under the GPDO, NRW were informed that the proposed works fell outside these regulations and would require full planning consent after all (despite the footpath being about a third of the width of a forest road).

The delay in determining the planning requirements during the first part of 2014 subsequently caused a great deal of unnecessary stress and anxiety to those involved during the remainder of the year and into the first month of 2015.

It took almost five months to resolve the planning issues to the point where the contractors were able to start work. Meanwhile the grant funding on which payment for the work relied was time limited and had to be spent by the end of the 2014/15 financial year.



Construction of new easy access path Coed Dolgoed February 2014

The likelihood of not being able to do the work in an ever narrowing window and therefore having to forfeit grants to the value of almost £83,000 became a real and horrifying prospect. In these circumstances we even approached the main grant funder about the possibility of extending the grant period to 2015/16.

Thankfully, at the time of writing in mid February 2015, the contractors are in full flow and work to build the new paths is progressing well. The work will be done and the grants will be spent. But it was all very 'touch and go'!

Both parties have learnt hard lessons from this experience. For our part we have learnt that not all advice, even though well meant, can be relied upon; and that to seek a definitive answer (in this case on planning) it is advisable to go direct to the prime source at the earliest opportunity.

Clearly the answer that NRW received from the Planning Authority in August 2014 was not what they expected. It showed that at least some Authorities seem to apply a very narrow view of the GPDO and while a forest road may be constructed under these regulations, a footpath requires full planning approval. A lesson for the future!

Working Relationships

Of fundamental importance to the effective working of the Management Agreement and in achieving a successful community woodland project has been the building of good working relationships.

We believe we have built up a very sound relationship with the NRW forestry staff, underscored by mutual trust and respect, that has benefited the project in so many ways, both in helping to achieve successes and in seeing us through the difficulties.

To quote Brian Hanwell, NRW Local Area Manager:

“Coed y Bont have developed a very positive working relationship with NRW. This has been based on mutual trust, recognizing the skills of NRW managers, civil engineers and planning staff; and the enthusiasm and determination to secure funding of the Coed y Bont members. Coed y Bont’s willingness to take advice in practical matters, and appreciation of landowner liabilities has enabled NRW to apply a ‘light touch’ to their volunteering activities. Site meetings have proved very beneficial, as these have enabled all parties to get to know each other in a relaxed and friendly way. So much better than formal meetings! We look forward to continuing the partnership as the project moves forward from the construction phase.”

4. Funding and Finance

When the group was set up we initiated a membership system with a modest annual fee. Whilst this helped to raise some funds for day to day running costs, such as the hire of a meeting room, we came to realise that it was only the same few people who were making this contribution. Others attended meetings but never paid a fee, whilst we were so anxious to increase attendance that we were reluctant to press them.

Also, looking to the longer term, the community woodland would be a facility from which everyone would benefit, whether they were 'members' of not and it would not require payment of a membership fee in order to access it. It did not seem fair to continue with a membership fee system when essentially it was only committee members who paid it. So this was dropped.

Hazel Gloves fungus in Coed Cnwch

We also raised funds by holding table top sales periodically in the village hall. Some of our members were particularly good at organising these and we continued to raise modest sums of money in this way.

However, we knew that the sorts of sums of money needed for installing infrastructure items and particularly for creating new access paths were far in excess of what we could hope to raise from local events. We had to get involved in applying for grant funding, which for most of us was a new venture.

For finding and getting grant funding we need to acknowledge the help we received from CAVO. They conducted a 'Grantfinder Search' on our behalf of all possible appropriate grant funders and pointed us to the Natural Resources Wales Funding Newsletter which also references many sources of funding relevant to environmental projects.

Identifying possible sources of funding is relatively straightforward, but the application process is less so. It requires time, patience and perseverance and the ability to give clear and concise answers to questions like why grant is needed, what will be done with it, what the benefits will be, who will benefit, how the benefits will be sustained in the long term and so on. Not everyone has the inclination to do this job and if a group has someone who has some experience of applying for grant funding, that is a significant advantage. We were lucky because, having registered our project with Environment Wales, we benefited greatly from the advice and experience of the EW Development Officer when it came to making grant applications to EW and other funders."



Funder	Date	Grant Outcome (£)	
		Successful	Unsuccessful
Ceredigion County Council - Balchder Pentrefi Grant	2013	500	
TCV Chestnut Fund Grant	2014	350	
Environment Wales -Project Grant	2014	7,642	
Welsh Government - Aggregates Levy Fund Grant	2014	82,000	
Tidy Towns Wales Community Led Funding Grant	2014		28,000
Big Lottery People and Places	2014		10,000
Ceredigion County Council - Community Grant	2014	918	
TOTAL		91,410	38,000

It quickly became clear that many funders do not provide 100% funding. There may be a need for match funding and if this is in cash it may be that applications to more than one funder will be needed. If this is the case there is the uncertainty that if one of them is unsuccessful this could undermine the whole project. Also, there are timing issues because the application windows and offer dates of grant funders are different and this limited the options of suitable grant funders available to us as we needed to bring the grants from different sources together at the same time.

A further aspect we discovered in relation to trying to raise the match funding needed, was that some grant funders seem to wish to see their money being allocated to a discrete and identifiable project, or even a sub-project or identifiable part of the whole, rather than simply being a contribution to a larger pot of money needed to fund the bigger project. In our efforts to build up the portfolio of funds needed for the new access tracks we overlooked this and one of our key applications was unsuccessful as a consequence.

In applying for grant funding to build new access paths in our woodland we encountered all of these challenges.

Summarised above are the grants we have applied for to date and the outcome. We are grateful to those grant bodies that have provided funding, as without their support the Coed y Bont project would not have been possible.

Lessons learnt

Below is a summary of the main lessons that we have learnt in the few years since we have been running the Coed y Bont project:

- Get a good core group together of committed, enthusiastic people who are willing to give of their time/expertise. Importantly have people who are willing to do things and not just offer ideas. It is essential to have people with the drive to make things happen; otherwise the project will not progress well.
- Have a vision of what we are trying to achieve, then
- Clarify and agree as soon as possible what the group's aims and objectives should be in order to realise that vision and what actions are needed to achieve the objectives. Have a plan!
- But resist the temptation to be over ambitious - it is easy to come up with lots of ideas but somebody has to implement them. Don't forget we are all volunteers. So prioritise and take one step at a time. And keep reviewing progress and adapt and amend as necessary.
- Recognise the importance of building and maintaining good working relationships with the staff in NRW.

- Involve and inform the community as much as possible and as early as possible so that they are aware of what is going on. Publicity, publicity, publicity there can never be too much publicity!
- Keep working at engaging the community. Changing passive support to active involvement isn't easy and requires consistent and persistent effort. But be aware that there will always be those who have little interest in what is being done.
- We found the programme of public events that we started in 2014 very good for raising awareness and generating interest. Equally the volunteer work parties were good for getting more local people involved by doing hands-on work in the woodland.
- Communications are, like publicity, absolutely essential. It applies in all directions: internally within the group; between the group and the community; and between the group and a whole host of external organisations, particularly in our case, NRW as the land manager, but also anyone from whom grant funding or advice and help is sought.
- On grant funding, seek all the advice available. Be persistent; do not be baulked by failure. There are two options - keep going or give up. So keep going!
- Good baseline information is important. Hard data of community support from our door to door survey provided excellent evidence in subsequent grant applications. Sound wildlife data derived from surveys conducted in house and undertaken by ecological contractors were invaluable in the planning application for new paths and will advise on appropriate future management actions in the woodland.

- Finally, be patient! Changing a woodland into a community woodland takes time. Certainly, we have found that it can be a slow process.

Where do we go from here?

The main thing is to continue the work we have been doing. In the short term, this year, we intend to complete the construction of the new easy access paths, the creation of new ponds and the enlargement of the picnic area. Also an interpretation and welcome board will be installed for visitors to the site. We shall assess if further access paths are needed and may apply for grant funding for these in 2016.

We shall also continue with monthly events and work parties, building on the success of our programmes during 2014. Once the new paths are constructed we expect a lot of work for volunteers in tidying up and future maintenance. There will be more wildlife surveys to do in the future and we hope to involve volunteers in some conservation management tasks to enhance the woodland habitats and their biodiversity. We shall also decide at some stage if some sort of permanent shelter on site would be appropriate and how to raise the necessary funding.

In the autumn of 2015 we intend to have an open day to explain and promote the Coed y Bont project and all the new work that has been done. Everyone will be welcome and all the organisations and individuals that have helped us will be invited.

Through what we have managed to achieve we feel that Coed y Bont has gone a long way towards the aim of changing this area of woodland from one that was simply used by some members of the community into what we believe to be a proper community woodland.

This Case study has been prepared for Llais y Goedwig by Jim Cowie, a member of the Coed y Bont community woodland.

Contact Coed y Bont:

<https://www.facebook.com/coedybont>

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 for association members, and others interested in community woodlands in Wales.

Contact Llais y Goedwig:

www.llaisygoedwig.org.uk

