

This report, written by Zena Wilmot, Jane Gronow, Rosie Strang and Fay Sharpley, brings together the discussions and outcomes from five regional events held around Wales in Autumn 2014

Date: January 2015

Cover image: Word cloud showing the vision for community woodlands as a tree (the shadow) based on the notes from the event debates and designed using the online tool www.tagxedo.com



Image: Photo of participants at Blaen Bran community woodland

Llais y Goedwig would like to thank Coed Cadw/Woodland Trust for funding the five regional events and to Natural Resources Wales for additional financial support. Llais y Goedwig also wishes to thank the Community Woodland Groups who hosted each event and everyone who attended.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Llais y Goedwig is the membership based voluntary organisation which represents and supports community woodland groups in Wales. In Autumn 2014, Llais y Goedwig held five regional events across Wales. The events aimed to:

- Bring community groups, landowners, agencies, policy makers together to talk about community woodlands in Wales
- Explore the current situation for community woodlands in each region
- Create a vision for community woodlands in Wales
- Discuss how to realise that vision and take things forwards
- Visit community woodlands

This report summarises the discussions and outcomes from the regional events.

Participants

Attendance at the events exceeded expectations, with a total of 150 people attending the events.

Table 1: Five regional events

Representing	Town	Hosting Group	Participants
Mid West Wales	Lampeter	Long Wood Community Woodland	30
North Wales	Llanrwst	Golygfa Gwydyr	36
South East Wales	Cwmbran	Blaen Bran	34
South West Wales	Swansea	Penllergare Valley Woods	18
Mid East Wales	Knighton	Knighton Tree Allotment Trust	32

The people who attended representing a wide cross-section of the forestry sector including community woodland groups, woodland managers, agencies, Local Authorities, Wildlife Trusts, national and local charities and private landowners. See Table 1.



Image: Event discussion groups in South East Wales (Cwmbran)

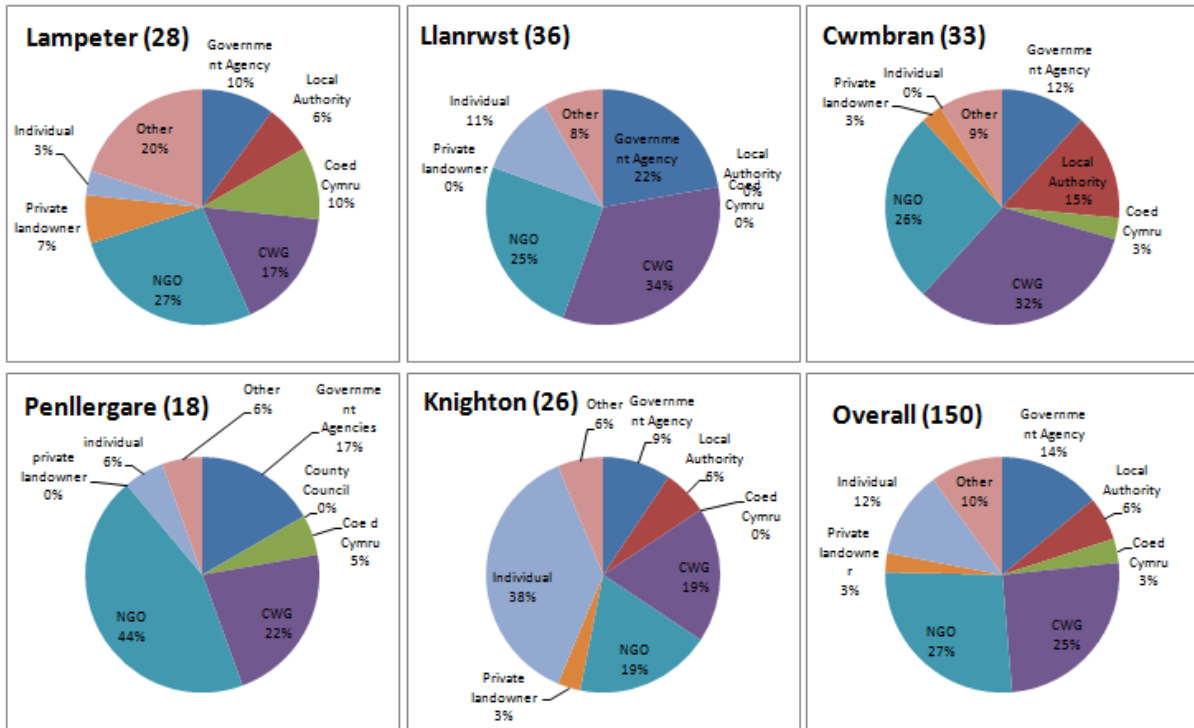


Figure 1: Participants at the regional events, the number in brackets represents the total number of participants at each event.

Regional Area

Attendees were asked to mark their location on a map of Wales. The areas represented by the people attending each event are shown in Figure 2 on a map of Wales.



Image: Attendees at the event in Mid-East Wales (Knighton) marking their location on the map.

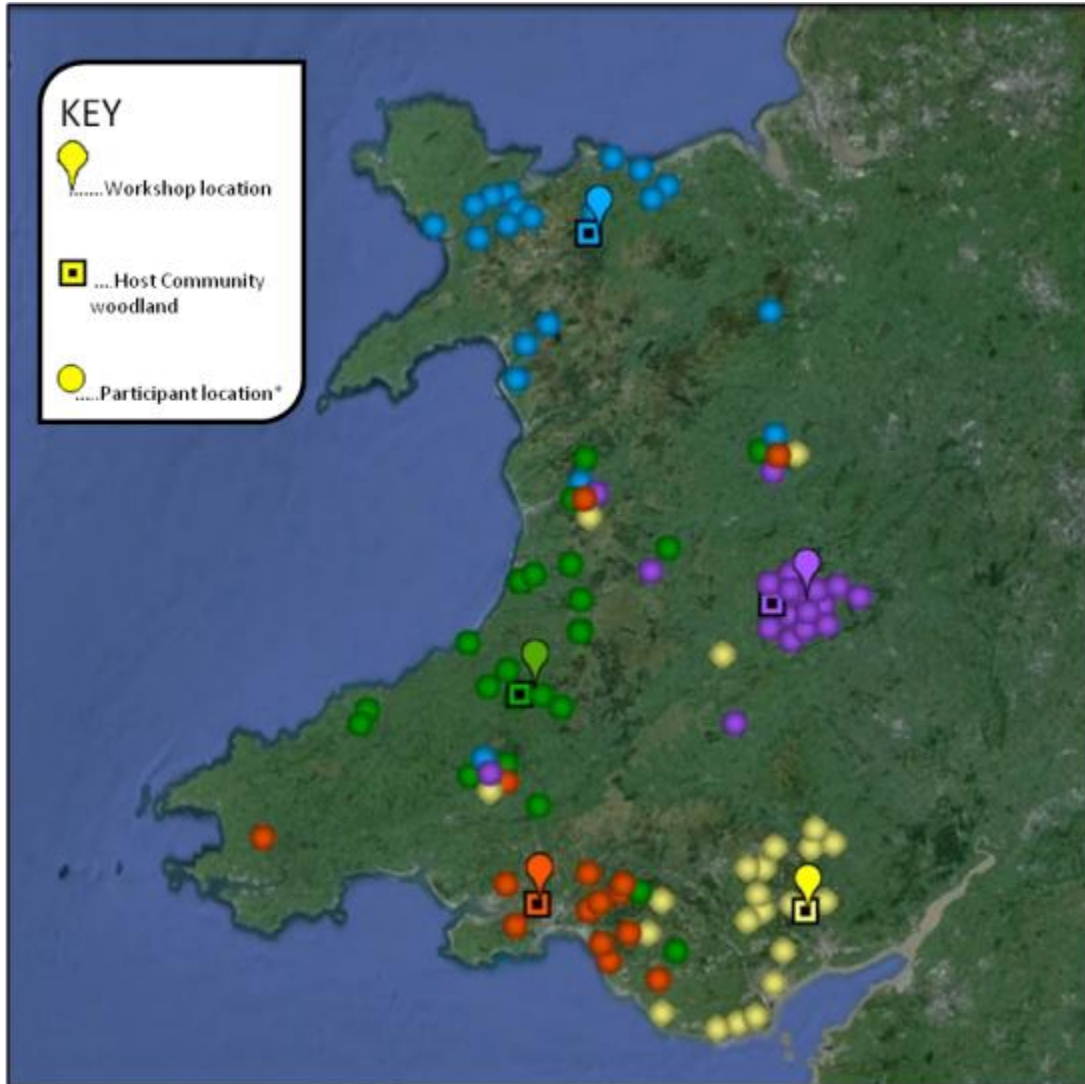


Figure 2: Map showing event locations and participant distribution (Source: Google Earth).

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Event 1 (Green): | Lampeter, hosted by Longwood Community Woodland |
| Event 2 (Blue): | Llanrwst, hosted by Golygfa Gwydyr Community woodland |
| Event 3 (Yellow): | Cwmbran, hosted by Blaen Bran Community Woodland |
| Event 4 (Red): | Swansea, hosted by Penllergare Valley Wood |
| Event 5 (Purple): | Knighton, hosted by Knighton Tree Allotments Trust |

Scope

This report summarises the discussions at the five regional events. The facts and figures provided during the events are presented in good faith; it is beyond the scope of this report to verify them.

Every effort has been made to fairly summarise the discussions and debates, the authors welcome any comments or amendments from event participants or any organisation referenced in the report. Individual reports on each event are also available from Llais y Goedwig.

A large body of information was gathered during the events; please refer to the individual record of each event in the appendices for more detail. The report does not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the authors or the funders.

Event programme

Each event began with a short introductory talk by Llais y Goedwig, followed by debates (in groups¹ and plenary) on three topics²:

Debate 1 - What is happening with community woodlands in this area?

Debate 2 - What is the vision for community woodlands in this area?

Debate 3 - What is needed to realise the vision for community woodlands?



Image: Event discussions in Mid-West Wales (Lampeter)

After a networking lunch, participants went for a guided tour of a local community woodland. The event closed with a plenary session to discuss 'next steps'.

The feedback³ from the events was overwhelmingly positive, for instance:

- *"The right balance of time, interactive and informative"* Mid-West Wales (Lampeter)
- *"Exceptionally good and well managed"* and *"very dynamic"* North Wales (Llanrwst)
- *"Everyone is welcome and everyone's view point is respected – the whole event was well managed"* South-East Wales (Cwmbran)
- *"Event and Day in general was Great!!"* and one person commented on *"feeling part of a wider 'movement' / network"* South-West Wales (Swansea)
- *"Structured and business-like but friendly and informal atmosphere. The refreshments and lunch are a rare treat these days! The field trip was excellent and well led"* Mid-East Wales (Knighton)

¹There were three working groups for each debate at each of the five events, making a total of 15 working groups, and overall up to 150 people, debating each topic. Each working group then presented their findings in a plenary session, followed by questions and answers.

² See Appendix 3 for worksheets

³ Feedback and recommendations from each event were analysed and, where there were issues, the structure and content of the following event was adjusted in response to this feedback. For full notes on the feedback from each event see Appendix 5.

Definition of ‘community woodland’

Being clear about what is or isn't a community woodland was a concern in many debates. Community woodlands take many forms in Wales; with varying types and levels of community engagement. It was agreed that community woodlands are those woods where local people have a degree of responsibility for the woods (and do not include woods that are simply used by local people).

They are woods where the local community has some degree of control over how the wood is run or managed.

A community woodland is usually supported by a community group.

Community woodlands take many different forms; they can be owned, leased or managed in partnership with a landowner through an agreement.



Image: Field visit to Knighton Tree Allotment Trust, Mid-East Wales, discussing the challenges in a community woodland group working on steep terrain.

2. CURRENT SITUATION FOR COMMUNITY WOODLANDS IN WALES

Introduction

What is the current situation for community woodlands across Wales? Are there lots of new groups 'springing up' or is the situation 'static' or even challenging? What organisations are supporting community woodland groups across Wales?

The aim of this debate was to build up a picture of what is happening for community woodlands in each area of Wales, what groups are active, if there are new groups emerging, if there are any blocks or barriers. The event groups also discussed what support organisations and schemes had an impact on groups in that area and the availability of woodland sites.



Figure 3: Key words event participants used to describe the current situation for community woodlands in Wales. Created using Wordle⁴, the size of the text represents the frequency of each word.

The working groups were asked to summarise in one word the current situation for community woodlands in their area. These varied from 'challenging', 'disappointing', 'static' and 'confusing' to 'thriving' and 'vibrant' and 'hopeful' (See figure 3).

- In Mid-West Wales (Lampeter), participants felt that there is a lot going on, a lot of interest, and a growing awareness of community woodlands and their benefits. The current situation is positive for community woodlands and that there are new groups '*popping up*'.
- North Wales (Llanrwst) identified areas of particular community woodland activity in Anglesey, the Gwydyr Forest, the Conwy Valley and Llanbedr. The feeling seemed to be that '*everything is OK but not going anywhere*', also described as '*static*'.
- South-East Wales (Cwmbran) identified quite a few well established groups and lots of activity going on in the area, described as '*bubbling away*' with some new groups springing up.
- In South-West Wales (Swansea) there was a feeling that the situation is quite '*static*' and '*challenging*' due to the funding cuts; there are lots of sites available, and there are groups volunteering in woodlands but not taking on any more responsibility.
- In Mid-West Wales (Knighton), there was a feeling that the coverage of groups is currently sparse and disappointing, the situation being described as '*jogging along*'. However, it was felt that the groups in the area have a wealth of practical skills and knowledge.

⁴ An online tool for generating "word clouds" from text www.wordle.net

Community Woodland Activity

The working groups were asked to discuss the community woodland groups they were aware of in each area. They listed the groups and discussed their current situation; notes from these discussions are available in Appendix 8.

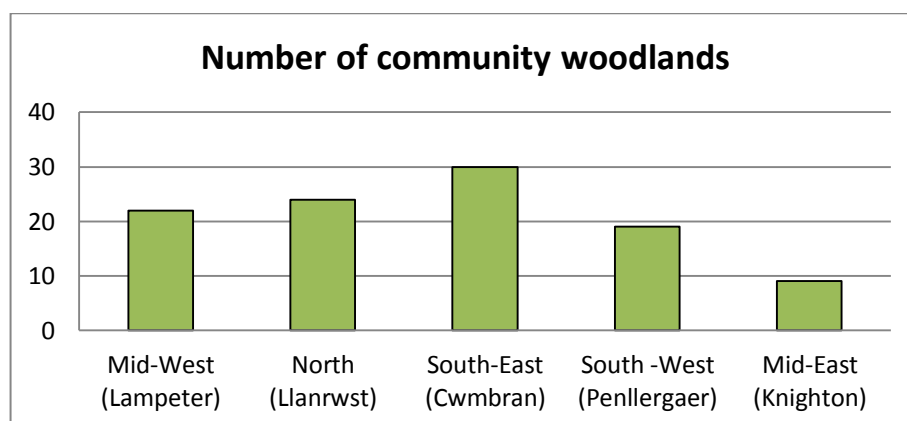


Figure 4: Number of community woodland groups identified at each event

There is community woodland activity in all the areas, with established groups and a limited number of new groups appearing. The area with least community woodland activity is Mid-East Wales, though there are some very active established groups. Figure 4⁵ suggests that South-East Wales has the most community woodland activity.

Practical challenges for community groups in all the regions of Wales hinged mainly on income generation, accessing funding, getting and keeping volunteers and increasing membership. It was noted in North Wales (Llanrwst) and in Mid-East Wales (Knighton) that it always seems to be the 'same faces' and there was a concern that the next generation is not coming forward to take part in community woodlands.

In South-West Wales (Swansea) a working group described the challenges of bringing people together in a deprived urban area – particularly tackling vandalism and other anti-social behaviour, not being able to attract volunteers, woodlands not being seen as a priority by the community, and green spaces being prioritised by the community for sports fields and urban parks.

In South-East Wales (Cwmbran), one of working group focused specifically on urban woodlands; it concluded that there are advantages to being in an urban area (such as having woodland on the doorstep and access to funding) that could make forming and maintaining groups easier. However, disadvantages similar to those identified in South-West Wales (Swansea) were also cited including antisocial behaviour and community priorities, for example, when there are cuts to leisure facilities and libraries taking place then woodlands may be low on the agenda.

In Mid-East Wales (Knighton), a rural area with comparatively low population, the groups felt that this caused challenges to forming and maintaining community woodland groups. The low population and larger travel distances meant that it was difficult to recruit an active membership and volunteers, and that the hilly terrain made the practical work more challenging.

⁵ Due to discrepancies over the definition of 'community woodland', some of these represent volunteer groups or woodlands used for activities rather than community woodlands.

Table 2: Support organisations and schemes important to community woodlands⁶

Support organisations and schemes / region of Wales	M-W	N	S-W	S-E	M-E
ALSAF – aggregates levy, Levy Sustainability fund					
Biffa Award (Landfil Tax Trust)					
Blaenau Gwent Council					
Brecon Beacons National Park					
Caerphilly Groundwork					
Coal Authority					
Coed Cymru					
Coed Lleol 'Active Woods'					
Community Volunteer Service					
County Voluntary Councils					
Cynnal Cymru					
Cynefin					
Dyfi Woodlands					
Environment Wales					
European Social Fund					
Green Flag Award scheme					
Green Valleys CIC					
Glastir					
Glasu					
Keep Wales Tidy					
Llais y Goedwig					
Local Authorities					
Monument Trust					
National Lottery (BIG, Heritage lottery)					
Natural Resources Wales (NRW)					
NFU					
PAVO					
Powys County Council (PCC)					
RENEW Wales					
Resource Efficient Wales					
RSPB					
Rural Development Programme (R.D.P.)					
Shropshire Hills AONB SDF					
Small Woods Association / Heartwoods					
Snowdonia National Park					
Sustainable Development Fund					
Torfaen Council					
Valleys Regional Park					
WCVA Volunteering Fund					
Veolia					
Welsh Assembly					
Welsh Rivers					
Wildlife Trusts					
Woodland Trust / Coed Cadw					
Woodlands.co.uk					
WREN					

⁶ Note that this table shows the views of people in the events, and is not a comprehensive list.

Support organisations and Groups

The working groups identified support organisations and schemes they felt were important for community woodlands in their areas of Wales (see table 2).

Environment Wales and the Woodland Trust / Coed Cadw were seen as important in all areas of Wales. Other organisations identified in most areas included Keep Wales Tidy, the National Lottery, Natural Resources Wales, Coed Cymru, Llais y Goedwig, Local Authorities, the Rural Development Programme and the Wildlife Trusts. Other organisations and schemes were seen to provide more regionally specific support.

In Mid-East Wales (Knighton), Coed Cymru used to have three officers sitting within Powys Local Authority providing free woodland advice and to promote the management of neglected woodlands in Wales, but these positions have been cut, leaving a gap in support in this area.

Natural Resources Wales is seen as important to community woodlands in three of the four areas; it was also noted that, as an organisation, it has developed over the years and now has more understanding of and is more open to community involvement in the National Estate woodlands.

The merger of Forestry Commission Wales with the Countryside Council for Wales and the Environment Agency into Natural Resources Wales that started in 2011 was described as being a period of transition and that this has meant that many things have been blocked. Now that the merger is complete it was described as an opportunity to re-focus and move forward.

Availability of woodland sites

At each event the availability of woodlands for community groups to manage was discussed. The Woodland Trust / Coed Cadw said that they welcome community involvement in the woods they manage. At each event Coed Cadw distributed a list of 112 woodlands that they believe have the potential for community involvement (full list and maps are shown in appendix 7).

Groups can access Welsh Government woodlands through the Natural Resources Wales scheme known as Woodlands and You (WaY)⁷. This scheme allows for community involvement in short and long-term projects on the woodland estate. Agreements for up to 20 years are available. To date uptake of WaY by community groups has been quite modest. Llais y Goedwig is about to publish a report on community uptake of WaY.

In many parts of Wales there is some form of local participation in Local Authority owned woodlands; mainly in the form of volunteering and 'friends of' groups. The greatest number of active community woodland groups on Local Authority land is in South-East Wales (Cwmbran) (though this may reflect the high proportion of Local Authority staff at this event). The current economic climate is leading some Local Authorities to seek ways to devolve the management of woodland sites; at the Mid-East Wales (Knighton) event, Powys County Council stated its willingness to devolve its green spaces to community management. Llais y Goedwig is about to publish a report on community involvement in the management of Local Authority woodlands in Wales.

Few private woodland owners attended the events. However a woodlands.co.uk representative attended 3 events and stated that their organisation was keen to encourage community involvement in their woods. It was suggested at the Mid-West Wales event (Knighton) that many of the local farm woodlands are tied into agro schemes that effectively render them unavailable for community projects.

⁷ See www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-8J2GJ9

3. VISION FOR COMMUNITY WOODLANDS IN WALES

What is the future for community woodlands in Wales? Do people want to see a community woodland in every community? Is there huge potential for community woodlands? Or will community woodlands only emerge where a wood is under threat? The working groups were asked to come up with one or two key words to describe their vision, and this is summarised in figure 7.



Figure 7: Key words event participants used to describe the vision for community woodlands in Wales. Created using Wordle, the size of the text represents the frequency of each word.

Each of the regional events worked on visions for their areas of Wales; the visions are summarised by region in Appendix 9. Key themes included:

- 1. A vibrant and active community woodland sector in Wales.**
The sector should be inclusive and support community participation in the woodlands of Wales at all levels (and not one size fits all). There should be more 'connectivity' in the sector with agencies, organisations and groups working together.
- 2. More community woodland groups in Wales**
Everyone concluded that there is the potential for more community woodlands in their area, and that groups should be supported along this path. Some felt that we should be working towards ensuring every community or catchment has a local community woodland group. Larger organisations should actively make woodlands available.
- 3. Community woodlands - a community right that meets current and future needs**
Community woodlands should be integral to the local community - creating community landscapes, within parcels of woodland, parkland, farmland, rivers and coast providing what the community needs.
- 4. A strong community woodland support network in Wales.**
Community woodlands need to have a strong voice in Wales. Community woodland groups need to support each other in a connected local network or cooperative.
- 5. Groups to be self-sustaining through income generation**
To sustainably generate local woodland products and quality woodfuel. For groups not to be reliant on short-term funding.
- 6. To sustainably manage woodland to benefit people and wildlife**
Communities need to have the knowledge, skills and resources to sustainably manage woodlands. Communities can support and directly assist with management of the Welsh Government Forest Estate WGFE – its important woods remain in public ownership. Part of the vision is to create landscape 'connectivity' through sustainable management, working with adjacent landowners and creating wildlife corridors.

4. REALISING THE VISION FOR COMMUNITY WOODLANDS IN WALES?

Having looked at the vision for each area, the groups looked at what is needed to realise the vision. Participants looked at barriers limiting the development of community woodlands and what is needed to overcome them. These discussions are summarised below and more fully in *Appendix 10*.

Areas in which blocks or barriers were identified:

- **Understanding** and awareness of community woodlands
- **Expertise** or understanding of woodland management
- **Community engagement**
- **Liabilities** – insurance, H&S, public liability, dealing with paperwork
- **Negotiating** land agreements
- **Availability of resources**, machinery, tools, etc.
- **Link** between community groups and woodlands
- **Information** and support available all in one place
- **Support** for new community woodland groups
- **Woodland sites** – finding out about appropriate sites, finding ownership
- **Sustainability** of existing groups
- **Education** – link with the next generation
- **Funding** – availability and process
- **Economic viability** of community woodland groups
- **Strong voice** for community woodlands
- **People resource** to host / support community activity in woodlands
- **Joined up working** between sectors, organisations
- **Evidence of** benefits

The groups discussed and debated possible ways forwards from the current situation to realise the vision for community woodlands in Wales. Below are some examples:

Grassroots

- **Peer support** and learning between groups
- **Sharing resources** such as tools and machinery between groups in a local area
- **Regional networking**
- **Local practical action days** where groups within an area get together to do a certain task
- **Joint funding bids** between groups
- **Different approaches** to involving the community and volunteers

Networking

The need for a stronger voice for community woodlands in Wales was discussed at all the regional events. As the community woodland network for Wales, Llais y Goedwig is already fulfilling many key roles in providing a voice for community woodlands in Wales but with very limited resources.

Ways of strengthening Llais y Goedwig were suggested:

- **Creating partnerships** with other organisations.
- **Better resourced**, applying for bigger pots of funding.

- **Regional/federal model** with staff on the ground to provide support locally, e.g. WI, Federation for City Farms and Community Gardens, French / German community woodlands.

There is a need for a network that can:

- **Facilitate communication** at every level from grassroots to agencies to policy.
- **Increase wider awareness** of community woodlands through outreach, publicity, lobbying and advocacy.
- **Create opportunities** for peer support, learning, training and knowledge transfer.
- **Support new and existing groups** with issues such as setting up a group, community engagement, woodland management plans, legislation, planning, liabilities, insurance, accessing funding, recruiting and keeping volunteers.
- **Support landowners** to work with communities through awareness raising, dealing with issues such as public liability, planning, insurance, drawing up agreements with groups.
- **'Brokering' role** working with communities, community groups and landowners to support the establishment of new community woodland groups, assist in the negotiation of agreements with landowners.
- **Matching groups to woodlands**, investigation is needed to find woodlands that are appropriate, discover their ownership, publicise these woodlands exist and link them to local active groups.
- **Information hub**, such as an online 'green directory' or 'green pages'.

Policy

Some of the suggestions need work on a policy level, including:

- **National and Local Authorities understanding and supporting** local community groups in a proactive way.
- **Clarity and transparency** from Natural Resources Wales and Local Authorities on what woodlands are available, what community participation is possible, and what support can be provided.
- **Accessible funding mechanisms and processes** appropriate for community woodland groups.



Image: Wood stack managed by Knighton Tree Allotment Group at the Buddhist Meditation Retreat Centre near Llangunllo

5. NEXT STEPS

Having looked at the current situation, the vision for community woodland in Wales and how to realise that vision; participants discussed possible next steps in each area.

Mid-West Wales, Lampeter

- **Need for a clear definition of community woodlands**, which is helpful for outside organisations to understand them.
- **Create a guide for community access to the forest estate** managed by Natural Resources Wales.
- **Create case studies** from the perspective of both community woodland groups and agencies, with different models of land agreements.
- **Need a 'broker' to support groups** to the stage where they can negotiate with statutory bodies and to facilitate a process for 'giving away control / rights' for woodland owners and managers that make it explicit what the responsibilities are.
- **Document showing Llais y Goedwig partnership with Natural Resources Wales** on the Woodlands and You (WaY) web page, e.g. similar to the existing one for the *Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens*.
- **Local Support Network** – sharing contacts after the event for local networking, skillsharing, physical resource sharing.
- **Study tours or blogs** about community woodlands in other countries (e.g. France and Germany).
- **Join Llais y Goedwig** to be part of the existing network and take part a direct discussion google group.

North Wales, Llanrwst

- **Online public forum on community woodlands** for exchanges of knowledge, funding opportunities, etc.
- **Follow up meeting** after all the events and the report has been written to discuss how to take things forwards and make recommendations from an informed position.
- **Make recommendations known at to the Welsh Government** by booking a slot at the Senedd.
- **Look at different network models** to learn lessons to build a stronger community woodland network, e.g. WI, Federation for City Farms and Gardens.
- **'Wales you Want' for 2050 campaign**, Environment Wales are running this campaign and have funding for any groups who want to discuss this.
- **One-stop-shop for information**, the Woodland Trust are currently putting in funding to the Plunkett Foundation to create this online resource'

South East Wales, Cwmbran

- **Go to Welsh Government** to suggest some RDP funding go towards a scheme similar to 'farming connect' for woodlands.
- **More meetings like this** to create momentum, ideas and encourage networking.
- **Raise the profile of Llais y Goedwig**, many people don't realise what it is, particularly non Welsh speakers.
- **Link to other organisations** such as the Federation of City Farms and Gardens and the Community Land Advisory Trust that are well resourced.
- **Guidance note on the Woodlands and You (WaY) web page**, there is an information leaflet about how to go about community gardening but nothing on community woodlands.
- **Link community woodlands to 'hot topics'** such as health and employment.
- **Regional network group for networking and sharing ideas**, starting with everyone present at this event, need to share email addresses.

South West Wales, Swansea

- **Follow up meeting** to take things forwards with groups and agencies.
- **Smaller regional network** for groups to meet up more often and linking woodlands doing similar things.
- **Online calendar** for advertising open days and volunteering days.
- **Visit days** for groups to see what's happening in other woodlands.
- **Recognition from Welsh Government** that if they want more community woodlands they need to be supported, particularly with jobs at key support organisations (Keep Wales Tidy, Groundworks) at risk of losing staff.
- **Awareness raising with the Welsh Government** about what support groups need.

Mid East Wales, Knighton

- **Keep Wales Tidy and Shropshire AONB** to share information on how they can support community woodland groups.
- **Green pages searchable database** pulling together information on organisation that can be searched regionally.
- **Raise awareness of Llais y Goedwig website** and the information they have available on groups, organisations, support and funding.
- **Develop Llais y Goedwig online resources** to provide a searchable database.
- **Map of land owned by town council** to identify local areas of woodland.
- **Local sharing of advice on contractors** for woodland work to ensure good working practice.
- **Quarterly report to Welsh Government**, Keep Wales Tidy, who compiles this, would appreciate information from groups about what they are doing and numbers of volunteers to provide evidence.

6. FIELD VISITS TO COMMUNITY WOODLANDS

Each of the events was hosted by a community woodland group who kindly took all the participants on a tour of their woodlands.

Coedwig Cymunedol Longwood Community Woodland, Lampeter

James Kendall, Project Manager, led the tour of Long Wood, a 300acre mixed woods site which lies just north of Lampeter in Ceredigion.

- The group was formed in 2003 by local residents and community councils, who wanted more community benefit from the woodland and in response to the lack of opportunity to benefit economically from their local forest resource managed by Forestry Commission Wales.
- They started with a 10 year management agreement and then purchased the woodland in 2011 through the Big Lottery Asset Transfer Programme. This was a difficult process for the group.
- They are in the process constructing a straw bale and timber building; there were issues with the Planning and Building Regulations process, but these problems have been successfully navigated. There remains a problem with insurance for a non-traditional building in woodland that is yet to be resolved.
- The timber processing yard is well equipped and handles all timber felled on site. The idea is to supply the local market with timber from Long Wood to create both jobs and helping invigorate the local economy.
- Recently an area of woodland was successfully coppiced using local peoples help in return for firewood.



Image: Visit to Long Wood led by James Kendall

Golygfa Gwydyr, Llanrwst

Roger Davies, Company Secretary of Golygfa Gwydyr (GG), led the tour. GG has a community management agreement (CMA) with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) on a 15 hectare site in the Gwydyr Forest. The site comprises a mile long labyrinth pathway, an outdoor performance space, an outdoor education space, a registered orchard, and is a facility which community members and visitors can freely access to walk the pathway and enjoy the forest environment.

- GG is in the process of negotiating a new Management Agreement with NRW. The new agreement aims to redefine the area of land to be managed by GG so that all the land under the agreement is designated as Low Impact Silviculture System (LISS). This will never be allocated to commercial felling and extraction.
- The aim of the CMA is to demonstrate how communities can manage public land that would otherwise be unmanaged, and as a result, enable communities to benefit directly from land management. This will include use of timber for structures in the Caerdroia theatre, use of the land as a training resource, and some extraction for production of firewood.
- All income generated through this agreement will go to community projects run by GG and this, in turn, will reduce the community's dependence on grant funding.
- The local NRW staff are fully supportive as this enables more of the Gwydyr Forest to be under management without drawing directly on NRW resources.
- The site will continue to be managed as a LISS site by GG and the group will introduce and encourage greater biodiversity of species and habitat.
- Public sector cuts in Wales mean that there may be cost savings which could mean more land is taken out of management. GG have emphasized to NRW the benefits of the group managing these 15 hectares of woodland: they will get volunteers in, train people in rural skills, and put people in the forest that can go on and make a living, this will help Conwy meet its work and employment targets.
- GG aims to build its capacity so that it can become a community contractor for small, non-commercial management operations on other coups in the Gwydyr, e.g. clearing invasive species, windblown, pathways, etc.



Image: Visit to Gwydyr Forest

Blaen Bran, Cwmbran

David Williams and Roger Stephenson led the tour of Blaen Bran community woodland, a 100 acre woodland site surrounding a disused reservoir in Upper Cwbran in the County Borough of Torfaen.

- An early leasehold (999 years) acquisition by the Forestry Commission in the 1930's, the area had been planted with Japanese Larch, Scots Pine and Spruce. Subsequent history saw the leasehold pass through private hands before an embryonic community group in the form of a Trust had the opportunity to take over the lease and bid for grant funding.
- In the process, the community group evolved from a Trust to a Company limited by guarantee before buying the lease in 2005, and has gone on to also become a registered Charity and set up a social enterprise trading arm.
- In the early days Blaen Bran Community Woodland had to deal with problems of vandalism, fly tipping and illegal motor biking.
- The woodland is now reaping the rewards of community involvement and major investment in woodland management with new plantings and improved access tracks. This was done with more volunteer effort than financial input.
- However, the presence of *Phythoptera Ramora* has resulted in the removal of large swathes of larch and the group have had to face the unexpected problem of how to restock these areas.
- The social enterprise trading arm provides training opportunities and generates an income from adding value to on-site timber. The event area has milling and firewood processing facilities and volunteers and trainees alike were in evidence making outdoor furniture for sale at local outlets and shows.



Image: Tour of Blaen Bran community woodland

South West Wales, Penllergaer

The Penllergare Trust was formed in 2004 as a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity to save the historic landscape designed and created by the 19th century horticulturist, philanthropist and pioneering photographer, John Dillwyn Llewelyn, on the northern fringe of Swansea.

- The site had been neglected, vandalised and was being threatened by development. On the site of the mansion house there are now council offices, and expansion of a modern housing estate threatened the walled garden, which includes the remains of a rather special orchid house.
- A 104 year lease of Penllergare Valley woodland from the private landowner was assigned to the Trust in 2012 for payment of what is a rather daunting annual sum. Lease of Council owned areas, including the walled gardens and observatory, is being negotiated.
- In 2012 the Trust was awarded £2.4million from the Heritage Lottery Fund Parks for People programme, and £600,000 cash and 'in kind' voluntary help has been raised as partnership funding. The work has also been supported by a grant from the European Regional Development Convergence Fund through Visit Wales and the Welsh Government through the 'One Historic Garden Project' linking heritage, gardens and opportunities across South Wales.
- The amount of work achieved in such a short space of time on this site is inspiring. One of the lakes has been dredged, terraces and a bridge restored, paths cleared, waterfalls made visible and repaired, car parking and a small cafe and visitor centre built, and an Archimedes screw installed beside the lake to generate income from hydropower. Woodland has been managed to open up vistas after more than fifty years of neglect, and undergrowth cleared revealing forgotten features such as perfectly preserved steps and yet more cascades.
- The challenge now is to raise funds for the next restoration phase (to include the orchid house and walled garden) and to find ways to ensure that the project is sustainable.



Image: Tour of Penllergare Trust woodland, standing next to the Archimedes screw

Mid East Wales, Knighton

Angie Zelter from the Knighton Tree Allotment Trust led a tour around one of the sites that the community woodland group manages at the Samantha Trust, a Buddhist Meditation Retreat Centre at Llangunllo – a 1.95 hectare larch and sweet chestnut plantation.

- An Environment Wales pre-project grant enabled the Trust to employ Dr Evelyn Over to survey the plantation and write a feasibility study. Dr. Over did a great job –they discovered that the *Phytophthora ramorum* fungus was only 40 miles away and the risk of it attacking the larch plantation was around 50% in the next 10 years. So felling it and replanting with mixed broad-leaves seemed like a good idea.
- When working with private woodland owners, the main challenge is how to reconcile two different sets of objectives. The Samantha Trust was keen to improve biodiversity and convert the woodland to broadleaves but they also use the site for meditation. The Allotment Trust were keen to manage the wood sustainably but also to generate fuelwood and other products and to encourage training and skill sharing. The Samantha Trust drew up a 10 year agreement which was signed in January 2013.
- In the two years of working the site, volunteers have taken part in coppicing, high pruning, brashing, processing and stacking firewood and conducting ecological surveys. Many have taken part in woodland management courses.
- The Allotment Trust has also contracted out felling work for the larch – the slopes are too steep for them to do it themselves. A coupe of 60 larch trees was felled and 158 broadleaves planted – finding suitable contractors to work such a small site has been problematic.
- The Samantha Trust has prepared a set of ‘tips’ for voluntary/not for profit groups on working with landowners on woodland – this is very useful and was widely shared.
- At present the Trust has 50 volunteers.
- The future – the Allotment Trust faces a number of challenges – it has relied upon grants so far but needs to become much more self-reliant – for example to have funds to pay for an administrator and a volunteer co-ordinator. Also it is difficult to find contractors who are skilled and reliable and will fell small quantities of larch on steep slopes. The group also want to attract more volunteers and offer them better training opportunities.



Image: Tour of site managed by Knighton Tree Allotment Trust

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The five regional events led by Llais y Goedwig and funded by Coed Cadw were very successful and brought together 150 people, from across the sector. Attendance and interest was beyond what was anticipated and the feedback from the events very positive.

The current situation for community woodland groups varies between the different areas of Wales, but the following conclusions can be made:

- There are established community woodland groups in all area of Wales, these have a wealth of experience and knowledge.
- New groups are appearing but this is sporadic and there is no scheme or programme that is specifically encouraging or supporting new groups.
- There are areas in Wales where there is less community woodland activity, such as Mid-East Wales (Powys).
- There are a wide range of support organizations that offer support to different groups; some areas feel well provided for but in some areas and for some groups it can be bitty and confusing. There are some gaps in support.
- The availability of woodland sites does not appear to be a limiting factor, but there are issues around linking woodlands and potential groups and in negotiating agreements.

Overall, community woodlands in Wales appear to be in a reasonably stable position, but with little forward momentum. The value of community woodlands to the community, environment and local economy came across very strongly in the events, and the need for greater momentum and more effective support mechanisms.

Moving towards a shared vision for community woodlands in Wales, these themes were identified:

1. A vibrant and active community woodlands sector in Wales
2. More community woodland groups in Wales
3. Community woodlands to be seen as a community right that meets the communities current and future needs
4. A strong community woodland support network in Wales
5. For groups to be self sustaining through income generation
6. To sustainably manage woodland to benefit people and wildlife

The debates on how to bring the sector closer to realizing these aims identified actions needed at a grassroots, networking and policy level. This has given Llais y Goedwig a lot to think about.

Next steps:

- The creation and dissemination of this report bringing together the event debates.
- Follow up meetings and / or questionnaire to prioritise actions and match them to potential delivery mechanisms.
- Initiating Regional Networks, as suggested as a priority in all areas, initially by sharing contact details between attendees at the event, which may develop further at a grassroots level and / or through Llais y Goedwig.
- Look into the possibility of going to the Welsh Government with a summary of the vision for community woodlands and what is needed.
- Work towards strengthening and developing Llais y Goedwig as a network to be able to implement more of the networking needs of community woodlands in Wales.
- Preparation of a major funding bid to be able to better support community woodlands.