

This Advisory Note is about understanding the needs of your community so that you can assess how your woodland group can respond to them. It gives an overview of experience and suggestions from community woodland groups and highlights different elements that new and established groups should consider. Every group and every setting is different but there is much that we can learn from each other.



What do we mean by community?

Community is about people who can be defined geographically, as a group of people who live within or close to a distinct place, or as a group of people who share a common interest. In both cases, it is a collection of people with a shared aim or purpose. From the point of view of community woodland groups (CWGs) the community is largely the former, people in a defined area associated with a specific woodland. Communities of interest do form around issues e.g. conservation of Red squirrels or activities e.g. a coppice group and such groups whose membership can be nationwide, can become involved with specific woodlands in a practical way which, of course, will have local impact.



Knowing the community

Your group needs to be clear on the identity of your community and who is included. This refers both to the area you identify with and the people you are serving. So, is it everyone within two miles of your woodland? Or potential clients for woodland well-being services in your town, county or region? Generally, there is already a lot of data out there on the history and current status of villages and towns organised around administrative units e.g. council boundaries. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) presents data for what are known as Output Areas with Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) being the smallest units for which data are available.

The Lle Geo-portal for Wales includes LSOA (lle.gov.wales/catalogue/item/lowersuperoutputareas) though you may find it easier to download 1:25,000 scale LSOA boundary maps from gov.wales/docs/statistics/lsomap. Make a note of the reference numbers for which you want data i.e. 9 digit numbers commencing W01000 as many data tables only reference these numbers.

You can obtain data for each LSOA on population, the index of multiple deprivation from StatsWales: statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue

Useful data can also come directly from your Local Authority, social housing associations etc. You should gather up as much of these data as are relevant to inform a picture of the community in its geographical, social, economic and cultural context. Many community needs will derive from this, for example, employment opportunities for isolated and economically inactive rural communities.



Community activity- can cover all ages Photo: Stuart Ashley



Community and woodland needs

Woodland management can be done in isolation, by a single landowner or contractor, but community woodlands have to reflect the needs of many people and be managed accordingly. Of course, community needs are likely to be far greater and more diverse than a woodland resource and a woodland group can provide. However, it is useful to have a holistic assessment of community needs before deciding on how woodland-based activities might respond. The needs of the woodland e.g. biodiversity interventions and silviculture, can then be assessed (see Advisory Note 4) alongside community needs and an appropriate management plan developed (see Advisory Note 6).



The community woodland group

You need to be clear about what your group members are signing up to and what skills they bring in relation to the skills your group will need. In many respects your group will be engaged in community development which combines social, cultural, environmental and economic activities; therefore your group will need people skilled in these three areas. Your group will be a collective of individuals, with individual perceptions, bias and conflicts and you will need to find a way to act corporately for the group dynamic to form.

The backbone of your group will be a solid core of members who manage the group, but this alone is not enough; you also need as many members and volunteers as you can muster to engage with woodland and community activities. Make sure individuals have enough time and support to participate. Try to have a realistic assessment of how much time will be needed to manage both the group and specific activities. Too often groups fail to deliver because time runs out or the energy of overburdened key group members is drained. Reliance on key group members is the main factor behind group burnout and collapse. Membership of your group, and Board, should reflect your community profile so that specific needs can be represented and prioritised. However,

care must be taken where one sector is overrepresented, which could cause conflict, e.g. the wishes of conservationists clashing with those of cyclists. In particular, if your retired population is large, and this is reflected in your group's profile, then the succession of the Board and key members becomes very important for the group's long-term sustainability.

Community groups generally need to be formally constituted in one way or another, for example, as a charity, limited liability company, Community Interest Company or as an unincorporated association. Which form you take will depend on how your group wants to 'do business' and what your group may need from other organisations (see Advisory Note 2). If external funding is required, working with partnerships is anticipated, services are to be provided or you intend to own land, then some form of formal incorporation will be required along with a bank account. Your group will also need insurance and if you are acquiring property or land there will be legal issues that need to be considered.



What does your community need?

There are many ways to identify community needs. One approach is to use questionnaires applied using structured interviews or left with people to fill in and return. Undertaking interviews can be daunting but it can be a good opportunity for community volunteers, it can also be more perception-based and less personal, easier for the interviewee, and it can make your group more visible within the community. The main thing to watch out for is that the interviewee does not introduce personal bias into the interview session and feedback. Posting questionnaires is less scary but they also tend to be ignored and without follow up you can expect to have around 1 out of 10 of your questionnaires returned.

Generally, the more participatory the method of collecting community views the better the outcome. The community will have a greater sense of ownership and you will be able to feed back such as: 'you said you needed that, so we are doing this'. Telling everyone involved what you found out in your survey is critically important and constitutes the next step in clarifying and prioritising community needs. If you do not have community backing for your group's proposals you will store up problems for the future. These may manifest as lack of community buy-in, local challenges to funding applications, and negative publicity: 'we do not want that here'.

The needs or issues identified may not seem to be ones that your woodland can address, for example interviewees may state:

"I have teenage children that 'hang out' in the village, and knowing that there's drugs around gives children the opportunity to experiment."

Taking this forward, exploring a little more, an interviewee may state:

"I believe that young people should have more things to do in the community, for the sake of the area and in order to avoid antisocial behaviour."

The woodland group can then look at how it may be able to provide 'more things to do' for young people, whether woodworking activity, events targeted at different age groups or even volunteer work opportunities.

You can use both data and perception-based analyses (though you may need to think about how to access these skills) to inform your proposals and funding applications. Structured analysis can

provide strong evidence to provide new services or for woodland facilities such as youth theatre, woodworking and cultivation. Take care not to be too negative when reporting back on the needs analysis. There will always be descriptions of lack of services or jobs so ensure positive aspects of your proposed activities are mentioned up front.

Community needs will be broad and you will find many ways of utilising your woodland resource to address them, some of which you may not have previously considered. However, take care not to overstretch your group's resources and, in particular, raise expectations within the community that you may not be able to fulfil. Keep the process of community engagement ongoing; needs and priorities change, for example, from the current public sector spending cuts. You also need to assess how well your group is doing and make modifications as needed.



Planting a hedge for 'Tree O'Clock' event Photo: Blaen Brân Community Woodland



Going forward

Once you have completed your initial community appraisal and reported back to the community, it is important to validate and check that messages are clear and have been understood. The *community* has to prioritise its own needs and agree on action based on the report. The *group* should then seek support for the next steps. These are likely to be:

- Identifying opportunities for the woodland group to meet needs identified
- Agreeing action plans to address priority and opportunity
- Providing a framework for action, who does what by when
- Matching action plans with available skills/experience
- Identifying resources requirements



Regular engagement

Community engagement is not a one-off activity - attitudes and priorities change. To keep in touch with people you will need a means of communication. There are many options: newsletter, bulletins, websites, and Facebook or Twitter are all effective channels which can provide information for the community and a way for the community to engage and give feedback.

There is no one model for community engagement but getting to know your community and having a clear, honest and open relationship with them is a vital aspect that helps define a *community-led woodland group*, foster participation and create a community-based identity for your woodland and activities.



Photo: Golygfa Gwydyr



Inviting in the neighbours Photo: Zena Wilmot

This Advisory Note was updated in 2022 from the original prepared for Llais y Goedwig by Roger Davies of Golygfa Gwydyr and David Williams of Blaen Brân Community Woodland in 2011.

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. These are a growing series of Advisory Notes that focus on different aspects that we hope will be useful to our members and others interested in community woodlands in Wales.

As Community Woodland Groups much of what we do falls under the remit of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Act provides us with a useful planning aid that we can use as individual groups to direct our activities and outcomes, and as a Wales-wide collective working towards common goals. Information and guidance on the Act can be found [here](https://futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act) (futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act) and in our [Advisory Note 5 WFGA and SMNR](#).

Contact us:

Llais y Goedwig

Unit 1, Dyfi Eco Park, Machynlleth, Powys

SY20 8AX

Tel: 01645 700061

www.llaisygoedwig.org.uk