



Civil Society, Communities and Woodlands: Key messages from a meeting to share experience and discuss emerging opportunities

Background

In February 2011, a meeting was organised to draw together people with experience in forestry and woodland management, social and community enterprise, and social science research to investigate the implications of current and evolving policy for community ownership, stewardship and participation in woodland. The meeting, with participants from England, Wales and Scotland, gave an opportunity to take stock of experience across all three countries, exchange lessons and look towards the future.

Discussion included both communities brought together by virtue of their geographical location, but also communities of interest, those with shared objectives, focused around particular defined tree-covered, wooded or forested areas. It encompassed community woodland groups along a spectrum from those who own a wood, to those who lease one, to those who manage woodland under agreement with a landowner.

Circumstances are evolving fast for community groups and other civil society organisations looking to involve themselves in forest and woodland management and ownership. The drive towards greater civil society involvement in different aspects of policy, the push for greater localism, and the development of social and community enterprises all provide new opportunities as well as challenges for those concerned. This is as true for existing groups looking to maintain and develop their woodlands and activities, as it is for potential new groups.

This report sets out the content of presentations and discussions at the meeting and draws out key messages on what is needed to enable communities and civil society to have more direct involvement in shaping the future of woodland.



Summary of the meeting

1. Panel discussion

Judy Walker of Small Woods Association – initially saw the Big Society as an opportunity to devolve power to the most appropriate level, to build a community woodland network in England as in Scotland and to extend social forestry. The Localism Bill will provide new rights – the right to buy and the right to challenge.

The right to buy is an opportunity for communities, but where are resources going to come from? Woodland management can provide money to support woods.

Could the right to challenge result in protests against sustainable management of woods by those who are uninformed? A study by Small Woods Association commissioned by Forest Research showed the frustration of woodland groups in England criticised by communities for sustainable management of woods.

Mark Walton, Community Development Foundation (CDF) spoke about the Waterways project, which proposes social enterprise and asset development opportunities that might arise from the transfer of British Waterways to a charity. The CDF itself has suffered in the ‘bonfire of the quangos’ and is to become a charity. He also mentioned the Localism Bill, and changes to planning legislation, but highlighted barriers, including funding, capacity issues (time and skills), and dealing with differing views within communities. Opportunities include new forms of local sustainable development, more active engagement of communities with their environment, and connections between communities. CDF is asking for a Commission on Environmental Assets to avoid silo thinking in governance approaches to natural resources.



WTPU/Keith Huggett

Marcus Sangster of Forestry Commission exhorted people to raise their game and understand that the proposed disposal of the public forest estate in England offered a unique, once-in-a-century opportunity to engender community ownership and management on the scale and of the type seen in Europe. The public forest estate is extensive and if its ownership is to change then its potential to support long-term, sustainable jobs in wood processing, forest management, environmental management and outdoor recreation should be exploited to the full. The contribution of the forests to the wider rural economy, especially in the tourism and recreation sectors, can be greater than the value of the income generated directly by the forests themselves. We found this when we closed the forests during the foot-and-mouth-disease crisis. Capturing this value requires professional management and a strategic outlook. Breaking up the estate into small-scale ownership

concentrated only on delivering very local, social benefits will fail to secure this potential. Community ownership of very extensive forest areas should be considered, with transfer of assets to those communities free of charge. Local people should be given rights over the forests that are relevant to contemporary society, creating new common lands for the 21st century that are regional and national assets for the future.



WTPU/Nick Cobbing

Questions and discussion covered:

- The complexities of different woods and different communities – the fact that there can't be a 'one size fits all' solution.
- Assets are also liabilities and this needs to be recognised. We need to educate and equip communities to take on assets.
- The need to reinvigorate a wood culture in this country as still exists in France and elsewhere in Europe.
- Also, whether we need to transfer ownership or whether there are opportunities for civil society to have control and management without it.
- The need for a strong tier of local government (or alternative systems of governance as once existed in the New Forest) to take on woods if the European model is to succeed here.
- A modern forestry industry can't be supported with whittling, pea sticks, mushrooms and berries – these are valuable but essentially minor activities.



Community tree nursery project, Scotland

2. Community woodlands in context

Anna Lawrence, Forest Research

Provided background statistics on community ownership and management worldwide. In England, only 4000 ha out of a total of 1 million ha is recorded as community owned, and in Wales and Scotland the amount is even lower, according to data from the 1990s which is currently being updated.

The presentation compared different models and highlighted what might be learnt from abroad:

- Germany, where rural communities have had forests for centuries, covered by Forest Laws, managed by foresters on behalf of local governments, and where fuel and timber are strong motivations.
- Romania, where forests have been returned to the pre-war owners since the collapse of communism, in a relatively chaotic but popular process. Because the current situation is based on historical precedent, the result is lots of different models. Fuel and timber, but also symbolic and political value of forests are a motivator.
- USA, where very little community owned wood but the example was a site taken on by the community to save it from development – ‘conservation easements’ used to enable purchase.
- Canada, where most forest is publicly owned but a range of mechanisms exist for community involvement and benefit – eg where community owns the company that exploits the state-owned forest.
- India and USA, where participatory science has produced relevant and usable knowledge for community/co-management decisions.
- UK – historical inequities in land use, great variety of woodland resource and population. People are motivated by conservation and recreation; there are many possibilities for models that we can learn from other countries.

Questions and discussion covered:

- Need for learning mechanisms, a manual of what has worked elsewhere including an understanding of the context and design features that are fixed or can be developed
- Understanding of different legislation in the countries of the UK.
- That ownership is not the only mechanism for increasing the opportunities civil society has for engaging with woodlands and forests.
- Expertise is not just professional knowledge, and is located both within and out with communities.
- More research and understanding of the role that private finance could play

Visions of the future for civil society involvement

Ann Marie Wrigley, New Era Enterprises

Gave brief history of the co-operative movement, self-help based on ethical principles. People have always been proactive in empowering themselves regardless of the political and economic circumstances. Despite fall-off in funding, this will continue. It is also important for the government to understand what role it should still be playing, where there are actions it can undertake for the public benefit.

Jo Sayers, Mersey Forest

Gave good examples of the benefits of community forests for mental and physical health, dealing with behavioural difficulties, and skills for employment. The Community Forests are about bringing back an ethos of understanding woodland and forests as an important part of the urban and peri-urban landscape. The future for Community Forests

lies in building more community commitment and interest in trees, woods and greenspace and providing people with the confidence to make a difference in their locality. The role of an enabling institution such as the Community Forest would seem to be important amongst urban and deprived communities with fewer skills and less social capital.



WTPL/Mark Feather

Wilberforce Wood: Local residents in Hull were consulted on how a 14 ha site should be redeveloped to create a green space for all to use.

Jenny Wong, Coetir Mynydd

Gave an example of a community seeking to influence the management of their local woodland. This led to them buying one wood, and finding ways of influencing the forest design plans of the Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) in another. The opportunities and barriers associated with each were discussed. There was then a realisation that governance systems needed changing and influencing, which was an ambition beyond the capacity of a single community group. This contributed to the establishment of national umbrella body for community woodland groups which has enabled more input and influence over policy at national level. The future lies in continuing to build relationships with FCW at a policy level so they recognise the practical management and contracting tasks community groups are capable of, providing more support for new and existing woodland groups to develop their 'projects' and continuing to build entrepreneurial capacity.

Forestry Commission 2002/620



Building project at community wood in Scotland

Questions and discussion covered:

- The complexities of risk and liability in urban woodlands in both social and technical terms (e.g. woodland on regeneration sites may have environmental liabilities that communities cannot take on alone).
- The need for 'fit-for-purpose' governance institutions.
- The role for investment finance.

4. Evidence from experience: What facilitates successful civil society and community engagement with woodlands

Jon Hollingdale, Community Woodlands Association

Community Woodlands Association (CWA) was established 2003 in Scotland, now has 190 groups who own, lease, or work in partnership with others in their woods. Government policy has been to increase land value but decrease the value of the products from the land, which makes it very difficult for communities to buy land and then develop sustainable businesses. This may change with biomass and carbon.

- **What doesn't work:** Policies need to be flexible to allow for variation in communities and woods. Too much bureaucracy and regulation stifles community initiatives.
- **What does work:** Empowerment, access, the opportunity to participate, passionate individuals who can bring others with them, professional support, networking, training, and time.

Policy makers in England need a serious commitment to transfer control to communities, an understanding of the governance structures needed, a forum for networking, suitable funding, and recognition that this is a long term process.



Community Woodland Association

Nigel Lowthrop, Hill Holt Wood

Described Hill Holt Wood, social enterprise and thriving business, as an example of what can be done with creative enthusiasm. The site includes a school, training programmes, design and building projects. Last year the enterprise turned over £1.2million, employs 70 people, and provides services to government, all from a 32-hectare site. This is the kind of activity that demonstrates the real value of woodland. What works is getting the right business model in place in the right location. The right business model means including the local community as board members or other governance/ownership structures, managing to ensure the resource is perpetual, seeking multiple benefits through multiple products, maintaining public access and interest, and ensuring equity in benefit sharing and business costings and levels of employee remuneration.



Community Woodland Association

Roger Davis, Llais y Goedwig

The work of the new voluntary association of woodland community groups in Wales, Llais Y Goedwig (Voice of the Woodlands) was described. The history and objectives of a number of the member groups was summarised. Highlighted as key ingredients of success for establishing and strengthening community woodland groups were: start-up funding or investment, many, although not all, of the woodland community groups in Wales have received significant grant funding through e.g. the Cyd Coed programme; a clear objective or purpose that communities can buy into; long term planning; the ability to raise finance or income from forest operations. Also noted was: the need to put monetary value onto social benefits provided by forests if the evaluation and assessment of the success and impact of community and civil society forestry was to be properly understood and judged; the need for better co-ordination between local authorities around potential for civil society and forestry within the Rural Development Plan; the need for more joined up thinking around environmental resources such as woodland.

Peter Eustance, Woolton Village Residents Association

Provided a history of the Residents' Association and the sister group managing Woolton Woods over 82 acres. The group has managed to gain accreditation to use land and woodland management equipment so that it is able to undertake tasks such as mowing and tree maintenance work on council-owned land. Ingredients of success come from: proving to public agencies the ability of the community group to undertake complex tasks such as woodland management planning and mechanised maintenance tasks; support of third sector organisations such as the BTCV regarding skills training and insurance; maintaining varied funding streams from grant funding to Community Contract Initiatives, as well as community fund raising activities. Noted that the group has come to a limit in terms of financial and activity capacity and needs to be looking at how to take things to the next level. Was clear that politicians are a barrier, preventing the group from felling and looking at the entrepreneurial management they want to do.



Friends of Woolton Woods

Woolton Village Residents Association and Friends of Woolton Woods receive equipment from T and H Tractors, Ormskirk. As well as woodland work, the residents are creating a wildflower meadow to counteract bumblebee decline.

5. Key messages

The collective conclusions of the workshop participants were as follows:

Experience and evidence:

1. The evidence concerning which models of civil society engagement in forestry are successful across Great Britain is now substantial – we should learn from this experience.
2. Evidence shows community-based commercially viable forest management is possible. The start-up costs to woodland and forest management are a major barrier.
3. Woodland ownership can be attractive and helpful for community based development, but in many cases community groups do not desire ownership, or find it unfeasible. It is important to consider (and learn from) the wide range of other tenure models available.
4. In this regard, partnerships with local authorities are significant, but often overlooked in the debate.
5. The ‘soft’ outcomes and ecosystem services which flow as a result of civil society ownership and management are undervalued.
6. Developing social enterprises is an attractive proposition as a mix of commercial, social and environmental benefit outcomes should result through active woodland management.
7. In some areas economic use of woodland by civil society organisations is hampered because it is the poorest quality woodlands which are offered to civil society or are affordable.

Ways forward:

8. A governance framework for community and civil society based forestry and woodland management is needed which can accommodate different models in different local contexts.
9. Communities and civil society groups need to be made more aware of forestry and woodland potential for social, environmental and economic resource and enterprise opportunities.
10. Developing community and civil society based forestry is not an overnight process – medium and long term support mechanisms are required.
11. Achieving aims of more localism and greater community empowerment demands resources. With traditional grant funding reducing, other resource mechanisms will need to be explored e.g. tax breaks, reduction in bureaucracy – employment law, Companies House requirements.
12. Enablers are needed to facilitate civil society management and ownership of woodlands, for example to help build capacity and skills within community and civil society organisations, to ensure they have access to training and equipment, and to facilitate knowledge transfer to and between groups.
13. Overarching state policy and strategy need to be translated by community and civil society organisations into action plans where their development is aided by local authorities and government agencies who serve to improve planning but not to withhold it. Political will is required to develop these mechanisms.