Community Woodlands and Community Woodland Groups in England: Sustainability, Networking and Voice

Workshop Synthesis Report

Prepared for

Forestry Commission England and Small Woods

by

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Forest Research is the Research Agency of the Forestry Commission and is the leading UK organisation engaged in forestry and tree related research. The Agency aims to support and enhance forestry and its role in sustainable development by providing innovative, high quality scientific research, technical support and consultancy services.

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Executive Summary

1. Representatives from 11 community woodland groups (CWGs) met for a day to debate the key issues around the social, economic and ecological sustainability of the sector, and to consider ways forward in terms of mutual support and networking.

2. Barriers to sustainability CWGs emphasised were:

   - **CWG capacity and development** to meet emerging opportunities (e.g. social enterprise) and ensure continuing membership and skills development, and maintain a strong volunteer base

   - **financial barriers linked to lack of working capital and cash flow** problems aggravated by retrospective grants impacting on the choice and range of management activities and social or financial interventions CWGs are able to undertake. The large start up costs for new groups was also mentioned as a brake on development of the community woodland sector.

   - **governance arrangements and institutions** that were difficult, complicated and time consuming to access and deal with, of particular mention were lack of experience taking advantage of the localism agenda and negotiating beneficial Section 106 agreements.

   - CWG capacity issues around **woodland management planning and implementation**

   - **relationships with owners** relating to CWG autonomy and landowner buy-in to what CWGs are trying to achieve

   - The **poor condition, size, access and viability of woodlands offered to CWGs** for management or available to them on the open market

3. **CWGs continue to access a large range of support types** from an equally large range of providers. Support ranges from grant aid, equipment sharing and loans, knowledge and skills. There were few examples of CWGs supporting each other.

4. Many **CWGs are looking for alternatives to grant aid**, but there were more limited ideas about what products and charging systems might be appropriate. **Social enterprises** are an emerging form amongst CWGs, but it was noted that many more CWGs are likely to continue work with more modest objectives and capacities. The condition, size and location of woodland, as well as the ownership of the woodland, were noted as key barriers to developing sustainable income streams from community woodlands.

5. The **public continue to hold negative perceptions** of woodland management, so are often hostile towards CWG activities. This was attributed to a lack of understanding of active woodland management systems and the benefits provided. Public engagement was considered vital to ensuring social, environmental and economic sustainability.

6. **A lack of land owner networking** including CWGs remains a barrier to tackling woodland management issues such as pest control that rely on shared values and joint working across holdings.

7. There was a general consensus amongst CWGs that local level networking amongst groups would be useful for practical problem solving, shared learning and access to shared equipment and services. Allowing this **local level network to grow organically as a grass roots** led initiative was a strongly held view.

8. Ideas about the initial steps to develop these local networks included the **provision of a single list of CWGs across England** so groups can contact each other, and **sub-national events to bring CWGs together** in a single forum to get to know each other and make the initial contacts that could take forward the development of local networks. The development of appropriate communication tools including web pages and social media were also mentioned.

9. There was general agreement that a national level community woodland organisation would be welcome, but **no appetite for a resource heavy additional structure**. CWGs expressed unease **about the level of long term commitment and level of time and resources** required to sustain such a body by CWG volunteers and the leadership required to move towards such an organisation.

10. The **core functions** of a national body were identified as **information provision, advocacy and influence, co-ordination between local level institutions, building a joint identity**.

11. Initial actions suggested to support development of a national level organisation were the **production of a web-based hub** for the collation of information, and the organisation of an **annual meeting of CWGs** to build understanding, actions for and momentum around formation of a national body.

12. Whilst there is support for CWG networking and a national body it may be that:

   - **external support** is needed to initiate this process,

   - CWGs in England would benefit from **greater understanding of the organisational models** in Wales and Scotland,

   - **involvement from organisations** CWGs are **already affiliated** with is needed to build a new English CWG brand identity.

Community Woodlands and Community Woodland Groups in England: Sustainability, Networking and Voice

1. Introduction

A total of 25 representatives from 11 community groups met at Appleton Village Hall, Oxfordshire on 12th January 2013 to discuss issues related to the sustainability and growth of community-based woodlands and forestry. The meeting was organised by Small Woods on behalf of Forestry Commission England. The purpose of the meeting was:

- to bring together community woodland groups to share contacts and experiences,

- seek opinions and information from group representatives about how the community woodlands sector might be supported and developed.

A morning walk through Besselsleigh woodlands was followed by afternoon workshop discussion sessions that explored:

1. The main barriers to growth and sustainability faced by community woodlands

2. How community woodlands engage with the public and other stakeholders to promote woodland culture

3. The need for, and mechanisms to facilitate, mutual support and networking amongst community woodland groups

4. The value of, and ways to achieve, a 'voice' representative of the English community woodland sector.

This document reports on the headline messages and key issues that emerged through the day.

2. Main findings

2.1. Sustainability – Barriers and opportunities

Economic and financial

Although it was recognised that the level of available grant income, either for the woodland resource or for people focused activities, had declined significantly in recent years, grant income was still available from a range of different sources. Where groups rely on grant support the value of collaborative and partnership working, as well as the continuing use of volunteers and their contribution to matched funding proposals was emphasised.

The most significant barrier mentioned was **cash flow and retrospective grant aid**. CWG's lack of working capital and small capital reserves prevent them from developing activities and woodland operations where there are large up-front costs not covered by either an immediate financial return, or where grant aid payments were paid out after delivery is achieved. The paucity of grant aid and support for maintenance work and paid for posts such as rangers was also noted. As one participant expressed it:

> *"The biggest problem of all is that the system of funding, "capital spend", is completely divorced from the reality of what is needed for conservation which is continuity of site management – revenue spend"*

Lack of **pump priming style funding for CWG start-up** was mentioned by a few participants as a barrier to developing the number of CWGs operating in the sector.

There was some enthusiastic discussion around the value of **community-based social enterprise as an approach** now being evolved by a number of the CWGs represented at the meeting, as well as across the sector more widely. The barriers to evolving social enterprises were identified as **mostly knowledge-based on the supply side**, i.e. CWGs not having adequate knowledge of how best to proceed and develop their enterprise in form, how to business plan and find suitable marketable products, and **attitudinal on the demand side**, i.e. potential customers not wanting to pay for goods and services traditionally viewed as free.

It was noted that some **income earning activities should be viewed as methods for overcoming some of the barriers** faced by CWGs, for example, using the training courses providers pay to hold in CWG woodland as means of undertaking woodland management work where CWG volunteer time and skills are limited. Further advantages of this approach are CWG cost savings on operations and provision of products for sale.

There was also a recognition that not all CWGs would wish to take this income generating or social enterprise route. Some **CWGs have relatively modest**

ambitions, and others may have group objectives and woodland **management plans which may not be income led or require significant income for their realisation**.

Illustrative comments around financial sustainability were:

> *"Some groups involve people who simply want to mess about in the woods at weekends and feel like it makes a difference to their environment … not get into the business or endless money chasing game"*

> *"It's just not realistic to think woodland groups are going to be thinking about how to make money out of the woods all the time, that's not their main motivation"*

> *"To be honest you get to a certain point and there's not always that much which needs to be done in the woods anymore. Everything just sort of ticks over. After some initial outlay …. you need little pulses of money for smaller tasks at that point"*

> *"We have always relied on grants and we will carry on … we muddle through …. but there is a sea change .… there has been a big shift in attitude to try and do something different"*

> *"I don't see how anybody can really get anywhere without initially really big large scale money from funding bodies, and that's the real skill, not so much for sustainability, but in getting going in the first place"*

> *"The barrier to sustainability is the longer term funding …. I don't particularly find there is any issue with getting grants of initial one-off chunks of money to set something up but it's then how do you employ somebody …. like a Ranger or somebody … that's more of a long term than capital funding thing."*

> *"We should really be charging for people to walk in our woodland …. but would the government ….. allow us to do that? Not this one …. I don't think so"*

The woodland resource

There were fewer comments from representatives about the barriers to woodland sustainability in an ecological/environmental sense. Some participants noted that the **size of the woodland, the condition, access, and level of use by the public,** can limit the potential of smaller woods to realise a full range of sustainable benefits. Eight of the CWG representatives debated this point and felt woodlands **above 4 ha** were the best proposition in terms of ecological and financial sustainability.

The majority of representatives did however mention the **importance of woodland management plans**. Preparation of these was noted as a significant barrier to resource sustainability. The particular challenges mentioned were:

- **Lack of understanding** amongst CWGs about woodland systems and forestry practice

- Difficulty CWGs have **negotiating management objectives** amongst a group and in collaboration with land owners

- Devising plans where **delivery is realistically achievable** within the limits of the CWG (knowledge, skills, time, equipment, finance).

Social and institutional

The social strand of sustainability generated vigorous discussion. Key issues related to **group capacity and development**, **relationships with owners**, and **governance arrangements and institutions**.

Many of the CWGs represented manage the woodland for owners, particularly Local Authorities. Several groups mentioned the lack of "a woodland culture" within Local Authorities as an increasingly pressing issue. Groups felt this was largely an outcome of budget reductions causing decreases in woodland and silvicultural related roles within local government. These gaps in understanding of woodland management issues are thought to lead to a **lack of "buy-in" from owners**.

Consequently, **woodland risks and potentials are often poorly assessed, the profile and importance of woodland and CWG work are not prioritised, consent for activities often withheld, and decision making delayed**.

This was having impact in three main arenas: woodland pest management (e.g. squirrel, deer and bracken control); felling and silvicultural operations (negative attitudes to this kind of working and a risk averse H&S culture); increasing public access (risk averse H&S culture). One participant expressed their frustrations by saying the woodland owner:

> " …. know[s] little or nothing about conservation or the sites, contribute very little, do not talk to anyone but decide all the time about what is best"

CWG capacity in terms of available time to contribute to group running, management and activities, as well as the skill mix and knowledge of group members, membership recruitment and succession issues, sustaining volunteer numbers were all debated as significant barriers to sustainability. The lack of connection between the generations and people at different stages in lifecycle amongst the most active CWG members was noted.

There was a clear **tension for some CWGs around access to woodlands** by different woodland user groups **and the dangers of success**, i.e. resource degradation brought about by increased numbers of visitors, and the increased use of woodlands by users from outside the local community. However, there was a directly contrasting view to this too. Some CWG representatives though that **providing a full range of activities**

and access opportunities reflecting the needs of as many different user groups as possible, as well as the range of interests amongst different segments of the public, was a key to social sustainability.

Finally a group of 6 participants debated **the localism agenda** and methods of keying into this as an important route to sustainability. Three main routes to overcoming barriers mentioned were:

- **Clearer guidance** for local authorities and community groups about how best to negotiate and secure Section 106 agreements - and successor forms - to include woodland creation and the management of existing woodlands for community benefit

- **Increasing understanding** amongst Local Authority staff, council members, and other local level decision makers about the range of benefits amongst those

- **Producing best practice case studies** of how other CWGs have achieved success implementing Section 106 agreements.

As one participant noted:

> "*the [Council] members are only interested in people complaining about lack of this or that service …. we struggle to get our representatives to understand what we are doing and why it's important …. you take them into a woodland and they say "Oh yes" and then they're gone*"

Currently used support mechanisms

The discussants provided a long list of different kinds of support. Support providers and kinds of support used varied according to the objectives of the CWG and their woodland management aims. The main types and sources were:

- **Grant aid**: this was for resource focused operations as well people focused activities within woodlands, with sources from large and small awarding bodies.

- **Equipment**: loans and sharing of e.g. tractors, splitters, saws, with other CWGs, landowners, farmers and businesses.

- **Knowledge and information**: from other CWGs, landowners, environmental, volunteering, woodland and conservation based NGOs and civil society organisations with a relevant interest in the CW sector.

- **Starting points, signposts and gateways**: help navigating all the information and resources available was recognised as important to CWGs particularly new entrants. Help here is provided by other CWGs, Local Authority contacts,

woodland and conservation based NGOs and civil society organisations with a relevant interest in the CW sector.

- **Woodland management planning**: Oxfordshire Woodland Project, Sylva Foundation, BTCV (now TCV) and Small Woods were listed as the organisations providing tools, training and support in this area.

- **Biodiversity surveys, other inventories and 'research'**: advice and support around volunteer involvement provided by a range of woodland and conservation based NGOs and civil society organisations with a relevant interest

There were very few examples of CWGs supporting each other.

The importance of the woodland officer role (Forestry Commission and non-Forestry Commission) was emphasised as important for the provision of:

- Technical expertise

- Management planning support

- Promotion of CWGs to other stakeholders and support bodies enabling networking and access to resources

However, it was noted that, as non-traditional woodland managers, CWGs sometimes experience difficulties accessing woodland officers.

2.2. Woodland culture - Engaging with the public and other stakeholders

A general consensus at the workshop was that the **public continue to hold negative perceptions** of woodland management, so are often hostile towards CWG activities. Delegates agreed that this was, for the most part, due to a lack of understanding of active woodland management systems and the benefits provided. As one person remarked:

> "*The public look upon the forester as a tree murderer*"

Finding **ways to communicate with and engage the public** and increase understanding was considered vital. The CWGs listed the types of activities currently undertaken and the relative merits of different approaches. Methods employed included: being generally available to the public; get-togethers; open days and tree fests; interpretation signage; the use of social media (mostly Facebook) and websites; the use of printed media; and making efforts to engage with local people and institutions such as Parish Council meetings. The key points here were:

- Strategies to **craft and manage messages** suited to the interests and concerns of the public in specific locations are vital to shifting perceptions

- The **effective use of web-based social and other media** may be a missed opportunity for many CWGs

- Strategies to **avert or manage anti-social behaviour** in woodlands are a key attitude changer

- Strategies to **maintain CWG morale** dealing with difficult issues, anti-social and other challenging public behaviour are crucial.

It was also noted that **some segments of the public are more intransigent and may never change viewpoint**, as this comment illustrates:

> *"There is a set of people who believe that the best things for the woodland are for things to be left alone for nature to do what nature intended …. we've tried all kinds of things open days and other things …. but there is a section of people who will never change their point of view …. they have set ideas about what a woodland should be …. in the end you just have to live with them"*

In addition some groups felt that **traditional families and strongly traditional rural cultures** acted as a brake to CWGs efforts because of a resistance to perceived "new and strange ways" of working and managing the land.

This issue is particularly significant where **land owner networks** to tackle management issues such as pest control rely on joint values and shared working across holdings.

2.3. Working together – Networking and mutual support

There was a sharp debate about the need for networking and support at different levels and for different purposes. The lack of a local level CWG network to improve support was mentioned as a barrier to sustainability. There was a distinct preference for **practical experience sharing and joint problem solving** being something organised by **community groups themselves at the local level**. There was a general consensus about allowing this **local level network to grow organically as a grass roots** led initiative. It was agreed that it would need to be self sustaining, not least because the "stop-start" associated with grant aid acts as a brake to development.

The **main functions** of a local level network that were mentioned included:

- Local level **support and learning networks**

- Provision of **exemplars, case studies and mentors**

- Building CWG **confidence and inspiration** through example

- **Equipment** sharing

- **Joint procurement**: This would include joint purchase of consultancy and technical advice services e.g. engagement with Oxfordshire Woodland Project.

- **Co-ordinating** interaction between CWGs at the local level

- Providing a **voice upwards** to other organisations

Some simple but **important first steps** were identified which could facilitate the growth of a local network approach. These were:

1. The production of a simple list, database or map of all known CWGs in England, available on one community woodland branded website. The list would include:

    - Contact details

    - Geographic location and context (e.g. rural, peri-urban, urban)

    - Group objectives

    - Description of the woodlands CWGs interact with and the woodland management objectives

    - Activities undertaken or completed by groups

    - Skills and experience audits

2. Sub-national events to bring CWGs together in a single forum to get to know each other and make the initial contacts that could take forward the development of social and learning networks

3. Help with the production of social media websites and other communication tools beyond static print and newsletter formats to support local level initiatives

4. Roadshows travelling between regions and bringing specific issues-based training and discussion to CWGs e.g. woodland management planning day, fuelwood benefits day

5. Open days and visits to other CWGs to allow stories and experiences to be shared.

2.4. Community woodland sector voice

There was recognition amongst all the CWG representatives that a national unified voice for CWGs in England was generally "a good idea". Discussants agreed that a voice

interacting in national and sub-national forums playing an advocacy role where it mattered, could make a difference to overcoming some of the barriers faced and help grow the sector. As one participant expressed it:

> " …. *most groups are quite parochial in their view and only want to look at their site, and I understand that, but they can't think strategically about where we need to get to, we have to work together because people have to think strategically to think about what we can do together to force a change of attitude*"

However, there was some debate about **how exactly CWGs might benefit** from any national body, and **why they should contribute** resources to such a body. There was also a degree of **unease about the level of long term commitment and level of time and resources** required to sustain such a body.

There was a very clear message that there was **no appetite for another resource heavy additional structure** amongst all the other groups and institutions CWGs already belong to. What was recognised as a **key requirement was leadership**. Overall the feeling seemed to be in favour of "somebody else doing this for us".

The potential **core functions of a national body** were listed as follows:

- Central point for **information and advice including** lists of service providers, with particular attention given to emerging opportunities such as social enterprise and learning from innovation and experimentation in different national contexts

- **Central point of contact** enabling interaction with other groups in other regions and sub-national contexts

- **Lobbying** Local Authorities and government

- **Advocacy and influence** with forestry, environmental and planning departments of government

- Organising an **annual meeting** for all CWGs

- **Providing and building an identity** for the CWG sector

- **Facilitating** working together schemes.

Some simple but **important first steps** were identified which could facilitate the growth of a national body. These were:

- Provision of a simple **web-based platform acting as a hub for resource** collation and communication. There was recognition that there were plenty of resources of the sorts required available from other organisations with the need being a web-based home to marshal all these together effectively. The existing maze of information needs sign posting

- Web architecture of such a hub to allow **connections (spokes) to local CWG** produced sub-national material

- **Kick starting a process of national organisation building** by facilitating a system of revolving hosts taking on responsibility to convene an annual meeting of CWGs to build understanding of, buy-in to forming and discussing decision making or governance arrangements around a national body.

3. Concluding comments

The barriers and opportunities CWGs discussed at the workshop and are reported here are largely a reiteration and reinforcement of evidence already collected, with additional information about the detail related to the contexts that the different groups represented at this meeting operate in.

What is different about this meeting is the new conversation about CWG networking and the potential for local, sub-national and national level organisations. There is a positive attitude towards local networks and a national body, but fewer clear ideas about how to bring this about.

The evidence suggests that:

1. **Establishment of a national CWG body may need external support**. The national bodies in Wales and Scotland have received considerable external support in their establishment. In Wales particularly, significant financial and project support from the Forestry Commission established LLais Y Goedwig, through sponsorship of a project led by Coed Lleol.

2. **CWGs would benefit from better understanding of what LLais Y Goedwig and the Community Woodlands Association** do for their members, how they established themselves, and information about their governance, funding and organisation. This kind of information is likely to help CWGs better articulate the form and function of local, sub-national and national organisations in England.

3. It may be appropriate for **the creation of a "brand identity"** for CWGs as a collective through the **involvement of other stakeholders**. CWGs in England operate for a variety of different reasons and are consequently linked to a large range of organisations representing those varied interests including conservation, urban regeneration, parks and recreation, education, and enterprise development. Organisations and 'brands' such as the Woodland Trust, Small Woods, TCV, Greenspace already provide trusted affiliations for many CWGs. Bringing together such stakeholders to work together in the establishment of a nascent national identity for CWGs could be a productive route forward.

![Forest Research logo]

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