

Inquiry into forestry and woodland policy – stakeholder seminar in Maesteg

On 22 June 2017, the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee held a stakeholder seminar with user groups in the Llynfi Library in Maesteg. The seminar was designed to inform the Committee’s inquiry into forestry and woodland policy in Wales; in particular, the delivery of the Welsh Government’s Woodlands for Wales Strategy under the ‘Woodlands for People – serving local needs for health, education and jobs’ strategic theme.

The topics for discussion were:

01. Community involvement with woodlands – exploring the extent to which there are effective mechanisms and support structures for community engagement and involvement.
02. Recreational use of woodlands – exploring how a well-managed woodland can deliver social and economic benefits for all users and how the different recreational uses of woodlands can best be promoted and managed.

Group 1 – Community involvement with woodlands

Participants:

- Sasha Ufnowska, Llais y Goedwig
- Mark Blackmore, Bridgend Countryside Volunteering Network
- Rob Jones, Bridgend County Borough Council
- Sam Packer, Woodland Trust
- Fay Calloway, Communities First Bridgend
- Jeremy Dimond, Communities First Bridgend
- Rowland Pittard, Bridgend Local Access Forum & Youth Hostelling Association
- John Herd, Llynfi Valley Woodland Group
- Vivienne Herd, Llynfi Valley Woodland Group



– Noel Thomas, Llynfi Valley Woodland Group

01. Is there enough support and guidance available to enable community groups to engage successfully with woodlands? Is there more that Natural Resources Wales (NRW) can do to facilitate community group activity in the woodlands it manages?

- The Llynfi Valley Woodland Group is a new and informal group. Nobody has overall responsibility. They could do with some training and support. However, the group has received support from local businesses and has done some training with Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations (BAVO).
- In the past year, in response to a request from NRW, Llais y Goedwig has been working to link groups to provide a network of peer support. It also now has two members of staff providing capacity building and on-the-ground support but feel the project is understaffed. For example, Sasha Ufnowska covers the whole of south Wales, which is challenging. Llais y Goedwig's website is full of information but staff are needed to walk around and see people.
- Llais y Goedwig could do so much more to support community woodland groups had there not been such large budget cuts.
- Many woodland groups don't know about other groups and don't know how to access support. For example, the Llynfi Valley Woodland Group has no mechanism for engaging with other groups.
- Bridgend Countryside Volunteering Network includes training and licences for certain woodland activities, whilst there is a toolkit for community growing.
- The Woodland Trust provides free and subsidised trees and advice on the best trees for a particular location. Should this be a government role?
- Woodland community groups should have better coordination and support from NRW, but NRW needs more resources to be able to undertake this responsibility.
- NRW doesn't have the resources to ensure that Wellbeing of Future Generations Wales Act (2015) is implemented at community level – it gets watered down.



- There is no cohesive formula for communities to actually ‘manage’ community woodlands – without a feeling of ownership, they can’t effectively manage the woodlands.
- Because they don’t own the woodlands, communities need permission to undertake activities in them. Currently the application process is the same for motor vehicle use as use by woodland management volunteers. NRW’s Area Team is trying to make this process simpler for communities.
- There is confusion over whether community woodlands are just for the local community, or whether they are for the nation – should they provide facilities for those visiting from elsewhere?

02. Do local communities have sufficient say in decisions made about planning and managing woodlands?

- In the case of the Spirit of Llynfi Woodland, NRW spent two years consulting and engaging with people in the valley before the project started. However, there is a perception that NRW didn’t really listen to the communities they consulted with. NRW and communities learning how to work together effectively is seen as a gradual process.
- There is concern that there is not enough information provided about how access to and enjoyment of woodland might be affected by development projects happening within and adjacent to woodlands, e.g. closure of footpaths. However, this will be addressed through the Planning Act.
- Community woodland groups should have a role in Area Statements. People don’t know how these are defined and how they can feed in to this.
- There is concern about information not going to relevant stakeholders. What is a ‘relevant stakeholder’? People who are not part of an active/vocal group don’t know how to get their voices heard.
- There needs to be a mechanism for continued engagement throughout life. Young children are often engaged in woodlands but we need to maintain their interest.



03. What role can woodlands play in contributing towards community wellbeing and economic regeneration in former industrial communities?

- NRW is working with the communities in the Upper Llynfi Valley to restore the former Coegnant Colliery and Maesteg Washery sites into a new community woodland. Local residents, community groups and schools have all been involved in tree planting, as well as contributing ideas about what they want to see at the site; for example fruit trees, running and cycling tracks, a dog activity trail, a sensory trail for disabled people, a new wetland area, sculptures (such as the popular oak sculpture of a miner), a time capsule and poems.
- The project's main driver is the health and wellbeing of the surrounding communities (which have a life expectancy 20 years shorter than people in nearby Bridgend), as well as environmental benefits such as reducing flood risk and promoting biodiversity.
- However, there is concern that not enough protection and promotion has been afforded to the site's industrial heritage (e.g. it was suggested that the old railway line has not been maintained. However, the route has been adopted as a cycle and bridleway).
- There are 30,000 trees in the Spirit of Llynfi Woodland, including two community orchards where members of the local community can go fruit picking. There is also a wetland area and plans to create a play area for children and a green gym for adults.
- There has been no emphasis on producing wood for construction in the woodland because it has been identified as a woodland for community use, to enhance health and wellbeing.

04. What are the barriers to increasing access to Welsh woodlands?

- Increasing access to woodlands is a slow process, due to regulatory and on-the-ground barriers. For example, there is one mechanism for obtaining access to land for different purposes which doesn't work because one size doesn't fit all. NRW is the custodian of the Spirit of Llynfi Woodland estate and legislation prohibits the handing over of woodlands to communities. There is also a list of things NRW needs people to do before it can agree that communities will manage woodland sites and there has to be a written agreement. There is a perception that the Government is not acting



sufficiently on this; for example, it is a long and expensive process to get access via a new footpath.

- There is one member of NRW staff in the Mynediad team who is based in north Wales. That staff member is trying to link NRW with communities but they don't speak the same language.
- Barriers to community use include not being able to get insurance for things like tree harvesting for community purposes. Can NRW help with this?

Other points

- Clear felling is still happening; there is a perception that woodlands are currently not very attractive, particularly in the aftermath of felling larch trees. What are they going to restock with?
- Community funding is typically for a maximum of three years. This is not long enough for long-term management or harvesting.
- Woodland groups are generally run by older people. There is a need to target the younger generation and to make woodlands 'cool' again. We should encourage young people and maintain the Welsh Bacallaureate work with community groups to play a significant role in that. There is not enough involvement of schools and universities with woodlands and the wider countryside. In part this is because NRW's education team no longer exists, whilst funding for projects like the Mosaic scheme is only short-term. There is a perception that funding has decreased since NRW was established.
- Woodland needs to be put on the political agenda and seen as an asset rather than a liability through monetising the benefits that it provides to society.
- Different kinds of benefits need to be integrated; productive and community uses currently operate in silos.
- Community voices need to be heard.
- Access to woodlands must be maintained and improved, whilst species diversity is required to improve the appearance of woodlands.



- Schools should be involved more. Communities First worked with NRW to take a group of Year 6 pupils to the woodland. The pupils were encouraged to say what they would like to see in the woodland and to write poetry. Some of the pupils' ideas, such as dog trails, have been put in place.
- Land owners (including NRW and local authorities) need to have more faith in communities; give them the support and trust they need to be custodians of woodlands.
- There is a perception that woodlands always seem to be low on the political agenda. People see trees as issues rather than seeing them as valuable, and they don't realise the potential of woodlands.

Group 2 – Recreational user groups

Participants:

- Rebecca Brough, Ramblers Cymru
 - Mark Weston, British Horse Society
 - Rachel Evans, Countryside Alliance
 - Ian Danby, British Association of Shooting and Conservation
 - Daniel Gomm, Bike Park Wales
 - Marianne Walford, Trail Rides Wales
 - Robin Hickin, Trail Riders Fellowship Limited
 - Duncan Green, The Treadlightly Trust
- There was consensus within the group that NRW lacks a strategic approach to managing access in the woodland it manages. The current approach seems to vary from area to area and depend on individual personalities. Leadership and consistency from NRW would allow for more access opportunities.
 - There are some good examples of NRW and user groups working together to increase access opportunities; for example with mountain biking projects. These



should be built upon and rolled out to make NRW the exemplar for private woodland owners to follow.

- There was discussion around whether a zonal approach should be taken for different types of recreational uses. However, it was felt that this approach could be too restrictive and that an approach based on principles would facilitate more access overall.
- There was a feeling that NRW was missing an opportunity to generate revenue. Many user groups, for example those involved with motorised vehicles, would be happy to pay for access to NRW-managed land.
- The point was stressed, however, that user groups with rights of access, such as walkers and horse riders, should not pay for what they can already access as a right.
- There was a feeling that more NRW-managed land could be opened up and that there is more than enough woodland to cater for the needs of all the different recreational user groups.
- NRW seems to be too risk averse and lacks the necessary resources to increase and promote access opportunities. There is an army of volunteers involved with the user groups – this a resource that NRW could use more.
- There is very little real conflict between the different user groups; they are respectful of each other's needs. There is a problem with illegal activities, such as illegal motor vehicle use, mountain biking and shooting, but this could be addressed through a strategic approach to more and managed access.
- There was agreement that the more managed access to woodlands there is, the more self-policing by users takes place. Illegal users tend not to want to go to areas where others are legitimately accessing the woodland.
- There was agreement that access opportunities for disabled people and people recovering from health conditions should be encouraged.
- Access to private woodlands depends on the relationship between the user groups and the land owner. Motorised vehicle and shooting groups use this approach.
- Broader access issues were discussed with stakeholders wanting to see the existing rights of way network maintained properly, and gaps in the network filled.



- The importance of countryside access to Wales’s tourism offer was emphasised. It was questioned whether access featured prominently enough in local authority Destination Management Plans.
- Access issues should be reflected properly in forthcoming documents such as Area Statements and Local Well-being Plans.
- There was agreement that a future post-Brexit land management payment scheme should include incentives for land managers to improve access to their land. The importance of public money being used for public good was emphasised.

The Committee would like to thank those who attended the seminar and took the time to share their views.

