



This information note is one of a series produced by the Community Woodlands Association. It gives an overview of issues around community woodland groups taking on “community foresters” which is here used to refer to individuals engaged by community woodlands in management roles. In practice they can have a variety of job titles and descriptions, and the relationship with the group can be structured in a number of ways. The note covers the advantages and potential disadvantages of employing a community forester, the nature of the role, the structure of the employment contract and some key considerations. Many of the general principles are applicable everywhere but references to funders and regulators are for Scotland only.

Community woodlands vary greatly in scale and type, and community woodland groups differ in capacity and objectives. Managing a community woodland requires a broad range of skills, particularly when, as is often the case, groups seek to deliver a variety of social, environmental and economic benefits.

An essentially non-profit-distributing ethos and management oversight by a voluntary board to deliver local aspirations, are likely to be common to all groups. Many community woodlands are managed day-to-day entirely by volunteers, with outside contractors bought in for specific, discrete tasks (tree-surgery, accounts, formal woodland management planning), or for larger scale operations and those requiring specialised equipment like timber harvesting.

One of the key issues that community woodland groups need to address is “capacity to manage”: demonstrating to funders and regulators that they understand the skills required to deliver their projects and objectives and how they will acquire them.

Community woodland groups have four main routes to delivery: volunteers, free support and advice (e.g. from CWA), using contractors and directly employing staff.

Volunteers

Many community woodland groups carry out practical works such as tree planting, path building and pond digging using volunteer work parties. These can be very effective, especially when on a small scale, but require appropriate training, equipment and supervision.

Volunteering provides not just a means to get work done but can deliver significant social and community development outcomes, indeed provision of volunteering opportunities is a key outcome of community woodlands.

CWA info note 7 contains more information and guidance on working with volunteers in community woodlands.

Free support and advice

The Community Woodlands Association provides advice, assistance and information to community woodland groups across Scotland. In addition to one-to-one support we deliver training and networking services, linking groups together and facilitating peer-to-peer support through our members’ e-group and at events such as our annual conference. Experience and knowledge from other community woodland groups can be a valuable source of information and support.

Support and advice is also available from a range of statutory and voluntary sector bodies: see the resources section on the last page for links.

Working with the private sector

Most community woodland groups will use externally procured services at some point in their development. The extent of private sector involvement, and the nature and structure of the relationship, can vary significantly. Options include:

- one-off contracts to prepare a woodland management plan or deliver a forest operation;

- medium term (five or ten years) forest management or timber harvesting contracts; and/or
- a long term investment relationship e.g. a private sector “investor” could facilitate community acquisition by paying upfront for future timber harvesting rights - providing a forest management role to realise these.
- To manage the relationship with private sector forestry companies and contractors;
- To provide a public face for the organisation within the woodland: having dedicated staff working in the forest is a tangible sign of community ownership and can provide an effective link between the community woodland group and the wider community.

For more information on working with the private sector, see “Community Woodlands and Private Sector Forest Companies: a guide to working with the private forestry sector”. <http://scotland.forestry.gov.uk/images/corporate/pdf/fcs-community-and-private-sector.pdf>

Employing a community forester

Some community woodland groups, particularly those with larger woods or more ambitious plans, have engaged community foresters to take an on-going management role, often facilitated by post-acquisition revenue grants from e.g. The Scottish Land Fund. Group objectives include:

- To create employment locally: increasing the economic benefit of the forest is often one of the primary objectives of community woodland groups, especially those taking on significant assets in rural areas, and creating jobs is an obvious way to deliver this;
- To buy in skills and experience which aren’t available within the Board or membership: community forest management requires a wide variety of skills, many will be available in the local community but almost inevitably there will be gaps;
- To relieve the workload on volunteer Board and membership: owning and managing a forest brings a lot of responsibilities, some of which can be rather mundane – having staff whose role includes managing these can mitigate the risk of volunteer “burnout”;
- To present a professional face for the organisation: some funders and regulators may be reassured that the community body has experienced and qualified staff in place, and be more likely to invest in the group’s projects;

Concerns are sometimes expressed around engaging a community forester, including:

- That Directors would need to take on additional responsibilities, such as line management;
- That the community body would be taking on additional financial and governance responsibilities;
- That the community group’s objectives may be compromised by the need to seek funding to keep staff in place.

In practice, whilst there are additional responsibilities involved in taking on staff, the gains far outweigh the costs for most if not all groups. However, the long-term funding of staff posts is a perennial issue and one that a number of groups, particularly those without substantial unrestricted income from timber or other sources, have struggled with.

It is also worth considering that the need for a staff post may change over time or the type of post needed may evolve as the group matures. So the initial need may be for a forester / business manager to make the forest fit for purpose for community use and to establish necessary income streams and management systems, but in the longer term the need may be more for a community ranger to encourage and manage community use of the forest.

The role

The community forester role covers a very wide job description, and indeed can have a variety of job titles. In most cases the community forester (whatever their actual job title) role includes elements of what might in other circumstances be three separate jobs filled by individuals from very different backgrounds:

- **Forest Manager:** concerned with silviculture and land management, they may do some “hands-on” forestry as well as managing contractors and processing forestry grants;
- **Business Manager:** concerned with the future business development of the community company, developing projects (crofts, housing, renewables), bringing in investment etc.;
- **Community Ranger:** focussing on community engagement, working with local community, schools, visitors, user groups with specific needs.

The balance between these components will vary according to local context: the nature of the woodland and the needs, skills and objectives of the community. If the role is being grant-aided then the requirements of funders will need to be taken into account.

Structure of employment

Community woodland groups engage their community foresters in two main ways:

- **Direct employment:** the community forester is taken on as a member of staff and the group is responsible for recruitment, line management, PAYE/NIC, etc.,
- **Self-employment:** the community forester is a private contractor who is paid an agreed daily rate (or annual retainer). The group retains responsibility for directing/managing the contractor but does not have some of the other responsibilities of being an employer.

Most community foresters have been directly employed, usually on a fixed term contract linked to grant support. Where groups have long term income stream (e.g. timber or renewables) these may become permanent roles.

In practice the self-employment model is probably only viable for a part-time role – it is unlikely HMRC would accept a contractor only having one source of income. With the second option, the role might be split into a number of smaller contracts – this is effectively the way Abriachan Forest Trust operate, with a private sector forestry agent

engaged to manage the forestry business whilst health and education projects are undertaken by specialists under contract.

It should be noted that whilst the self-employed contractor option removes some obligations on the community group, there will still be a significant management requirement. Although the community groups will not have to pay holiday, sick leave or PAYE / National insurance, it is likely that these will be bundled into the contractor’s day rate, so cost savings to the group may be limited.

Additionally, a self-employed contractor may be less flexible and more likely to adhere to the specifics of their contract, unlike an employee with an “any other duties...” clause in their contract of employment.

Shared Forester

A further option which has been discussed but not yet been fully implemented in Scottish community woodlands, is a shared forester model, whereby the group pays for, and has access to a community forester for, say, a day a week (or a week a month). There are a number of options as to how this could be organised, e.g. the community forester could be:

- directly employed by each of a small number of groups, i.e. having 4 or 5 separate but linked part-time posts;
- directly employed by one community group, and then sub-contracted to others. This could be a new post, or an existing forester in an established role with one group being sub-contracted to others;
- directly employed by another organisation, such as the Community Woodlands Association, with community groups either buying the community forester’s time on an ad-hoc basis or paying a retainer to CWA for the forester’s services.

The shared forester option could prove attractive for groups without the resources or need for a full-time post. Depending on the structure of such a post, there might be a reduction in bureaucracy for participating community groups; there would still however be a need for a well-thought-out job description and careful management.

Key considerations

There are two important considerations arising from the broad and mixed job descriptions typically produced for community forester roles:

- Groups must be clear, and agreed amongst themselves, about what they are looking for in the role and what the priorities are, as it is usually unlikely that one individual will have all the essential and desirable skills and experience.
- Groups need sound mechanisms to manage and support a community forester, including (where appropriate) access to training and continuous personal development opportunities.

Groups must ensure they meet their statutory duties, including the provision of:

- a contract of employment and a statement of terms and conditions;
- payroll and PAYE/NIC systems;
- a workplace pension scheme for staff;
- employer's Liability insurance; and
- appropriate Health & Safety measures, including risk assessments and lone working arrangements.

Conclusion

In practice, almost all groups that have had the opportunity to engage a community forester have done so, albeit that they have used different structures and contracts, and varying job titles and descriptions.

Everything hasn't always worked out perfectly: finding the right candidate for the complex and multi-purpose roles expected of community foresters has not always proved easy, and maintaining staff posts after an initial period of post-acquisition development funding has proved challenging for some groups.

However, most if not all would agree that a dedicated staff resource has had a positive impact on their group's development, and allowed them to progress faster and further than if all the work had been left to volunteer Directors.

Further advice on engaging staff/contractors, and sample job descriptions etc., is available from CWA, whilst many of the groups who have employed staff will be happy to share their experience and documentation.

Resources

Community Woodlands Association (advice and support for community woodlands)

<http://www.communitywoods.org>

Making Local Woods Work (advice, tools and resources for woodland social enterprises)

<https://makinglocalwoodswork.org>

Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation (advice and resources on managing staff):

<https://scvo.org.uk/running-your-organisation/staff-volunteers/staff>

Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service - provides free and impartial information and advice to employers and employees on all aspects of workplace relations and employment law):

<http://www.acas.org.uk>

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