

Axewoods Cooperative South & East Devon, England

Consumer cooperative producing firewood through woodland management services for landowners

This case study is one of a set written as part of a Forest Research project. Some case studies are written by the community group, others by researchers who visited and interviewed group members, but they have all been validated and endorsed by the community groups.

Forest Research developed a standard method for describing the case studies, outlined in Lawrence and Ambrose-Oji, 2013 "A framework for sharing experiences of community woodland groups" Forestry Commission Research Note 15 (available from www.forestry.gov.uk/publications).

The case study comprises three parts:

1. The **Group Profile** provides essential information about the form and function of the community woodland group. Profiles were prepared following the methodology
2. The **Change Narrative** which documents key moments in the evolution of the community woodland group with a particular focus on the evolution of engagement and empowerment
3. The **Engagement and Impacts Timeline** documents milestones in the development of the community woodland group, its woodland and any assumed or evidenced impacts.

The case studies collectively provide a resource which documents the diversity and evolution of community woodland groups across Scotland, Wales and England. The method ensures that the case studies are consistent and can be compared with each other. We welcome further case studies to add to this growing resource.

For further information, and for the detailed case study method, please contact:

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1. Group profile

Woodland: Axewoods operate over a number of different woodland sites
Map ref: National Trust, Salcombe Hill SY 144 884, National Trust Prickly Pear Wood, Ottery St Mary SY 062 942
Webpage: <http://axewoods.org/>
Date of profile: 14th December 2012
Resources: Site visit, group and individual interviews

1. Institutional context (in December 2012)	
1.1 Ownership of the woodland(s)	<p>The woodlands that the Cooperative works in are owned by other organisations. At the present time these are the National Trust (NT) and the Woodland Trust (WT).</p> <p>Classification of tenure: Informal agreement (private)</p>
1.2 Access and use rights to the woodland(s)	<p>Axewoods agree with the woodland owners where in the woodland they will work, which trees they will remove, and what other works might be undertaken. Members of the Co-operative take part in the working groups implementing these agreed forestry operations. Rights to the products/materials produced vary according to the membership level an individual has subscribed to. Logs are only sold to cooperative members. There are four levels of membership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry membership at £15 a family. Free access to a number of woodland events per year + discount to the price of a builders bag of seasoned logs • Housebote/basic membership at £30. Unlimited collection of small log volumes and brash collected by the member on the day of a working party • Woodcutter (qualified chainsaw users only) at £200 comprising: £50 insurance for chainsaw use, £30 membership and £120 for two builders bags of logs

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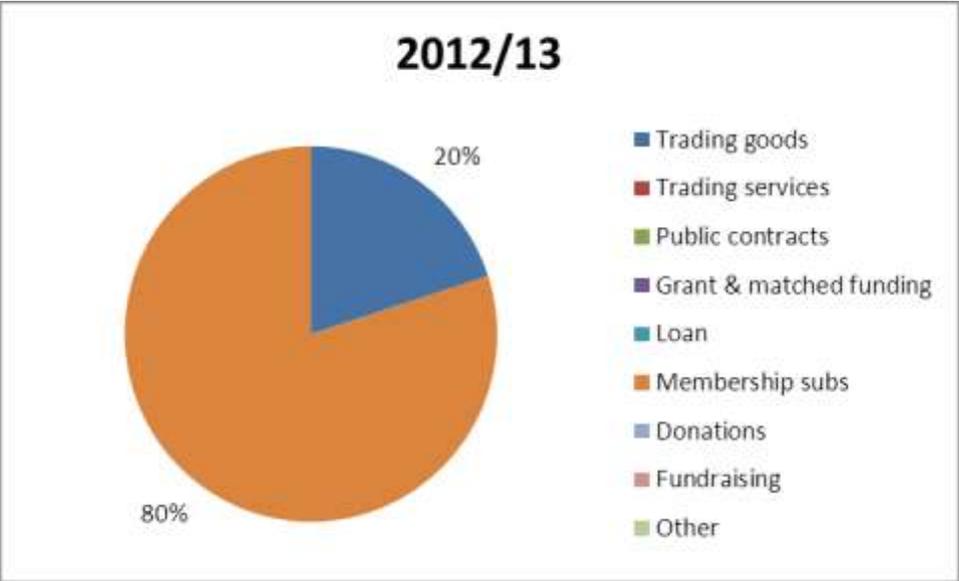
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volume output. As woodcutter + 25 percent of the value of additional timber removed = £250+
1.3 Regulations/ responsibilities affecting the woodland(s)	<p>Axewoods are bound by the agreement formulated with the woodland owners, who will in turn be constrained by the conditions linked to any woodland grants that may have been secured, felling conditions, FSC, UKWAS & UKFS, and to H&S legislation and the management of the public on a woodland site with active operations. Axewoods has responsibilities to the public and holds Public Liability insurance. The wood is in the East Devon AONB and a Heritage Coast area and is in the south west corner of the Blackdowns Joint Countryside Character Area, so this is a consideration in terms of forestry operations and landscape impacts.</p>
2. Internal organisation of the group/enterprise	
2.1 Group members, representation and decision making	<p>People in the region (Devon/East Devon) are eligible to join the group. Membership of the group at Entry level appeals to families and others looking for "A day out in the woods" and Forest School type opportunities, with levels 2-4 taken up by those looking for fuelwood as either a subsidiary or the main form of household heating.</p> <p>There were 11 fully paid up members at the time of the visit with a further four expected to pay.</p> <p>Members at the "Woodcutter" level who were active on the day of the visit can be characterised as early retired professional people, including those with a connection to land-based businesses.</p> <p>This is more a community of interest than perhaps a community of place. The Cooperative only claims to represent the interests of the members, around the objectives of collecting firewood, skills development/learning and bringing neglected woodland into management.</p> <p>Decision making lies in the hands of the Committee of the Society of which there are five Directors. These Committee members undertake traditional roles and responsibilities such as accounting and financial reporting, communication and organisation, contact and negotiation with woodland owners etc. Axewoods works collectively and supports all members, conscious that everyone has something to offer – often with links and friends with woodlands needing work.</p>
2.2 Communication and learning processes	<p>The main method of communication is by word of mouth and through the Axewoods Cooperative website which posts invitations to the latest events and workgroups on the homepage. Communication also happens during attendance at the regular social meetings organised as part of the group's activities. Group learning is done through the working groups and social meetings, and is largely practice focused learning by doing and</p>

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	<p>observing. It is informal and experiential.</p> <p>Other skills training and learning has been supported through Axewoods, and three of the Woodcutter members secured and fully funded their own full chainsaw operating training and certification. Axewoods is bidding into SDF funding for 2013 to secure £1,000 from East Devon AONB for the training of four new chainsaw operators (each of whom will contribute 50% match funding).</p> <p>With a growing number of Woodcutter members, the group is beginning to evolve in terms of competency and in terms of the numbers of woodlands it can engage with. Some of the terms of membership have also evolved as a response to the increased volumes of logs harvested with increasing capacity.</p>
<p>2.3 Structure and legal status</p>	<p><u>Axewoods Cooperative Ltd</u> is constituted as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS). Membership by share is subject to a £1 fee, with the rest of the annual subscription contributing to group management, insurance, development activities and running woodland events. <u>The rules of the Cooperative</u> outline the groups working procedures responsibilities and limitations. Financial reporting and auditing as an IPS is the Financial Conduct Authority.</p> <p>Classification of legal form: Industrial and Provident Society</p>
<p>2.4 Regulations/ responsibilities affecting the group/ enterprise</p>	<p>The reporting and auditing connected with being an IPS is a notable responsibility, although this does not affect Axewoods’s operating model.</p>
<p>2.5 Forest management objectives and planning procedures</p>	<p>The objectives of the group are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enable co-op members to secure their own wood fuel needs, and improve their understanding of woodland ecology and management • To provide the means for members to connect with woodlands • To provide the means for members to learn woodland crafts and skills and offer training events • To provide a means for members to contribute to the work of the Woodland Trust/National Trust by working on sites owned by them but managed by Axewoods

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	<p>The National Trust and Woodland Trust properties in which the co-op works may or may not have formal management plans. The committee members of Axewoods are responsible for discussing the management plans with the woodland owners and ensuring that the works Axewoods undertake contribute to the plan, or is in accordance with the objectives for the particular property. The NT and WT are keen to work to FCS standards. The focus of the NT is largely on heritage preservation and conservation with some recreational access and for the WT is largely conservation management.</p> <p>The National Trust is directed by national policy to support community involvement. Its head warden for Branscombe has indicated that the Trust has every intention of expanding and developing the significant amenity potential of Salcombe Hill to encourage wider public access and use. To that end the head warden has expressed his desire to source funding to support ongoing development of Axewoods.</p> <p>Overall aim of plan: Productive woodland and employment</p>
<p>2.6 Implementing the woodland management plan</p>	<p>Axewoods co-operative members undertake the works themselves. The lead is a qualified forester with his own contract forestry business who shares his skills and knowledge to help direct and guide the other members during the working parties, alongside those members who have completed chainsaw training. The equipment used belongs to the individual members. Felling and cross cutting is done by chainsaw with cutting to length done in situ and hand hauled to members vehicles. One of the major concerns of Axewoods has been training and developing members' awareness of on-site H&S procedures. The main focus of the operations to date has been on thinning neglected stands, halo and liberation thinning in particular, as well as some scrub bashing and H&S operations on boundaries and close to footpaths. Working parties are seasonal and operate largely during the winter period.</p>
<p>2.7 Business/ operating model and sustainability</p>	<p>Axewoods aims to bring as many neglected woodlands in the East Devon area into productive management as possible. The main clients at the moment are WT and NT but Axewoods would like to increase the network of sites and owners it has management agreements with. The co-op is not looking to sell fuelwood on the open market: sales are limited to members and paid for through the membership fee or at £60 per bag. The co-op is a response to the dual problem of woodland neglect and lack of local fuelwood supply.</p>

	<p>Overall sources of income for the group in 2012/13</p> <p>Membership 80%</p> <p>Trading:</p> <p>Revenue from log sales 10%</p> <p>Revenue from rental of log splitter 10%</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>2012/13</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Income Sources for 2012/13</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Source</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Membership subs</td> <td>80%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Trading goods</td> <td>20%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Trading services</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Public contracts</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Grant & matched funding</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Loan</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Donations</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Fundraising</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> </div>	Source	Percentage	Membership subs	80%	Trading goods	20%	Trading services	0%	Public contracts	0%	Grant & matched funding	0%	Loan	0%	Donations	0%	Fundraising	0%	Other	0%
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<p>2.8 Benefit distribution rules</p>	<p>The tangible benefits for group members are the logs and small wood produced. These are distributed according to membership level. Other benefits mentioned by members include social networking and learning. The additional benefit is improved woodland condition.</p>																				

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3. External linkages	
3.1 Partnerships and agreements	The initial establishment of Axewoods was supported by a host of organisations including Forestry Commission, East Devon AONB, Make it Local, Silvanus Trust and Devon County Council. Obviously the National Trust and the Woodland Trust are the substantive partners. The Co-op is still linked into the Blackdown Hills/East Devon AONB network and is supporting a new sister cooperative called Culmwoods, which will operate in the Blackdown Hills AONB.
3.2 Associations	Axewoods has good, albeit informal, communication links with Small Woods Association (Phil Tidey) Oakfrith Community Woods (Urchfont, Wiltshire) and Woodmatters (Cumbria).
4. Resources	
4.1 Forest/woodland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Salcombe Hill woodland that Axewoods have been managing for the last two years (i.e. winter 2011/12 and 2012/13) is an area of approximately 16 hectares located on a coastal hill/cliff overlooking the town of Sidmouth. Access is good through the main road and forest tracks. Much of the woodland is on level ground with a section belonging to the Woodland Trust (called Page Wood) on the steeper slopes running down to the sea. The soil type is light to medium sandy/flinty acidic to neutral pH 6-7 .5 thin soils over greensand and chalk formations. The site has medium potential with some windthrow risk. The species mix consists largely of Douglas fir, mature and over mature Scots pine, and larch. The broadleaved areas of the wood are dominated by beech, ash and oak. There are large beech trees on the boundaries, and some semi-mature sycamores scattered through the wood. Classification of woodland type: Mixed mainly conifer The management history of the woodland was not well known. There are records of a woodland being present on the site from about 1880/90. The winter storms of 1990 caused damage that was replanted mostly with oak. There has been little obvious maintenance of these compartments. Salcombe Hill prior to 1914 was a heathland site (according to Phil Planel archaeologist with East Devon AONB and Axewoods member). There is a significant amount of deadwood, fallen and standing, throughout the broadleaved sections of

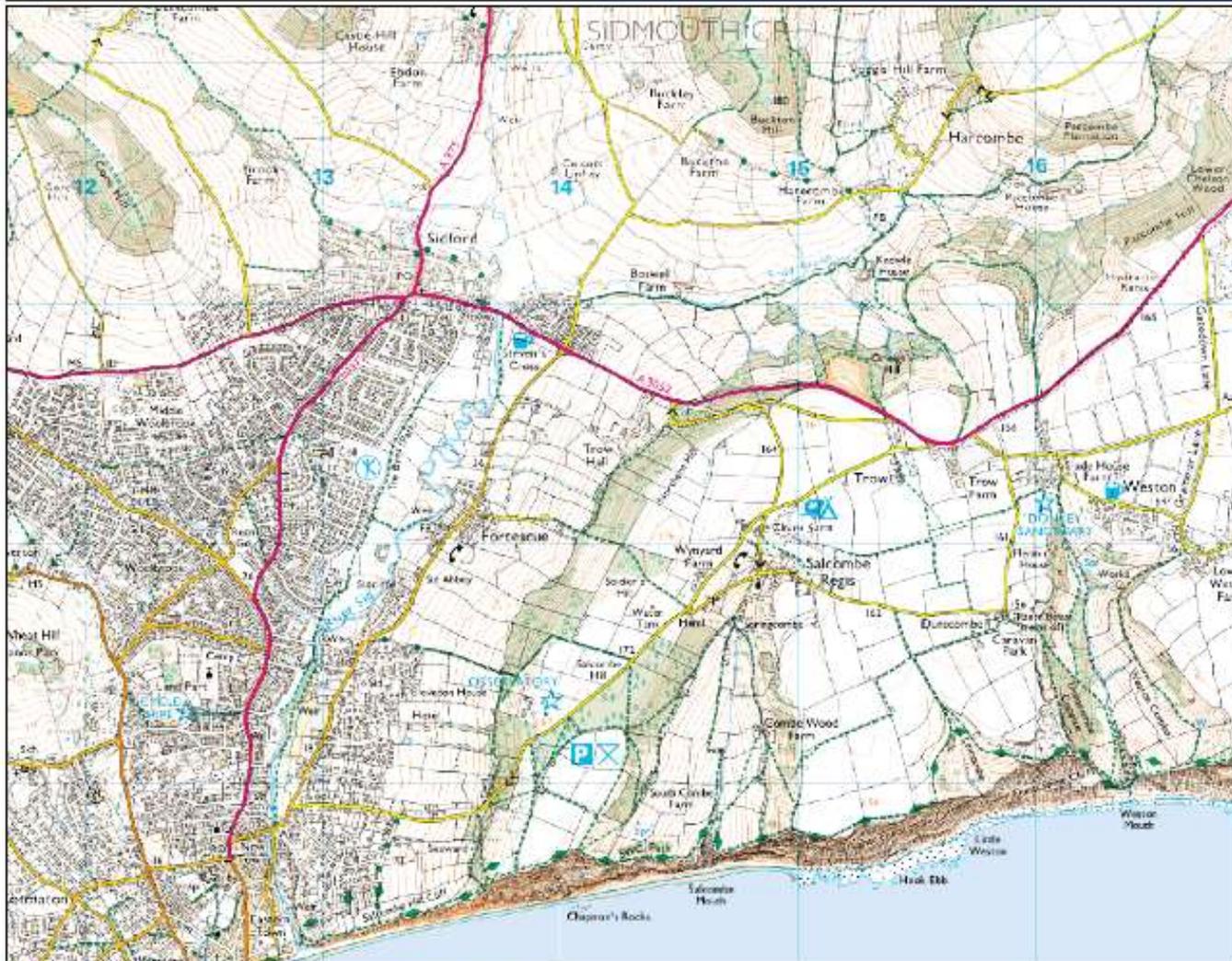
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	<p>the wood. Axewoods have opened up rides to the northwest of the site.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The condition of the conifer areas of the woodland is good, while the broadleaved areas without a specific conservation management objective are undermanaged. • There was no knowledge of any biodiversity information or surveys having been undertaken in the woodland.
4.2 Woodland and group funding sources	<p>The group is completely self-financing to meet all insurance/ training and health and safety requirements</p> <p>The head warden of NT Branscombe is working on a funding proposal to secure a regular works coordinator</p>
4.3 Knowledge, skills, human and social capital	<p>The expertise being drawn upon in the development of the group and its work is largely internal, although chainsaw training was external. Group learning is through practice and observation during the working parties and also by Q&A during social and other events held in the woods.</p> <p>The expertise within the group has also been used to support (NT and WT) estate managers who may not have specialised forestry knowledge themselves and benefit from supportive coaching in the agreement of management operations.</p> <p>There is a good working relationship with the local FC Woodland Officer and land managers in the LA and surrounding area.</p>

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Axewood Cooperative working site Salcombe Hill Wood



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Mapping & Geodata

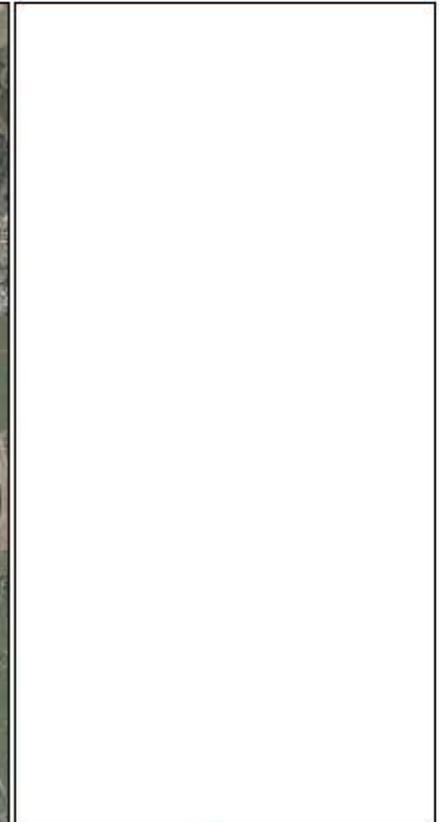


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Axewood Cooperative working site Salcombe Hill Wood



Mapping & Geodata



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2. Change Narrative

1. Group History. Moments of change, motivations and engagement

The key motivations for the eventual formation of the Axewoods Cooperative was a general interest and concern by members of the woodland and landscape management community in the general condition of woodlands in the Devon/Somerset area and the un-realised potential for provision of woodland products such as timber and fuelwood. Regional woodland and market surveys were undertaken by one of the founding members of the group, using funding from the Forestry Commission and the East Devon AONB in 2008 and also by Working Our Woodlands (A project of the [Silvanus Trust](#) and BEDWA) between 2009-2011, which demonstrated the extent of the undermanaged woodland, and the barriers to management experienced by woodland owners and managers.

John Bell, Silvanus Trust and the English Food and Farming Partnership together took forward a feasibility study to scope out the possibility of forming a producer co-operative that could operate amongst a group of owners of undermanaged woodlands, to produce fuelwood, and provide a means to overcome the challenges faced by owners of such assets. The feasibility study concluded that much of the woodland being considered for this model presented an uneconomic resource, i.e. it was situated in areas with poor access and difficult terrain, which meant that the costs of operations and extraction were just too high to make even a cooperative model of management and market entry between owners a feasible model. However, an alternative idea of establishing a co-operative using volunteer labour to undertake the work in exchange for access to woodland and lower priced products was considered viable by owners and volunteers alike. It was this idea that was then taken forward for development. Axewoods was established as a consumer cooperative in the form of an IPS late summer 2010. The ambition was to test the co-operative model with volunteer labour over a single woodland parcel in the first instance, and then to expand and include 6-8 parcels (considered in the feasibility study to be necessary for economically and ecologically sustainable working) over time. The establishment of Axewoods and funding supporting the coordinator came through "Making It Local", an LA managed grants scheme with partnership funding from EU-RDF, DEFRA, South West RDA and Leader, and the sustainable development funds

from the Blackdown Hills and East Devon AONBs. With the initial research and the external support Axewoods began with **group formation** in response to sector concern and the **consultation** undertaken during the feasibility study. The forestry expertise and guidance of the woodland coordinator of the group has facilitated a swift transition from **group formation** to **active management** by the group in the woodland parcel it currently operates in. It was the group's Coordinator who contacted landowners and carried out discussions and negotiation of informal access to the woodlands. A small amount of timber was cut and removed to dry store for the coordinator to sell to compensate for work done and to encourage local people with wood burners to get involved to source their own woodfuel.

2. Challenges, barriers and opportunities for change: Key issues in evolution

Facilitating Factors

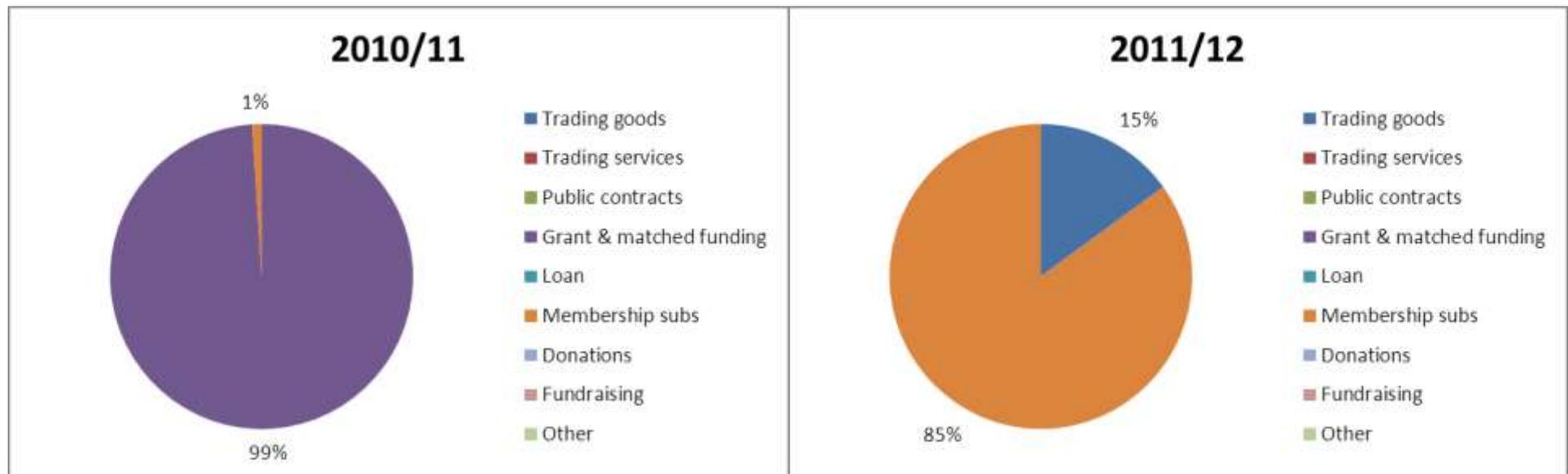
- Initial grant support of £23k to establish the group and pilot test the concept, and grant funding of £1,400 to buy equipment including a log splitter
- The forestry expertise and membership of local networks of the Coordinator which were key to establishing the group.
- The interest and ability of members to buy equipment and pay for appropriate training

Barriers and Challenges

- Finding woodland owners willing to allow a volunteer group on their land to undertake works is challenging because even if this is supported as a general idea, the level of trust and organisation around risk and liability is quite daunting for land owners.
- The group coordinator has not received payment over the last two years for the liaison with landowners and technical forestry support provided to the group. This stands in contrast to the original concept of the model providing employment, and will have a potential impact on the sustainability of the group.

- Axewoods has not received any grant funding since the pilot project, which took place at both Colwell (private) and NT Branscombe. The consumer cooperative model may provide benefits to members in the form of fuelwood and benefits to the woodlands, but finance to develop the group and cover operating costs is a significant barrier to future development of the group and these kinds of woodland services.
- Demand for family type activities and access to woodlands for recreation by members conflicts with the silvicultural activities and fuelwood production.

3. Evolution of income streams



4. Woodland history and change: Benefits and impacts before group involvement

Axewoods aims to work on a number of different woodland sites and does not necessarily have the knowledge of, or access to, records about previous management and benefit streams. The information below is therefore incomplete.

Salcombe Hill Wood

Time Period	Owner/Manager	Objectives / Benefits (and evidence)	Major operations	Access and use rights
-2011	National Trust	Conservation and Heritage management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodland ecosystem services • Biodiversity • Public access and recreation 	Replanting and stocking 1990	Public Right of Way (PROW)

5. Woodland history and change: Benefits and impacts since group involvement

Axewoods's work in Salcombe Hill Wood has had an impact on the general condition of the compartments they have been operating in, mostly through halo and liberation thinning of broadleaves. In terms of charting impact of operations on the woodland, there was no knowledge of any current, past or future biodiversity or other survey work available that might chart any differences over time. The main benefit stream has been the fuel provided (and money saved), and the skills/educational benefits to: (i.) active chainsaw users, (ii.) those members and their children taking part in working parties and (iii.) Those members taking part in forest school type activities. There are estimated records of the fuelwood harvested , but no other evidence of impact through evaluations etc. and there is non formal record of volunteer/working group hours. Some of the members of the working party mentioned social networking and individual health benefits from taking part in outdoor exercise as part of a group as benefits. No disbenefits were noted. No surprising benefits or disbenefits were noted.

Salcombe Hill Wood

Time Period	Owner/Manager	Objectives / Benefits (and evidence)	Major operations and events	Access and use rights
2011	National Trust with Axewoods undertaking some management operations	Productive woodland management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodland ecosystem services • Biodiversity • Public access • Timber for fuelwood (Axewoods accounts) • Education and skills (event records, training records) 	Thinning and felling Forest School/bushcraft Volunteering and training opportunities during work parties Social events	PROW

6. Future plans

Future plans centre on maintaining and expanding Axewoods's membership and increasing the number of sites the group is able to work on. There are plans to develop the co-op such that it operates in 'clusters' with groups of members focusing on sites most local to themselves. This development of the co-op relies on members continuing to develop their woodland and forestry skills and competencies, more members completing chainsaw training and in new working sites being secured. Transition from a grant maintained and subsidised project to a self sustaining group, and developing co-operative skills to perhaps provide a fuller range of woodland management services, is also underway although this was not discussed in greater detail. There is a willingness amongst the group to offer bushcraft/forest schools events, because these seem to be in local demand, however, this could only happen if and when land owners feel able to allow such activities.

By further reducing barriers to woodland working and encouraging successful group formation the group aims to link more local people with local woodland and provide them with the means and training to enjoy those woodland spaces that, are for now, degrading. To do this Axewoods's goals are simple: to reduce the work load involved with woodfuel as far as possible by providing appropriate splitting and processing machinery as required by a growing network of clusters; to bolster and support the social forestry side of their activities through letting people working together to enjoy and secure their timber needs. The group hopes that this will lead to a more European style culture of connection with woodland and communities working together.

3. Engagement and impacts timeline

Year	Event	ENGAGEMENT	Reasons Barriers and challenges	Changes/Impacts and outcomes Social (evidence)	Changes/Impacts and outcomes Woodland (evidence)	Changes/Impacts and outcomes Financial/ Economic (evidence)
2008	Woodland Survey	None	To investigate options for improving conservation and landscape condition after it was demonstrated that over 40% of local woodlands were not in active management.	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline
2009-2010	Woodland Feasibility Study and Working Our Woodlands woodland resource survey	None	To add more information about the state of local woodlands. Feasibility study showed costs of management non-economic and proposed volunteer-based model of co-operative			

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2010	Co-op established	INFORMAL ENJOYMENT to GROUP FORMATION	To secure wood fuel needs and improve condition of woodlands. Funding obtained through Making it Local Search for members			
2011	Woodland working begins	GROUP FORMATION to ACTIVE MANAGEMENT	Members trained in small tree felling obtain certificates through The Conservation Volunteers (formerly BTCV) only allows group to cut and extract.	Forestry skills Improved social networks and self-reported health	Thinned canopy	Provision of fuel wood to group members