



Introduction

Community woodlands by their very nature involve people and trees, and where there are groups of people and stands of trees there is a risk that things may go wrong.

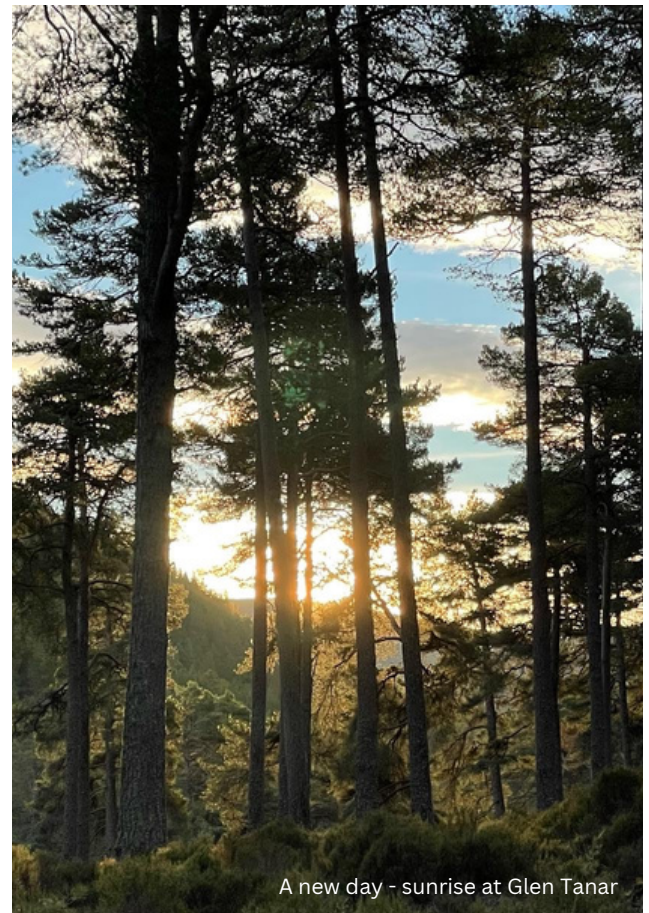
Disagreements amongst people, storm events causing trees to fall, lack of funding or capacity, the threat of fire or browsing damage by deer - the list of things that might go wrong can be very long.

In this information note we don't intend to try and address the long list of potential problems or situations, or try and identify every risk, rather we look at selection of situations, the risks, and potential mitigations, as raised and discussed by Community Woodland Group (CWG) members at our CWA Annual Conference in 2023. Topics included are – Governance, Community, Money, and Tree Safety.

Undoubtedly the best method of dealing with things that go wrong is to prevent them happening in the first place. A good way of identifying what might go wrong, and how best to deal with it, is by maintaining a Risk Register. This can be reviewed periodically, and action taken to reduce risks. Forewarned is forearmed.

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A new day - sunrise at Glen Tanar



Good governance is key to successful community woodland management, and a fully engaged, properly functioning Board of Trustees, or Directors, is an essential prerequisite.

There is much guidance of good governance and the roles of a governing Board and we don't intend to duplicate these here, rather just provide pointers, prompts and give examples as raised at the CWA Conference. For an overview of Good Governance check out the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations web site where they have a comprehensive set of guidance [Good Governance - SCVO](#)



Some of the difficulties encountered by community groups in attaining a stable and properly functioning Board are:

- Difficulties in identifying and recruiting Board members
- Minority self-interest on the Board
- Trustee Disagreement
- Trustee conflict of interest/ minority voice
- Personal relationships and paranoia

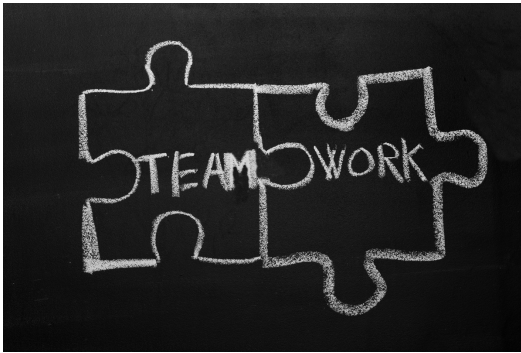
There is no easy answer to these issues and often it can be useful to 'recruit' an arbiter or external advisor, such as the [Development Trust Association for Scotland \(DTAS\)](#) [Development Trusts Association Scotland | \(dtascot.org.uk\)](#), especially in cases where Board and or community relations have become difficult or broken down.

Some members attending the CWA Conference workshop suggested that succession planning ought to be a priority to mitigate ongoing challenges of recruiting Board members.

Another suggestion was that each office bearer should have an understudy depute – although this may place additional strains on the organisation, especially in a small community with a small pool of potential Board members.



A Trustees term of service – almost like a job description - was mooted as being useful in setting out boundaries, and the Office of Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) provide a suite of dos and don'ts for Charity Trustees, [OSCR | Guidance and good practice for Charity Trustees](#). Unfortunately, neither Companies House nor the Government provide a code of good practice for Limited Companies, however SCVO do have a code for Third Sector organisations, regardless of their constitutional arrangement [The Scottish Governance Code for the Third Sector - SCVO](#).



Further suggestions from CWGs for ensuring a good balance of expertise on a Board were:

- **A skills gap analysis** to work out what each Community Woodland Group needs at the point of recruiting Board members, e.g., those with an understanding of finance, HR matters, forestry, etc.
- **An induction/ informal training for board members**, to understand the role of non-executive Directors. e.g. a Board Member Pack, as above with the OSCR example, [OSCR | Guidance and good practice for Charity Trustees](#)

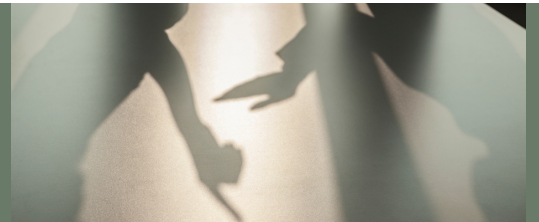
- Boards may require **Human Resources (HR) training** required if the CWG employs staff.
- **A Board Pack** (based on the OSCR guidance) would support the understanding of the requirements and expectations of a Board member and should be regularly revisited to avoid minority self-interest
- **The Scottish Mediation Service** is a very useful resource to have if things become challenging [Scottish Mediation – Turning Disagreement into Opportunity](#).
- **Limit the number of related Board members** to reduce silos and bias

Other ways to resolve conflict of interest resulting from a minority view are:

- Board training
- Constitution (mandatory)
- Annual Review – who? When? How?
- Code of Conduct with shared and agreed values
- Vision, Mission and Values



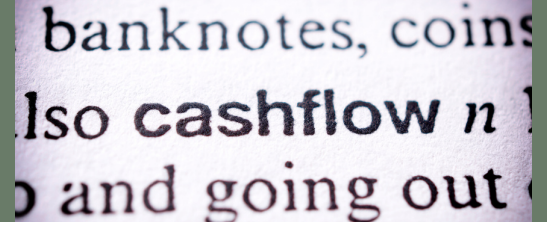
Community conflict and vocal minority



Communities are collections of people and as such there is always the possibility or likelihood of conflicts, acts of self-interest or 'institutional capture' (of the Board or organisation). Examples of these types of scenarios, and examples whereby employees have gained an undue and often unhealthy influence over the Board were given by CWGs. Dealing with such problems, once they have arisen, is not easy, or straightforward.

Gaining community confidence and having full and transparent community engagement, i.e., the wider community know and understand what the CWG is doing and how it is run, is a good thing and as outlined above, DTAS, and the Scottish Mediation Service [Scottish Mediation – Turning Disagreement into Opportunity](#) are useful arbiters in these situations.

Cash flow and lack thereof



A sound business plan is a good place to start in assessing the financial requirements of a CWG and financial projections -income and expenditure - should be realistic, conservative, and based on known sources, proper quotations and current prices. CWA will be producing an Information Note on Fundraising in the near future, based on our excellent *Fitness to Fundraise* session with Steve Sloan: https://youtu.be/1iOmrPU5_IQ

Time and resources need to be allocated for financial planning and fund raising, something that should be done by all Trustees (in the absence of dedicated employees) and is ultimately the responsibility of the Board. Where practical there should be a Reserves Policy in place and if the CWG is a Charity, Gift Aid should be used to continue to boost income. Where possible, CWGs should consider alternative options to create financial sustainability, i.e., traded income, renewable energy payments (or grants) and legacies.

Tree safety assessments



With increasing storm events and many CWGs operating in woodlands close to houses or public access, tree safety assessments should be made annually, and included in the woodland management plan. Legally, a forest/tree owner needs to use their 'best endeavours' to keep trees in a safe condition. Having an annual inspection by a qualified arboriculturist and acting on their recommendations is good practice for tree safety. Risk assessments, and actions taken to mitigate the risk should be recorded as evidence of risk mitigation.

CWG should ensure that they have an insurance policy covering such eventualities as public liability and tree damage to property – NFU Mutual, ZurichCharity Insurance and Lycetts, provide cover for such liabilities.

Crisis Review



Although social enterprises are commercial ventures operating within environmental or socially conscious principles, they are certainly not immune to business failure.

Just Enterprise's Crisis Review service has been designed to support those social enterprises who are facing significant financial difficulties and the potential failure of the business.

Acknowledgements



Thank you to everyone who took part in the 'When things go wrong' workshops at the 2023 CWA Conference, sharing their issues and contributing to the discussion. Thanks also to CWA chair Willie McGhee for writing this Information Note.

This information note is necessarily brief but will be revised in time. If you see errors, corrections, omissions or points you'd like to add then please let us know: admin@communitywoods.org.

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