

The Community Woodlands Association Background

The Community Woodlands Association is the representative voice of its member community woodland groups and the wider community woodland movement across Scotland. Since its formation in 2002, the CWA's aims have been twofold:

- **Firstly**, CWA aims to support established and emerging community woodlands across Scotland, to achieve their aspirations and potential through provision of information, training and other services.
- **Secondly**, CWA aims to represent and promote the interests and benefits of community woodland groups, within the political arena, thereby ensuring that they have a favourable policy, regulatory and funding environment in which to operate.

From small beginnings in the late 1980's when Borders Community Woodland made the first, specifically community woodland purchase of Wooplaw Wood, a number of organizations and agencies have been instrumental in the expansion of the community woodland movement. By 1999, 30 groups had been established and the first ever Community Woodland Conference was organised by Reforesting Scotland and Borders Forest Trust, bringing together 50 representatives from all over Scotland.

There are now over 200 community woodland groups involved in, or responsible for, the management of thousands of hectares of woodland and open space, with new groups setting up all the time. There are a variety of tenure arrangements: land may be owned or leased by the group, or managed in partnership with another private owner or public organisation, such as Forestry Commission Scotland. The community woodland movement is an established and growing sector with enormous potential for providing sustainable rural and urban development.

Community woodlands are partly or completely controlled by the local community, usually through a formally constituted Community Woodland Group. The land and communities involved are massively diverse: from ancient semi-natural woods to extensive conifer plantations, from less than a hectare to over a thousand hectares, from crofting townships in the north-west Highlands to small towns and inner-city communities in the Central Belt.

The initial stimulus for the formation of community woodland groups has sometimes been a perceived threat to the well-being of the community and /or their local woodlands. However, more recently, communities across Scotland are using new opportunities provided by legislation and funding to acquire woodlands as a resource to address the specific needs and issues of their particular communities.

Common to almost all community woodlands is that they are innovative and dynamic places, usually run by local volunteers working to conserve and improve the local environment, economy and vitality of their communities and bringing the community together through organised events and activities.

Whilst the aims and objectives of individual groups varies according to local needs and aspirations, and the type and scale of the woodland involved (whether purchased or simply managed by the local community), all are working to common goals: the delivery of sustainable forest management through provision of a wide range of public benefits, including:

- **Social inclusion** – involving the community in planning and decision-making, building social capital and ensuring that the benefits of community woodlands are available across the whole of the community they serve and the wider public.
- **Economic development** – increasing the value of forestry and woodlands to local communities, creating jobs and developing small scale wood processing capacity and local

markets for timber and non-timber forest products. Explore opportunities to develop tourism and affordable housing.

- **Biodiversity** – restoring and expanding native woodlands, and carrying out habitat improvements to conserve and enhance Scotland’s biodiversity and national heritage.
- **Renewable energy** – developing local supply chains and markets for woodfuel, to help reduce dependence on fossil fuels and contributing to reducing the effects of climate change
- **Education, recreation & health benefits** – providing opportunities for woodland education and awareness programmes, improved public access and well-being through facilities for outdoor recreation and healthy exercise, ranging from Forest Schools to “all-abilities” access and activity trails.

The community woodland movement has been at the forefront of turning the process of land-reform and community ownership in Scotland into reality at a grass roots level and under the banner of sustainable development.

Each community woodland group has different needs at different stages of their development. These range from common ones - such as to how to formally constitute themselves or raising and managing funds - to the need for more specialist research and expertise in woodland management, such as access, social inclusion, social enterprise, woodland and biodiversity management plans, insurance, skills development etc.

However, after what can often be a euphoric period of successful formation, and achieving initial aims, what all community woodland groups **fundamentally require** is on-going support to make them more self-sufficient in terms of sourcing and maintaining high levels of motivated and skilled people and financial resources.

It was the community woodland movement itself which recognised the importance of a national association or body to represent, co-ordinate, support and help the community woodland sector.

During its formative 3-year period CWA benefited heavily from the active and “hands on” approach of its Board of Directors. The directors are volunteers themselves, who commit a huge amount of time and energy to the work of CWA. The Directors benefit the organisation hugely by having first hand understanding and experience of the issues and challenges facing the community woodland sector. The inherent energy and experience of the Directors enabled the Association to represent the community woodland sector on many fora across Scotland (including the Forestry Commission Scotland’s (FCS) Forestry for People Advisory Panel, the Scottish Forestry Forum, Rural Development Forum and the Regional Forestry Fora). Their active participation also helped shape and change policy and helped lead the way for community engagement in rural development and community involvement in these areas.

As a result of the substantial growth in the community woodland movement, CWA’s membership has expanded rapidly during its 5 year operating period and currently stands at over 130 member groups and individuals, with around 40 emerging groups poised to join.

The Association anticipates that, with the consolidation of the Land Reform legislation in Scotland and the introduction of other initiatives such as Forestry Commission Scotland's National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS), Woodlands In and Around Towns (WIAT) and Woodland Crofts, this trend of interest in community woodlands and the increasing prominence of the community woodland sector will further accelerate its growth. This will underpin the rationale for the Association to expand the scale of its representation, facilitation, networking and support services.