

Your community group

Mobilising support



WOODLAND
TRUST

MOBILISING SUPPORT

Community woods are not just in the hands of ordinary people, they should be run for the overall public good, and with wider community needs at heart. So even if you already have a committed band of like-minded individuals in place, it pays to do your homework about who else might have a stake in your project, and get them informed, enthusiastic and involved.

And remember: community isn't just defined by location. Yes, you should be talking to people in the neighbourhood about your hopes and plans; but reach out also to those with a shared interest in what you're doing. It might be schools, businesses, sports groups or conservation bodies. It might be a red squirrel group, a horse-riding club, a green energy co-operative... you name it.

Here's a step-by-step guide to mobilising support...

1. Know your base

First, do some homework. How big is the community affected by your project? How far might it extend, how affluent is it, what's the age breakdown and the social mix? You can glean lots of insight from a postcode search at the government's neighbourhood statistics website (neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk).

Make a list of organisations who might be interested in your wood by scouring council lists and local newspaper websites. Add the names of shopkeepers and other businesses which could become stakeholders: can you reach out to them, too? And search online for others who already use and cherish the wood: maybe there's a professional forester or tree surgeon based nearby; maybe an ecologist or conservation volunteer. Maybe a keen amateur photographer has posted images of the wood on Flickr, and might chip in to your publicity effort. It's really important to identify everyone who already has a stake in the wood. Interview them face to face to glean their aspirations and concerns. And speak to people passing through the wood about why they love it and how it might change.

Write to the relevant local authority, the parish council and your MP. Will the Lord Lieutenant or the Lord Mayor lend their support? Don't forget local councillors, school headteachers, your town's history society, ramblers' association, scout troops, faith groups, Rotary Club and Women's Institute branches. And do approach conservation bodies, such as Natural England, the Environment Agency, the National Trust, the RSPB, Wildlife Trusts and the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England. Perhaps the

Woodland Trust can send along a speaker to address your first public gathering.

2. Bring people together

A public meeting is your chance to start building support. Choose a venue close to the project's logical community. It needs to accommodate everyone without dwarfing the audience: smaller is generally cheaper, and it's better to pack out a village hall than get lost in a conference centre. Perhaps a local business will give you a free room, or even sponsor your event. It should be wheelchair-friendly and have light and heat, a kitchen and toilets. If you can, twin your meeting with a woodland walk or site visit, to bring your aspirations alive.

Spread the word: email your existing contact list; tip off the local media; paste up posters in pubs, libraries and arts centres; and leaflet door-to-door. Make sure you include the leaders of other community groups, who can spread the word to their members. And if you've a celebrity speaker, shout about it.

Encourage people to let you know they're coming beforehand, and ensure that everyone signs in at the venue. It's a useful way to gather contact details and a tick-box for data protection, should you decide to keep people informed about the latest goings-on.

3. Prepare your case

A public meeting is an invaluable opportunity to test ideas for your wood, pool local knowledge and skills, and find out what your community wants from the project. But do go in with a clear proposition of your own. Prepare a map of the wood, photograph it (on a sunny day!), and find out all you can about its habitat and history, its flora and fauna... anything that makes it appealing and unique. How do local people use the wood already? What are the potential threats to it, and what are the opportunities? Assign different speakers to set out your case: is there a local woodland expert or conservation body who'll lend their voice to your cause?

Articulate the benefits you feel community management can bring: environmental, social, economic or all of the above. Pitch your own ideas but be open to others. What do people think of the place now? How do they feel it could be improved? You can gather opinion via comments from the floor, written surveys, face-to-

face interviews, or simply by inviting people to scribble their thoughts on post-it notes or a pin-board. The more interactive the better.

Of course, you could simply post out questionnaires instead – but expect to get no more than one in ten returned. And by consulting local folk in person, you'll foster a greater sense of ownership, and can later feed back in a concrete way: "You said you wanted that, so we are doing this..." The data you gather will be invaluable both in shaping plans for your wood and formulating funding bids. But be aware that your meeting also offers a forum for grievances people may have about your project. Plan and practise the running order beforehand so that all proceeds smoothly, and appoint an assertive chairperson to keep things running smoothly.

If you're short of funds, shake a bucket on the day. Making a donation can also help win the 'buy-in' of local people longer-term.

Now alert the local media and report back directly to the wider community with your action plan. Seek their support for your next steps, and take care not to raise expectations that you may not be able to fulfil. And do keep the process of engagement going, inviting feedback via newsletters, e-bulletins, Facebook or Twitter. Needs and priorities change, and you want locals behind you all the way. For more on recruiting members and raising awareness, check out the advice sheet 'Building a volunteer army,' elsewhere on this site.

4. Your core team

Is there enough appetite – and enough active support – among the community to move forward? By now you should have a good feel for who is likely to sign up properly and get stuck in. It's time to form a committee made up of these stalwarts, lay out your key objectives for the wood, and scope out the skills already in your armoury.

Running your wood will need not just silviculture and conservation knowledge, but bookkeeping, IT, publicity, fundraising, administration, health and safety... all manner of tasks. Assign individual roles, and be realistic about the time and commitment everyone can devote, compared with what your project demands. Your solid core of enthusiasts won't suffice: you'll need as many members as you can muster to help run things and muck in with specific activities.

Make sure everyone is signed up to your initial plan for the wood, and agrees who's doing what and by when – disagreements or misunderstandings will sow seeds of discontent. It is often sensible to focus on just two or three key objectives at the start, achieve them, win further support and build from there. Set a realistic timetable and be sure you're not overstretching, in terms of the funds you'll need and the resources you can marshal to the cause. For more guidance here, visit the 'Planning your wood' section of this website.