

Heartwoods End of Project Evaluation

A report by
Resources for Change
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1 INTRODUCTION

Heartwoods, the West Midlands Woodfuel Project, will reach the end of its funding period in September 2013. In preparation for this, Resources for Change was commissioned to undertake a simple evaluation of the project, reflecting on the project since its inception in September 2009.

The **key topics for the evaluation** were:

- The difference Heartwoods has made, in relation to
 - Its objectives (building capacity to provide advice and deliver training, helping to create new enterprises and woodfuel businesses, helping to expand existing businesses, encouraging people to manage woodlands and get more timber into the supply chain)
 - Woodland owners, businesses and organisations involved in the project.
- The way Heartwoods has worked
- Lessons for future work with the sector in the West Midlands.

The main channels for information-gathering were:

- In-depth semi-structured phone interview with the project manager
- In-depth semi-structured phone interviews with steering group members (n= 8)
- In-depth semi-structured interviews to create 4 impact stories (1 Woodfuel Champion, 2 woodfuel businesses, 1 woodland owner)
- Short phone interviews with project participant businesses and individuals (n=20)
- SurveyMonkey Web questionnaire open to all beneficiaries (20 responses).

The report also incorporates monitoring data collated by the Heartwoods team in relation to:

- Event and advisory visit satisfaction monitoring forms
- Woodland areas in receipt of advisory visits.

A summary of the headline findings was presented to the Steering Group, leading into a discussion about learning points and recommendations for next steps. This material has been incorporated into this report.

In reading this report, please note that the FINDINGS sections simply describe and summarise what respondents told the review team; there is no element of analysis. The ANALYSIS and CONCLUSIONS section presents the review team's interpretation of the findings, including suggestions for a way forward to consider and take action on key messages and learning from this review.

2 FINDINGS – THE DIFFERENCE HEARTWOODS HAS MADE

2.1 BUILDING CAPACITY TO PROVIDE ADVICE AND TRAINING

2.1.1 Training events

The training events have been well received, with respondents reporting back positively, in relation to:

- Providing very relevant information for their work, e.g. biosecurity, tree species identification, managing woodlands for woodfuel
- Providing up-to-date information on fast-moving topics, e.g. tree diseases and pests, RHI
- Providing a good variety of training topics, based on listening to what organisations' and individuals' said their needs were
- The use of high quality speakers with real experience in their field
- Good discussions, related to having good numbers of attendees
- Reaching out to invite people from beyond the traditional core of the forestry sector
- High standard of event organisation.

Respondents noted that the training had made a difference in terms of:

- Increasing their knowledge and skills, e.g. timber extraction
- Making the learning available in a way that made it accessible
- Giving them confidence
- Becoming more aware of what is happening in the sector
- Providing an opportunity to talk to others about the issue

An additional benefit that a number of respondents noted was the networking opportunity that the events presented. This included the chance to meet “like-minded people”, as well as those from other parts of the supply chain with whom there could be business development possibilities.

There were a couple of caveats to the positive comments made: a bit too much repetition in one training session; preferring to receive information about training events further in advance (but also noting that improvements had been made).

The partnership working between organisations was also said to have worked well, in that having two different organisations involved helped in terms of the content of the event, as well as therefore making it possible to attract a variety of attendees from both organisations' networks.

15 of the 20 businesses interviewed had been on one or more training event. Of these, all respondents spoke positively of the events. 17 of the 20 businesses who responded to the Web questionnaire had attended a training event. Of these, 16 noted that they had found the events good.

“The best seminars I’ve attended for a while”.
“The training was well structured”.
“Brilliant. Really useful key speakers”.
“You can’t underestimate the networking value of the events they put on”.

2.1.2 Advice and support

Advice was provided in three main ways: to woodland owners by Woodfuel Champions; to woodland owners and to businesses by Heartwoods staff; on an ad hoc basis by staff in response to individual queries.

As with the training, there was overwhelmingly positive feedback about the advice and support received. This included:

- Being available to provide advice as and when it was needed
- Providing active support, as well as advice
- Providing sound, practical advice based on real experience
- Giving ideas

“He helped break the jargon down”.
“There are grants available, but without something like Heartwoods, you don’t stand a chance of accessing it”.
“Woodfuel Champions have been a really good resource”.
“Just knowing the organisation’s here to get help from has been good. Learning would have been harder without them”.
“The team has been responsive, answered my questions”.

The difference that the advice and support has made to respondents included:

- Making it possible to apply for a grant (for woodland management and for businesses’ equipment)
- Helping some woodland owners to think about management for the first time
- Helping other woodland owners to make the first active steps towards management, in particular through woodland inventories, the production of management plans and helping with grant applications.
- Helping woodfuel producers achieve accreditation
- Encouraged confidence
- Keeping people in touch with the sector (through information emails)

Of the business interviewees, 8 had received advisory visits and 14 had received help in relation to grant funding. Of the respondents to the Web questionnaire, 7 had received advisory visits and 3 had received help with grant applications. The general feeling was that being able to access grant funding had had a medium - big impact.

An additional benefit noted by a few respondents was that the Woodland Champion who had provided the initial advice was then able to organise the implementation of the grant-funded activity, e.g. road-making, thinning.

2.2 CREATING AND SUPPORTING BUSINESSES

No evidence has emerged from the evaluation in relation to creating new businesses (note that this was not a key objective of the project, and therefore was not subject to specific monitoring) but there have been useful findings in relation to helping to support existing businesses. Business owners and managers reported a variety of benefits as a result of their involvement with Heartwoods:

- Upskilling of employees and themselves
- Success in winning grant-funding for capital equipment seen as vital for their business operations, and then leading to business output improvements such as increased firewood production
- Networking opportunities, and in some cases, leading to new business relationships and new work
- New customers
- Increased business
- Improvements to their business financing
- Improvements to their marketing

3 businesses¹ reported that the support/input from Heartwoods had helped to create a new staff position.

There were business benefits for the Woodland Champions, in terms of bringing potential and actual new business. More than one Champion noted that the independence of Heartwoods had opened up the possibility of work with customers who would have been reluctant to make a first move to contact a purely commercial business; in these cases, the brokerage of Heartwoods as an independent and impartial organisation was seen to have been vital. One Champion noted that the benefit of having Heartwoods bring the customers to them, negating the need for their own business development which is an 'at risk' cost to a business. The other really important factor was said to be the subsidy from Heartwoods for the Champion's initial support, which made the work affordable in the perception of the customer. The work done during the Champion's initial visit was then able to demonstrate to the owner the potential for economic benefit from the woodland (where this was realistic for their woodland), and therefore open the door to follow-on work by the Champion which

¹ 2 responses from Web survey, 1 from business interviews. Note that due to the option for anonymity on the Web survey, it is possible that the business interviewee also completed a Web questionnaire, and that therefore one of these three is double-counted.

would be arranged directly. In some cases, the intended aim of the Champion's initial work was to source grant-funding for the additional work, e.g. a management plan that would then lead to thinning. It was noted however, that there can be a time delay between the Champion's Heartwoods'-supported visit and any follow-up work, for a whole variety of reasons.

Some respondents made a more general point that they believed Heartwoods had helped to improve the overall business environment through contributing to increasing the profile of the woodfuel sector.

"Our business has been able to expand its geographical coverage".
"It's generated more business for our company".

2.3 ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO MANAGE WOODLANDS AND GETTING TIMBER INTO THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Respondents were positive about Heartwoods' achievements in terms of encouraging people to manage woodlands and therefore bring more timber into the supply chain.

The most significant achievement was seen to be Heartwoods' success in reaching out to woodland owners that other organisations had not been able to engage, in particular farmers. The reasons that respondents cited for this success were:

- The development of partnership working with NFU and CLA to be able to reach out to their membership through their databases, and then to be able to offer a service that was of potential economic benefit to the members.
- Heartwoods staff's ability and on-going work to contact woodland owners, 'cold calling' and being persistent, in order to explain the services on offer.
- The offer of a heavily subsidised first visit, therefore making the service affordable to the woodland owner (as they perceived it).
- The availability of on-going advice and support to woodland owners, offered in a variety of ways.

The advice provided by Heartwoods staff and the Woodfuel Champions was seen as instrumental in helping to bring woodlands into management, and various examples were given. However, it was noted that there was no formal mechanism for monitoring what happened as a result of Heartwoods interventions, so the full impact would not be known.

Heartwoods' work with woodland owners was said to have made a difference in a variety of ways:

- Getting owners to think about woodland management for the first time.
- Actually bringing about new woodland management actions,
- As a result of the new woodland management, having an impact for owners and the

woodland itself, e.g. creating new income through firewood sales, habitat improvements, access improvements.

- Helping owners to understand the economic potential (or otherwise) of their woodlands.
- Helping owners to add value to their woodland products.
- Helping owners to apply for grant funding, through signposting to suitable grants and helping with the application forms.

“I expect more than half of the woodlands I worked with will end up bringing timber to market that wouldn’t otherwise have done so, maybe 75 per cent”.

“Once there was a foot in the door, owners were happy to commit money because they understood the possible financial returns”.

“Heartwoods has helped to unblock several important pinchpoints”.

“It’s amazingly different in the woodland now...we can now get down rides you couldn’t before....vegetation has opened up and bluebells are coming up in places we haven’t seen before”.

“Getting to the parts FC can’t or won’t reach”.

“Excellent outreach into a section that we don’t usually engage with”.

3 FINDINGS: THE WAY HEARTWOODS HAS WORKED

3.1 WHAT HAS WORKED WELL

The evaluation sought to find out people's views about *the way* that Heartwoods worked and to understand more about the reasons for its success. A variety of different aspects were highlighted.

As noted previously, the training events were thought to have worked very well, and this was attributed to a number of factors, including the choice of topics based on people's real needs, the high quality speakers, the quality of discussions amongst participants. An important part of this was that Heartwoods staff had asked people what training was needed, and had been shown to have listened.

The smoothness of project administration and the good relationship with the main funder was noted, considered to be due largely to the project managers' experience and skills, but also to the constructive working and discussions at Steering Group meetings.

The partnership working with key organisations was seen as a real achievement for Heartwoods, building up constructive relationships in a way that is not believed to be common to the sector. Again, the project manager's skills and experience were cited, as well as a will on the part of all players to work together towards a common aim and for mutual benefit.

The Steering Group was seen as a very effective body, comprising a good mix of representation from across the sector. The Chair was commended for her leadership of the Group, and the value of her experience was noted. The Group was said to work well together, with good discussions and a common sense approach.

This latter theme is repeated in relation to the staff team, who were seen as very down-to-earth, practical and hands-on, with the 'right' attitude to work with the target audiences, as well as being willing to make themselves available to help. There were particular compliments for the project manager, whose experience, knowledge, commitment, ambition and attitude were said to have been instrumental in building the reputation and achievements of the project. Together, the project manager and his team created a sense of trust amongst the target audience which was vital in enabling the project to work.

It was widely acknowledged that the project's target audience was hard to reach, and that the project staff had succeeded where other projects and organisations had failed (or not tried) because of their willingness to 'cold call' and their persistence. This had worked well in combination with the partnership working with other organisations which unlocked the potential amongst their members through giving access to their membership databases.

An important part of Heartwoods' success was said to be the project's independence and impartiality. This worked at two levels: collaborating organisations could feel confident that

Heartwoods was working with them and not competing with them; woodland owners could feel that they were dealing with an organisation that was not trying to make money out of them and that did not have a commercial agenda.

3.2 WHAT DID NOT WORK SO WELL

There were relatively few things that respondents picked up on that they felt could have been improved on:

- The issues with the first selection of Woodland Champions could have been picked up and dealt with earlier; however, the review and second phase had worked well.
- There were some difficulties for Woodland Champions to get the owner to complete the evaluation form, which delayed their ability to invoice Heartwoods for work done.
- There was no mechanism to monitor whether the advice and support given actually led to active woodland management, so there can only be estimates or anecdotal feedback about the outcomes². Training was mostly not accredited, which may have been an issue for some participants.
- The reach of the project across the whole of the West Midlands was patchy. It was noted that the capacity and location of project staffing made it difficult to make visits across the whole area, and that there had been a tendency to focus on locations where it was easier logistically to arrange visits and where potential was thought to be highest. There were attempts to co-ordinate visits with a number of woodland owners in a similar location when further away from the office, but this proved difficult in practice. The second phase of recruitment of Woodland Champions deliberately sought to be able to offer advisory capacity towards the 'edges' of the West Midlands.

Also, it was noted by a number of respondents that the project's achievements happened in the wider context of a strengthening woodfuel market, and that this could have contributed to some of the project's success.

²² Note that as part of their contract, woodfuel champions are required to report on whether woodlands are in the process of being managed, and if so, how much timber has been produced.

4 FINDINGS: WHAT NEXT?

The evaluation asked respondents about what they thought should happen next, in the light of the cessation of the current funding later in 2013.

The most frequent response was that the work done by Heartwoods should continue, as they did not think there were any other organisations or projects doing this work, but yet it was really important. All the different elements of the project's work were mentioned, including: access to grant funding; access to well targeted and high quality advice, support, information and training; subsidised woodland management advice; networking opportunities; promotion and awareness-raising for the sector. Several respondents expressed a strong wish to be able to continue with the same team, in part because of their skills and abilities, but also as an effective way to maintain the knowledge, capacity and profile that has built up over the period of the project.

Other specific responses included:

- Support for woodland management plans to get submitted and approved.
- Building and maintaining a (vetted) database of people who use or supply woodfuel, and related machinery and products.
- Marketing, including collaborative marketing.
- Facilitating the local supply chain.
- Try to push up the prices.
- Raise awareness of the financial realities/real cost of getting product to market.
- Get involved at a policy level and with legislation.
- Bring together groups/hubs of small woodland owners to make work financially viable. Ward Forester approach.
- Encourage more tree planting.
- Regular local networking meetings.
- Focus on a couple of counties where the most potential is, e.g. Herefordshire, Shropshire.
- Market research.
- Provide support for infrastructure, e.g. timber stores.
- Work at all stages of the supply chain.
- Short films/videos as a means of providing training, e.g. introduction to woodland management, managing a wood for woodfuel.
- A delegated grant fund which takes risks.
- Longer term funding, 3 years is not long enough.

5 FINDINGS – GENERAL

As with any evaluation, there were some responses that do not fit precisely with the Key Topics used to structure the evaluation. However, it is important to include these, and this is the purpose of this section.

The project has been mentioned in the national and regional media in a positive light, including Farming Today, BBC West Midlands and several local radio interviews. Heartwoods was also noted in the Independent Panel on Forestry Report and is recommended as a delivery agent for woodland enterprise zone activity in the Marches Timber Study.

Some respondents identified impacts that they believed Heartwoods had brought about, above and beyond the intended impacts. These included:

- Delivering on the business and skills agenda for the sector in a way that other organisations had not.
- Assisted a number of organisations to deliver on their own agenda, therefore taking pressure off them to put their own staff resources in.
- Unlocking RDP funding for the sector.
- Acting as a facilitator for WEG.

Also, there were several comments about how Heartwoods had made it possible to do something that would otherwise not have happened, and how Heartwoods provides a service that isn't available anywhere else.

“The grant allowed me to work in places I wouldn't have been able to otherwise”.

“Without the help, the longterm benefits to the business wouldn't have happened”.

“If you don't go to Heartwoods, where do you go for this resource of knowledge?”.

“A breath of fresh air”.

“If the Government wants woodlands managed, I think this is one of the most effective ways of doing it”.

“They've made an invaluable contribution to woodland culture in this region...getting people thinking about woodlands, managing them sustainably for the future”.

“It's been a very great support for the sector...it's helped the sector head in the right direction”.

“What they've done is filled a very useful niche”.

“All you have to do is have somebody with a passion”.

“A good job – well done”.

6 FINDINGS: THE MOST VALUABLE THING

Nearly all respondents were asked the question, “In your view, what is the most valuable thing that the Heartwoods project has done?” The responses are shown here, in the respondents’ own words.

The intermediary between small woodland owners and professional managers.

The subsidised advice for woodland owners.

Raised awareness of developing woodland management and new market opportunities.

The collaborative working to provide a good range of training and advice to landowners.

Providing the technical support for businesses, and how they do that.

Engaging lots of woodland owners.

The engagement with the non-traditional forestry sector, i.e. farmers.

The door was always open, support was always there.

The training events.

The team.

Creation of woodland culture in the region.

Engaged small woodland owners in the West Midlands and engaged the forestry industry through events and training.

Profile raising of woodland management across the region.

Events and conferences.

Events, training and grants.

Given support for management.

Contact with people.

Bringing the use of timber as firewood to the forefront.

Got started with work on the woodland, got me interested and motivated.

Introduction to woodfuel and the possibilities for income.

Raised profile, showed woodland owners the value of the resource.

Raising awareness of woodfuel.

Team expertise and knowledge.

Promoting firewood.

Guidance – help and advice.

Raising awareness of woodfuel.

A resource hub – first port of call for all in the supply chain.

Run training courses.

Helped me plan my woodland management.

Enabled me to purchase a piece of equipment integral to my forestry business.

Raised the profile and given enthusiasm to new contacts.

Raised the profile of woodland management.

Got the supply chain connected – met many different people on courses.

Got people thinking about managing woodlands.

One stop shop.

General pool of information across the board.

Helped to convey the message that a healthy woodland is worked, whether for fuelwood or other products.

Made woodland management possible through excellent knowledge.

Raised awareness of good woodland management.

Given a focus for expansion of our business.

7 ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the evaluation team's interpretation of the findings, including suggestions for a way forward to consider and take action on key messages and learning from this review.

7.1 ANALYSIS

Filling a niche and fulfilling a need

Unlike many other projects, this project clearly fills a niche that no other organisation or project does. The responses show that stakeholders believe that Heartwoods fulfils a unique role and that there will be a distinct gap if Heartwoods cannot continue. Moreover, respondents were not referring to a situation where it would be 'nice' if the project continued its work, but rather that it was 'necessary' that the work should be done.

High calibre working

Again unlike many other projects, the level of positivity about the quality of the work done by the project was exceptional. Although there are things that respondents note could have been done better, none of these are really major issues, as many of them commented in their responses. The reasons given for the success were varied, but suggest some key factors. The staff team was highly complimented, in particular the project manager; the qualities that made the difference were their down-to-earth approach, their relevant skills and knowledge, the fact that they listened and acted on what they heard, and their availability.

Reaching the parts that others don't

It was frequently noted that the project had been extremely successful in reaching out to small woodland owners that no other organisation had previously engaged with effectively. Universally seen as 'hard to reach', Heartwoods had overcome these difficulties through three key mechanisms: partnership working in a very constructive way with CLA and NFU, many of whose members are small woodland owners with under-managed woodlands; the resource, time and ability to 'cold call' these owners; the offer of a highly subsidised initial advisory visit which was targeted at identifying potential economic benefits for the owner.

A project that is more than the sum of its parts

Each element of the project has played its part in making Heartwoods as a whole work, and the project would not succeed in the way it does if any of the elements were taken out. For example, the informal and accessible advice from the team backs up formal advisory visits from a Woodfuel Champion, networking at a training event helps to build business already supported by a grant.

Affordable advice with the carrot of economic benefit

It has been crucial to the success of the advisory visits that the input from Woodfuel Champions was subsidised. In this way, woodland owners felt that the investment required from them was affordable. Another key element was that the advice was targeted on identifying potential economic benefits for the owner, so that they could immediately see if

– and how – they could get something out of the actions being recommended.

Impartiality

In a number of ways, the fact that Heartwoods has been impartial has contributed to its success. Woodland owners have been more willing to respond positively, as they haven't felt that it has been a purely commercially based 'sales' call. Other organisations have been willing to work co-operatively because they can see that Heartwoods is not pushing its own (or a rival organisation's) agenda.

With hindsight

None of the issues raised are significant, in relation to the project as a whole. The issue relating to Woodfuel Champions was picked up and dealt with. Any future project could usefully build in a monitoring mechanism to try to find out whether the Champions' advisory visits had led to management actions, e.g. through a phone call to the woodland owner 6 months and 1 year afterwards. The requirement for the owners' evaluation sheets to be completed in order for the Champion to invoice would probably need to remain; its disadvantages are outweighed by the fact that the Champion does not need to give any 'at risk' business development time to getting the work.

Looking forwards

There is widespread appetite to continue the work done by Heartwoods. Respondents provide convincing arguments that there is no other existing organisation with the resources to do this, or other project with a remit to do it. A future project would need to have the following characteristics:

- Maintain the trust created by this Heartwoods project;
- Have the right attitude, as demonstrated by the current project;
- Work closely with other sector bodies, so that it can continue to meet some of their goals at the same time as its own;
- Provide seedcorn subsidy, without which small woodland owners would be much less likely to engage;
- Have to work even harder and reach out to less-touched areas.

Beyond this, the access to grants offered by the current project has been very highly valued by recipients, but it is recognised that the economic situation makes this difficult to continue. However, it is likely that more in-depth research could provide a sound financial argument for the benefits of the grant support received.

The core of the argument for continuing this kind of work is Heartwoods' role as a catalyst to woodland-based economic development; the investment is re-paid by private sector business growth. There are additional benefits to the physical environment, in terms of improving ecological diversity and species conservation, which may be of interest to particular policy and organisational stakeholders.

7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are unusually short and straightforward, based on clear evidence from across the spectrum of respondents about the need to continue the work begun by

Heartwoods, and through the delivery mechanisms developed by Heartwoods.

We recommend that the Heartwoods Steering Group **seeks to continue the project**, and that it should work in much the same way as at present, but perhaps in particular focussed geographical areas where there is particular need and where a staff team can effectively operate. In the light of learning from this project, any new/continued project should include a requirement to monitor the nature and level of woodland management arising from project intervention, contributing to full project evaluation.

We recognise that finding funding for this in the current economic climate is likely to be extremely challenging, but believe that there are potentially persuasive arguments that can be presented in favour of the investment that meet key policy agendas for government.

In order to open up discussions with potential funders, the Steering Group should **prepare a 'persuasion paper'** which outlines the need for the work and the evidence for the Heartwoods approach, and includes a clear 'ask' in relation to the funding required. The findings from this evaluation will be an important source of information, as will the Marches Timber Study, but additional work will be required particularly in relation to the 'ask'.

There is some time pressure to do this follow-up work, not least to attempt to keep some level of continuity of work. The problems associated with breaks between project funding are well recognised, including in particular staff retention, loss of profile, loss of operational information and systems.

7.2.1 And finally.....

The Heartwoods project is widely recognised as a very successful project which has met a real industry need in an effective way. The challenge now is to demonstrate how continuing its work will contribute to a stronger local economy, and how the investment required to do so will provide value for money.

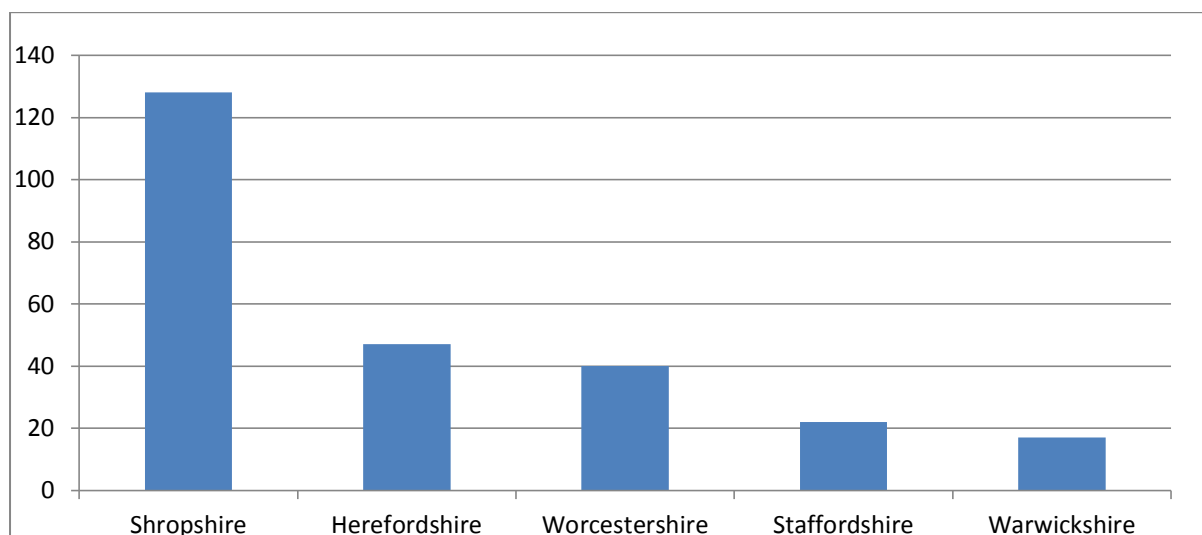
Heartwoods is in a good position to provide decision-makers with real evidence of this. Don't just show them the arguments on paper; take them out to meet the people whose businesses have grown as a result of the Heartwoods interventions, whose stories told face-to-face will have an impact that words on a page never could.

8 APPENDIX – A QUANTITATIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of the project, the team have collected data relating to various aspects of the project. Some of the key data summaries are presented in this appendix.

WOODLAND ADVISED ON

The project has provided advice relating to 280 woodland sites, together comprising 7503 hectares. The spread of these sites through the counties of the West Midlands is shown below.



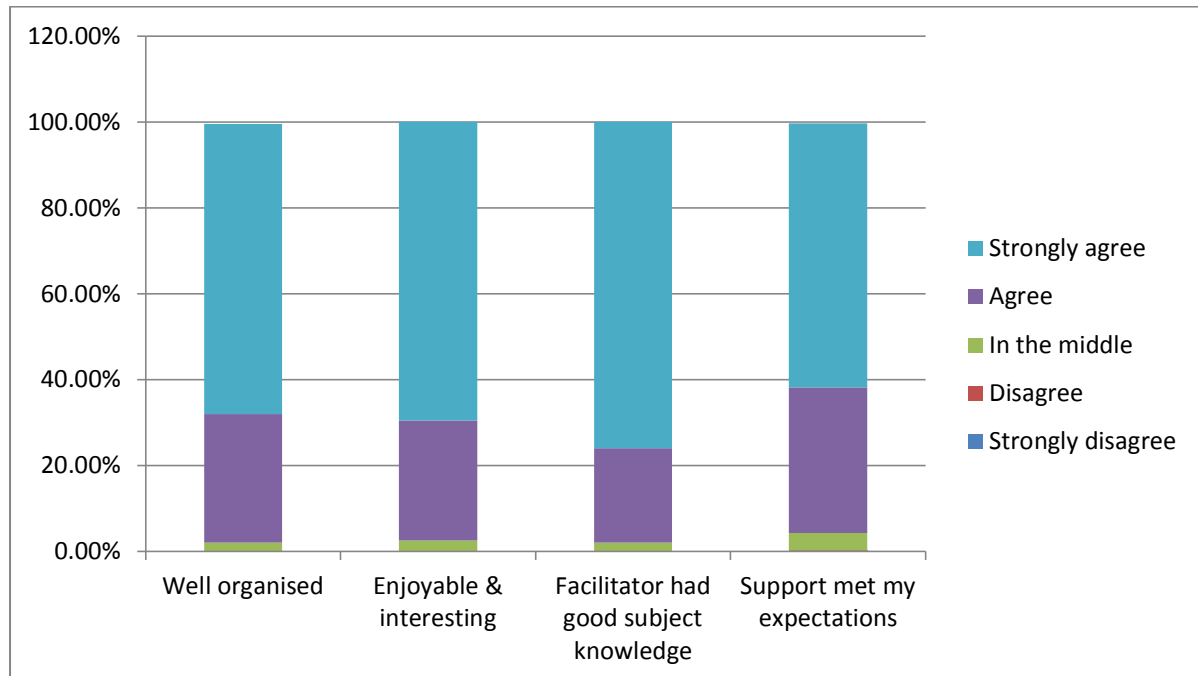
A considerable majority of woodland sites have been less than 20 hectares, as shown here.



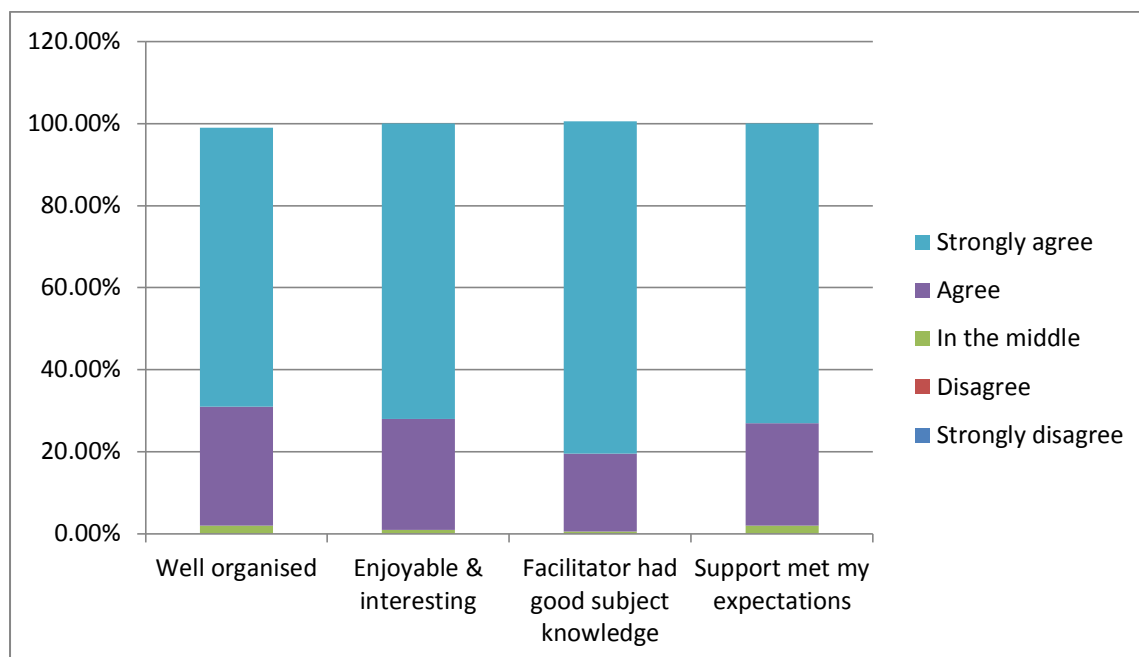
EVENT AND ACTIVITY EVALUATIONS

Each participant in the project's events and activities was asked to fill in an evaluation sheet. 558 event participant responses and 212 advisory visit participant responses were analysed. The results are shown in the tables below. These demonstrate a very high level of satisfaction with the activities.

Events



Advisory visits



ALYN HAWKINS – WOODLAND OWNER

Alyn bought a 77 acre woodland in Staffordshire about 3 years ago. As he noted, it was cheap for a reason! Unmanaged since it had been clearfelled in the 1980s, it was in a very bad state. He came to Heartwoods for help and support with bringing the woodland back into management.

One of Heartwoods' Woodland Champions worked with Alyn to review the site and then drew up a management plan. This enabled Alyn to apply for – and receive – a grant to pay for 20 days' thinning work. Around two-thirds of the woodland is semi-natural ancient woodland and Alyn says, "It's amazingly different in the woodland now...the vegetation has opened up and we're seeing bluebells coming up in places we haven't seen before".

Access has been a big problem, so the grant Alyn was able to get towards clearance of the rides has made a big difference. Not only can he now reach the far end of the woodland "without needing a machete", but he has been able to take out the material from the thinning, and estimates that he has been able to sell up to 10 tonnes of firewood so far. He plans to increase this, extracting more wood once the condition of the rides improves as they dry up – something that is now possible, now that they have been opened up.

The other support he has received from Heartwoods has been instrumental in helping him with developing the firewood sales. The team helped him through the process of grant application which besides the thinning, contributed towards the purchase of 2 chainsaws, a PTO driven log cutter and a wood storage shed. He was able to complete subsidised chainsaw training through Heartwoods, an essential element of the firewood production work.

Alyn is excited about how his woodland is changing, and recognises how Heartwoods have helped towards this. "Without their help, the management plan wouldn't have been done or approved by Forestry Commission. The grant for ride clearance wouldn't have happened either. We need the grants to be there to get the woods into production."

ROSANNE HOWES, WOODFUEL BUSINESS

Rosanne joined the family woodfuel business – Logs West Midlands Ltd. - full time about three years ago, with a focus on marketing and promotion, having previously worked in a part-time capacity. She looked to Heartwoods initially for general advice and support, but then found that the business was able to benefit in other ways too.

She notes that Heartwoods staff were a reliable reference point, giving good advice, and that "there was always someone who could help". She is very positive about the project staff's ways of working, describing them as "having a very sound and approachable ethos in place".

Nick, the Heartwoods project manager, worked closely with Rosanne to help her through

the Woodsure accreditation process. As she says, “He helped with the jargon, he came to the testing, he checked we were alright at all stages of the process....he helped me all the way”. She greatly values the practical advice she received, and the way Nick’s input enabled her to see how their existing work practices met the Woodsure requirements.

She was also able get support to apply for a grant for a wood splitter, with Heartwoods staff helping her to decode the jargon, reviewing how she had completed the application form and ‘fine tuning’ her wording. Some of her team attended tree species identification training, which they found both enjoyable and useful. Since then, they have been updated regularly on other courses that have been available, as well as potential funding opportunities for training.

She reflects on the importance of Heartwoods as an impartial body, which respects business confidentiality. She sees potential for building on the project’s work to have an independent central point for “a tremendous networking system bringing lots of people’s work together” for the West Midlands, and views this as increasingly important within the growing woodfuel industry.

ANDY GRUNDY, WOODFUEL BUSINESS

Now Production Manager with Midlands Wood Fuel Ltd., Andy’s first involvement with Heartwoods came when he was the staff member involved in developing the project. Since then, he has been a stalwart member of the Steering Group, keen to help to provide a voice for the private sector.

Right from the beginning, Andy saw Heartwoods as a way to “put the tools into place” to bring undermanaged woodlands back into working condition. “I could see woodlands dying on their feet, and wanted to do something about it”. He recognised that it would be crucial to be pro-active and “to handhold woodland owners to the point where they can see the advantages”.

In relation to his own business, he speaks of several benefits. Several staff have attended telehandler training, essential to the business’ operations. He has attended various training events, of which he found the tree health and tree diseases day particularly worthwhile. He notes how valuable the networking can be at these events, as they bring together people from all different parts of the supply chain. He has also had support to apply for capital grants which have enabled him to support the acquisition of a wood chipper, timber trailer and pneumatic chip delivery vehicle for the business.

Andy speaks very positively of what Heartwoods has been able to achieve for the sector as a whole, as well as his own business. “It’s freed up the resource that was tied up in under-managed woods...it’s helped to unblock several pinchpoints in the timber supply chain”. And he also draws attention to the way Heartwoods has worked collaboratively with other organisations in a variety of its activities, including for example running events jointly with ICF, RFS, NFU, CLBA and Confor, bringing together the whole land based sector.

Looking to the future, Andy points out that land management is a slow process, which needs project support over more than three years. He hopes that it will be possible to build on Heartwoods' work, in particular to encourage more woodland planting, and notes that there would be many biodiversity benefits in addition to the economic value.

MARTIN JONES – WOODFUEL CHAMPION

Martin has worked as a Woodfuel Champion for Heartwoods since the project began. Visits to Heartwoods clients have mostly involved producing woodland inventories, but also some management plans. He notes that it has been an important first step for the woodland owners to know what their woodlands contain – what the species are, the volumes and the amounts that should be thinned. Also, the site meetings have been a useful way to discuss opportunities and options for managing the woodland.

He notes that the subsidised advice offered by Heartwoods has been really important to woodland owners. On more than one occasion, he has signposted potential clients to Heartwoods, who have then chosen to sign up and get woodland management advice for the first time because of the subsidy.

One of Heartwoods' objectives has been to strengthen businesses in the fuelwood supply chain, and Martin talks of the benefits for his business, the Woodland Stewardship Company Ltd. "It's certainly boosted the business, through the initial introductions and also work later on." In relation to this, he points out how Heartwoods' intermediary role has been important, as farmers have seemed to be more comfortable approaching the project than a consultant directly; in this way, clients have come on board that he believes he and other consultants would have struggled to draw in on their own. He also comments that it can be very difficult to know who owns a particular plot of land, so Heartwoods' access to landowner databases had made a real difference, together with the fact that they had staff resource and time to follow up this information and make phone calls to the owners.

Beyond the practicalities of the work, Martin describes other benefits. "As a local employer, I'm very passionate about how far we can contribute to the economy and environment, so this fits very well with the ethos of our company." He sees real potential for jobs in the industry, especially for contractors to carry out the woodland management tasks identified in the new management plans. He is hoping for a continuation of the project, believing that investment in this type of work is instrumental in strengthening "woodland culture" and woodland management.