

## Evaluating Cydcoed – have community-managed woodlands provided social and economic benefit?

Woodland can help deliver 11 of the UK government’s 15 headline quality of life indicators. Numerous studies on greenspace and woodland have shown that they are highly valued by communities, and that access to woodland is not only important for exercise but also makes visitors feel relaxed, happy and close to nature. Cydcoed (which is Welsh for ‘Woods for All’) used a large EU grant to fund community groups in Wales that wanted to plant new woods or improve woods in their neighbourhood. These groups used grant money for activities such as improving the condition of woods; opening up woods with new paths, signs and benches; artwork in and around woods; buying land; tree planting; and developing forest facilities that provide local benefits such as forest schools, woodland-based businesses or recreation facilities. This project evaluated the Cydcoed programme and the ways in which these communities have benefited from managing their local woodlands. The projects reflect the diverse communities, environments and needs across Wales.



*"Everything we've done has made me have more faith in the community; for everything that's gone wrong, ten things have gone right"*

Teacher, Ynyscynon Tyfiant Woodland

### Background

The Welsh Assembly agenda revolves around the vision of a sustainable Wales, where action for social, economic and environmental improvement combines to create positive change. Aimed at, but not exclusive to, the most deprived communities in Wales, Cydcoed encompasses community woodland projects with outcomes that promote health and well-being, education and learning, access, recreation and economic sustainability within those communities. A total of 81 projects took place on Local Authority owned land and 19 on Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) managed land, resulting in 100 locally negotiated land management agreements. Other projects took place on land owned by the groups themselves. The projects sought to make a positive contribution to social and environmental justice in Wales.

### Objectives

This research aimed to:

- explore the social and economic impact of Cydcoed intervention on individuals and communities

- provide an economic analysis of the non-market public benefits of the Cydcoed programme
- explore the implications of the intervention and offer recommendations for future policy and strategy in FCW

### Methods

- Postal surveys were undertaken with all 163 projects across Wales and a further in-depth survey was undertaken with a representative sample of 24 groups.
- Semi-structured interviews with FCW staff and project members were used to add depth to the surveys, whilst focus groups, telephone interviews and site visits provided insights into perceptions, behaviours, attitudes to and benefits of the programme.

## Findings

Groups reported that being given both the remit and the money to develop, manage and deliver on a project had been empowering. Of the groups, 80% thought their project had helped develop stronger ties within their community, while 84% thought the community's quality of life had improved. Partnerships had proved important to success, where these had been negotiated and managed by the group. Groups expressed impatience with statutory agencies' representatives who did not recognise fully their potential to deliver. There is considerable social value for the people of Wales in managing local woodlands: community members are able and willing to participate in local processes of decision-making, finding it an empowering and cohesive experience.

More than 50% of interviewees reported that involvement in Cydcoed had considerably improved their overall health and well-being. This is particularly important for projects in the South Wales Valleys where health deprivation is among the highest in Britain.

Developing and implementing a thorough monitoring and evaluation framework is important for programmes and projects. A lack of baseline data and on-going monitoring limited the depth of our evidence base.

Cydcoed has made significant contributions to the Assembly's social and environmental justice agenda in Wales.

Economic non-market benefits to the wider community across all projects have been estimated based on responses from the survey to 24 projects where respondents were, in effect, self-selecting. This should be taken into account when considering the figures below:

- annual costs avoided to the education sector may exceed £107,000
- annual recreational benefits may reach £15 million
- annual costs avoided to the NHS may be as high as £815,000
- annual environmental benefits are around £840,000

## Recommendations

### Public involvement

- Community members may possess some of the required skills and competences but will need support to identify and fill skills gaps.
- Statutory-sector organisations could be helped to work sensitively with community groups, to ensure that the community contribution to the decision-making process is recognised.

### Local or national policy makers

- Further commitment from FCW to community development programmes will necessitate a balance of local viewpoints with more national and regional strategic objectives in order to capitalise on successes.
- Other non-statutory partnership organisations can provide important links to a wide range of people and knowledge. Where appropriate, working with organisations such as Communities First should be encouraged.
- A strong monitoring and evaluation framework, including collation of baseline data, should become embedded in FCW programmes and projects.

### Partners

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