

Hill Holt Wood: social enterprise and community woodland

Hill Holt Wood (HHW) is a 14-hectare deciduous woodland situated on the Lincolnshire/Nottinghamshire border. Its owners bought the wood in 1995 and developed a social enterprise and community woodland that in 2004 employed 14 people. The enterprise primarily provides vocational training for young people who have been excluded from school or are unemployed. A five-month study began in late 2003 to explore and describe what was taking place at the wood, to gain an understanding of what could be learnt and assess whether a similar approach could be applicable elsewhere. The study highlighted three main elements of importance at HHW:



- 1) its status and role as a social enterprise
- 2) the community involvement and control of what takes place in the wood
- 3) the delivery of education and vocational training to young people

Background

Social enterprises are businesses with social and/or environmental objectives whose surpluses are reinvested into the business rather than there being a need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners. The government suggests that such enterprises have an important role to play in creating a sustainable and socially inclusive economy, through the use of business solutions to achieve public good. From the beginning, local people were encouraged to participate in HHW, and a committee was formed in 1997 to link the woodland owners and the community. In 2002, HHW Ltd was established as a not-for-profit, community-controlled membership organisation.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- explore how the work at HHW has developed into a community-run woodland
- examine the effectiveness of the enterprise in meeting its aims and objectives
- explore the public benefits that are being derived from the activities at HHW
- identify what lessons can be learnt from HHW that might be applicable to other community woodlands or woodland management in general

"I've placed young people with attention deficit disorder and syndromes somewhere on the autistic spectrum, and HHW works really really well with these young people. It's the open environment, how they move the tasks so the attention span can be managed really well in the open spaces."

Connexions Service Advisor

Methods

- A qualitative methodology was used to explore the research objectives.
- Semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with representatives from a range of organisations in Lincolnshire, including: the Learning and Skills Council, Connexions Service, Education and Cultural Services Directorate of Lincolnshire County Council, Forest Enterprise England, the Forestry Commission, and a staff member of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award.
- Interviews were undertaken with HHW staff and members of the HHW board and the Executive Committee.
- Executive and board meetings were attended, as well as activities in the woodland, such as a Duke of Edinburgh event day.

Findings

HHW is meeting its objectives to manage the woodland, be self-sustainable and encourage community involvement. The beneficiaries are young people who are either excluded from mainstream education or unemployed, and members of the local community who can become members of HHW and enjoy public access to the site. HHW approaches woodlands in a different way, not only as a habitat to be managed but as a woodland space that can be used to achieve other goals, such as employment, education and training.

The young people often have difficult backgrounds and special needs. Interviewees felt that the approach taken

at HHW, in which there is respect for the woodland, the young people and the public, was a key to success. The young people were allowed to progress at their own pace and learn basic skills, such as use of computers and vehicle maintenance, as well as carrying out conservation work at HHW and elsewhere. The type of education provided at HHW is available in other settings, however the woodland venue has a number of advantages, including:

- 1) its ability to absorb activity without seeming crowded
- 2) its calming and therapeutic effect
- 3) its suitability for a range of different training activities such as coppicing and making wood products

Recommendations

HHW has taken an holistic approach to its work, focusing on people and communities, management of the environment and the creation of a sustainable business.

For future projects and interventions we suggest the following.

- Successful examples of woodland social enterprises such as HHW should be promoted to enable others to learn from existing experience and expertise.
- Specific funds could be targeted to help support new or existing successful woodland ventures, such as HHW, that provide a range of public benefits.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the impacts of enterprises such as HHW should include the ecological impact, as well as social and economic impacts, and in particular the effect of vocational training on young people who are excluded from mainstream education.
- Opportunities could be explored for creating capacity among social entrepreneurs to encourage the creation of new innovative projects. Through a partnership of organisations, small areas of woodland could be allocated to a woodland social enterprise, such as HHW, to allow further projects to be set up with specific social and environmental objectives.

Partners

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Funding / Support

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Reports and publications

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