

# Social interaction, inclusion and community cohesion

## Cydcoed: evaluating social and human benefits

### Introduction

The Cydcoed initiative was within the 2001 *Wales Woodland Strategy* – the Welsh Assembly Government’s long-term strategy for trees and woodlands in Wales. Phase one of the initiative ran from 2001 to 2004 and phase two from 2003 to 2008. It was a £16 million programme, funded through the European Union Objective 1 programme (supporting development in less prosperous regions) and the Welsh Assembly Government. Although a Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) programme, Cydcoed was delivered at arm's length from the organisation. Initially the project was developed and run by Tir Coed, an alliance of countryside organisations promoting the benefits of woodlands in Wales, then in 2002 it moved under the FCW umbrella but still operated semi-autonomously.

### Principal objectives of Cydcoed:

- use community forestry to facilitate social inclusion and foster social capital;
- help create and maintain community groups with the capacity to influence decisions about their local area;
- provide woods that offer long-term social, environmental and economic benefits;
- involve individuals with the ability to play a positive role in their communities.

The initiative focused on two main areas: communities where the population had no access to community green space for exercise and relaxation; communities classified as being the most deprived by the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Cydcoed provided 100% grants to 163 community groups for community forestry initiatives to improve existing nearby woods or to plant new woodland. Grant funding was used for activities such as: buying land; tree planting; improving the condition of woods; providing new facilities like paths, signs and benches; installing artwork in and around woods; and developing forest facilities that provide local benefits like forest schools, woodland based businesses and recreational facilities. The majority of projects were undertaken on local authority owned land, with the remainder on either private land or land owned by the community group and a small number on FCW managed land. Community groups were supported by Cydcoed Project Officers who, with their knowledge and expertise in community development, acted as facilitators and advisors, and were a fundamental success factor of the programme.

## Evaluation methods

An evaluation of Cydcoed was completed in 2008, looking at both objective (qualitative) and subjective (experiential or qualitative) outcomes. Alongside desk-based research and literature reviews, qualitative case studies and economic analysis of the non-market benefits of Cydcoed were also undertaken. The evaluation methods incorporated surveys, semi-structured interviews, telephone interviews, and focus and discussion groups involving Cydcoed groups and woodland users. Unfortunately there was no ongoing monitoring and no baseline data to work with.

## Results

The evaluation covered many aspects of the programme, including the health and well-being, education and learning, recreation, environmental, employment and local economy, and non-market public benefits, as well the development, positioning, structures, skills, partnerships and processes of the initiative. Here the focus is on the results of the evaluation of social and human capital benefits as the key successes of Cydcoed were improved social cohesion and social capital.

When the 2008 evaluation was completed, Cydcoed project groups had around 8955 members and worked with another 6490 individuals from other community groups.

- More than half of those questioned agreed that the level of trust within their community had increased as a direct result of Cydcoed involvement.
- Approximately 75% said that they knew more people as a result of taking part in a Cydcoed project.
- Around half of respondents stated that Cydcoed had offered them the opportunity to volunteer which indicates a latent desire to play an active part in the community.
- More than a third of those questioned asserted that the project had reduced, or put an end to, anti-social behaviour in and around the woodlands.
- Over a third felt that the projects had provided a safe place for children to play.
- Case study research demonstrated that the knowledge and skills developed through Cydcoed were being cascaded throughout the community.
- Importantly, the focus on trees, woods and forests was also seen as valuable since many participants reported that they would not have been as keen to become involved if the projects had not been concerned with these settings.

## Conclusion

Evidence suggested that Cydcoed projects increased trust and helped build social networks and relationships at the individual and community levels. However, the 2008 evaluation recognised that building social capital takes time and that it was too early to be able to fully discern the depth of its increase as a result of the programme. It was suggested that, in the future, further evaluation would be useful to investigate the long-term contribution that Cydcoed projects had made and the long-term effects of the intervention.

## Reference

Owen, R. and Lewis, N. (2008). *An evaluation of Cydcoed: the social and economic benefits of using trees and woodlands for community development in Wales.*  
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