Woodland Social Enterprises: **Supporting people 'in-need'**

Summary report

Prepared by Clarity CIC and
Neroche Woodlanders, with ARC CIC
for **Making Local Woods Work**

Summary report

Aims and Methodology

A research project was commissioned by Making Local Woods Work (MLWW) in 2018 to explore the relationships between Woodland Social Enterprises (WSEs) and 'in-need' groups in the community. Three research contractors (Clarity CIC, Neroche Woodlanders and ARC CIC) collaborated to undertake this piece of work.

A mixed-methods approach was taken to the research, with quantitative and qualitative elements. 159 woodland-based organisations were identified. A questionnaire survey generated 65 full responses, from all parts of the UK, albeit with a majority from England. A Facebook group generated discussion with individuals from 14 WSEs. A subset of respondents took part in telephone interviews, and two focus groups were conducted, at Young Wood in Somerset and Foundry Wood in Warwickshire, involving eight WSEs.

"One of the biggest comments that our participants make about coming to the woods is feeling part of a 'community' or "I feel like I have found my tribe". It taps into something primal about sitting around a fire with others, but also having a purpose (doing what's needed to keep the fire going, prepare food, manage the wood). A really simple session can meet these needs."

Findings

The most common legal structure of the WSEs in the study is a Community Interest Company, and the majority have an annual income below £100,000. Most rely on grants or local authority contracts to fund their work with those 'in-need'; respondents said that as clients do not usually have the funds to pay for services themselves (unless they are in receipt of personal budgets), funding has to come from external sources. A majority of their
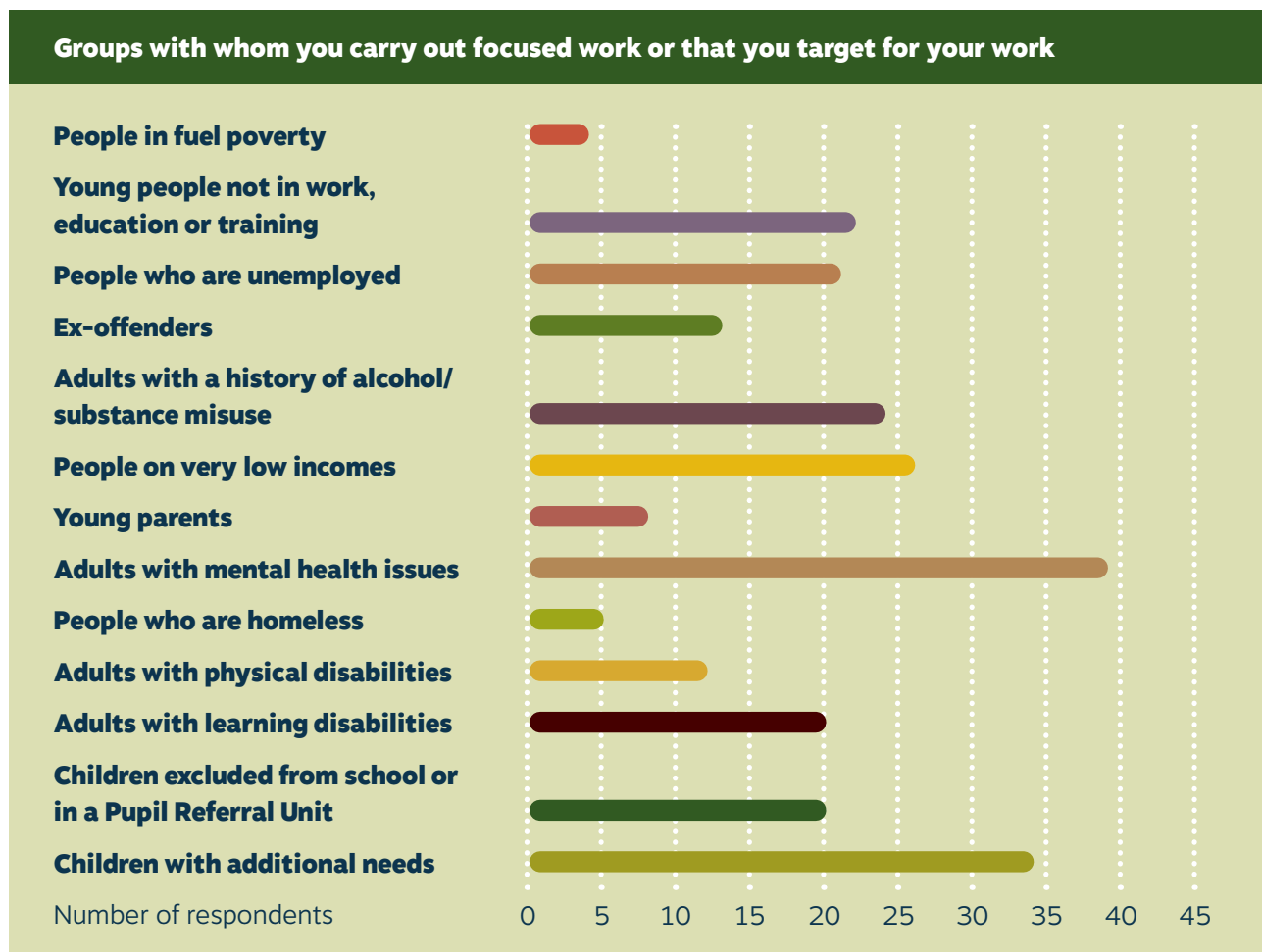
woodland settings are in a rural location, and the woodlands tend to be leased, or owned by a member of the group. Some are operating peripatetically on others' sites.

The definition of 'in-need' used by WSEs included practical, psychological, financial and educational need, and there is a large overlap between these categories. Overall the most common focus is on adults with mental health issues, children with additional needs, people on very low incomes and adults with a history of alcohol or substance misuse. WSEs are working in many cases with many more than one kind of 'in-need' group.

There is no single overarching type of approach being used by WSEs for their engagement with 'in-need' groups, but work includes elements of ecotherapy, (i.e. a deep connection to nature with therapeutic aims); Forest School (learner-centred activity, in

a non-judgmental learning setting, used with adults as well as with children and young people); environmental arts projects; approaches based on the Five Ways to Wellbeing (connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, give); teaching transferable skills (e.g. from fire-lighting, learning patience, team work, perseverance); and using the John Muir Award as a structure (the four challenges of Discover, Explore, Conserve and Share). At its heart however, the approach is always about being together, in a natural setting, around a fire, doing the practical things necessary for being in a group. Specific activities include woodland management, craft making, play, cooking and eating together. Provision may be in short blocks of weekly sessions or longer-term programmes.

Barriers and challenges reported in pursuing this work revolve mainly around funding,

Groups with whom you carry out focused work or that you target for your work

People in fuel poverty

Young people not in work, education or training

People who are unemployed

Ex-offenders

Adults with a history of alcohol/ substance misuse

People on very low incomes

Young parents

Adults with mental health issues

People who are homeless

Adults with physical disabilities

Adults with learning disabilities

Children excluded from school or in a Pupil Referral Unit

Children with additional needs

Number of respondents   0   5   10   15   20   25   30   35   40   45

capacity to maintain and develop businesses, practical issues in using outdoor settings, and potential burn-out amongst key staff. Respondents felt they were dealing with over-complicated and short-term funding, which disempowers the very communities being served. Finding (and keeping) staff with the right mix of skills is challenging on small budgets. People with needs come with a range of issues which present their own challenges, requiring staff sensitivity and flexibility. Practical issues around transport, clothing, access to shelter and lack of experience in woodlands can be barriers to people engaging.

"...other organisations look for quick fixes and don't appreciate the long term nature of working with vulnerable people."

Interpretation

The personal commitment of lead individuals is a key driver in WSEs, often despite poor remuneration, but this presents issues for sustainability and succession. Most staff are working as self-employed freelancers rather than being employed on payroll. The operation of a WSE as a business, together with work with 'in-need' groups, demands a wide range of skills and aptitudes. Opinions vary amongst WSEs about whether formal qualifications for working with 'in-need' groups are necessary. WSEs' work with 'in-need' groups is most commonly run by female staff, whereas a high proportion of clients are male – WSEs are successfully supporting men in their work, which many wellbeing organisations struggle to do.

The special qualities of woodland (peacefulness, provision for productive work, wildness and informality) are all seen as important for the work being done. Practical woodland activities allow people to easily see what they've achieved, get a sense of purpose, and feel safe and yet also 'wild'. People can work alone or as part of a group, allowing the individual learning or the therapeutic effects of nature to take effect. WSEs' work with 'in-need' groups can also offer a way for neglected woodlands

to be enhanced for wildlife and amenity. With the benefits come practical challenges around weather, physical safety, individual reaction to 'wildness', remoteness, transport challenges, access to facilities like running water, shelter, sanitation and communication. The reliance of WSEs on affordable access to land is crucial to their work, yet the variety of formal, informal and 'nomadic' arrangements suggests an uncertain foundation in this respect.

Many of the WSEs are small and under-resourced for the work being carried out with people 'in-need', and dependency on volunteers and 'free time' from staff can mask financial frailty. Support to people 'in-need' is not likely to be sustainable in the long term, given short-term grant cycles. Few WSEs are funding their work through income generation from their social enterprise. Some newer groups are working almost entirely on a voluntary basis, while some longer-established groups are confident to charge more realistic rates for session delivery.

Addressing these financial challenges requires a suite of approaches, including broadening business models to enable wider revenue-generating activity, together with improving access to grant sources.

WSEs highlighted their need to be able to influence and be understood by partner bodies in local authorities, the NHS and elsewhere, both at a local level and at a regional/national level. This looks like a young field of work that is seeking recognition and mechanisms to engage with those in positions of power.

WSEs are very enthusiastic about networking with peer groups. The sector appears to be naturally collaborative and happy to learn from each other. Any future support needs to incorporate the potential for collaboration and networking.

"I think the more we connect with each other and push the boundaries as a group the easier it will be to find strength, viability and durability".

Recommendations

The majority of WSEs in this study would like to do more work with people 'in-need'. The main enabling factors for this were seen as funding and resources, improved networks and contacts, and training or skills development.

WSEs need to be able to access delivery and impact measurement tools to help them run activities in the way they want to, while also maintaining quality and effectiveness. A quality-defining body similar to the Forest Schools Association could potentially help WSEs develop their skills and ways of measuring social impact. Support needs to be flexible, targeted and practical.

As the MLWW project draws to a close, and discussion takes place about future strategic provision and support for WSEs, the authors would suggest that this research demonstrates that the following points should be given prominence:

- WSEs should be involved from the outset in how to adapt provision and design future schemes, and provision should be regionally-focused, to be accessible and responsive to local needs. When involved in this way, the time taken away from WSE's core work with 'in-need' groups should be recompensed, as these small organisations have little or no core funding.

- There is a strong demand for continuing opportunities for WSEs to network, gain peer support and learn from each other, at both a local and wider level.

- Investment could be made in already-established WSEs within each region, which have the infrastructure to provide central services for training, consultancy and peer-to-peer support.

- There is scope to develop training covering areas such as impact measurement, funding applications and web development, from which WSEs can pick elements that suit their needs.

- A dialogue is needed with grant funders, large woodland owning bodies, the NHS and other parties to improve their capacity to incubate and support existing and newly emerging WSEs.

- The options for an umbrella body to set standards, help define best practice and help WSEs measure and maintain the quality of their work, should be explored.

- Helping WSEs find a voice amongst bigger players is crucial for the sector to grow. To be able to sit alongside the larger NGOs etc., and speak in each locality with health and social care commissioners or budget holders, WSEs need help to gain capacity, confidence and ability.

"I would like to see the benefits of our work reach many more people …I would like to see councils and NHS partners enable and encourage people to go along to any of the WSE projects available in their area and registered with this body. I would not want to see uniformity enforced by this approach, rather that the diversity of bespoke approaches that exists now be sustained."

Two Case Studies

Neroche Woodlanders Ltd, Somerset
www.youngwood.org.uk

Neroche Woodlanders Ltd is a Community Benefit Society registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965, and established in 2012. It has a small board of unpaid directors and a shareholding membership, and a small number of part-time paid staff on freelance contracts. It has occupied Young Wood, a 100-acre block of mixed woodland forming part of the Forestry Commission's larger Neroche forest on the Blackdown Hills, since 2011. Early activity was supported by a Lottery-funded landscape partnership scheme across the wider area. Neroche Woodlanders gained a 10-year lease of Young Wood in 2015, plus a long-term management agreement to work the forest stands within the site. It pays a rent to the Forestry Commission.

Neroche Woodlanders is creating a practical, working wood which celebrates wildness, the natural world, harvesting natural materials, and making and doing things by hand. Its main focus is the development of woodland-based learning activities and volunteering. The core wellbeing programme, Wild Learning, began in 2012, to build the confidence and soft skills of a targeted group of adults, using the Forest School approach. The project is aimed at residents in deprived areas of nearby Taunton, and includes residents from homeless hostels. The project uses the John Muir Award as a structure for learning. Wild Learning is now in its seventh year, having received funding each year from Somerset Skills & Learning, with match funding from Taunton Association for the Homeless and other sources. A 'Families in the Forest' strand of activity runs alongside Wild Learning, focused on parents and children.

Neroche Woodlanders has a modest range of activities yielding an earned income, including team-building days for local organisations, school summer camps, craft courses and site hire. Off-site events and consultancy is also provided to extend reach and broaden income. Sales of wood products from the forest are small, focused on charcoal making. Volunteering is central to Neroche Woodlanders' activity. A conservation volunteer group is maintained to carry out woodland management and do work on nearby nature reserves, and volunteers also support staff running wellbeing sessions.

ARC CIC, Warwickshire
www.arccic.co.uk

ARC (Achieving Results in Communities) CIC manages a 2 acre urban woodland in Leamington Spa and has access to a further 6 acre private woodland around 2 miles from the town. They run two types of session for people struggling with their mental health, social isolation or in addiction recovery. Ecotherapy@FoundryWood is a weekly drop in that operates throughout the year and supports participants to practice the Five Ways to Wellbeing through woodland maintenance, craft activities, mindfulness, socialising and cooking and eating together. It is an informal but very welcoming and sociable group.

Tallis Wood Wellbeing operates through courses of 10 weeks, where participants are asked to commit to the whole course and engage more fully in the activities on offer. Alongside similar activities to Ecotherapy, practical tools for managing and improving mental health are shared, participants set personal goals to work towards in between sessions, and the group members support one another through positive feedback and encouragement.

ARC also runs a number of gardening projects with the aim of improving neglected areas of the town whilst also engaging local people for health and social benefits. Most projects are grant funded, some unrestricted income is earned through regular pizza making sessions for the general public, educational sessions and private parties.

Making Local Woods Work is a pilot project working to help support and grow woodland social enterprises across the UK. The project is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund (Big Lottery Fund) and led by **Plunkett Foundation** in partnership with: **Community Woodlands Association**, **Locality**, **Llais y Goedwig**, **Woodland Trust**, **Shared Assets**, **Grown in Britain**, **Hill Holt Wood**, **National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty**, **Forestry Commission** and **Forest Research**. The project has created a vast array of case studies, tool kits, research papers, films and resources, all accessible via the Making Local Woods Work website.

■ **Email: woodlands@plunkett.co.uk**

■ **Website: www.makinglocalwoodswork.org**

■ **Twitter: @localwoodswork**

■ **Facebook: www.facebook.com/makinglocalwoodswork/**

Plunkett Foundation helps rural communities UK-wide to tackle the issues they face, through promoting and supporting community business. Community businesses are enterprises that are owned and run democratically by members of the community and others, on behalf of the community. They come in many forms, including shops, pubs, woodlands and anything which lends itself to community ownership. In addition to developing and safeguarding valuable assets and services, community businesses address a range of issues including isolation, loneliness, wellbeing, work and training.

■ **Email: info@plunkett.co.uk**

■ **Website: www.plunkett.co.uk**

■ **Phone: 01993 810730**

■ **Twitter: @plunkettfoundat**

■ **Facebook: www.facebook.com/plunkettfoundation**

■ **Address: Plunkett Foundation, The Quadrangle, Woodstock, Oxfordshire, OX20 1LH**

Plunkett Foundation is a registered charity, numbers CC 313743 (England and Wales) and SC 045932 (Scotland).It is a company limited by guarantee, registered number 00213235 (England and Wales).

Clarity CIC helps rural communities UK-wide to tackle the issues they face, through promoting and supporting community business. Community businesses are enterprises that are owned and run democratically by members of the community and others, on behalf of the community. They come in many forms, including shops, pubs, woodlands and anything which lends itself to community ownership. In addition to developing and safeguarding valuable assets and services, community businesses address a range of issues including isolation, loneliness, wellbeing, work and training.

■ **Website: www.claritycic.org**

■ **CIC No: 09147860.**

■ **Registered office: Old Bakery, Old Road, Harbertonford, Totnes, TQ9 7TA**