

Social Forestry Task Group
Friday 20th June 2008 – 10am
Green Wood Centre – Ironbridge

In Attendance

Judy Walker (SWA), Pat Gordon (WM Care Farm Initiative) , Richard Thomason (SWA), Ferdinand Addo (Bulmer Foundation), Phil Ridley, Jason McLain (FC), John Winterbourne (FC), Sara Roberts (WMRFF), Justin Milward (WT)

Apologies

Helen Townsend

The National Perspective

Sara Roberts talked through Helens presentation regarding the National Perspective on 'Social Forestry' which gave everyone lots of food for thought and how we can work to align it with regional aims.

How can we help deliver the policy? What is social forestry, what is the task group going to focus on?

The Regional Perspective

Judy Walker outlined the current position: there are a wide range of agencies such as the PCTs, Probation services, social services, Connexions, schools, etc, which are seeking beneficial experiences for alienated young people which lead to qualifications or employment.

This group has been called together to investigate some of the issues involved with the delivery of social forestry programmes, and to see how they may be addressed.

The group were invited to share their own projects with the group and to see how working together might add value to individual projects.

Scoping exercise

Various experiences were discussed, (and Sara Roberts said that there are a lot more projects in the West Midlands that she would contact.) There seemed to be no consistent method of evaluating the projects or any national standard. Anyone could set up a course or offer training but there is no standardised training.

The group then went on to a general discussion and scoping exercise to outline the main issues involved with social forestry

Funding opportunities

Another point was securing long-term funding, so that projects and initiatives might become less reliant on short-term grants and start to fund themselves through contracts. The Group felt it was necessary to establish a level of charges so that social enterprises might make a return on their investment, time and efforts ensuring the longer-term sustainability of their businesses. There is also the potential for generating some income from small woodlands. We need to do a cost comparison with other groups that work with different client groups, e.g. probation services; so as not to be over or under-charging.

Evaluation

The point was made that the West Midlands seems to be the focus of national activity, spearheading many of the initiatives. This might offer leverage from national funding sources but it is most important to better evaluate what is being done.

The Forest Schools initiative has developed a set of simple questions that can measure the impact on the children and young people; something similar may be of help to evaluate social forestry so we can show results not just in economic terms but quantifying social benefits too. The development of an evaluation system would help to influence government policy and, in the long term, would help with funding. Perhaps this group could develop an evaluation form for beginning and end of each course.

Accreditation

If the social forestry movement is to be relied upon as service providers by a wide range of agencies then it must find a means of accrediting both service deliverers (tutors) and the project sites.

- Social services look for accredited places to send the students; do we go down this road?
- Will it be a barrier to people wanting to start projects?
- Could buddy up course and mentor so as not to put people off going for accreditation,
- Lots of different levels could be achieved.
- No job profile for currently available for social forestry so no definition of the role

Standards

The point was raised that standards of woodland management are linked to accreditation, so that projects can demonstrate that the woodland is progressing as well as the people.

- How do we show that we add value to everything/everyone that comes into contact with social forestry?
- Should we concentrate on standards first, and then move onto accreditation?

Good practice handbook

This group could put together a Best Practice Guide/Handbook setting out standards and explaining the process of establishing a social forestry programme.

Networking

In addition to influencing policy and decision-making at both national and regional levels, there is a need for better liaison with those commissioners and agencies that are seeking appropriate social forestry programmes, e.g. police, social services, etc. Acting as a “gateway” this could signpost to forestry groups or woodland owners in their area, promote the use of woodlands for such programmes and register sites.

There is need to establish an evidence base - finding out what “triggers” made people come on board with social forestry so we can encourage others in the business to come on board to.

Within the draft terms of reference is a list of people who should make up the Task Group membership. Additions would be welcome; all were encouraged to add to it. Suggestions included representatives from: the health sector, PCTs, West Midlands Public Health Group, local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships, higher education, registered network of tree officers.

Group focus

From this list of issues the group decided to focus on three main areas:

Points to concentrate on

1. Good Practice Standards Handbook – different levels to achieve, risk assessments, case studies.
2. Networking – identifying delivery organisations, and developing links with agencies who might want to use them for placing clients
3. Evaluation – develop a base line method of evaluation that was accessible to everyone.

Next steps

Sara: To contact the list of social forestry projects in the West Midlands, and any projects that group members were aware of should be sent to Sara.

Richard Thomason: To contact Hill Holt Wood and liaise about evaluation.

Everyone: To think about the proposed Good Practice Handbook and to send in any case studies they would like to go in it (national or regional)

Judy: To ask Helen Townsend what she would like to see in the handbook

Timing: 1 Month to get ideas and information to Judy

Next meeting to be arranged once - we have gathered information and have something to report. Opportunities for group activity/work programme to be carried out via email network(s).