

Ancient Woodland Restoration Project



Project Evaluation Executive Summary

March 2018



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Project summary

The Ancient Woodland Restoration (AWR) project was a five-year project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and led by the Woodland Trust. The project started in 2013 and ended in March 2018. It was a nationwide landscape scale project, with two key purposes:

- To engage private landowners and forestry professionals, promoting understanding about the importance of restoration and encouraging them to carry out restoration, and
- To raise awareness of ancient woodland among members of the public.

The project was delivered in ten project areas: Great Glen and Three Firths, Cairngorms and Hinterland, Northern Ireland, Clwyd, Powys, Western Mid Wales, Herefordshire and West Worcestershire, South and West Yorkshire, Exmoor, Low Weald and Chilterns. Delivery arrangements varied across the project areas. The majority had a dedicated Project Officer who was employed by the Woodland Trust; some were hosted by a partner organisation and in the Chilterns, where there was no Project Officer, the project was run in partnership with an independent forestry management agency.

Project Officers were, in most instances, line managed by an AWR Manager for their region. There were also officers based centrally who provided a range of functions: overall project co-ordination, budget monitoring and reporting to HLF, project communications, internal liaison, volunteer recruitment and management, public engagement co-ordination. Other Woodland Trust teams also inputted to the project, providing specialist support in specific areas that included Communications and IT.



The project evaluation



Icarus has independently evaluated the AWR project. The evaluation addresses a set of key questions within an evaluation framework that has been applied consistently throughout the evaluation; it has informed the development of the evaluation tools co-designed by and utilised by the AWR team and Icarus.

An interim evaluation report was produced in November 2016. This was followed by an action planning workshop with key Woodland Trust staff and project stakeholders, exploring how the findings should influence the on going work of the project as well as the work of the Woodland Trust more generally - for ancient woodland restoration and for other large-scale, externally funded projects. A detailed action plan was produced as an output of this event and progress against this was reviewed in July 2017, showing that work had commenced on a high proportion of those actions agreed at the workshop, and over half the actions were due to be completed before or for the agreed deadline.

Both quantitative and qualitative evidence has been utilised in the evaluation, and a reflexive process of enquiry underpinned by the triangulation of data. Research for the final AWR project evaluation report involved the following activities: online surveys to Project Officers, AWR Managers, the central AWR Team, AWR project volunteers and woodland owners engaged by the project; semi structured telephone interviews with Project Officers, AWR Managers, central AWR Team, project partners and Woodland Trust internal stakeholders. Thematic analysis of project Steering Group minutes, HLF progress monitoring reports and Project Officer quarterly feedback also took place.



The evaluation findings overview

The HLF funded AWR project was successful overall. It has achieved a high proportion of its outputs and made good progress against the majority of outcomes. There are a number of notable key highlights from the project.

- Success in winning over the hearts and minds of woodland owners.
- Increased understanding about how to influence agents and contractors.
- Better knowledge about the ownership structure of woodlands.
- Understanding of regional difference in ownership structure and holdings size.
- An improved picture of the condition of ancient woodlands in the project areas.
- Positive examples of partnership working.
- A high proportion of woodland owners undertaking or committed to restoration, even without grants.
- High levels of engagement with the general public.
- Innovative examples of engagement and interpretation for the general public.
- High quality research papers written by volunteer heritage researchers.
- Volunteers committed to on-going work with the Woodland Trust.
- Skills, knowledge and expertise of the project team retained and embedded into the Woodland Trust's work.
- Restoration Strategy and Outreach Strategy developed.
- Better understanding about managing a large scale, externally funded project.
- Evaluation embedded and adding value.
- A committed, adaptable and knowledgeable team.
- Growing credibility and reputation on ancient woodland restoration in the forestry sector.



The following summarises the key findings from the evaluation across the four sets of project outputs and outcomes (heritage, people, communities, project management).

Heritage findings

Good progress has been made and the targets for hectares assessed, and hectares committed to restoration have been surpassed. The project has made a good start on what is inevitably a long-term process of change and has achieved far more than many expected given the lack of grant aid in some parts of the country.

Despite reaching a lower number of woodland owners than planned, knowledge about ancient woodland restoration has increased, particularly among woodland owners, and hearts and minds have been won over or encouraged. The extent to which the degree of commitment has led to restoration actually taking place is uncertain, as is the transition of woodlands from threatened to secure status, although there are indications that some owners of small woodlands are progressing restoration.

The conversion rate of woodland from assessment to committed varies between 32% in Northern Ireland and almost 100% in Great Glen and Three Firths and overall there is a commitment to restore 15,892 ha of the 21,047 ha of woodland assessed. The fact that the targets for hectares assessed and committed to restoration were achieved, and indeed

surpassed, without a comprehensive regime of grant aid is a testament to the commitment and expertise of the project team, the relationships built with partners and woodland owners, and the quality and functionality of the woodland surveys. There is also a much better record of the condition of a number of ancient woodlands as a result of the project, including remnant features and, in some cases, whole woodlands that were not previously recorded.

Four sites have benefited from interpretation on the topic of ancient woodland: Plas Power, Great Knott Wood, Highland Folk Museum and Penn Wood, with further reach provided by the AWR yurt. The aspiration for these to engage 50,000 people has been substantially exceeded, with a figure above 3.5 million demonstrating a great deal of success and a significant degree of reach.



HERITAGE FINDINGS

ENABLING FACTORS

- The high priority given to outputs 1-3. (landowners engaged, ha assessed and ha in process of restoration).
- Project Officer expertise, enthusiasm and commitment.
- Project Officer flexibility to work in different situations with different kinds of owners, as well as agents and contractors.
- The level of interest expressed by many owners.
- High quality engagement with woodland owners.
- Detailed and high quality site survey reports, valued by woodland owners.

CHALLENGES

- The focus on outputs 1-3 affecting other aspects of the project's work, such as outcome 2 (events).
- Lack of grant aid for restoration.
- Changing the hearts and minds of some owners, contractors and agents.
- The long timeframe for restoring ancient woodland / need for gradual change.
- Initial preconceptions and / or lack of Woodland Trust credibility on the topic of AWR.

People findings

There have been a number of notable successes against the people outputs and outcomes, even though the large number and ambitious nature of these has been challenging for the project and the resources available for interpretation, engagement and volunteer co-ordination have been stretched throughout.

The project has exceeded the number of volunteers trained by a significant degree, training a total of 131 people, as well as the number of volunteer gatherings. There have been challenges embedding volunteering into this project and securing commitment from local teams to the volunteering offer, particularly in its first year. Volunteers have committed a lot of time to the project, totalling 2,166 volunteer days, only slightly lower than planned. Many of those responding to the volunteer survey report said they could have spent more time volunteering for the project. There is also a high degree of on-going commitment to volunteering for the Woodland Trust and continued involvement with ancient woodland restoration. A total of 30 volunteers have committed to carrying on working with the Woodland Trust.

There was a lower number of volunteer talks than planned, with 66 achieved

in total, which had an accompanying impact on the audience reach that was also lower than the target figure that reached 2,096 people.

Workshop attendance targets have been exceeded, with 181 contractors trained as well as 2,218 woodland owners and non-woodland professionals. There have been other notable successes with regards to the project's role around CPD. For example, Natural Resources Wales asked the project to deliver training to their staff on PAWS assessment and restoration and are seeking further training support in 2018, illustrating the reach and respect that has been built up through the project. It is also a major achievement of the project that Interpretation activities were introduced onto 11 sites in private ownership, demonstrating the positive relationships developed with those owners.



PEOPLE FINDINGS

ENABLING FACTORS

- Strong leadership from central team members responsible for volunteering, engagement and interpretation.
- Volunteers brought a range of skills and expertise to the project.
- Volunteers made a significant time contribution to the project contributing to the achievement of a number of targets.
- Woodland Trust systems were in place to support volunteers.

CHALLENGES

- Large number and ambitious set of outputs.
- Under resourcing of the central team responsible for engagement, interpretation and volunteering.
- Volunteer management an additional call on Project Officer time.
- Under-resourced specialist team resulted in minimal support for the project.
- Narrowly focused, inflexible volunteer roles until reviewed in January 2016.
- Early focus on outputs 1-3 to the detriment of people outputs.
- Overly ambitious volunteering targets given the characteristics of the project and the project areas.
- Uncertainty over the long-term future for project volunteers.



Communities findings

A number of communities and enthusiast groups have been engaged by the AWR project. Enthusiast groups that have benefited from the training delivered by the project have included a wide range of groups with a general interest in ancient woodland, within the project areas; these have included community woodland groups, Wildlife Trusts, RSPB, local history groups and communities where restoration work has been taken place.

Two thousand Community Toolkits were produced, exceeding the planned target; the toolkits were shared with the community groups engaged by the project, as well as volunteers on the ground and other teams within the Woodland Trust.

Sixty four partner organisations have been involved in the project in many different ways, with mostly positive experiences and impact. Partnership work ranging from formal partnerships to more informal partnering with individuals has been critical to the successful delivery of the project. Some of the partnerships were established from the outset and others evolved as the project developed. Some were with organisations that the Woodland Trust had existing relationships with, while others were entirely new. The ultimate goal for partnership working within the AWR project was to contribute towards effective delivery on the ground, fulfilling the original purpose and outcomes for the AWR project, while ensuring collaborative advantage for all the partners that have engaged with the project. The catalytic relationship between these two key aspects of partnership working made a significant contribution to effective project delivery.

The required number of training opportunities has been delivered, but the evidence for increased learning and awareness among participants attending training is weak. However, team members anecdotally report that, despite the challenges of presenting a very technical topic, members of the public have generally enjoyed and engaged with the material they have experienced at events.

Volunteer heritage researchers have produced some detailed, extensive research and their contribution has largely been positive. Forty four reports have been produced by 12 heritage researchers, and 24 reports have been submitted to local archives. They were not however widespread across all project areas. Some Project Officers were not aware of this role at all; some knew of researchers who undertook the training but did not end up volunteering; some would have welcomed the opportunity to work with a heritage researcher; and others saw the considerable efforts made by volunteers in doing their research. In 2017 one of the volunteers received the Woodland Trust's Oak Award for her pioneering research into Wealden woodland history.

COMMUNITIES FINDINGS

ENABLING FACTORS

- Working collaboratively and in partnership with other organisations.
- Tailoring the way in which material was produced for different audiences.
- Utilising the knowledge and enthusiasm of staff for public facing events.
- Harnessing the research skills and expertise of heritage research volunteers.

CHALLENGES

- Difficulties in accessing enthusiast groups to engage.
- Low numbers of heritage researchers recruited and deployed.
- Getting meaningful feedback from events in a consistent manner.
- Heritage research not fully embedded in the project.
- Reduced resources and capacity for many local authority and government organisations during the project lifetime.

Project management findings

Overall, the project has performed well against the project management outputs. The AWR team has worked effectively and have shared a sense of joint endeavour and commitment to the project; they have engaged positively with the evaluation and have been committed to making the project the best it could be.

There are several key areas where the project team have felt that the organisation could have supported them better, where there is learning about project management for the organisation to take account of. These include: IT system not fit for purpose; lack of support from specialist colleagues in the Woodland Trust; lack of clarity about priorities and the project's obligations; the complexities for a matrix management system; monitoring and evaluation not in place from the outset; too many demands on Project Officers' time / diverse skill set required.

While there is some sense among team members that the organisation has not adopted the learning from the project, the Woodland Trust more generally has participated in this evaluation and evidence suggests that a high proportion of the learning points from the interim evaluation report were taken account of.

It is a notable success of the project that AWR has a much higher profile within the Woodland Trust than previously and is now embedded in its work; a number of project team members will continue working for the Woodland Trust and retain an ancient woodland restoration brief into the future. This work will be incorporated into a new Outreach Team and its new strategy and provides the opportunity to build on the learning from the HLF project and further develop the Trust's credibility and technical knowledge on restoration. The retention of many of the Project Officers will ensure that the expertise and knowledge of the individuals who have been involved to date will not be lost. This is key, given that there is still a pipeline of woodland owners wanting to engage with the project and with the Woodland Trust on the topic of ancient woodland restoration.



PROJECT MANAGEMENT FINDINGS

ENABLING FACTORS

- The commitment of the project team.
- Flexibility of project team members to try new approaches.
- Commitment to comprehensive evaluation process, willingness to learn and respond to recommendations.

CHALLENGES

- Woodland Trust organisational structure and matrix management.
- Difficulties with some organisational systems and practices.



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