

Lost Woods of the Low Weald and Downs Woods Project – Development Phase NHLF

Summary of “Unstructured Conversations & Consultations”

By Action in Rural Sussex, Lost Wood of the Low Weald and Downs, Village Agent team. Nov 2021

Introduction and methodology

Between approx. Nov 2020 and Nov 2021, in addition to online surveys and pilot community engagement events, the AirS Village Agents team, carried out a programme of mapping of and consulting with community and woodland contacts in the Lost Woods zone. This was interrupted by furlough and made more difficult by covid, but over time has resulted in a rich body of evidence.

Consultations have been held over zoom, by phone, and in person with a wide set of stakeholders, and with members of the public via events including the World Environmental day at Amberly Museum, the South of England Show, Burgess Hill Wellbeing event, Lottery players engagement events in shopping areas in Small Dole and Burgess Hill too. Each consultation aimed to gauge interest in the Lost Woods project and were written up in note form (“nuggets”) and are collectively summarised below.

Events attended

Lottery players consultation - Small Dole and Burgess Hill - [Numbers Consulted- 32](#)
South of England Show - [Numbers Consulted 50](#)
Burgess Hill Wellbeing event - [Numbers Consulted 50 - 8 groups and 20 individuals](#)
World Environmental Day - Amberley Museum-[Numbers Consulted 15](#)
Mid Sussex Voluntary Action 3rd Age Forum - [Numbers Consulted 7](#)
Mid Sussex Voluntary Action Wellbeing Forum - [Numbers Consulted 8](#)
Active Worthing wellbeing centre consultation - [Numbers Consulted 10](#)
Learning from a Lost Woods event - Scaynes Hill - [Numbers Consulted 25](#)
Hurstpierpoint and Sayers Common Parish Council Annual Parish Meeting [Numbers unknown](#)

Number of consultations

Number of Community groups consulted - 67
Number of Government and larger charities consulted - 21
Number of Landowners consultations -11
Number of Individuals residents, potential volunteers, and local businesses - 9

Names of community groups:

Active Worthing Wellbeing Centre	Mid Sussex area bridleways group
Albion in the Community (Building Better Opportunities)	Mid Sussex Prostrate Cancer support group
Amberley Museum	MIND
Aspire Sussex	Plumpton College
Barnardo's Make Trax Programme	Preventing Homelessness Team
Batchelor's Farm Friends of Group	Princes Trust Worthing
Bramber Brooks	Routes Programme - Brighton & Hove
Brighton Housing Trust	RunTalkRun
Burgess Hill Young Carers	Scaynes Hill Sustainability group
Burgess Hill Youth Group	Shoreham Trees
Care for the Carers	Social Prescriber - Steyning / Henfield
Championing Youth Minds	Steyning Downland Scheme
East Clayton Farm	Steyning For Trees
Equine Therapy-Shine For Life	Storrington Conservation Society
Friends of Ashenground and Bolnor woods	SummerHaven Mental Health Group
Friends of Burgess Hill Green circle	Sussex Black Poplar Working Group
Friends of Markstakes Common	Sussex Clubs for Young People
Green Tides Network	Sussex Green Living
Greener Futures Hastings and St Leonards	The Escape Youth Club Burgess Hill
GROW	The SID Youth
Henfield Conservation Society	The Wellderness CIC
Hurst Meadows Advisory Group	The Worthing Hub
Hurstpierpoint Woodland Flora & Fauna Group	Tottington Woodlanders
Hurstpierpoint Guides	Voices In Exile
Lewes Arboretum	Wild in Washington
Lewes Railway Land	Wildside
Men in Sheds Henfield	YMCA

Names of Government and larger charities:

BugLife	Hassocks Parish Council
Burgess Hill Town Council	Henfield Parish Council
Changing Chalk	Kent high weald partnership conservation centre
Circle of Life rediscovery and Laughton Green woods	Mid Sussex district council
Climate Change Committee	Senior Sustainability Advisor, WSCC
Countryside Officer ESCC	Sussex Wildlife Trust - landscape advisor
East Sussex County Council	Wivelsfield Primary school
Families Outreach Officer SDNP	Woodland Trust - Grantham
Froglife	Woodland Trust -Local woods manager
Going Local Adur & Worthing	Woodland Trust: South East volunteer development officer

Summary of AirS learning.

1. Underserved groups

Interest in the project.

- There is a strong interest amongst underserved groups, to engage in the Lost Woods project, for the wellbeing of their members and for taking part in conservation.

Reaching those who are most in need.

- Towns are often the hub for groups supporting underserved in rural areas. The only large town with groups in the project area is Burgess Hill. Many groups and organisations that support underserved communities such as NEETS, carers, disabled people, BAME community and refugees are based out of our project area, often in the coastal or larger towns. There is appetite amongst these groups to visit woods in the project area, though often lack of public transport is an issue.
- Work with underserved audiences is often labour intensive and has unpredictable outcomes, therefore we need to engage with more groups initially to allow for some fall out and groups progressing at different paces.

Capacity within community groups

- In our consultation for this project, with some exceptions, we have found that we are able to progress more quickly with groups who have paid staff, or a link to an organisation with paid staff, that support them. Smaller volunteer led groups often have lower capacity to engage despite initial keenness. Previous projects have worked successfully with volunteer led groups and activity leaders emerge over time. We anticipate from experience with other similar projects a period of 12 weeks hand-holding and input may be necessary before the volunteer leaders are confident. We hope this is a model that can be replicated in this project.

Different groups have different wants, needs and barriers.

- For example Burgess Hill Young Carers - want free-play in the woods and the leaders want external facilitators to run activities, whereas Brighton Housing Trust, mental

health group, are keen to become skilled leaders, beginning with facilitated sessions (light touch) and then access to conservation activities in accessible woodlands.

Making activities accessible.

- We recognise that particularly underserved groups find it difficult to commit to regular activity. They need a safe and stable group to join and participate when they are able. Therefore, we need to support and create groups with core leaders and regular attendees who are less in need. This allows higher need people can access the provision when they are able.
- We have learned from talking to Mind that integrated groups provide less stigmatic opportunities for people experiencing long-term mental health issues. There is mental health support within the groups and leaders undertake mental health first aid training. If this is not possible, we learned that some organisations have experienced volunteers providing extra support during activities.
- Travel and transport can be a major barrier even within an (accessible area) Burgess Hill. For example, people with Mental Health needs not coming to Bedelands independently and more so for people outside the project area. Therefore, we need to take activities to people, build relationships and help overcome barriers and build confidence.

Complexities within communities' groups

- From our mapping and consultation work we have experienced that many lead volunteers in community groups are also engaged in a number of other projects and roles. It seems that due to their capacity, or lack of it there engagement with the project can be erratic and perhaps concerns about capacity mean they prefer not to put us in touch with other volunteers within their groups currently. We need to be sensitive and respectful to these issues whilst maintaining some engagement if possible.

Menu of activities

- Some groups have been clear about the activities they want, whilst others have requested and appreciated a menu of woodland activities to choose from.

NEETs

- We have contacted a range of provisions that work with NEET young people. Two centres within the project area that work directly with young people - East Clayton Farm and Camilia Botnar Foundation both have a closed-door policy to working with other organisations and providers. These two centres are good examples of catering to rural NEET young people and offering opportunities in conservation.
- The Princes Trust were only keen to work on projects within their local communities and for many other organisations, transport and staff shortages was a barrier to accessing woodlands and putting on extra activities.

2. Woodland & Conservation groups

Woodland and conservation groups are a tremendous asset in the Lost Woods Area. Each group is different, but we have found some commonalities in the following areas:

Volunteers

- From our consultations recruiting new volunteers is a challenge to many woodland groups. Current volunteers are generally from an older demographic. Groups are keen

to recruit new volunteers so that knowledge and experience is not lost, and capacity is increased.

Volunteer roles

- Our professional observation is that groups would benefit from having a lead volunteer that welcomes and looks after volunteers ensuring that volunteers needs, and expectations are met which may lead to greater volunteer retention.

Support for new woodland groups.

- Groups that are newly taking on the management of a woodland or wanting to create a friends of a woodland group have requested networking opportunities in order to raise understanding and confidence in conservation skills and tool use.
- Some established coppice groups e.g. Butcher's Wood have expressed an interest in diversifying their volunteering with an interest in surveying and youth engagement, and cross pollination between projects, sites and organisations.

Raising awareness amongst the public of using the woods sustainability

- A selection of groups expressed frustration and distress with the way the public are using or misusing woodlands. For example, cutting down wood for fires, creating dens and not dismantling them, creating new paths and disturbing animals as well as the wider issues of dog poo and deliberate vandalism. They would like an education program to help with this issue especially amongst young people

Complexities within woodland conservation groups working with underserved groups.

- A selection of groups have described difficulties of having vulnerable volunteers attending their conservation activities due to the unsustainable levels of supervision and support that are needed. With a need for volunteers, some of the same groups are open to welcoming groups again but in our opinion don't currently don't have adequate health and safety procedures in place to enable this and reflection in order to make these experiences more successful for both parties. We hope this can be approached through training activities related to volunteering and networking between groups.

Networking.

- There has been a positive response amongst conservation groups for networking activities and suggestions for themes varying from informal events where all of the groups/individuals involved in the Lost Woods Project meet and discuss shared aims and views to small, committed groups of volunteers to do regular woodland working parties.

3. Sustainability groups

Interest in the project

- We have linked up with a selection of sustainability groups including HKD Transition and Sustainable Henfield 2030. There is a strong interest from them to engage with the Lost Woods Project. They have common aims and keen to work together in engaging communities in living a more sustainable life.

Tapping into community assets

- Sustainability groups within our area are a great asset in the community, with good connections, resources and keen to work together to share resources and engage a diverse range of communities.

Introductions, networking and events

- Landowners, woodland volunteers, councillors, colleges, outdoor therapists, transition groups to name but a few examples have all been introduced to other parties that we are working with. They have met people who they didn't know were working on similar projects in their local area and felt the experience both beneficial and informative.

4. Local government organisations

Success at Chailey common

- We have developed a good relationship with one of the East Sussex rangers taking two underserved groups to Chailey Common to do conservation tasks. This has been a success that we are keen to repeat and use as an example to other Council rangers on what can be achieved. We have learnt that some rangers have little time and capacity to take on groups.

Exchanging project information

- We have had a range of conversations with Parish, Town and District Councils about the Lost Woods project. Exchanging information, leads and networking.

Non responders

- West Sussex Carers were contacted without response
- Mis Sussex Rangers have been contacted with a meeting request, without response.

Interest from individual councillors

- We have found key lead Councillors in our areas that are championing environmental work and linking with us and networking. They are also able to refer us to areas of need in their communities and share information on their local issues and priorities furthering the cohesion of collaboration.

5. Landowners

Landowners:

- Have expressed an interest in meeting one another and learning from each other and potentially sharing equipment or helping each other. They have expressed interest in charcoal making, green woodwork and surveying skills.
- Some landowners want to be open with their woods in theory but feel conflicted when faces considering practical issues of allowing groups and general public access.
- Feel very protective over their woods, for example feeling that the wood can cope with only a very small number of visitors and expressed frustration and distress with the way the public are using or misusing woodlands.
- Some landowners expressed being glad there they didn't have public access to their land and challenges general public not respecting or understanding boundaries.
- Some landowners have been surprised and happy about the amount of work a group could achieve in their woodland and this has opened up potential opportunities for regular and longer term work.

6. Access

Travel and transport

- are a major barrier even within an (accessible area) Burgess Hill. For example, people with MH needs not coming to Bedelands independently and more so for people outside the project area.

Access barriers for Young People.

- Speaking to a variety of organisations that work with young people, transport is a huge barrier. Many services are based in larger towns or on the coastal strip which can make accessing woodland difficult for those that do not drive or can't afford to. Organisations that work with young people do not have access to minibuses so therefore need to rely on public transport for their service users to access activities.

Access to transport for those who live in built up areas

- From our experience people in rural areas tend to have access to transport, however those living in built up areas rely on public transport. This makes it challenging when getting people from towns / cities to woodlands. An example was working with a Muslim Women & Children's group who were keen to explore local woodlands, but they did not have access to cars and therefore needed to access an area with good public transport links. For the sustainability of groups to access woodland it is important that they can make their own way there without having to hire transport.

Financial barriers.

- Whilst most people living who would like to be involved in the project area have access to either public or private transport, some have expressed that the cost of transport or fuel is a barrier

Access to private woodlands

- There is often no parking or it is on busy roads, of there is a lack of a footpath by the roads leading into woods. This adds to the challenges of underserved or general public accessing the site
- There appears to be a lack of easy to find information on where to go and what one can do there. Many sites are advertised on specific sites but you would need to know a little about the area to find it.

Access for disabled people

- The wheelchair users we spoke to have told us they don't know where there are suitable tracks with parking and there is not one place one can locate all the information. This makes it more difficult to go out as there are too many unknowns.

7. Covid

Barrier

- Some groups and organisations have been tentative to meet in person or not wanted extra activities on top of their busy services to service users. Large organisations for example YMCA (working with NEETs) needed to concentrate on bringing back their face-to-face services and prioritise staff shortages rather than doing woodland activities.

Woodland Wind-down

- Noticing the impact of Covid on staff that had supported people throughout the pandemic we put on a woodland wind-down session. A chance for staff to focus on their own wellbeing. We received good feedback, with opportunities for staff to network and an interest in continuing to do these sessions regularly.

Opportunities

- Woodland conservation groups observed a huge increase in woodland use, during lockdowns. More people going out into woodlands and getting to know them, gives us a wider audience for our project. We have greater opportunities to engage groups such as the Young Carers in woodland activities as their usual indoor activities being cancelled, and those young people and their parents have been grateful for the support in getting out of the house, despite some anxiety.

8. Awards

Interest and barriers for groups to John Muir Award guides, Plumpton, young carers

- A range of groups were consulted about their interest in the John Muir award. A couple of groups were interested in engaging in the award Guides and Plumpton College, however other time pressures and activities had to be prioritised and the award has not progressed. Some groups such as the young carers initially felt that an award such as this would distract the children's agenda or would require more of a time commitment than they could give. After working with us over a number of months, this group is more open to an award that recognises children's activity in the woods and with no fixed time commitment.

Awards for underserved groups

- We have observed that underserved groups needed to build relationships with the Lost Woods Project team and see how we work before engaging with the idea of an award.
- Only 25% of our survey respondents from the underserved groups, said that their members would not be interested in an award at all and there was most interest in a certificate of attendance in training.

Awards for Conservation groups

- There was much less interest amongst woodland conservation and sustainability groups for anything other than an award recognising taking part in conservation activities

Different groups want different woodland activities

Underserved groups

Brighton Housing Trust - want accessible woodlands, facilitated sessions (light touch) and access to conservation activities

Homeless prevention group (Worthing, ex-prisoners) - want to upskill and motivate their staff, so that they can be shown how to bring nature into wellbeing.

Refugee group - want people to facilitate multiple activities and have choices such as horticulture, leaves, arts, and crafts, but nothing too structured. They also did not want dogs but did want food.

Unemployed - want to learn conservation skills and need a recognised certificate.

Prostate Cancer group – want things that are well organised and safe. Limiting the people is also important to ensure that nothing gets over-developed and out of control

Mental Health groups - want a task that occupies their minds, (in some cases so they do not have to talk to other people). Also, gentle walks, time in nature (Worthing Hub).

Worthing hub - want information on where they can go, and they want to be shown around

Social prescribers - who work closely with mostly older people – want to be able to prescribe to a regular event where clients can sit in a local park or woods and have tea and a chat. They also want to be driven to places, not necessarily to walk but to enjoy the drive (Although we feel that other places can serve this need better than Lost Woods). They want to reduce isolation coming out of Covid. If the project had capacity, we could talk about memories of Woodlands.

Young carers - want free-play in the woods at Bedelands, the leaders do not want to lead activities

Conservation Groups/Students

Plumpton - want to learn new things, have confidence building, with good supervision and respectful interaction

Tottington - want more volunteers and training

Volunteers

Volunteers - want the opportunity to give something back and to make a difference.

Woodland Users

Survey respondents/Woodland users - want citizen science, walks

Woodland users - want in this order;

- a. Nature walks
- b. Foraging
- c. Coppicing and charcoal making
- d. Outdoor arts and crafts
- e. Mindfulness and meditation
- f. Bushcraft skills

Lost Leads. - Groups initially interested but unable to progress due to capacity or location barriers

The Princes Trust (Worthing)	Burgess Hill U3A
YMCA	Hurstpierpoint Guides
Camelia Botnar Foundation (NEETs)	Burgess Hill Rotary
East Clayton Farm	Macs Farm
MIND	Mosaic in Brighton
Voices in Exile	Woodland Flora and Fauna group
Refugees East Sussex	Haywards Heath Job Centre
West Sussex County Council Careers Team (NEET 16-18)	Turning tides homelessness support
West Sussex Carers	East Sussex Adult Carers

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[Unstructured Conversations Consultation Report](#) Saved in LW / Consultations / Reports for Vikki