

SOCIAL FORESTRY IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS Conservation Fund Project Report 2016 – 2017

Why we wanted to run the Project in the Shropshire Hills AONB

After designing and delivering the Social Forestry OCN Level 3 in Wales since 2014 and getting consistently positive feedback about it, Richard Thomason of the Small Woods Association and Julia Walling of Woods for Wellbeing wanted to offer the training to individuals and organisations in the Shropshire Hills AONB. Due to a history of generous funding from the Welsh Assembly and to the work of Small Woods Wales, there is a great deal of social forestry activity there and the Social Forestry OCN L3 has been very warmly welcomed. It has enabled course participants to really get to grips with connecting people with woods for the mutual benefits of woodland conservation and of people's health and wellbeing. It has created opportunities for developing activities, for forming partnerships and for sharing resources. Course participants have wanted to continue the sense of community that is created by participating in the course and requested that we develop a framework in which this can happen. This, in turn, is leading to plans for developing frameworks for social forestry as an industry. For this reason, it seemed important to develop things here in south Shropshire where we could offer this to our local partners. We could then use this to create a model for developing social forestry communities elsewhere. Applying to the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership for help with funding felt like much the best way forward and as expected, it has enabled us to achieve the training and to set up the beginnings of a social forestry community.

About the Project

Following on from a series of local consultation meetings in 2015, leading to the Conservation Fund grant award we have run the project "Social Forestry in the Shropshire Hills" from April 2016 to March 2017 for the SHAONB Partnership. The project comprised of two complementary and overlapping elements:

- The training of up to 12 individuals who were able to work with groups in woodlands in and around the Shropshire Hills AONB.
- The launch and development of a social forestry community in the area

It has involved:

- Training 11 people in the Shropshire Hills AONB in Social Forestry Open College Network Level 3.
- Creating well-trained, educated and skilled Social Forestry practitioners who can deliver high quality social forestry services and develop a social forestry network in the SHAONB.
- Tailoring the course appropriately to suit the specific needs of the SHAONB and the participants, with particular regard to their woodland conservation objectives.
- Enabling participants to develop and sustain existing woodland projects and consider new ones.
- Preparing and enabling participants to work with a range of different individuals, community and referred user groups.
- Training and skilling them to help create a social forestry community network in the SHAONB.
- Consulting with people in the SHAONB involved in social forestry about their needs and suggestions of ways of developing the community

It has opened up possibilities for:

- Creating local links and networks
- Enhancing existing and creating new partnerships
- Maximising existing resources

The Social Forestry OCN Training Course:

Participants were recruited from a variety of organisations and projects in and around the SHAONB, including two staff members from AONB Partnership, staff members from National Trust, Wildlife Trust, Education Services, Wyldwoods CIC, woodland owners and woodland project workers. The course took place over a period of 4 days, was designed to meet all the necessary Open College Network criteria, and tailored to meet the objectives identified by participants and by the SHAONB Conservation Fund.

The course involved:

Training about different woodland types, human impact on woodlands and woodland wellbeing, woodland laws, sustainable woodland management, theory and practice, with practical activities in woodland management and green woodworking and crafting. The human wellbeing element, which is becoming increasingly important in project management and sustainability, was delivered using transformative learning methods to engage participants deeply with the issue of wellbeing. We worked with research evidence on the health and wellbeing benefits of the woodland environment, with issues around leadership, facilitation and group management and the relevant duties of care and legal obligations.

All participants who completed the course did the written work and all passed with several outstanding portfolios including two from SHAONB staff.



1. Around the fire, under the tarp at Edge Wood, Westhope

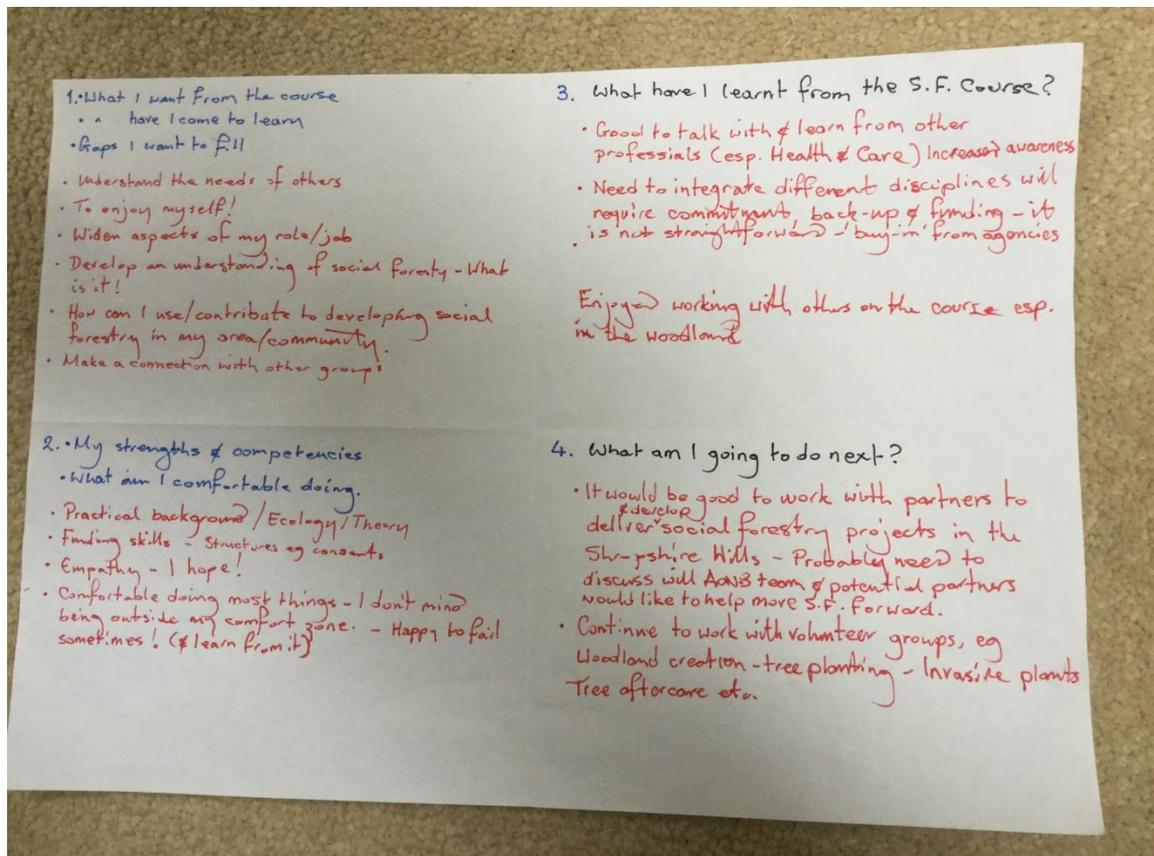
2. Richard demonstrates tool use

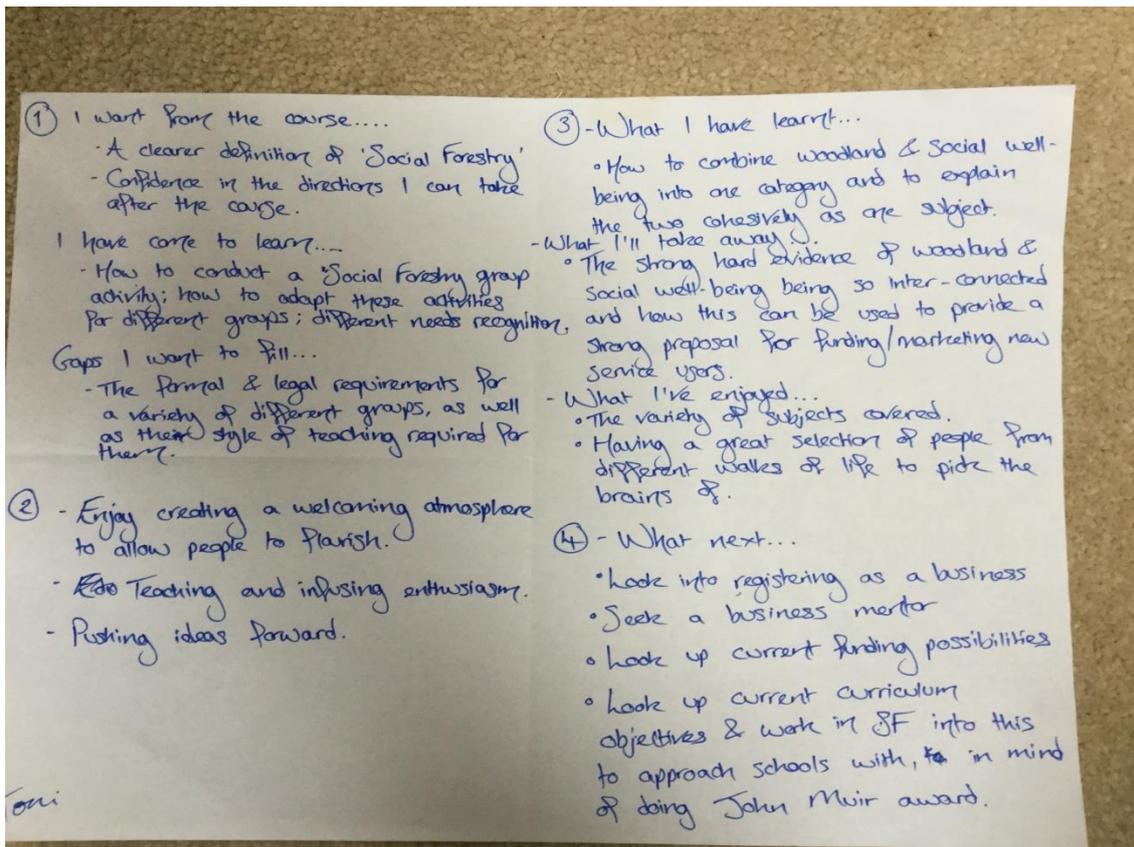


Sustainable woodland management activities at Edge Wood, Westhope

Feedback on the course:

Written and verbal feedback about the course has been consistently good. Participants all felt they benefitted from talking with other professionals, both with similar and very different skills from their own. It enabled them to get a whole picture of social forestry, feel comfortable in and recognise the value their own skills and see where they fitted within the whole. They enjoyed learning from others with different knowledge and skills and being able to envisage how they could and would like to develop their social forestry work. Discussions on the topics provided great opportunities for problem solving and sharing knowledge, expertise, ideas and resources. Everyone acknowledged that they very much enjoyed working together in the woodland.





Building a Social Forestry Community in Shropshire and future developments:

The project will continue indefinitely beyond the funding year. Funding has enabled us to set up but things will continue to evolve and develop. Our first consultation meeting involving social foresters in the SHAONB and surrounding areas took place at the Green Wood Centre in January 2016 and led to our confidence in applying for a Conservation Fund grant. We held another meeting in January this year at the GWC, which was well attended, attracting new community members. Most of the course participants were able to come and were joined by others who had completed a Social Forestry OCN course we ran last October, so they were able to meet. There were others, too, who are involved in social forestry in the SHAONB. People fed back about the projects they had been managing in the last year and we discussed the future of our social forestry community. We learnt a great deal about the wonderful variety of projects and activities taking place here, about the work of individuals and of organisations and people were able to share information about forthcoming events. Julia Walling has committed to producing literature about social forestry, which showcases projects being delivered here. There will be a directory and information about social forestry, which will be useful in explaining the work and helping to form partnerships, recruit volunteers and invite referrals from agencies whose service users could benefit from social forestry services.

Very recently, new partnerships and communications have developed with Mersey Forest and with local providers of NHS Forest projects, with MIND, the Woodland Trust, The Forestry Commission and other new partners who understand the value of social forestry and the need to be part of our community.

Julia Walling