



1. Overview

This report summarises Neroche Woodlanders' activities as a social enterprise over the twelve months from April 2022 to March 2023. The year saw Woodlanders continue to build on its reputation as a respected provider of nature-based wellbeing experiences for adults, families and children, using the public forest to tackle inequalities and improve lives, while nurturing Young Wood for wildlife and for people.



Despite the weather continuing to become more extreme and unpredictable, including a very hot, dry summer, we worked through all the seasons with adults with mental health challenges, families needing support, and children on free school meals, enabling them to gain from the therapeutic benefits of a wild outdoor space, while enjoying non-

judgmental company and support. This service continued to be enabled by practical volunteering to provide safe spaces, structures, firewood, routes through the woods, and wildlife-rich habitats to enjoy.

2. Organisation and Governance

Board of Directors

At the start of the 2022-23 financial year there were six directors: Gavin Saunders (Chair), Barbara Wilcox (Treasurer), Jenny Archard (Secretary), Sarah Holdway and Becks Gould. During the year they were joined by Andreas Hofmeyr and Sue Farrell, and later by Maxine Anderton. The directors worked in a voluntary capacity.

Staff

The executive directors and core staff were Jenny Archard, Sarah Holdway and Gavin Saunders, who are paid for delivering work as agreed by the Board. In addition during the year we contracted the following staff to manage, lead or assist with sessions and other work: Tiff Lovedale, Sarah Churchill, Alan Bruford, Jane Embleton, Rowen Wilde, Eleanor Hayes, Lawrence Bole, Gilly Notley, Jo Hinds, Nancy Castle and Clare Smith. All staff were hired on casual contracts as freelancers. Chris Heron continued to work as virtual administrator.



Volunteers

Volunteers have continued to be essential to the running of all aspects of Woodlanders' work, with considerable time being devoted to volunteer recruitment, and associated DBS checking and training for those involved with our client groups. Volunteers working alongside Sarah, Jenny and Tiff on wellbeing programmes were Lucy Montgomery, Barbara Wilcox, Becks Gould, Jo Hind, Christine Langston, Sue Farrell, Richard Threlfall, Anna Stewart, Kim Russell, Debbie James, Cath Grantham, Maxine Anderton, Sonia Hulejczuk & Donna Harris.



Meanwhile Neroche Conservation Volunteers continued to operate on almost every Wednesday throughout the year. During the twelve months ending 31st March 2023, 44 task days took place, clocking up 323 person-days (or 1776 hours) of volunteer work. As well as 17 Wednesdays at Young Wood, the group spent time at Mount Fancy reserve for Butterfly Conservation, Thurlbear Wood and Brimley Mire for Somerset Wildlife Trust, Otterhead Lakes for the Otterhead Estate Trust, Underway Meade for the Combe St Nicholas community, and pulling balsam for the Hemyock community. Tasks were organised by Peter Maben, Mike Woodhead and Gavin Saunders. There was regular volunteer support from Paul Jones, Mike Rostron, Peter Woodcock, Nigel Perry, Dave Downs, Chris Baker, Peter Joyce, David Bryant,

Claire Stenhouse, Lorri Bee and Fred Constantine-Smith.

Organisational development

We obtained a development grant of around £10,000 from the Somerset Community Foundation to enable us to look forward, establish more robust accountancy and finance systems, train up volunteer leaders and develop a fundraising strategy. Emma Gould worked with us to develop our HR provisions and facilitated a directors' planning session. Gavin, Andreas and Paul Jones undertook tractor training to obtain FMOC certification for using the tractor, trailer and flail at Young Wood. We developed our volunteer recruitment and management and safeguarding processes. We used funds to enable volunteers and staff to update their training, and have moved our accounting online using Quickbooks.



Fundraising

Alongside other grant secured outlined in this report, Becks undertook further small grants fundraising work, including securing grants from Somerset West & Taunton, Tesco and Asda Green Tokens.

Promotion and Publicity

Our website www.nerochewoodlanders.org has continued to develop during the year, and we use an online booking platform (Bookwhen) for charged-for events. We have three Facebook pages for different strands of work: Neroche Woodlanders' main Facebook page, Young Saplings parent-toddler page, and Wild Explorers (project) pages.

Collaboration

During the year we have worked with the following organisations and individuals: The Taunton One Teams, SW&T Council, Priorswood Community Centre, The Link Centre, SASP, SPARK, Redstart Learning Partnership, Holy Trinity School, Minerva School, Forestry England, Butterfly Conservation, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Knight Brothers Buses, Otterhead Estate Trust, Towards Tomorrow Together, Blackdown Hills AONB, Woodland Journeys, Somerset Mental Health Network, and Somerset Local Nature Partnership.

3. Project Delivery

Young Wild Explorers Parent and Toddler Group

This group worked with 15 different families through 2022/23, providing a hot lunch at every session and free transport for those who needed it. A large team of volunteers supported the sessions, enabling parents to get a break and a hot meal.



Wild Explorers

A further six sessions of this group were run, using underspend from the previous Wild Explorers programme, and reaching 15 families, most of whom we had worked with over the 2 years of the main Wild Explorers

project. During these sessions we have been able to reconnect with previous families whom we know are in difficult circumstances. We provide free transport and a hot lunch for all.

Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) - Easter, Summer and Christmas 2022

We bid for funds to deliver HAF sessions three times a year in each of the main school holiday periods. This central government funding for activities for children on free schools meals comes via Somerset Activities and Sports Partnership (SASP). We chose to focus on primary age children, with extra funding for SEND children. These sessions are complex, demanding and have taken a huge amount of organising as we have targeted the children who we think will benefit most from (a) being outdoors (b) getting fed and (c) being away from difficulties at home. To do this, we have worked very closely with Minerva, Priorswood, North Town and Holy Trinity Schools. During the year we catered for a total of 184 places, and achieved well over 90% attendance. We were recognised by SASP as an 'Outstanding Provider'. Running HAF sessions has enabled us to reach new families and bring them into other projects, or signpost them to other support.

Sessions for Families with Disabilities - Short Breaks

Short Breaks funding comes from Somerset Council Community Inclusion Team to support families who have children with a disability. We bid to offer sessions in holidays and half terms. We are usually oversubscribed and worked with 74 children and 50 parents/carers during the year.



Woodland Wellbeing (adult groups)

This programme provides nature connection and a sense of community for local adults with moderate to severe mental health or other life challenges, who come to us via referrals, through agencies or by word of mouth. Sessions are run in blocks of around five, with staff spending time staying in touch with participants between sessions. Some participants come to sessions very regularly while others drop in and out as they need extra support. Some participants experience significant personal development as a result of attending, and others just need a regular place to go that is accepting, kind and has practical things to do. We usually have a waiting list. Sessions have four staff plus two to three volunteers, meaning everyone has space to be heard during a day.

We need funding from a variety of sources to enable this programme to run. We completed the Open Mental Health (OMH) funded one-year project (£16,000) which ran from Autumn 2021 to Summer 2022. We then secured two years' worth of new funding from OMH and the Halpin Trust (£45,000 in total) to run from Autumn 2022 to Autumn 2024. This was less than we had bid for, and into 2023 we are continuing to need to find further funding.

At the end of March 2023, we were offered an additional £3,500 from the Somerset Wildlife Trust Nature Connections project to invest in our adult wellbeing work, as they were unable to complete their project running in the Blackdown Hills. This is being used to provide extra sessions.

Nature-Wellbeing for NHS Staff

With funding and support from Daphne Marston at Natural England, we worked to create two trial sessions for local NHS staff in March 2023. These aimed to provide personal wellbeing benefits for those staff as individuals, a chance to explore the evidence to back up why being in nature is effective, and an opportunity to think about how and where to bring nature connection to their patients. Twenty NHS staff attended and a project report (available on the website) was shared with Natural England and Somerset Mental Health Partnership.

Rise Up Wild & Rooted

Our monthly Saturday group for young teens attracted a total of 19 young people, with approximately half attending regularly; some were paid for by parents, and some given free places through being local and on low incomes. We secured part-funding for the project from the YHA Outdoor Citizens Project to enable high levels of staffing and transport from Taunton. This project was really valued by young people and their parents, and having evaluated the work we want to develop this further in 2024. A full report is available.



Young Saplings

Young Saplings has reached capacity and we have a healthy waiting list most of the year around. Spaces generally come up at the end of each year, when children move on to school. Prices have been held to 2021/22 levels, though we have added a higher price option, should parents feel they can afford to pay more.

Holy Trinity Nurture Group

Holy Trinity school came to the woods to help improve speech and language with their nursery children. Most of the children had English as a second language and a few had delayed speech development. We found that just a few hours in the woods helped speech development and encouraged the children, who came with their parents, to chat more in both English and their native tongue.

Ecotherapy training

In autumn 2022 Halpin Trust offered us funding to support development time and piloting of a training course for potential practitioners in Woodlanders' approach to

ecotherapeutic practice. We took a team approach to developing our course which began being offered at a subsidised trial rate later in 2023. We hope to develop this into the future as a revenue earner to support our wider work.

Other activities

In August 2022 we hosted Meredith Little from the School of Lost Borders, California, to run a six-day course called 'Dark Nature' - an immersive training for people interested in psyche, soul and nature and based on a map of human nature called the Four Shields. This time enabled people to move through the challenges of the West Shield, the place of initiation and soul.

4. Young Wood

Site management

Woodlanders is now in the eighth year of a ten year lease of Young Wood from Forestry England. During the year we continued to look after Young Wood both as a setting for wellbeing activities and a habitat for wildlife. Small scale coppicing continued over the winter, while the advent of the tractor allowed for easier haulage of coppice wood from the previous year's coppicing site.



We obtained a grant of £4500 from the Blackdown Hills AONB and Somerset Discovery Fund to improve access provisions

at Young Wood. We used the grant to build a new fully-accessible compost toilet near the car park, and a level path to a new viewpoint and set of benches deep into the woodland. We also obtained a grant from the Blackdown Hills Farming in Protected Landscapes fund for a solar charger and lighting.



5. Financial Performance

Financial year 2021/22

Woodlanders' turnover for the year 2022/23 was £92,501. Our total net assets at the year end were £52,247, and our free reserves remained stable at £23,994. The full Statement of Accounts for the year is available separately.

An independent assessment of the accounts was provided by Lydia Baker, formerly of Young Somerset. Henceforward we have moved from cash accounting to an accruals basis, which will provide a more meaningful picture of within-year income against expenditure.

6. Looking forward

It is striking and salutary that the need and demand for the services we provide is growing rapidly. We know that we have a positive impact on people's lives, but it remains a huge challenge not only to maintain what we do, but to ensure that our work has a lasting value for our participants. By definition, the time we provide people in the woods is only a respite from everyday

life, and there are systemic issues affecting participants which we are powerless to change.

Given the uncertain, short-term nature of the funding basis of our work, we devoted significant time during the year covered by this report to strengthening our fundraising capacity and taking a broader, more strategic approach. This work is continuing, and we also need to understand better the 'ecosystem' of support out in the community for our participants, so that we can direct more of the available funding to our work, and can contribute to ensuring that support is joined-up and effective.

A notable development this year has been the move towards providing training in the Woodlanders approach to eco-therapeutic support. Over the last decade we have honed an approach which works, and one way of spreading the benefit is to equip other practitioners to learn from what we do.

Everyone who comes to Young Wood sits around the fire on a level, with the advantages and disadvantages of everyday life stripped away. That is part of a deep value of working in an open-air, natural setting. In many respects for all of us, uncertainty has become the only certainty in

life, not just for our participants but also for small enterprises like our own, and over the next year we need to seek Forestry England's support for extending our lease beyond 2025, and enabling us to harmonise our work with the management of the public forest.

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