

Case Study

South Downs Forestry Partnership

Improving Business Skills in the Forestry Sector

Background

The South Downs National Park has over 38,000ha of woodland which covers approximately a quarter of the landscape. If all of this forest resource were actively managed it is estimated that it could contribute £22.8m to the local economy.

The South Downs Forestry Partnership project has therefore been established to bring more woodlands within the National Park into active management.

The project aims to pool and co-ordinate the efforts of key organisations acting within the National Park (Forestry Commission, Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trusts and Local Authorities) and work closely with landowners and local enterprises to seize new opportunities and respond to emerging markets such as woodfuel and sustainable development.

This is a collective landscape scale approach that will encourage networking for environmental, social and economic gains and enable the effective utilisation of timber to become a feature of the South Downs National Park identity.



Students visiting English Woodlands Sawmill, discussing online marketing and sales with the Managing Director Tom Compton

The project

The South Downs Forestry Partnership has three broad aims, firstly to increase the amount of woodland being actively managed, secondly to develop a targeted and joined up package of advice for woodland owners and thirdly to develop and improve local forest businesses and the supply chain of forest products.

It is in pursuit of this third aim that the “Grow Your Business Course” was developed. Feedback from existing local forestry workers reinforced by the Hampshire Coppice Group and Small Woods Association suggested that many forest contractors set up as sole traders do not have a good understanding of core business skills such as tax planning, balance sheets, cash flow, business plans and modern digital marketing.

In an effort to make these small businesses more competitive and robust we piloted a three day business skills course for coppice workers and forestry contractors who are recent or new entrants into the sector.

The course focused on core business and marketing skills and included site visits to forestry enterprises keen to share innovative best practice.

“It is vital that new entrants into the forest sector have sound business and marketing skills to underpin their passion for the product”

Richard Thomason – Small Woods Association

The outcome

15 students attended the three day course . The students all came from the Hampshire and West Sussex area or with businesses that had the potential to operate within this area. The course was designed to meet local needs so where possible students would employ their new enterprise skills to the benefit of the local economy.

The syllabus focused on a range of essential business skills including business planning, tax, legal structure, budgeting, product pricing, advertising, marketing, social media and online sales. Throughout the course the students also developed a business plan which culminated at the end of the course with a presentation to our “Dragons Den” of industry experts for feedback.

The course also showcased the best practice of three local businesses that operate in different areas of the timber supply chain. A coppice and charcoal worker using new technology to increase efficiency, a sawmill showcasing innovative digital marketing, and an artisan builder using round wood timber in local sustainable construction.

Funding

The Grow Your Business Course was jointly funded by the South Downs Forestry Partnership and the Small Woods Association. In total the course cost £4,000 split evenly between the project partners. In addition the Sustainability Centre who hosted the event donated all classroom and accommodation facilities at no cost to the course.



Students developing their business and marketing plans and then presenting them to our panel of experts in the “Dragons Den” for feedback.

The future

The feedback from the students on the course has been overwhelmingly positive. Several are now operating successful new forest enterprises within the South Downs National Park.

The partnership with the Small Woods Association and the South Downs Forestry Partnership enabled both organisations to share expertise and costs, which proved essential to overcome barriers in the development of the training package.

There has been significant demand to run the course again in the near future. The pilot course proved that a short training package can deliver exponential benefits to small local forest enterprises.

Preliminary bids have been submitted in advance of the next round of the LEADER program, to secure funding for a further 3 Grow Your Business Courses, to be run across the project area.

The continued delivery of this training will contribute to a vibrant, robust and diverse forest based economy within the South Downs National Park.