

7.2 A study carried out by the 'Brain Boxes', University of Glamorgan Business School, for the Treforest Wholesome Food Association (TWFA), in summer 2008.

TWFA is a social enterprise set up to promote the dissemination of knowledge and training in sustainable food production methods and healthy eating approaches. The company has three plots of land, two for food production and one for eco-building and forest school projects. GROW is a community food production project carried out on one of these plots.

The 'Forest Schools' initiative is promoted by the Welsh Assembly Government, as a means of inspiring and providing development opportunities for individuals of any age through outdoor experience. A plot of land at the TWFA site has been prepared with a view to offering Forest School training to local groups and schools. A business strategy was needed to examine and enhance the commercial viability of this undertaking.

The aim of the study was to create a business plan to guide the development of TWFA's Forest School initiative as a community enterprise. The study also aimed to identify income streams with a view to covering operational overheads and providing for set-up costs.

The group undertook secondary desk research to acquire an understanding of the Forest School concept. They also examined the National School Curriculum in order to identify areas to which Forest School activities would relate. The group then carried out short interviews using structured questionnaires with three separate groups of respondents to gauge knowledge of the Forest School concept and potential interest:

- Primary and secondary school teachers, scout leaders, youth workers and play leaders
- 9-10 year-olds at a primary school
- Members of the general public in a local town centre

Findings

It was found that there were several areas in the National Curriculum that Forest School activities could make a useful contribution towards addressing.

It was noted that activities would need to be tailored to meet the specific needs of each age group. For example, the youngest children (Key Stage 1) would require varied fun tasks, each of short duration. At Key Stage 2, children would benefit from more educational content, e.g. measurement, time and the seasons, scale drawings, handicrafts, wildlife study activities, food growing activities. It was reported that all age groups taking part in Forest School-type activities were likely to experience positive personal development, improve a range of key skills, and gain confidence and improved self esteem.

The interviews and questionnaires elicited mostly positive responses to the Forest School concept. Among the 9-10 year-olds, 75% enjoyed outdoor play and 90% were keen to increase the amount of outdoor learning that they took part in. Response was less enthusiastic for hands-on gardening: only 45% were interested in learning to use gardening tools.

60% of teenagers questioned replied that they would welcome more learning about the environment; 70% of these respondents believed schools could help young people become more environmentally active, and 50% already had some knowledge of the Forest School concept. 60% thought that Forest School activities would be beneficial for teenage participants.

90% of the adult town centre shoppers had not heard of the Forest School concept. Very few had heard of the TWFA or GROW projects, despite their proximity.

A positive response to the Forest School concept from a local youth development officer was received via email. This respondent, however, observed that many groups would have difficulty paying fees to access the training and services.

The group identified a number of funding bodies who might welcome applications from TWFA, including Cydcoed, the Heritage Lottery Fund, etc.

In conclusion, the study ascertained that a local Forest School facility would be welcomed by local schools, youth groups and the general public. The study recommended that TWFA continue to target mainly schools and youth groups. The study suggested that a local advertising campaign to promote the Forest School concept and services to this potential market would be beneficial.

However, the study was unable to indicate how Forest School activities would be able generate the income necessary to sustain the initiative.

The report suggested possible means of income generation from other activities at the site or the adjacent GROW project site:

- Establishing a community composting facility, with a Big Lottery Fund grant to set up.
- Produce and sell vegetables and flowers grown on the plot, craft products, honey and other bee products, to local community members, retailers, etc.
- Produce and sell young trees and plants to the community or to garden centres