



LOTTERY FUNDED

TamarValley

Area of Outstanding
Natural Beauty



Community Woodfuel from Hedges Toolkit

Devon Hedge Group



How this toolkit is laid out

This toolkit gives you everything you need to know to start a local community woodfuel group. It is made up of:

- A set of FAQs, which gives you an overview of harvesting hedgerow wood for fuel, and what you need to make your group successful.
- A flowchart, which guides you through the steps of forming a group, developing a working relationship with a landowner, and holding hedging days.
- A set of attachments, which are in Word or Powerpoint, so you can edit them for your own use. You can access this by clicking on the red number beside each of documents in the list below, or in the flowchart at the end of this toolkit.

1

[Public meeting poster template](#)

2

[Wood fuel group constitution template](#)

3

[FAQs for farmers](#)

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[Licence agreement between a farmer and a community group](#)

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[Risk assessment form template](#)

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[On the day: A leader's guide](#)

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[Members visit register](#)

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[Winter bud identifier](#)

Introduction

Devon has at least 32,000 miles of hedges which are an extraordinary, world-class asset, prized for their biodiversity and heritage value. They are also a wonderful resource for woodfuel, and it is the traditional method of harvesting, which involves laying the hedge so it provides another crop in a few years time, which maintained the hedges over centuries. As hedgelaying is very labour intensive, it is too expensive to undertake as a commercial activity today. As a result, many hedges are just flailed, or left to grow unchecked.

This problem is also an opportunity. People from rural communities can learn how to harvest woodfuel from hedges, and lay them at the same time. The harvested logs can provide fuel for wood burners, for both the farmer and members of the group. Laying the hedges provides a refuge, habitat and corridor for a wide range of insects and animals.

A great way for local people to harvest woodfuel from hedges is to become part of a community woodfuel from hedges group. This is because a group can secure the necessary insurance, come to a clear agreement with a farmer, acquire any tools needed, and invite an expert hedgelayer to provide training.

People who work on hedges together receive many benefits, in addition to any logs they may take home for their own use. They learn new skills and continue an ancient tradition of hedge management, while getting fitter in good company! Hedgelaying is also a very satisfying activity.

This guide shows you how to start a community woodfuel group. The first section gives a flowchart, laying out the steps needed to form a group, and reach an agreement with a farmer. It has links to later sections, which give templates and other tools which can help at different stages.

If you would like more help or advice, please contact Devon Hedge Group, by emailing contact@devonhedges.org. The [group's website](#) also has a wider range of information which you may find useful. One of its resources is [Wood fuel from hedges: How to manage and crop hedges in south-west England for fuel](#), which, as well as talking about wood fuel, give an idea of the biodiversity value of hedges.

[Devon Rural Skills Trust](#) runs training on hedgelaying, among many other things. They may be able to supply a trainer for an introductory event.

Some community wood fuel groups have received grants from [Awards for All](#), part of the Big Lottery Fund. Other grants might be available through [Devon Communities Together](#), or from local charities.

Good luck!

Devon Hedge Group

FAQs for communities planning a hedgerow group

1. Why should we harvest wood from hedgerows?

In the past, hedgerows were often used as a source of woodfuel. Until the 1950s, most hedges were laid or coppiced every 15 years or so, with the wood being used as fuel for cooking and heating. This changed with the introduction of tractor-mounted reciprocating hedge trimmers and flails, which encouraged annual hedge trimming and 'tidy' hedgerows.

Coal and electricity were cheap at the time, so there was less demand for firewood, and climate change had not been thought about, so burning fossil fuels was not an issue. Wildlife lost out as a result of the change, because there were fewer nuts and berries for birds and small mammals to eat.

This situation started to change in the 1990s, when farm environmental grants made it more worthwhile to manage hedges in the old way. They came just in time to stop hedge laying skills from completely disappearing, which is important because laying a hedge is the traditional way of ensuring continued growth in the future, while providing a stock proof barrier, and a wood harvest.

Since then, rising electricity and gas costs, and concerns about climate change, have made woodfuel gathered from hedges more attractive.

There are also many benefits for people, of course. As well as getting access to logs for their wood-burning stoves, they engage in healthy exercise, and spend time enjoying, and learning about, the countryside, in the company of others. All this, and the wildlife in and around hedges benefits as well.

2. Why form a woodfuel group?

Woodfuel groups allow people harvest wood from hedges safely. They ensure the people working on hedges are led by individuals who take responsibility for making sure everyone can work safely and that the group is insured. Only members of the group take part in hedging days, and as members, they sign to confirm they will look after themselves and avoid risk to anyone else.

More than this, a group can form a relationship with a farmer or other landowner, and its officers can sign an agreement with them. The agreement lays out what the farmer and the group expect, avoiding misunderstandings later.

The group undertakes to make sure a knowledgeable person is involved in each harvesting day, and often have someone who can fell trees using a chainsaw, making more wood available.

The group will need a constitution, and a template is provided as part of this toolkit.

3. What do we need, to harvest hedgerows for woodfuel?

You need:

- An enthusiastic group of people – you can hold a public meeting to recruit them
- A landowner with a suitable hedge – ask around, or they may come to your public meeting (many do – they are often keen on hedging)
- A constitution, with a named set of officers, who are responsible for the group. This makes it possible to take out insurance (essential).
- Insurance
- An agreement with the landowner
- Either someone in the group with hedgelaying skills, or access to hedgelaying training
- A leader for each hedging day
- A risk assessment for each hedging day

4. Why do we need insurance?

Insurance is essential for any community group engaging in woodfuel work, either in hedgerows or woodland. Apart from anything else, your group's officers (Chair, Treasurer and Secretary, for example) could be personally liable for damage caused by negligence, and they need insurance to cover this cost.

Insurance can be obtained from Zurich Insurance, among others. At the time of writing (2106), it cost about £120 for a year. The cost of insurance can be recovered from membership fees – the cost will be much lower per person than the value of the wood harvested.

If any member of the group will be using a chainsaw, the group will need to pay for chainsaw cover for that individual. They will need an up to date chain saw certification and qualification (from an official body). They will also need to carry out a risk assessment before any work is done, and use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) when needed. The cost can vary from group to group, and you will need to contact the insurer to obtain a quote.

The insurance will not cover the landowner, who will normally have public liability insurance already. If they do not, the National Farmers Union or Cornish Mutual can quote to supply it.

5. How do we reach an agreement with a landowner?

Once you have a small group, and a signed constitution, you need a farmer with a hedge. The best way to find one is by word of mouth. Ask around in the town or village where you live, or contact a local farmer.

When you meet to discuss the idea, try to have someone with you who knows about hedges (and preferably about farming as well!). You may find it useful to give the farmer a printed copy of the FAQs for Farmers document, which is part of this toolkit.

The first meeting is very important. A good relationship between a farmer or other landowner and the community woodfuel group is essential. If they are interested in traditional management techniques, they will be very willing to listen, provided they are confident you know what you will be doing, and the group is not likely to create a problem. If the farmer has to spend time pulling cars out of mud, for example, he or she will not be very impressed!

Make sure you have a detailed discussion, clarifying: when you will come; what hedge you can work on; where you can park; what vehicles you may bring onto the land, and whether and where you may leave wood to dry. The farmer will probably agree to remove any stock fencing before work starts, and may also heap up any unwanted brushwood with a loader tractor for burning.

Whether you pay the farmer, and how much, depends on the quality of the wood, how much the farmer helps you, and so on.

You can use the licence agreement template in this toolkit as a way of recording what was agreed.

When you have reached an agreement, you will need to share everything with the group, so they know what is expected of them.

The farmer will show you the hedge which your group can cut. Ideally, this will be:

1. A hedge with the right level of growth. Hedges with 8-15 years of growth can usually be cut with hand tools. Much of the wood in hedges with 15-30 yrs growth will need to be cut with a chainsaw. Hedges that have been flailed in the last 8 years may not have enough usable firewood to be worth harvesting.
2. A hedge with a high percentage of good burning species, such as ash, beech, oak and hazel. Hawthorn and blackthorn also burn well, but their thorns are dangerous when felling, logging and stoking fires. Most hedges have some thorn, but a hedge with over 35% hawthorn or blackthorn may not be suitable for a firewood group.
3. Near a road or track, to make it easier to reach, and to remove harvested logs. Roadside hedges are unlikely to be suitable, though, for road safety reasons.

6. Training

It is very important that every hedging session is led by an experienced person. If your group does not include such a person, you could contact Devon Rural Skills Trust, who may be able to supply a trainer. In any case, no-one should use a chainsaw unless they are qualified and individually insured (which can be done under the group's policy).

You also need tools. A good selection of tools would include: some bowsaws (of varying sizes), some folding saws, loppers, secateurs and billhooks (for experienced users only). If you are removing or replacing fencing, you will need a multi-purpose fencing tool and a claw hammer.

7. Why do we need to pay so much attention to safety?

Farms and hedgerows are safe places, provided everyone understands what the risks are, and how to minimise them. If this is not done, it is easy for someone to be hurt. Apart from this, your insurer will expect you to undertake a risk assessment, share it with the group, and carry out its recommendations for minimising risk.

The group leader on the day is primarily responsible for this. Every session should have a nominated leader, who makes sure a risk assessment has been carried out,

that everyone present signs to say they have read and understood it, and that they are all members of the woodfuel group (again, for insurance purposes).

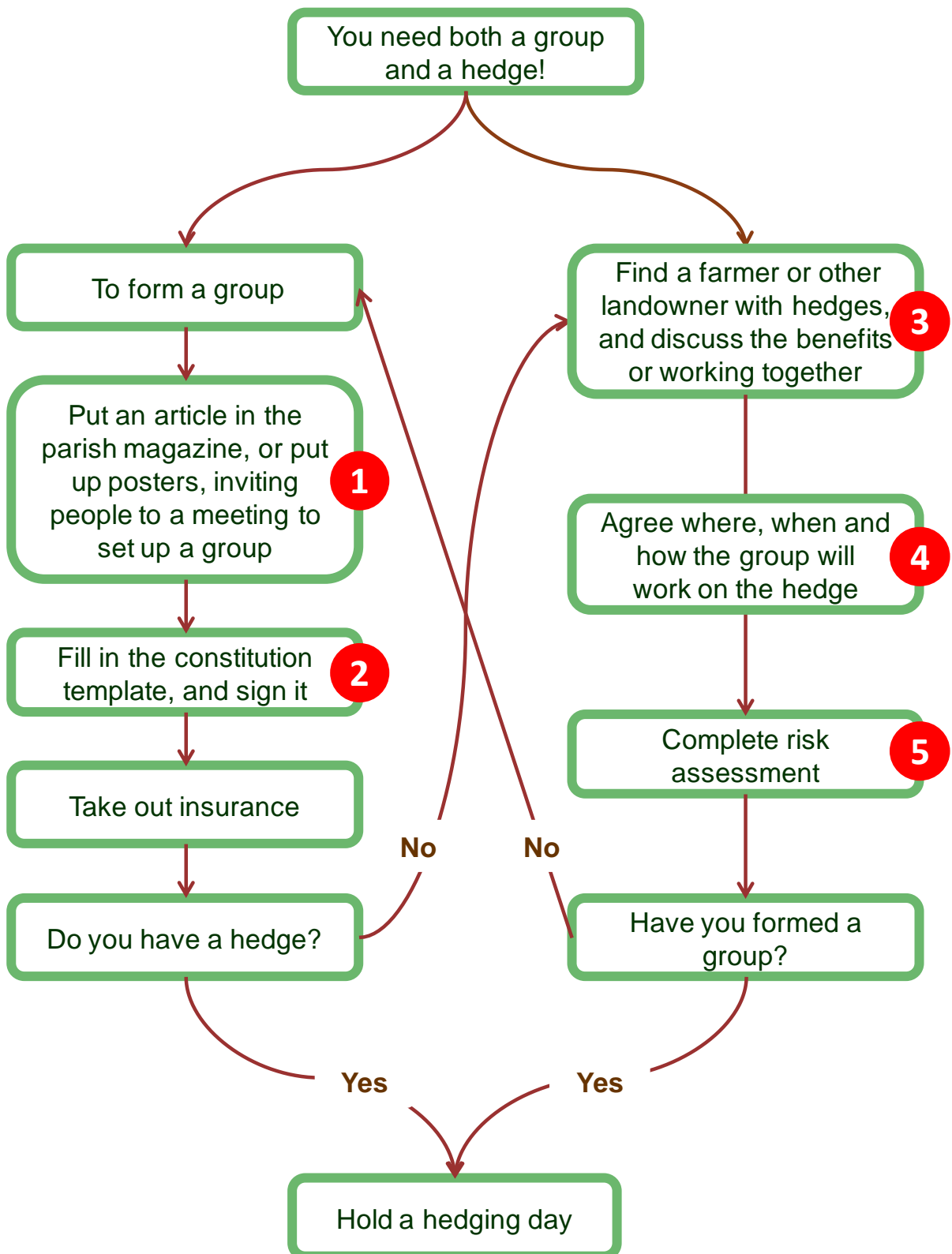
Remember, the group's officers are the ones most likely to be sued if there is an accident.

Everyone should wear strong, comfortable clothes which are as thorn-proof as possible, thick-soled work boots and thick leather work gloves that fit well. The chainsaw operator will need personal protective equipment.

You should buy a First Aid kit. You need one which is the right size for your group, and contains the items you need for the risks identified in your risk assessment. You can buy first aid kits from [The Conservation Volunteers](#). If possible, have a first aider on site, and ensure the group leader has a mobile phone.

If you have a chainsaw user, it is sensible to ensure the person accompanying them has a first aid kit which is appropriate to deal with an unlikely, but catastrophic, chainsaw injury, and knows how to use it.

Devon Hedge Group: Community Woodfuel from Hedges Toolkit



Resources

Leader's guide **6**

Member joining and risk form **7**

Winter bud identifier **8**



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