



Nurturing Wellbeing, Building Resilience, Creating Community

Business Plan

Introduction

Nature Unlimited runs sessions in woodlands across the Scottish Borders, ranging from employability programmes, school and community projects, to events such as team building & birthday parties. We nurture well-being, build resilience and create community through teamwork and nature connection activities using a Forest School approach. We encourage people to connect with nature, respect themselves and their environment and support them to improve their confidence, self-esteem and social skills.

While we specialise in working with marginalised young people in an effort to address issues of social inequality, our market includes people of all ages and from all walks of life. As more & more research shows the benefits to health and well-being of being outdoors and the detrimental effects, especially on children, of too much time spent indoors in front of a screen, we are uniquely positioned to provide a much needed service.

Overview of business (Year 1)

Nature Unlimited is a social enterprise (community interest company). Our board has a range of skills from finance to green woodworking and a wealth of experience in Forest School and Environmental Education. The business offers nature connection experiences to people of all ages and specialises in developing life skills to socially disadvantaged groups, through leadership & peer mentoring programmes based in the outdoors.

We run Forest School and John Muir Award programmes for schools as an intervention for children who are not thriving in mainstream education. They may have behavioural, social and/or emotional difficulties and/or be at risk of exclusion from or failure at school. By working and playing together in small nurture groups, participants become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. We expect to see growth in this sector because of the newly launched Pupil Equity Fund.

Our Wild Woodlanders weekend and holiday clubs run throughout the year. They are an antidote to screen time and give children the chance to get active, play wild, build dens, make friends, love nature and much more. Children learn about nature through games and activities and develop social skills through teamwork. The ratio of adults to children (usually 1:3) allows for a nurturing environment where children thrive.

We also offer one-off events such as woodland birthday parties, stag & hen parties, foraging workshops, Christmas wreath making etc. Adult team building days are a chance for work-place colleagues to get outdoors and connect with nature, break down barriers and do something to help the environment, whilst fulfilling their corporate social responsibility.

We offer training in leading outdoor sessions to teachers, youth workers, scout & guide leaders & other professionals. We also offer behaviour management training for outdoor settings. This supports schools and youth organisations to meet the Curriculum for Excellence Outdoor Learning requirements as well as to address the lack of time spent outdoors and the detrimental effect this is having on society as a whole but especially on children.

Our employability/volunteer development programme teaches woodland management and green woodworking techniques while focussing on developing life skills, such as communication and team work, and on improving prospects for participants. We are currently creating a nature trail in Langlee Woodland with some of our volunteers.

Plan for Years 2 and 3

The board's main challenge will be to grow our enterprise in these uncertain and difficult economic times. We need to generate work for the staff we have trained and to give our new volunteers experience and development opportunities. We need to find ways to overcome barriers to participation for the most marginalised groups. To this end, we have been actively looking for new sites to use in various locations so that travel is not an insurmountable issue. The majority of the people we work with need more than a short intervention. Our aim is to create a community for support and self-care that will become a model of good practice.

There is demand for our services across the age ranges and having built capacity over the last few months, we have staff ready and willing to work. As we take on more projects, through broadening our service user base, we will need to increase our pool of volunteers/staff. We will extend our in-house training programme to include certificated training in Forest School Leadership Level 1 this year and in the following two years, look to deliver Level 2 training in-house. This will enable some of our volunteers to qualify and work as assistant leaders and will contribute to a virtuous circle of growth and development.

Our medium- to long-term plan is to establish a permanent base in a woodland. This would enable us to have a workshop for green woodworking, storage and shelter. It would also function as a training venue and community hub, where intergenerational work around food growing and cooking could take place. We have several options of sites and a local trust who are considering how they can support us to develop this in the long term. However, we need to evidence the benefit that would bring.

Our volunteers and employability group shall be carrying out woodland management tasks at various sites across the Borders in order to develop their skills and to evidence the need for a permanent base. We plan to merge our Employability and Volunteer Development Programmes so that we can operate more effectively in terms of costs and time but more importantly to create a community consisting of diverse but equally valuable members.

The potential benefits of this project are huge. A community woodland can provide food and fuel but more than that, the sense of connection and belonging that it fosters will engender massive positive and lasting change to those involved.

We will continue to provide intervention programmes for schools and will develop a transition project for P7 and S1 children and their families.

We will run specific programmes for young people with mental health issues as we have directly observed the need for this in our work with schools to date.

Much of this work will need to be funded by grant making bodies, in the initial stages at least. Having successfully run grant-funded programmes in schools, we are now generating sales directly from schools and we hope to replicate this model with our new programmes. For example, after we run our Wild About Well-being Programme, we would hope that NHS Borders Joint Health Improvement Team would pay for future projects.

Other potential revenue streams include: development of school grounds, wildlife areas and community allotments; provision of Outdoor Learning as well as CPD training for teachers; extension of our one-off events programme; diversification into complementary area such as Music in the Outdoors.

Market & competitors

Our market includes:

- Parents of children, who will attend activity clubs, holiday clubs and residential. Parents are becoming increasingly aware of the detrimental effect that the “cotton wool” society and increased screen time is having on their kids. We offer something much more than child-care but at a comparable price with child-care providers and activity clubs.
- Businesses in Edinburgh and Scottish Borders for team building/staff away days.
- Nurseries, schools and youth groups - There is growing demand for schools and youth organisations to meet the Curriculum for Excellence Outdoor Learning requirements and there is a need both for delivery of sessions and for training to develop capacity within organisations.
- Hen and stag parties.
- Public bodies such as Scottish Borders Council, Edinburgh District Council and NHS Borders e.g. Health & well-being projects, family relationship building and readiness for school or transitions.

Our competitors include:

- Borders Forest Trust and Branching Out (Forest School Programmes)
- Mike’s Military Mayhem (birthday parties)
- Bowhill Rangers Service (Activity clubs)
- Instinctively Wild Services Ltd CIC (they work mainly with dementia patients and operate on a very part-time basis)
- Freelance Forest School Practitioners.
- Other providers of intervention programmes, such as Stable Life, who have similar aims but different ways of achieving them.

Our set-up as a Community Interest Company means that we are not exclusively relying on grant funding but are willing and able to generate our own income streams. We keep overheads to a minimum and offer excellent value in terms of outcomes. We are a strong team of committed staff and volunteers with a client focussed approach. Each of the directors bring diverse talents which enhance the service we provide; including a deep knowledge & love of nature and wildlife, backgrounds in teaching, youth and community work, green woodworking skills, environmental work and musical and artistic creativity. We constantly reflect on our practice and undertake regular CPD so that we can do our best to ensure good staff and volunteer retention. Woodland environments foster well-being and can be accessed freely, easily and independently by clients, even after their programme has ended.

As a large team with diverse skills, we are able to deliver a range of services, as detailed above, which are beyond the capacity of the majority of our competitors. The range and diversity of our knowledge and experience enables us to be flexible and responsive to the needs of clients and potential clients. We also have a network of skilled practitioners available to come in as sessional workers if and when they are required.

Marketing & Sales strategy

We target clients for Wild Woodlanders through social media, leafleting via schools, posters & our website. Our past experience has shown that word of mouth has generated extremely good growth in uptake of this service

Clients for team building/staff away days/one-off events will be targeted through our existing networks, direct sales – phone & email, and through our website. Local businesses will not only have an enjoyable & constructive staff day out, but will also fulfil their corporate social responsibility in working with us.

Schools and youth groups will be made aware of our services by post and via email and through Youth Borders ebulletin. Schools across Scotland have just received money from the Pupil Equity Fund and we will be promoting our intervention programmes as a way of spending some of that money.

Public bodies such as Scottish Borders Council and NHS Borders will be targeted using existing contacts, such as the Community Benefits Coordinator at Scottish Borders Council and via Public Contracts Scotland portal. We also attend Community Learning and Development partnership meetings in order to keep abreast of local priorities for addressing social inequality, which are great opportunities to network.

Our pricing is pitched competitively and, in terms of social impact, we believe that we offer extremely good value for money.

Team's skills

Jan Barr – Qualified Forest School Leader (level 3), Outdoor First Aider, Challenging Behaviour Management, former primary school teacher, experience in youth & community work. Experience in making successful funding applications.

Jan is the acting Chair of the Board of Directors and Project Coordinator of nature Unlimited. Her role includes budget management, purchasing, staff organisation, client communications etc. Her background in community work helped her to design the leadership/peer mentoring programme which the team runs for their 16+ group and her former job as a primary school teacher enables her to make curriculum links in the children's learning as required by schools. Jan undertakes regular CPD such as Dealing with Challenging Behaviour, Support & Supervision training, supporting workers with mental health issues and more. She is a member of the local Outdoor Woodland Learning Scotland group who are currently developing a strategy for outdoor learning across Scottish Borders and is always looking for opportunities to network.

Geraldine Keita – qualified Forest School Leader, Outdoor First Aider, African drumming teacher.

Geraldine is a project leader and, in her role as director, does the day to day accounting for Nature Unlimited. She organises our Wild Woodlander sessions and is also Events Co-ordinator. As a mother of 3 young boys, Geraldine is invaluable at maintaining a balanced approach to the dynamic of our various groups, which promotes the successful outcomes that we have achieved. She has also attended a 3 day accredited course on Dealing with Challenging Behaviour in the Outdoors. Her drumming skills give us a unique way of building skills, confidence and teamwork skills in the young people we work with and she is keen to develop this further, taking workshops into schools and creating musical instruments using natural materials as installations in various woodlands and also in school grounds.

Ruth Noble – Qualified in Environmental Education and Sustainability, Forest School Leadership, Map Reading and Outdoor First Aid

Ruth is our volunteer co-ordinator and is also a project leader. In her role as director she is minute secretary and undertakes some of the funding applications. Having led a sedentary lifestyle in linguistic publishing as her family grew up, Ruth now relishes the chance to get outside and engage in hands-on practical activities. Her Masters in Environmental Education (completed last year) gave her a wide experience of different teaching and learning styles, as well as tasters in subjects such as geology, ecology and navigation skills.

Wendy Patterson – Qualified Forest School Leader, Outdoor First Aider,

Wendy has featured on the television programme, Border Life and is often recognised in the local papers for her contribution to getting children outdoors and appreciating nature. She runs Newcastleton Wildlife Watch Club, which won runner-up for best new Wildlife Watch Club award in 2013 and runner-up for best club in the UK in 2014, (the only club awarded in Scotland).

Richard Barrie – qualified as a Forest School Assistant, Outdoor First Aider, volunteer assistant on projects.

Richard has had to overcome his own challenges as he progressed through school, similar to those faced by many of the children & young people with whom we work. He has an encyclopaedic knowledge of mini-beasts and ecosystems and is the go-to person when we are on bug hunts or carrying out environmental surveys.

Catriona Hamilton - qualified as a Forest School Assistant, Outdoor First Aider, volunteer and sometimes paid assistant on projects.

Carleton Blackwell - qualified as a Forest School Assistant, Outdoor First Aider, Bushcraft Leader, volunteer and sometimes paid assistant on projects.

Eoin Cox – director, green woodworker and teacher, furniture maker.

Sue Bennet – director and bookkeeper

Over the past year we have recruited more than twenty volunteers, some of whom were initially clients on our Employability Programme and some of whom will go on to do training in Forest School Leadership or Bushcraft Skills, as and when funding allows.

Operations

We run our groups in local public and private woodlands, mainly focussing in the central Borders – Galashiels, Selkirk & Hawick but also cover Kelso, Peebles other areas, including Edinburgh and the Lothians as required. We do not need an office and use our own cars, therefore keeping overheads low. The equipment we use is stored between us in our house or sheds and therefore we have no requirement to pay for storage for now.

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