

Monitoring and evaluating Quality of Life for CSR 07

As part of the delivery of A Strategy for England's Trees, Woods and Forests (ETWF), Forestry Commission England (FCE) have contracted Forest Research to develop a broad research framework to measure performance against corporate Quality of Life (QoL) targets, giving rise to the Monitoring and Evaluating Quality of Life for CSR 07 project. A strategic aim for FCE is to use the evidence generated by the framework to demonstrate delivery of the ETWF as part of its contribution to the Defra-led Public Service Agreement 28: Secure a healthy natural environment for today and the future. The framework will also enable FCE and delivery partners to demonstrate the effects of forest-related inputs on societal well-being, to learn from past successes and failures and to critically apply this learning to ongoing service delivery.



Background

Corresponding to the objectives set out under the Community and Places theme of the ETWF, FCE's Corporate Plan (2008–2011) outlines a range of targets. These include increases in the provision of accessible woodland (Target 1), and increases in visits to and engagement with local woodland, quality of experience and the personal and social benefits that people derive through woodland visits (Target 2). The research project sets out to measure performance against these targets through the delivery of a broad monitoring and evaluation framework.

Objectives

The project has the following main objectives:

- To establish an initial sample set of social demonstration sites.
- To develop and test an effective methodology for measuring the character and quality of visitor experience.
- To review relationships between sample sites and their local populations.

Methods

The framework is made up of the following four key research methods:

1. On-site 'visitor' and off-site 'catchment' surveys – covering key use, engagement (defined as involvement in site management activities), quality of experience and personal and social benefit indicators.
2. Catchment profiling – involving the spatial definition of each site's catchment area (using 500 m and 4 km boundaries) and using available socio-demographic descriptors to characterise the corresponding catchment population.
3. National survey – covering key use, engagement, quality of experience, and personal and social benefit indicators.
4. Site management records – harnessing routine on-site monitoring practices in order to gather data relating to 'activities and events' and 'site observations/incidents and hazards'.

Year 1 of the project has seen the implementation of visitor and catchment surveys and catchment profiling to generate baseline values at three sample sites:

- Bentley Community Woodland in Doncaster (managed by the Sherwood Forest District on behalf of the Land Restoration Trust).
- Birches Valley Forest Centre in Cannock Chase (West Midlands District).
- Ingrebourne Hill Community Woodland in South Hornchurch (East Anglia Forest District).

Findings

Research activities during 2008–09 generated baseline values for key use, engagement, quality of experience, and personal and social benefit indicators at the sample sites.

Use

The community woodlands (Bentley and Ingrebourne) are visited by a lower proportion of their catchment populations than is the case with Birches Valley Forest Centre. However, Bentley and Ingrebourne are visited more frequently by individual visitors.

Engagement

Proportionally more visitors to the community woodlands are actively engaged with the sites than visitors to Birches Valley. However, there is a higher level of engagement within Birches Valley's catchment population than is the case for Bentley and Ingrebourne.

Quality of experience

The research demonstrates that quality of experience at all three sites is fairly high, with 65 %, 71 % and 69 % of visitors to Bentley, Birches Valley and Ingrebourne, respectively, saying they would definitely recommend their site to friends or family.

Personal and social benefits

Consistently high proportions of each catchment and visitor population benefit in terms of health and healthy lifestyles, general well-being, and improvements to the physical environment. Low proportions of each catchment and visitor population derive any economic benefits from the sites. Similarly, relatively low values emerge for benefits relating to local participation and community cohesion.

Recommendations

After one year of development and implementation the following observations can be made.

1. The indicators and evidence produced through the framework will be directly relevant to local, regional and national performance assessment, providing valuable evidence for ongoing processes of policy design and service delivery. In particular, the facility to analyse the social distribution of QoL benefits marks a significant step towards assessing the social inclusiveness of woodland- and forest-based service provision, thereby enabling FCE to keep in step with developments in national diversity policy.
2. The scope for comparative analyses between visitor profiles and the catchment population profiles is currently limited to standard socio-demographic descriptors such as gender, age and ethnicity. The implementation of socio-demographic profiling indicators of more direct relevance to the personal and social benefits that people derive from forests would demonstrate where the delivery of benefits by a given site coincide with a given community's issues and needs.
3. It is currently unclear to what extent the results from the Flagship sites are transferable to other woodlands or areas of greenspace. The next phase of framework delivery should involve the development of a system for site (physical properties, infrastructure, use) and catchment population characterisation, to enhance understanding of the general applicability of the research results and to identify gaps in the current complement of case study sites.

Further information:

For further information contact: jake.morris@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Reports and publications

HM Government (2007). *PSA Delivery Agreement 28: Secure a healthy natural environment for today and the future*. TSO, London.

Morris, J. and Doick, K. (2009). *Monitoring and evaluating Quality of Life for CSR 07. Final annual report. 2008/9*. Forest Research, Farnham.

Morris, J. and Doick, K. (2009). *Monitoring and evaluating Quality of Life for CSR 07. Appendix report. Final annual report 2008/9*. Forest Research, Farnham.

Morris, J. and Doick, K. (2009). *Annex 1: Flagship case study report. Bentley Community Woodland*. Forest Research, Farnham.

Morris, J. and Doick, K. (2009). *Annex 2: Flagship case study report. Birches Valley Forest Centre*. Forest Research, Farnham.

Morris, J. and Doick, K. (2009). *Annex 3: Flagship case study report. Ingrebourne Hill Community Woodland*. Forest Research, Farnham.

The Forest Research reports listed above are available at:

www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7TGBUC