

Assessing the contribution of forestry grants to equal access for disabled people to recreation goods, facilities and services in Scottish woodlands

Forestry grants have long been an important mechanism for providing public benefits and have evolved over the years to deliver different mixes of economic, social and environmental benefits. Along with newly emerging schemes, these grants must take account of the need for woodland recreation goods, facilities and services to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005. They should also contribute to the Scottish Forestry Strategy's objective to make woodlands more accessible to all sections of society. As the largest single provider of outdoor recreation in Scotland and the provider of grants for recreation, Forestry Commission Scotland is assessing its responsibilities and its response to the 1995 and 2005 Disability Discrimination Acts and wider government policy.



Background

Following the Rural Development Regulation, and to accommodate changes to the Common Agricultural Policy, the way in which support for land management is delivered in Scotland has been reviewed. As a result, Land Management Contracts (LMCs), which include grants for access and recreation, have been introduced. As part of this process, research was commissioned to develop a methodology that would enable an understanding of the extent to which forestry grants for recreation promote equal access for disabled people to recreational goods, facilities and services in Scottish woodlands.

This work is part of a suite of three research projects exploring disabled access and woodland recreation.

Objectives

The research aimed to:

- examine evaluation methodologies appropriate to assessing forestry grant schemes that promote disability access
- develop and pilot a suitable evaluation methodology on the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme (SFGS) recreation grant
- reflect on the findings to understand the extent to which the SFGS has encouraged access for disabled people to woodland recreation
- produce an evaluation toolkit

"Disabled users with all sorts of disabilities are outside in all weathers – the weather doesn't put them off, but not knowing what to expect from a site does."

Access Panel member

Methods

- A desk-based critical review of evaluation methodologies was completed, using Defra-supported approaches to evaluation promoted by a Diversity Review and the framework included in the 'And your evidence is?' package (for more information see visit www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/outdoorsforall/diversityreview/history.aspx).
- An evaluation methodology was developed for the SFGS, using best practice recommendations from the critical review. The critical review identified several key stages in evaluation: identification of project objectives, assessment of the baseline situation, inputs, outputs and outcomes. These were incorporated as steps in the evaluation methodology.

- The methodology was pilot-tested at two woodland sites that receive funding for recreation under the SFGS. After refinement, the methodology was piloted at a further five sites before the final toolkit was produced. The pilot sites were selected to reflect a diversity of woodland type, rural/urban location and sites that had received funding for a broad range of recreation facilities as well as those aimed specifically at disabled people.
- **interviews** (ideally on site) with representatives of the target user group(s) to determine the impact of the project, if any, on their visiting habits and quality of life
- **a desk evaluation** of documentation associated with the project, the grant application process, any participation/involvement with the target user group, consultation stages and the follow-up inspections as grant money was paid, if any

The criteria for evaluation were developed to reflect the content of the recreation strand of the SFGS and the following methods used to address the steps identified above:

- **interviews** with woodland officers, woodland owners and managers about the whole project and their prior expectations, their experiences of the funding system, implementation and the subsequent use of the area
- **assessment** of the woodland and a simplified audit of the facilities/information etc. provided and funded by the grant. A lettered scoring system for each phase of the audit was used to enable an overall assessment of the effectiveness and value of each project grant

Findings

An evaluation methodology for forestry grants should assess both the individual project and the wider grant programme. Furthermore, to be successful, the evaluation should be integral to programme and project planning from the outset; an evaluation should not be considered as an 'add-on'.

Recommendations

- It is important to be clear about the values and assumptions inherent in an evaluation framework and how they may impact on results. In this methodology there is a concern that larger sites with more extensive investment will score more highly than smaller sites which have received less investment. An attempt was made to address this by adjusting the wording in the questions as it is known that small inputs of resources can make large differences to accessibility, for example through the removal of barriers such as gates and stiles.
- It is recommended that further consideration is given to the assumptions built into the methodology to enable a judgement to be made about its effectiveness in evaluating the impacts of grant funding on disabled access.
- Evaluation methodology for forestry grants should assess both the individual project and the wider grant programme.
- Evaluation should be integral to programme and project planning from the outset.

Partners

Suzanne Martin, formerly of Forest Research; Simon Bell, The OPENspace research centre

Funding / Support

Funded by Forest Research and Forestry Commission Scotland.

For further information contact: bianca.ambrose-oji@forestry.gsi.gov.uk or visit www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7LTFBG for details of projects exploring disabled access and woodland recreation.

Reports and publications

Bell, S. (2007). *Assessing the contribution of forestry grants to equal access for disabled people to recreation goods, facilities and services in Scottish Forests: evaluation framework*. OPENspace report to the Forestry Commission, Edinburgh, 45.

Travlou, P. (2007). *Assessing the contribution of forestry grants to equal access for disabled people to recreation goods, facilities and services in Scottish Forests – a critical review and amendment of the framework and toolkit used by commissioning bodies for the evaluation of projects for increasing access to the outdoors*. Report by OPENspace Research Centre, for Forest Research.