

Consultation and community involvement in forest planning: research in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset

During the period 1996–2000, developments in the way that local communities and expert groups were involved in the management of the New Forest culminated in a process called ‘New Forest – New Future’ (NFNF), which forms the basis of current practice in this forest district. Research was commissioned in 2003, in consultation with Forestry Commission England (FCE), to describe and evaluate the process of involvement and to reflect on how this contributes to the development of forestry practice. The research revealed considerable demand for local access to woodlands in areas where the publicly owned forest estate is fragmented and investigated different ways of improving the process of community engagement.



Background

This research builds on the work that has already been carried out as part of the Forestry Commission’s ‘Long-Term Forest Plan’ process. It also builds on various investigations into stakeholder analysis and the use of participatory tools in relation to Forest Design Plans (FDPs). The NFNF consultation process was seen by local managers to be successful in getting plans agreed; it now provides them with a model for participatory practice to help them understand and meet local needs.

Objectives

This project aimed to:

- describe and evaluate the participatory process developed in the New Forest as part of Forest Design Planning
- examine the process in action at Cranborne Chase and North Dorset Forest District

Methods

- The research was developed in two parts. The first part established what had already happened in the New Forest and the second part followed the process as it unfolded at Cranborne Chase and North Dorset Forest District.

“With regard to cyclists, it’s not always clear whether you can actually ride that track or not, although the tracks are made up with hard core and scalplings, and are quite well maintained, it’s never very clear as to whether you can actually either walk along them or cycle.”

Male, Blandford Discussion Group

- Existing relevant documents were collected for analysis and four semi-structured interviews and two in-depth discussion groups were carried out in the early part of 2004. The discussion groups, each comprising ten people, were recruited from residents of Blandford Forum who had not been involved in previous FCE participatory processes.
- The researcher attended both the FDP Forum meetings and the subsequent ‘drop-in days’ that had been designed to engage the public.

Findings

There was no doubt about the benefits of this new dialogue both to FCE managers and to members of the FDP Forum. FCE felt that, as a result of the consultation process, they have a 'licence to operate' and had been freed from much expensive and unproductive conflict. Forum members, for the most part, felt that their views were being listened to and acted upon.

Community engagement, mainly through drop-in days and forest walks, had worked well in some instances in the New Forest, but the drop-in days at Shaftesbury and Blandford Forum were poorly attended, perhaps

reflecting a local lack of engagement with forest access issues. In contrast, discussion groups made up of local people from Blandford Forum, who had not previously participated in the design planning process, revealed a strong demand for more local use of woodlands. The group discussions also highlighted some important issues arising from a confused understanding of woodland accessibility. There was clear potential to enhance the delivery of public benefit from FCE woodlands.

Recommendations

Following this research we suggest the following recommendations are considered:

- The process of engagement could be improved by:
 1. making a clearer distinction between strategic and site-specific issues, and choosing the engagement method most appropriate to each type when discussing it with the public
 2. ensuring there is careful, iterative recording and feedback of views expressed to reassure participants that they are being listened to and that their views are being acted upon and incorporated into plans
- It is recommended that the objectives of community engagement should be reviewed, especially in relation to forest districts with a fragmented forest holding.
- Formal analysis of individual stakeholder groups should be followed by the design of methodologies that meet the needs of the different groups.
- Investment in a participatory process that enables local understandings to be explored in more depth is justified in order to achieve the objectives of delivering public benefits to local communities and ensuring that local communities are fully engaged in making decisions that affect their environment.
- The greatest local demand will be for dialogue concerning relatively simple issues, such as access and facilities, and these are best dealt with using informal techniques (e.g. forest walks and coffee mornings). Large strategic issues (like the restoration of lowland heaths) will need a more formal approach.

Partners

Forest Research; Forestry Commission

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Reports and publications

Tabbush, P.M. (2004). *Consultation and Community Involvement in Forest Planning: Research in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset*. Forest Research, Farnham.
www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-632CL2