

Forestry Commission Scotland community engagement health-check

This study explored Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES) approaches to supporting and working with communities. It found that the experiences of communities in engaging with FES is diverse. Critical challenges relate to mainstreaming community engagement as an organisational objective and ensuring staff have the support and training to achieve engagement goals. There is also a need to better monitor engagement and to drastically improve the speed with which agreements between FES and communities are processed.



'We want to encourage local people to get involved with using and managing local Estate woodlands so we will actively engage with local communities and be open to work in partnership (Forestry Commission Scotland, 2013)

Background

In 2013 Forestry Commission Scotland established an independent advisory group to undertake a 'health check' of Forest Enterprise Scotland's (FES) achievements with local communities over the past ten years. To support this, Forest Research (FR) was commissioned to obtain feedback on FES's current support and interactions with communities on the National Forest Estate in Scotland.

Objectives

To work with community groups and FES staff to gain evidence on FES approaches to supporting and working with communities on the National Forest Estate in Scotland.

Methods

Evidence was collected using semi-structure interview guides, applied through group discussions and telephone interviews. These were supplemented with a scoring exercise and a questionnaire to provide background information about participants to the research.

Findings

The experience of communities engaging with FES is diverse and ranges from 'very good' to 'very poor'.

Three issues are critical in affecting the level of experience of communities:

- 1 Social: in urban areas the work of FES is valued for improving woodland quality and access.
- 2 Legal: difficulties arise when communities want more control and when legal or other formal agreements are required. Groups reported delays, frustration and abandonment of projects. These problems were recognised by FES staff.
- 3 Organisational: a failure to mainstream 'community engagement' as an organisational objective creates sharp distinctions between geographical areas in the attitude and support for community groups and the FES staff who work with those groups.

Recommendations

Mainstream 'community engagement' throughout FES. Establish community engagement champions at national level and in every district.

Extend training in engagement to all staff. Develop a consistent approach to reflection, learning from experience and sharing good practice.

Develop a clear way of distinguishing between different types of groups and engagement, and agreements that are appropriate to each type.

Address the land agent role, and develop procedures and targets to drastically improve rates of agreements.

Facilitate continuity when staff change, by establishing a record of interaction and agreements, and a 'traffic light' system to monitor progress

Invest in clear communication about what FES staff can and cannot do.

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Reports and Publications: Lawrence, A., Ambrose-Oji, B. and O'Brien, L. (2014). Current approaches to supporting and working with communities on the National Forest Estate: <http://scotland.forestry.gov.uk/images/corporate/pdf/communities-health-check-staff-and-community-stakeholders-report-2014.pdf>