

The Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England: Social use, value and expectations

Summary report

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What is this about?

The Forestry Commission England (FCE) manages about 258,000ha of land in England, through which it delivers many benefits, including improvements to the quality of people's lives. This research was commissioned to understand people's perceptions and expectations of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate (PFE) in England, and to compare these with those of woods and forests in other forms of ownership. It forms part of the evidence base for a study of the long-term role of the PFE by FCE¹.

This report summarises the findings of the study. Full details are available in the final report (Carter *et al.*, 2009)². It is based on a review of existing social research and datasets (Lawrence *et al.*, 2009)³, newly collected data from a specially commissioned public survey (here termed the 'PFE survey') and ten group discussions.

The PFE survey asked a representative sample of 1775 adults in England about their use of woodlands, reasons for visiting their most frequent and favourite woodlands, knowledge about ownership of woodlands, values associated with both public and privately owned woodlands, and preferences for benefits from PFE and private woodlands in the future. The ten group discussions (involving 80 individuals) provided insights into these perceptions and connections between them, and gauged the extent of societal engagement with the PFE and its future. They provide the qualitative detail for the statistics in this report which are drawn from the Public Opinion of Forestry (PoF) and PFE surveys.

In this summary we focus on

- how the study helps us to understand how people think about woodlands
- what people value and expect from woodlands in different kinds of ownership
- how that varies between different social groups.

¹ see www.forestry.gov.uk/england-estatestudy

² Carter, C., Lawrence A., Lovell R. and O'Brien L. (2009) *The Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England: social use, value and expectations*. Final report. October 2009. Farnham: Forest Research.

³ Lawrence A., Carter C., O'Brien L. and Lovell R. (2009) *Social benefits from the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England: review of current evidence*. Farnham: Forest Research.

What do people understand by ‘public’ and ‘private’?

It is important for the context of this study to consider whether and how people distinguish between different types of woodlands and ownership, and what significance they attach to these.

Across England an average of 57% of people surveyed visited a wood in the last year⁴. Of these, over 40% said they did not know who owned their favourite or most frequently visited wood (see Figure 1). This means that only one third of the population claims to know who owns the woods that they visit. Furthermore, only 11% of respondents said that ownership was an important consideration when deciding to visit a woodland. There appears to be little general awareness and knowledge about the range of public and private woodland ownership. For example, woodlands managed by environmental trusts are often thought of as being ‘public’.

It was clear from the group discussions however that whether or not people know who owns particular woods, most have clear and strong views about how public money should be spent and public forests managed. This is supported by the fact that 70% of respondents could list values for publicly owned woodlands, while only 55% of respondents could list values for privately owned woodlands. Therefore, while many people may not know whether they are familiar with publicly owned woodland most people have opinions about what they should be like.

Who knows about and uses the PFE?⁵

Those who reported using the PFE were more likely to be older, male, married, white, have children, be in full-time employment and live in rural areas, than those who reported using other woods, or did not know the ownership of the woods. They were also more likely to visit woods more often. There was no significant difference between disabled and non-disabled.

Those who visit the PFE were slightly less likely than others to see forests as places ‘where people have fun and enjoy themselves’, but more likely to agree that forests ‘provide places for relaxation and stress release’, and considerably more likely than visitors to other woodlands, to see woods as places ‘where I feel at home’. They were also more likely to see forests as contributing to the local economy.

⁴ Based on FR’s PFE Survey of 1775 adults across England, July 2009. This figure of woodland use over the past year is between the higher stated use of FC’s 2009 Public Opinion of Forestry Survey (77%; up 12% from 2005) and the lower stated use in the England Leisure Visits survey of 2005 (40%)

⁵ This section draws on an analysis of the Public Opinion of Forestry survey data (England) conducted by Gilly Diggins (FC Economics and Statistics) for this project; all differences indicated are statistically significant.

Other differences are correlated with knowledge of ownership, rather than the ownership itself. Respondents who know the ownership are more likely to agree that forests are 'places where I can exercise and keep fit', and to support the use of public money 'to make woods accessible to all', 'support the economy in rural areas', help tackle climate change', and 'provide places for wildlife'.

Data from the PFE survey showed that men are more likely than women to state that they visit PFE woods. For all groups PFE woods are more likely to be the favourite than the most frequently visited wood. The most striking social difference among preferred woodland ownerships is between ethnic groups: black and minority ethnic (BME) groups are much more likely to report visiting public woodlands other than the PFE (Figure 1), especially those owned or managed by Local Authorities.

This result is likely to be highly context specific (e.g. woodlands in vicinity of residence or suitable for specific recreational uses) but needs further analysis and research to validate this conclusion. Early studies of the FCE Quality of Life indicator suggest that BME groups are not underrepresented as users of community woodlands in urban areas. Women and disabled people are underrepresented in some woods but not others.

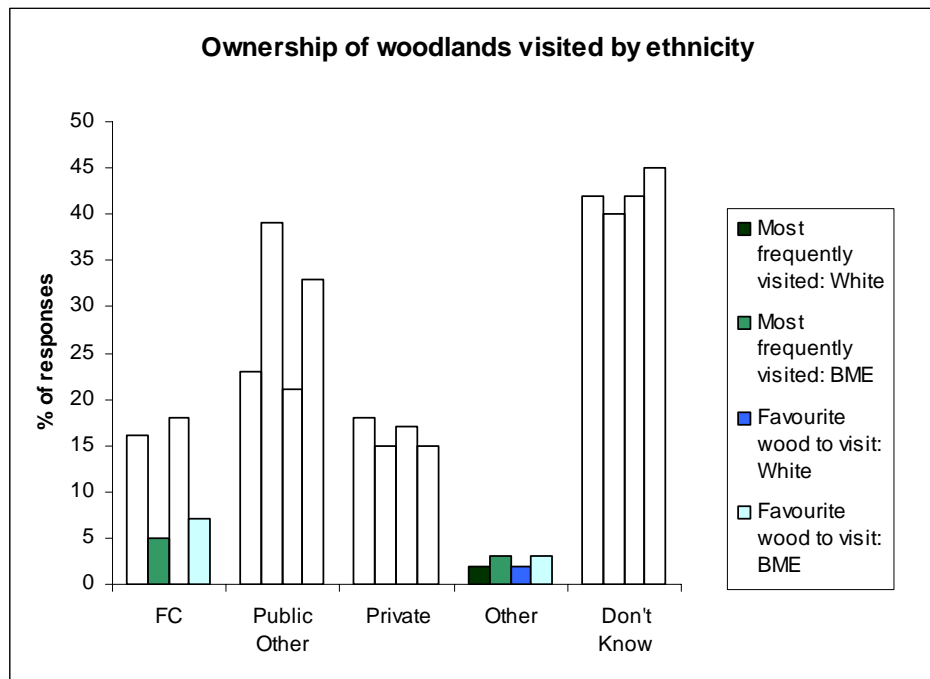
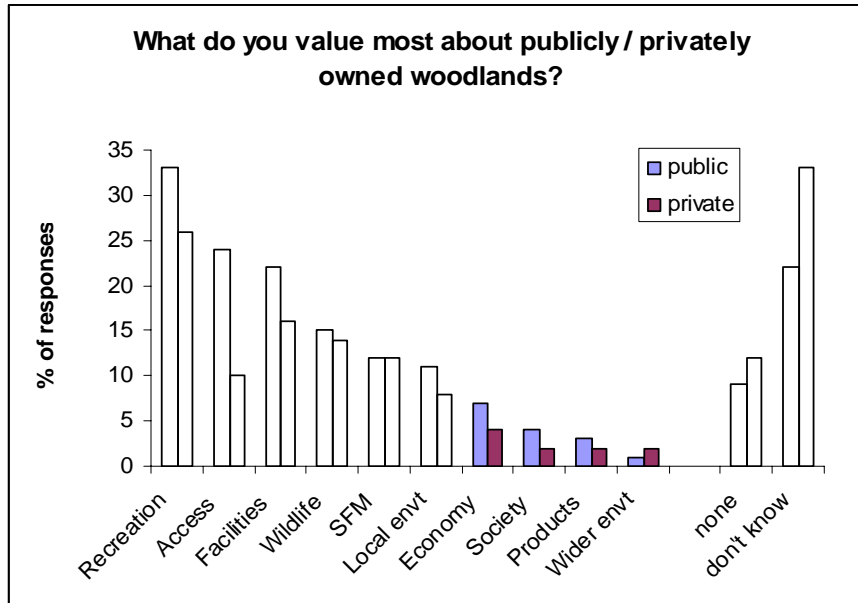


Figure 1. Stated knowledge of ownership of woodland most frequently visited and favourite wood, by ethnic group. Source: PFE Survey (Forest Research 2009)

What do people value in public and private woodland?



FR's PFE survey showed that all categories of values associated with woodlands are associated more strongly with publicly owned⁶ than private ones. Recreation, access and facilities (such as well-maintained paths, toilets and cafes) were most frequently reported in discussion groups as important.

Figure 2. Spontaneously stated factors valued in public / private woodlands (Forest Research 2009)

It is important when interpreting this information, to bear in mind that the question was an open one with no prompted answers. Under these circumstances, 31% of people could think of no values for public woodland and 45% could think of no values for private woodland (see Figure 2).

What benefits do people think the PFE and private woodland should provide in the future?

The PFE survey included a question about future benefits, which offered respondents a menu of options. This question was structured to match a question in the formal public consultation and to allow comparison between expectations of the PFE and private woodland.⁷ As such, 85% had an opinion on benefits the PFE should provide, while 79% had an opinion on benefits private woodland should provide (see Figure 3).

Again, almost all benefits are rated more highly for the PFE than for private woodlands. Notably, wildlife is rated more highly among future benefits than current values; and

⁶ This question was asked about 'publicly owned woodland' not specifically the PFE. A definition of 'public' and 'private' and 'PFE' was given before the question was asked.

⁷ The question followed a clarification of the definition of 'PFE' and 'private'. The question was phrased as 'Taking an England-wide perspective, what are the benefits that the Public Forest Estate, that is woodlands managed by the Forestry Commission, should deliver over the next few decades? Please tick up to five that you think are most important.' The same question was repeated for private woodlands; with each question specifying 17 options.

climate change, education and community involvement are also rated more prominently. This is likely to be (at least partly) a result of the menu of options offering possibilities that people had not thought of when responding to the open question. Especially wildlife conservation and education were themes that participants also raised in discussion groups as being of prime importance now and for the future.

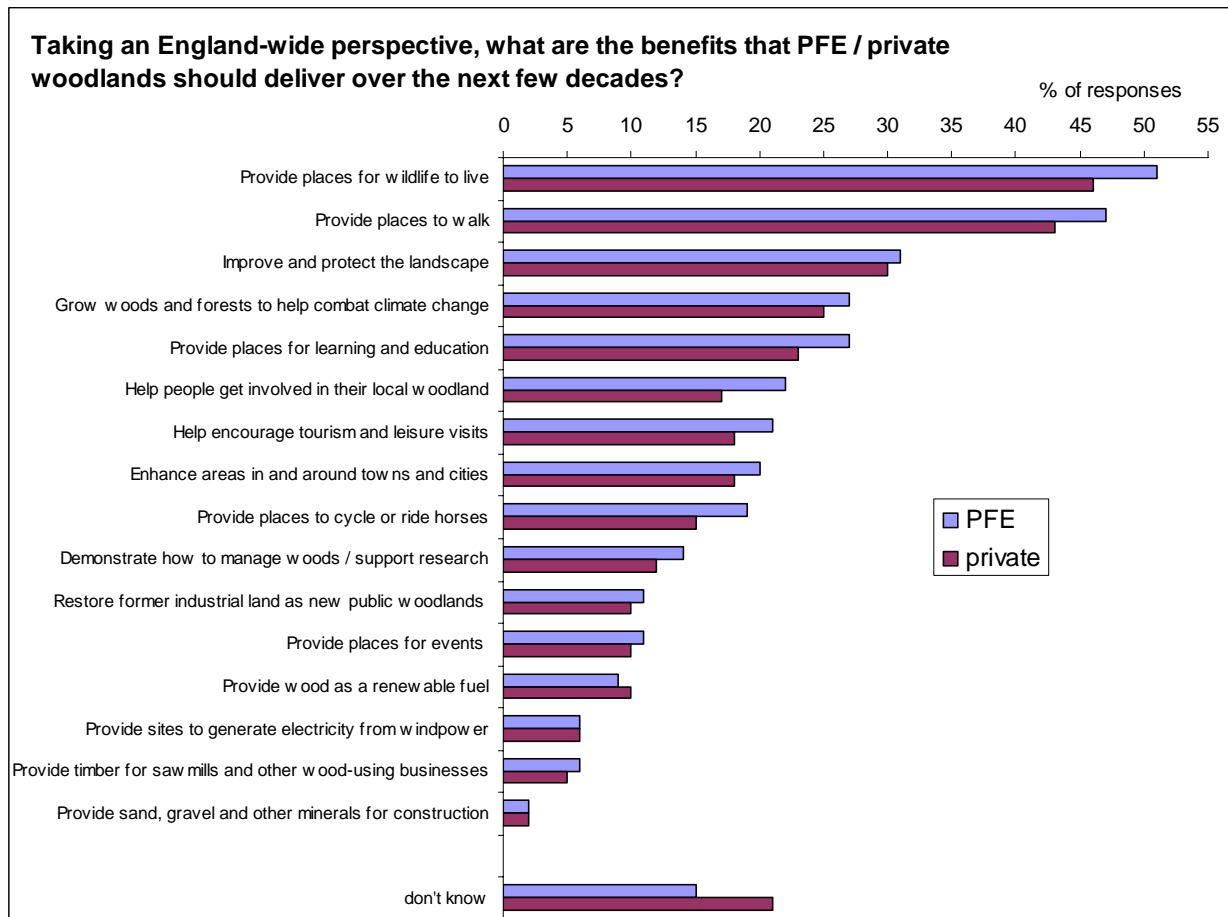


Figure 3. Benefits that PFE / private woodlands should provide in the future (Forest Research 2009)

More detail on particular values and benefits

This section provides further information on the societal values and preferences expressed in the PFE and PoF surveys, by drawing on the group discussions and the review of existing research provided through the interim report for this study.

The detail on specific themes should be read in the context of widely and strongly expressed enthusiasm for the topic. Reflecting earlier academic research, many of the group discussions began with spontaneous expressions of pleasure and attraction to trees and forests, discussion of enjoyable or inspiring experiences, as well as strongly held beliefs about the importance of trees in the environment.

Access and recreation

Access⁸ to woodlands emerged as the key topic in discussion groups, and the most distinctive difference between values for private and public ownership. Access was considered desirable to enable recreational activities that people want to be guaranteed into the future. A concern for access rights was usually tempered by respect for other interests (such as privacy, private use, timber operations or the protection of wildlife) and recognised as an ideal rather than an automatic right. Many expressed a desire for good signage, including clearly marked and well-maintained pathways, information boards outlining environmental and historical items of interest, and publicising or explaining special woodland management practices and planned operations. Many also recognised a need to leave areas undeveloped or 'wild' for nature, occasional exploration and as a place to get away from people and stress.

Recreational use of woodlands was the most common unprompted response to what was valued about publicly owned woodlands. Some recreational use was recognised as being of higher environmental impact (e.g. highly developed sites), or less compatible with other forms of recreation (e.g. motor-bike rallying), or requiring more infrastructure (e.g. mountain bike routes; wheelchair and pram access). Recreational use was often linked to individual woodland sites offering specific facilities, or forests with a certain combination of topographical and vegetation characteristics, or which are sufficiently large.

Facilities, size and characteristics of woodlands

Overall, the existing range of facilities in woodlands was acknowledged and appreciated. Most discussion group participants expressed a wish to maintain a diversity of woodlands, management priorities and levels of facilities, including family-oriented and educational woodlands, areas developed for specific interests (e.g. mountain-biking, cycling, Go Ape, music and other festivals), woodlands left 'natural' with basic footpaths and those in remote areas for timber production.

The group discussions highlighted an awareness of multiple demands from forests, even within the 'recreation' theme, and amongst most participants a wish to see the various needs accommodated (but allocated to different woods or segregated in different parts of the forest). Several participants observed that large forests are desirable and necessary to provide the range of benefits and opportunities, and recognised that the PFE consists of more such large areas. Their perception is supported by data from the FC National Inventory of Woodland and Trees showing that 90% of all woodlands in England over 20ha are in the PFE; and that the average size of an FC woodland is 145ha compared with an average of 14 ha for all other woodlands.

⁸ Usually meaning having path(s) through woodlands

Generally, intensive users of the PFE and FC business partners participating in the discussion groups expressed a greater awareness of the wide range of different types of forests and woodlands within the PFE. Most did however recognise the existence of different types of woodlands and degrees of management and development across England, and the UK more generally. Discussions often distinguished between forests that are heavily developed for family recreation and other intensive social uses, those for timber production, and woodlands which are and should be 'left wild'. Almost all participants expressed the wish to have more native and broadleaved woodlands and the need to protect and expand forest cover. Increasing woodland cover was sometimes connected with and justified in terms of climate change. Some emphasised that trees are important in both rural and urban areas (access for recreation; to reduce air pollution; absorb carbon dioxide; as noise buffer).

Most responses were based on 'accessible' woodland and recreational experiences familiar to participants. They did highlight the value of management and balance between different types of characteristics and facilities. Widely expressed dislike for conifer plantations was tempered by many who found dense stands acceptable as long as paths were provided, along with some attractive scenery or benefits such as fresh air and peace and quiet. It is important to be able to link values and benefits more clearly to different woodland types and facilities. A typology of different types of woodlands in terms of ecology, area, silviculture and site facilities would be useful to enable understanding of the connections between benefits or values and different woodlands.⁹

Wildlife and sustainable woodland management

Woodlands are widely recognised as an important habitat for wildlife and to maintain biodiversity (Figure 3). Wildlife and biodiversity also emerged as a key theme in all the discussion groups, especially among intensive woodland users and participants older than 45 years. Discussion about balancing different needs (both human and non-human) often resulted in participants mentioning a need for sustainable forest management. When considering any possible disposal of parts of the PFE, participants always highlighted a concern to ensure sustainable and responsible management now and into the future. This was seen as equally important for both private and public woodlands, but better control and guarantees are associated with woodlands in public ownership (see also 'Governance and public involvement' below).

Education

Discussions showed the importance of using woodlands, and especially the PFE, for education. Woodlands are seen as an inspiring and rich resource. This can be reinforced through offering a range of information, events and projects to help children and adults become aware of, engage with, and learn to care for woodlands - and the environment

⁹ SERG is currently developing a working typology as part of its work towards a systematic framework for social forestry research

more generally. Participants working with children or adults with disabilities, and those with a keen interest in outdoor activities and/or nature conservation felt particularly strong about this. Even those who preferred using woodlands to find peace and quiet often acknowledged the benefits of having specific sites with attractions and educational facilities for (families with small) children.

Public attitudes to the future

Participants in the group discussions frequently expressed strong concern about any possible reduction in the size of the PFE. They sometimes pointed out that they hadn't previously given a lot of thought to the matter, but that discussion around questions of ownership, access and cost had prompted deep concerns about the need to maintain forests in public ownership. Specific aspects of these views are considered here in further detail.

Cost of PFE

Some discussion group participants asked about the cost of managing the PFE, either because they assumed that a profit was generated from timber or because they had become newly aware of the range of benefits offered. Many participants showed surprise at the figure (30p / person / year) quoted in the public consultation document, and expressed the view that this was 'amazingly good value'.

In addition to gaining personal benefits from woodland use, many participants also recognised wider environmental benefits of woods. They expressed the need to put more public money into creating and maintaining the resource. Usually two kinds of reasons were given: a focus on improving local access; and pressures on the natural environment from development and global climate change

Several groups raised the issue of charges for car parking. While some resented compulsory charges, many more expressed the view that as long as a 'fair' charging system was in place and use of the money explained, they were happy to pay for using woodlands that had a range of facilities and activities on offer.

Governance and public involvement

Thinking about the cost and labour required of managing the PFE led some participants to consider that governance and management of the PFE may require more public involvement in the future. Few had been involved to date: three had participated in consultations (one in a professional capacity as local councillor and two as representative of stakeholder or lobby groups), and one had been connected with the early stages of setting up a community woodland when living in Scotland.

Most participants seemed happy to entrust the sustainable management of the PFE to the FC. Few had detailed knowledge of woodlands and their management, and the great

majority recognised that they had not really thought about it before. In discussing woodland management some realised that woodlands may need more local support and, in order to make some forests pay for themselves, felt that greater autonomy and flexibility would be required in decision-making. A few participants perceived the FC as overly bureaucratic and wished it to be more entrepreneurial and efficient.

The FC business partners who participated in the discussions found partnership working positive but would like to see greater long-term security of partnership terms (e.g. the lease) to be able to invest in and develop provisions. Representatives of recreational organisations and business partners expressed a need for more active engagement, and some perceived consultation as seeking comments on plans that had already been decided.

At the end of the discussion groups, many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to think about woodlands and their management. In particular, the group of business partners, the two groups of intensive users, one group of frequent semi-urban users and the group of older rural (predominantly) woodland users appreciated the opportunity to air and discuss views and concerns. The two groups of intensive users emphasised the benefits of being able to have good dialogue between FC and stakeholders or user groups (as already happening in several cases), and to negotiate access for different uses and management priorities. Such communication was felt to help balance different demands and increase understanding of the complexities of managing the resource well for current and future benefits.

Communication

The group discussions helped to elaborate on ways in which people find out about woodland ownership and management, FC activities and what they would like to see. Several made an explicit contrast between the FC and membership organisations that have a duty to keep members informed, e.g. through newsletters and event programmes. Few knew where to find this information for the FC, nor accessed the website.

The discussion groups highlighted the importance of signage at car parks, information boards and visitor centres as the main ways to make people aware of woodland ownership and management. There was a demand for better information and explanation when major changes are planned.

Conclusions

1. The English PFE is valued and widely supported by society. 85% of the adult public can name benefits they want to see provided by the PFE. Even people who do not use the PFE (or are not aware that they are using it) are very positive about its existence.
2. For all current values, and preferred future benefits, scores are higher for public forest than for private (with the single exception of expectations of woodfuel production from private woodlands). Forests and woods are valued most highly for access, recreation, facilities and wildlife. The productive and supporting ecosystem services (such as soil, water) benefits were rated less highly.
3. Experience and knowledge of the PFE, and ways in which it is valued, vary within British society. Those who report using it are older, male, married, white, have children, be in full-time employment and live in rural areas. Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups are much more likely to report visiting Local Authority woodlands than the PFE.
4. Even those who do not use woods, or more specifically the PFE, tend to value the societal and environmental benefits of woodlands. This was the case amongst all different age groups and people from different backgrounds.
5. Many people express a profound sense of connection with trees and woodlands; discussions feature spontaneous expressions of pleasure and attraction to trees and forests, anecdotes of enjoyable or inspiring experiences, as well as strongly held beliefs about the importance of trees in the environment.
6. Widespread concern about perceived loss of forest and urban greenbelt, is combined with high levels of trust in public ownership and management. Key advantages of public ownership that are valued by society, are direct management control, and responsibility for sustainable forest management.
7. Few people consider that private ownership would improve the efficiency and quality of woodland management; most wish to maintain and increase woodlands in public ownership. Many want to see the creation of new woodlands, especially on near urban or brownfield sites and surplus farmland.
8. People value a wide range of forest types. Native broadleaved forests are particularly highly valued. However, the data is not available to make clearer recommendations about which species, silvicultural systems and infrastructure or facilities are most valued. More work is needed to develop a typology within the PFE in order to demonstrate these aspects more clearly.

Further information

Project website: <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/pfesocialstudy>

SERG website: <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/peopleandtrees>