

Access for all? Barriers to accessing woodlands in the UK?

Equality of access has become a key consideration for forest policy in the United Kingdom. We present a cross-cutting analysis of several research projects which provide an insight into 'barriers' to woodland access. Our analysis presents an expanded and revised typology of barriers and shows how barriers are experienced by different socio-economic and cultural groups. This work will inform debates about appropriate policy and management responses to these barriers. Legislation for equality of rights to access *is not* achieving equality of actual access. This suggests that a 'one size fits all' approach may have limited impact.



"What is a waste of time is just going out in the countryside with your [mobility] scooter and hoping to do a ramble. 90% of the time you won't be able to. You've got to know where to go, and that information, a database of accessible places, is hugely needed".
[Disabled person]

Background

Equality of access to woodlands is an important issue, affected by recent legal, political and societal developments. Provision of accessible land has improved greatly and all public forest land is now accessible. Under the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000* (England and Wales) the Forestry Commission (FC) estate is Dedicated Access Land, where the public can walk freely. Under the *Land Reform Act 2003* (Scotland), the public has guaranteed access to land regardless of ownership. Forestry strategies for Wales, England and Scotland all refer explicitly to diversity, inclusion and equality. Despite these policies, and a number of targeted interventions, access to woodlands and forests in the UK remains unequally distributed across society.

Objectives

The research aimed to:

- Examine the barriers to accessing woodlands faced by different sectors of society;
- Bring together existing qualitative and quantitative research and carry out a meta-analysis to identify broad trends in barriers and their social distribution;
- Revise and update existing typologies of barriers to woodland access.

Methods

Data were drawn from 16 research studies conducted between 2002 and 2009. Overall the studies represent data gathered from 22,909 participants. The studies fall into two broad categories: 1) those with a direct research interest in understanding barriers and 2) those which collected data on barriers indirectly. Quantitative data was generated by surveys administered nationally, regionally, or by site or catchment. Qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

Findings

The data analysis highlights that different groups experience a range of different barriers. People who are disabled, female, from a black and ethnic minority (BME) group and fall within low social grade (C2DE) emerge as those facing the greatest number of barriers. Comparison with the barriers associated with these groups' socio-demographic counterparts, i.e. not disabled, males, white, ABC1 (high social grade), provides a strong indication that barriers are unequally distributed across society. Our typology of barriers has two key categories:

Physical and structural barriers – this category covers the physical, environmental and services-related issues that limit woodland accessibility for some. Our research evidence can be sorted into three sub-categories, 1) 'General/over-arching' (e.g. weather); 2) 'On-site barriers' (e.g. access points, signage, and facilities); and 3) 'Off-site' barriers (e.g. lack of information and transport).

Socio-cultural, economic and personal barriers – this category covers wider societal and cultural, as well as personal values and perceptual aspects. It also covers those economic factors which constrain visiting habits. Our research reveals that there can be some overlap between social and personal experiences of, and attitudes towards, woodlands. For example, an individual's lack of confidence to visit woodland might be associated with the absence of a cultural norm of visiting within that individual's community. Similarly, economic barriers can stem from individual (e.g. low income) as well as societal circumstances (e.g. deprivation). However, our research suggests that it is helpful to maintain the distinction between the personal and the social because some barriers within these sub-categories do relate either to the experiences of specific individuals, or are manifest at the level of social and cultural groups.

Recommendations

Through the analysis of research evidence we developed an expanded typology of barriers to accessing woodlands. This identifies the physical and structural barriers, and socio-cultural, economic and personal barriers that affect individuals.

- The expanded typology of barriers should be included in population surveys to allow more comprehensive quantitative analysis of this topic.
- Disabled, low income, females, and BME groups faced the greatest number of barriers. Forest managers could prioritise programmes and interventions that target these groups.
- If the FC is to deliver improvements in equality of access to woodlands and forests, our findings highlight the need to think beyond physical improvements to existing woodlands and the establishment of new sites, to targeted interventions aimed at specific groups.
- Research with excluded groups and relevant stakeholder organisations is needed to inform appropriate group- and place-specific responses to the barriers outlined.

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

Funding/Support

The 16 studies were funded by the Forestry Commission and Forest Research

Reports and Publications

Morris, J., O'Brien, L., Ambrose-Oji, B., Lawrence, A. and Carter, C., Peace, A. 2011. Access for all? Barriers to accessing woodlands and forests in the UK. (In Press), Local Environment. Also at: [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/FRMG003_Woods_and_forests_in_British_society.pdf/\\$FILE/FRMG003_Woods_and_forests_in_British_society.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/FRMG003_Woods_and_forests_in_British_society.pdf/$FILE/FRMG003_Woods_and_forests_in_British_society.pdf)