

## Civil Society, the Forestry Commission and Partnerships

The project set out to identify the extent and character of partnership working between the Forestry Commission and civil society organisations also known as Third Sector organisations.

Four kinds of partnership working were identified: Strategic; Policy Delivery; Operational; and Networking. The balance of civil society involvement compared with other kinds of agencies varied in each of these partnership types.

Relationships with civil society were particularly productive where they operated simultaneously at national and local scale.



*"You need a partnership approach if you're going to achieve anything - accommodating different objectives and organisation priorities gets to the bigger picture not the single issue"*

Partner from large environmental charity

## Background

Partnership working has become an important feature of environmental governance and delivery. The Forestry Commission works with a range of partners including Local Authorities and other public agencies, businesses, civil society and community-based organisations. Partnership working can be organised and delivered in a number of different ways according to context, for example whether the partnership is delivering woodland management objectives, if the work is landscape scale, whether there is a regulatory element, or what form of partnership approaches are promoted by country specific policy and organisational systems. The effectiveness of partnerships is closely linked with funding models, management and communication approaches, as well as links to particular projects and programmes. Different combinations of these factors and issues exist in different partnership models. All have associated advantages and disadvantages. The challenge for the Commission is to assess which are the most sustainable and able to provide the desired forestry policy related outcomes.

## Objectives

Focusing on the partnership work of the Forestry Commission and Forest Enterprise in England (FCE) this research aimed to:

- Map out the relationships between civil society organisations and FCE across different areas of business and varying geographical scales of the organisation;
- Evaluate which types of relationships and partnerships with civil society organisations are most successful and why;
- Understand how relationships with civil society organisations contribute to delivering forestry policy objectives;
- Identify any ways in which the Forestry Commission could improve engagement with civil society organisations.

## Methods

- A literature review to provide context and theoretical background;
- A desk study of Forestry Commission partnerships project documents resulting in a database characterising key features of 125 partnerships;
- Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 25 district, regional, and national level FCE staff and representatives from civil society organisations;
- Extended interviews with 6 participants to gather more in depth case study material about individual partnership arrangements.

## Findings

The qualitative research showed that the form and constitution of the relationship between FCE and civil society organisations (e.g. whether formal/informal, project related/issue focused, delivery oriented or networking) was not the main factor of success. Productive relationships were more to do with the generic principles of partnership working. The key features of successful relationships with civil society were identified as:

- Mutual **communication**
- **Transparency** in decision making and mutual objective setting
- Finding **shared working practices** (e.g. joint budget setting and accounting processes, joint forward job planning) that can be applied by partner organisations
- Mutual **understanding** of the organisations involved and their organisational objectives and professional context
- Mutual **trust and respect** which comes as a consequence of communication and understanding
- **Individual champions** and the effective management of people.

## Recommendations

- Plan enough time to develop good partnership working.
- Build communication and learning systems to share best practice and problem solving.
- Ensure relationships are objectives and outcome driven.
- Base relationships on the complimentary competencies brought by individual organisations.
- Engaging with low risk, high capacity partners operating at both local and national level may facilitate the best forest policy outcomes.

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### Reports and Publications

Ambrose-Oji, B., Wallace, J., Lawrence, A., and Stewart, A., 2010. Forestry Commission working with civil society.  
<http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7WCDZH>