

Public Engagement with Forests and Woodlands

'Public Engagement' in forestry is a broad term for civil society participation in the decision making processes and activities connected with forest and woodland planning, management and service provision. There are many different forms of engagement and a host of different tools and techniques that can be employed to facilitate participation.

This project aims to provide practical guidance and case study material which can help forest managers and others in the land use or environmental sector find more effective ways of engaging many different members of the public in the work they do and the services they provide.



"Actually when you stand up and you know you have everybody standing behind you saying this is the best thing since sliced bread, it is very powerful." Forest Enterprise England staff member

Background

The UK government and the administrations in the three countries in which the Forestry Commission operates have all recognised the value of increasing public and civil society engagement in forestry. This includes a whole spectrum of engagement opportunities including 'passive participation' expressed through recreational choices in the use of woodlands, through to much more active collaboration and empowerment which involves people in the co-design and co-production of woodland and forest designs, management plans, service and activity delivery. Public engagement processes are now evolving to take account of the range of barriers faced by different groups in society around access to environmental decision making and using greenspace such as woodlands.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- Synthesise information about successful public engagement methods and processes useful to forest and woodland managers
- Understand which methods and processes are best suited to engaging different sections of society
- Document particular examples of public engagement and analyse the impacts on different social groups.

Methods

- Literature review and review of engagement methods suited to urban forestry.
- Case studies based on semi-structured interviews with key Forestry Commission staff and stakeholders.
- Testing and validation of methods and techniques through action research and workshop learning.

Findings

A wide range of tools and techniques are available for a host of different engagement processes depending on whether these are focused on providing services and activities that the public want (e.g. designing mountain bike trails) or on a decision making process linked to forest governance (e.g. taking part in an Environmental Impact Assessment connected with a wind turbine project). Engagement in urban areas presents particular challenges. The population surrounding a wood is often large in number and mixed in character, and the intensity of interest and level of access into woods (even where small in area) is frequently very high. A greater degree of engagement activity may be required and familiar methods and tools will need to be adapted. Experience shows that a variety of engagement methods are needed in these contexts, and that:

- methods such as drop-in sessions and open days may not work well in urban areas;
- social events and activities in the forest are an excellent way of raising the profile of a site and providing information to large numbers of people;
- it is not easy to ensure adequate representation when using data gathering tools;
- involvement tools require careful planning as they work best with small groups - legitimate representation is a key issue;
- professional facilitation is an advantage, especially when dealing with groups that have particular needs, or where an element of negotiation and conflict management is required.

Successful engagement processes are shown to be based on the key principles of engagement: Transparency, legitimacy, commitment, communication and meaningful involvement.

Recommendations

- Forest and woodland managers need to define the objectives of any engagement process and the 'project' and outcomes that are being sought.
- Stakeholder analysis is crucial to identify who to include and how best to include them.
- Engagement tools and processes selected should be those best suited to different sections of society (e.g. less formal more visual methods are better suited to people who are not used to being consulted; theatre, music and creative methods are useful for exploring ideas with younger and older people).

Contact

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Links

Research about volunteering:

<http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7GDHD3>

Research about social diversity:

<http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7LTFAZ>

Research about community woodlands:

<http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7TSD7E>

Reports and Publications

Ambrose-Oji, B., Tabbush, P., Frost, B., Carter C., and Fielding K., 2011. Public Engagement in Forestry: A toolbox for public engagement in forest and woodland planning. Forestry Commission.

<http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/forestry/inf-d-5xmds8>

Tabbush, P., and Ambrose-Oji, B., 2011. Principles of Public Engagement.

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Tabbush, P., 2005. Consultation and community involvement in forest planning.

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