

Social research and the Forestry Commission: perceptions and applications

Many elements of forest policy have a strong social component such as increasing access to forests and delivery of benefits for society. Forest Research's Social and Economic Research Group (SERG) assists the Forestry Commission in delivering public benefits by improving understanding of a number of topics: public opinion; the role of trees, woods and forests in increasing human well-being and social inclusion; community organisation and development in relation to forests; and effectiveness of institutional arrangements (e.g. partnerships) for decision-making and delivery. However, given that social research needs to cover a wide range of issues for a number of end users both within and beyond the Forestry Commission, SERG conducted an internal survey of Forestry Commission staff across the UK in early 2009 to understand how social research is currently perceived and used within the Forestry Commission, with the goal of supporting future planning and dissemination of our work.



Background

A total of 44 Forestry Commission staff were interviewed across England, Scotland and Wales. The experiences and opinions of a wide range of people within the Forestry Commission were captured through interviews with operational staff, senior operational managers, Programme Advisors and Specialist Advisors. The key aims of this study were to identify experiences and opinions of social science research processes and outputs, how effectively findings from social science are communicated and what impact this has had on forestry policy and practice. Questions were focused around participants' views on the value of social research, their acceptance and understanding of methods (both quantitative and qualitative) and how they assess if the research is robust and worth using. We also asked for examples of social research that participants had found worthwhile and explored different formats for communicating the results of social research.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- explore opinions and experiences of social research within the Forestry Commission
- determine how and whether Forestry Commission staff currently use social research and identify obstacles to doing so
- understand opportunities and barriers to communicating social research across the Forestry Commission

"If there is available evidence then I would be silly not to use that as long as it was robust enough. I think I would not use research if I didn't see the point. You know, there is a lot of research for the sake of it. There needs to be a reason."

Local Area Manager

Methods

- Research data were drawn from face-to-face semi-structured interviews (17), email questionnaires (7), and group discussions (5).
- As this was an internal scoping study, sampling was purposive based on criteria linked to job role, experience, country location and staff availability.
- Interview transcripts were analysed using content analysis to identify key themes.

Findings

There was a range of responses from participants on what they perceived the value of social research to be. This was closely related to their occupational role. Key values included: demonstrating the social impacts of projects and programmes; allowing the Forestry Commission to understand its customers; challenging assumptions about what the public wants from forestry; facilitating engagement of organisations, groups and individuals in forestry; and providing evidence of delivery outcomes for policy, fundraising and partnerships.

Participants identified the main forms of assistance required from social researchers as: guidance on social science methodologies and best research practice; advice on social data gathering and how to target efforts; longitudinal studies (e.g. in health research); and digests of existing social research on specific forestry-related topics that might also draw on material from outside the UK.

The reported potential barriers to the use of social research included: time constraints; research outputs that are too detailed and difficult to read; difficulties in translating research findings into real world practice; lack of relevance of research topics and outputs to individual job roles; and lack of awareness that social research specific to forestry issues is produced by social researchers in Forest Research.

It is difficult to generalise about the best forms of communication because participants all identified different needs. However, the majority of participants currently obtain information through personal contact, internet and e-bulletins/newsletters via email. Workshops, seminar presentations and informal meetings are the preferred method of receiving research information, while short research summaries were also identified as useful. Collaboration between Forest Research and Forestry Commission colleagues can increase the visibility of social research, and engagement of Forestry Commission staff in research projects, especially from the outset, is welcomed.

Recommendations

The range of requirements and wishes expressed through this research needs to be considered in the context of limited resources. The findings suggest that personal contact and regular e-news are highly valued and SERG will continue to communicate through consultations and research updates, and will disseminate research through Forestry Commission technical publications, its own newsletter *Growing Places*, reports and summaries on its website and other formats. To address some of the barriers identified during the study, SERG should continue/consider:

- matching research methods to the needs of different branches of the Forestry Commission
- producing outputs that include a clear statement of the intended audience, and use a written style and terminology appropriate to that audience
- testing the 'usability' of research with the audience before finalising the research output
- explicitly stating the policy or operational relevance of social research in outputs, including an indication of how to translate findings into practice
- working towards making the processes involved in defining and commissioning social research more transparent and providing more opportunities for individuals to become involved in, or consulted about, the research process
- using 'champions' within the Forestry Commission to assist in wider promotion and dissemination of SERG research

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Reports and publications

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