

Review of the Forest Education Initiative in Britain

The Forest Education Initiative (FEI) was created in 1992 to increase understanding and appreciation of the environmental, social and economic potential of trees, woodlands and forests and of the links between trees and everyday wood products. We undertook a review of FEI in 2009/10 to examine its history and development, its governance and funding, and to produce a record of the members of the FEI cluster groups and their various activities.



"...it's building confidence in young people... they can work easily in a woodland setting... team spirit appears.. very often the teachers will find the most unruly child and most difficult will become one of the leaders" (FEI President)

Background

FEI aims to encourage first hand learning opportunities, increase environmental understanding, promote wood as a sustainable resource and develop emotional and physical well-being. At the time of our research (2009/10) FEI was operating through a network of approximately 73 cluster groups across Britain. Within these groups individuals and organisations with an interest in educating others about trees and woodlands, or forestry-related industries and activities are brought together with those who are directly involved with woodland ownership or management.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- Document the history of FEI: why it was created and how it has developed in the years since its creation in 1992.
- Focus on the activities and aims of FEI: what is taking place, and are the aims of FEI seen as appropriate and relevant to those involved?
- Better understand the activities of the cluster groups.
- Investigate the governance and funding processes of the FEI network and projects.
- Look to the future: what are the current strengths and weaknesses of FEI and what opportunities are there for the future of the network?

Methods

The methods used involved:

- Documentary analysis of the FEI Partnership Funded project reports, financial spreadsheets, annual reviews and strategies.
- A survey of the 73 active cluster groups in early 2010: 44 groups completed the questionnaire - a response rate of 60%.
- A total of 20 interviews with FEI partners, steering group members, national and regional coordinators.
- Case studies: a closer examination of 5 cluster groups through interviews to gain more detailed insights into how the groups are run (1 in Wales, 1 in Scotland and 3 in England).

Findings

Governance

- The Forestry Commission in England, Scotland and Wales is the main driver and partner of FEI.
- At least 245 partners have been involved in FEI Partnership Funded activities from 2003-2009.
- Many funding bids for forest education activity require a local network, partners and a system for working with schools and communities. This is primarily the purpose and role of FEI.

Funding

- FEI awarded funds for projects and activities of approximately £422K between 2003 and 2009. Every £1 awarded by FEI is at least match funded and is sometimes exceeded by additional funds and resources from other sources.

Cluster groups

- The membership of FEI, and the number of cluster groups and partners have all increased in recent years.
- On average 68% of cluster group activity was estimated to be connected to Forest School, either through training, delivery or networking (67% in England, 71% in Wales and 65% in Scotland).
- The top three motivations for membership of FEI were 1) opportunities to network regionally, 2) opportunities to access funding, and 3) support for Forest School delivery.

Strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats

- Strengths include the flexibility of the FEI governance structure with coordinators and steering groups supporting cluster groups, and the broad variety of people and groups involved, from teachers, rangers, education providers to the forestry sector.
- In terms of weaknesses, there is a lack of understanding of what FEI is, both internally within cluster groups, and externally within other organisations and the wider public.

Recommendations

- Ensure FEI activities are clearly communicated as FEI related. At present this does not always take place and opportunities are lost to raise awareness of FEI at the national level.
- Clarify the monitoring information needed to chart the progress and successes of FEI. A simple system could be set up so that all FEI activities (not just FEI funded ones) collect data on the number of participants involved.
- It should be a requirement of gaining funding from the Partnership Fund to complete a project report. With this in place, more accurate figures could be gained on the number of participants, the amount of match funding and the number of partners involved.

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Reports and Publications

O'Brien, L and Lovell, R. 2011. A review of the Forest Education Initiative in Britain. Forest Research, Farnham.

See report at: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-8K7D4Q>