

New pathways for health and well-being in Scotland: research to understand and overcome barriers to accessing woodlands

There is a range of evidence showing that access to woodlands and green spaces is beneficial for people's mental and physical health and well-being. However, evidence also suggests that the benefits are unevenly distributed: some under-represented groups of people, such as those in deprived areas, noticeably do not gain access to these benefits. This study, started in October 2006, aimed to understand the factors influencing people's access to woodlands. The findings suggest that the promotion of woodland access goes beyond tree planting and the removal of physical and social barriers. It is about using woodlands better, engaging with people in the context of their lifestyle and their local environment and, with their collaboration, building a new culture of woodland use.



"In Glasgow there was no woods at all, you couldn't do anything. All you could do was go outside and play with abandoned cars, stuff like that. There was a wee park, one swing for about 4000 folk!"

Young man, Galashiels

Background

Improving the health of Scotland's population has been a major cross-government policy issue for the past five years. The Scottish Forestry Strategy has a key theme of access and health, with an objective to use woodland access to improve both physical and mental health. An action research approach was taken in this project, in five case study areas. The work focused on those who do not access woodlands as much as others (such as low-income groups) and who live in close proximity to an existing green space or woodland initiative, such as the Woodlands In and Around Town (WIAT) Initiative. Four of the case studies focused on urban/peri-urban localities in central Scotland, Dundee and the Borders region, and on under-represented groups in these areas. The fifth case study was in the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, to research factors influencing rural communities in the Highlands.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- better understand the barriers that may prevent people accessing woodlands in Scotland for health and well-being
- identify, prioritise and promote potential opportunities to overcome these barriers

Methods

- A qualitative action research approach was used for the five case study areas.
- Interviews were undertaken with project workers of green space or woodland initiatives, and with relevant public/policy providers.
- Focus group discussions were undertaken with a community group in each case study, targeted to access under-represented users of green space or woodlands. These included a mother and toddler group, young men seeking employment, older people at a day care centre, a youth group and rural mixed local residents.
- The same respondents also participated in a green space/woodland activity at a particular site with the project worker for that site.
- Through this approach, on-going interaction was encouraged between project workers and the targeted community groups.

Findings

The literature review, which formed part of the final report, outlined a range of barriers to accessing woodlands, such as negative perceptions concerning fear and safety, and similar issues were identified in the action research. However, a key conclusion is that barriers to access are less about the single issues and more to do with wider contextual factors. The findings indicate that the complexity of local issues and groups having specific needs at different times in their lives, are equally if not more important in determining who will use a particular woodland and for what purpose.

The findings revealed that access providers struggled to balance the needs of their jobs with wider issues such as dealing with conflict, widening access for all and trying to ensure access would be maintained after projects had finished. Although evidence suggests that geographical distance or proximity is important, it is not just the availability of local woodlands that determines who accesses them. The process of promoting and widening access requires a step before the removal of barriers – engagement with hard-to-reach groups in the context of their everyday lives. This is the opportunity gap that often exists in the provision of access.

Recommendations

In considering the implications for Forestry Commission Scotland, it is recommended that the providers of access to woodlands should be aware of the need to:

- engage communities – setting up initiatives without community engagement does not work. Community engagement focuses on understanding the local context and building trust in order to create realistic projects;
- build local capacity – this means addressing local problems and meeting needs with the community and other community providers rather than imposing solutions;
- link services – working in partnership with other service providers and linking services through the pooling of resources enables project leaders to widen capacity and address multiple needs;
- leave a sustainable legacy – woodland access projects must be planned with an appropriate exit strategy, such as the setting up of a community woodland group, in order to leave a legacy for the community once a funded project comes to an end.

Partners

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Funding / Support

Funded by Forestry Commission Scotland.

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Reports and publications

O'Brien, E. and Weldon, S. (2007). A place where the needs of every child matters: factors affecting the use of greenspace and woodlands for children and young people. *Countryside Recreation Journal*, 15, 6–9.

Weldon, S. and Bailey, C., with O'Brien, L. (2007). *New pathways for health and well-being in Scotland: research to understand and overcome barriers to accessing woodlands*. Report to Forestry Commission Scotland. Available from www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-78PDPC, 83 pp.