Social Research and the Forestry Commission: Perceptions and applications

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Summary

1. The Social and Economic Research Group (SERG), in Forest Research, assists the Forestry Commission (FC) in delivering public benefit, by improving understanding of public opinion; the role of trees, woods and forests (TWF) in human wellbeing and social inclusion; community organisation and development in relation to forests; and effectiveness of institutional arrangements (e.g. partnerships) for decision-making and delivery.

2. This range of requirements from social research involves a correspondingly wide range of users within and beyond the FC. To help in planning appropriate research and dissemination, the social research team conducted an internal survey to better understand how social research is understood and applied within the FC. This report summarises the findings, with the intention of stimulating discussion about the role, approach and prioritisation of social research, amongst the SERG team and colleagues in FR.

3. We addressed this through three themes: what participants understand as social science, how effectively findings from social science are communicated to FC staff and decision-makers and what impact the above has had on FC staff. We interviewed 44 Forestry Commission staff from a range of units across England, Scotland and Wales, through qualitative one-to-one interviews, email questionnaires and group discussions.

4. The responses varied widely, with more confident and elaborate answers amongst policy advisers, and senior operational staff, who emphasised the business need for social research. Operational staff working in community and urban forestry found it more relevant than those working in more traditional forest production.

5. Most saw a primary need to demonstrate the social impacts of particular projects and programmes. In relation to the policy cycle, there was therefore a strong emphasis on monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Many operational staff also saw social research having value in facilitating stakeholder consultation and participation processes.

6. Despite expectations that most respondents would be more comfortable with quantitative research methods than qualitative, comments about methodology varied widely. Among many, there was a strong appreciation of the combined merits of qualitative and quantitative methods. Some felt that only statistically robust surveys were reliable, while others associated social research with qualitative approaches, and felt that the subject matter made quantitative approaches inappropriate. Policy advisers tended to be more comfortable with qualitative research than did operational staff, although those working most closely with communities expressed a need for location-specific case studies.

7. A core aspect of the usefulness of social research is trust. Several noted that their ability to rely on research results, particularly in an unfamiliar field such as social

research, lay with their knowledge and experiences of the researchers themselves. FR was highly regarded in this respect, and many felt they could leave the question of quality to the professional judgement of the researcher. However awareness of SERG and its work varies across the FC and there are opportunities to improve this.

8. In addition to existing strengths of SERG, such as M&E, and stakeholder engagement, the study highlighted some needs not currently being addressed in such depth. Those mentioned more frequently included:
    o case studies describing experiences of others in similar circumstances (often described as 'real')
    o an updated guide to social science methodologies (e.g. toolbox on involving people in forestry);
    o longitudinal studies (e.g. in health research);
    o assistance with analysis of data collected in districts and advice on how to target efforts;
    o digests of existing social research (across the UK and beyond) as well as work being conducted by other research agencies.

9. Those respondents who felt their access to social research was less than ideal, cited time, lack of relevance to their job, and lack of knowledge that social research (and the social research team) exists. There is a widespread perception that social research outputs are too detailed and written in a way that is confusing to readers from other backgrounds. There is also a widespread interest in greater involvement with the social research team, and a concern that high staff turnover in some areas meant that awareness of research outputs was lost. A key issue raised across the range of participants is that research should have a practical policy/operational benefit.

10. As regards communication, most respondents wanted to see a greater focus on short outputs highlighting key messages. Respondents prefer personal contact and the internet / email for searching for particular information, while workshops and short summaries are particularly popular formats for learning about research. Users' requirements cover a wide range and one important conclusion is the need to be clear about audience, and test the usability of the research with the audience before finalising production.

11. SERG will continue to communicate through consultations and research updates across the UK and disseminate research via FC bulletins, its own newsletter 'Growing Places', reports and summaries on its website and other formats. Suggestions for further improvements include: (1) matching relevant research activities and methods to the needs of different branches of the FC; (2) including a clear statement about the intended audience in research outputs so that the style and terminology used are obvious and appropriate to that audience; (3) ensuring the policy or operational relevance of social research is explicit in outputs including an indication of how to

translate findings into practice; (4) increasing the transparency of how social research is defined and commissioned to provide more opportunities for different sectors to become involved in, or consulted about, the research process, (5) identifying 'champions' within the FC to assist in wider promotion and dissemination of SERG research.

12. Clearly the range of requirements and wishes expressed through this research need to be considered in the context of limited resources. We hope that the experiences and opinions summarised here help to clarify the ways in which social research can be used, and to prioritise activities to further the effectiveness of our work.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Many elements of forest policy and management have a strong social component, such as access, forest design and delivery of well-being benefits. Forest policy and practice therefore needs to be informed by a good understanding of social contexts and outcomes. The Social and Economic Research Group (SERG), in Forest Research, assists the Forestry Commission in delivering public benefit, by improving understanding of:

- public opinion;
- the role of trees, woods and forests (TWF) in human wellbeing and social inclusion;
- community organisation and development in relation to forests;
- effectiveness of institutional arrangements (e.g. partnerships) for decision-making and delivery.

Much of the social science at Forest Research (FR) has focussed on evaluating the social components of various projects. However, the usefulness of social science goes beyond research into social attitudes, values and benefits. It includes research into the human (social, cultural, institutional) processes involved in developing and communicating new science and silvicultural practices. Increasing communication and understanding between social and natural science is an essential part of this. Moreover, with the widespread

focus on evidence-based policy there is also considerable scope for social research to contribute at all stages in the policy cycle: from agenda-setting (e.g. insight into decision-making processes), through to formulation of policy (e.g. communicating the interests, goals and values of stakeholders), its subsequent implementation and evaluation.

With these requirements in mind, social researchers at FR investigated the current impact and effectiveness of social research in forestry by exploring:

- what participants understand as social science;
- how effectively findings from social science are communicated to FC staff and decision-makers;
- what impact the above have had on FC staff.

Objective

This aim of this scoping study is to address the question:

How does knowledge and understanding of social research affect policy, planning, practice and outcomes within the Forestry Commission?

This study will assist the social research team at FR to:
- explore experiences and opinions of social research within the FC
- determine how and whether FC staff currently utilise social research and identify obstacles to its use
- understand opportunities and barriers to communicating social research across the FC

Research methods

We interviewed a total of 44 Forestry Commission staff across England, Scotland and Wales. The range of participants included:
- Ranger, Beat Forester, District Forester, Local Area Manager, Woodland Manager, Recreation Manager, Team Leader, Biodiversity Manager, Project Manager, Operations Manager, Development Officer and Forest Design Planner (25);
- Forest District Managers [FDMs] (6);
- Conservators/Regional Directors (6); and
- Policy and Programme Advisors and Specialist Advisors (7).

As this was an internal scoping study, sampling was often opportunistic and based on criteria such as respondents being within 2-3 hours travelling distance of researcher and the availability of staff. Research data were drawn from email questionnaires, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and group discussions. Where possible, interviews and groups discussions were recorded and fully transcribed. The authors then identified key quotes and examined these for emerging themes. In line with data protection and research ethics, the recordings are held on file at FR. Confidentiality was guaranteed to those taking part and so names are not associated with any of the quotations included in this report.

Research findings

Perceptions of Social Science

We started by asking respondents about their perceptions of the value of social research. We saw this as an opening question that would help us to establish mutual understanding of the subject matter.

The responses varied widely, with more confident and elaborate answers amongst policy advisers, and senior operational management staff. From these categories of respondents there was an emphasis on the **business need for social research**, as the part of the FC remit which is most novel and least understood by most:

- o *I think this is a particularly important area for us because we are in danger of grasping at straws* [Regional Director/Conservator]
- o *It is essential as we only manage woodlands so they deliver public goods.* [Regional Director/Conservator]
- o *At the end of the day the public are our customers, one way or another. … we need to have some kind of understanding of that customer base in order to service it effectively.* [Regional Director/Conservator]

Some did relate social research to political relevance:

- o *We need political awareness because we are a tool of government, we have to do work that is meaningful to ensure our survival.* [Regional Director/ Conservator]
- o *The danger is that a lot of very good work which no doubt is in here, gets mixed up with a whole politically correct … EqIA is a good thing to do, don't get me wrong, but the bureaucracy of the exercise is horrendous. So that is the*

danger. You then actually disenchant people. … you mix [social science] in with the sort of politically correct thing, you can get quite mixed messages. [Regional Director/Conservator]

Three participants associated with **urban** or **peri-urban** forestry saw it as particularly relevant. One beat forester noted that his interest in social research depended on his current posting. Whereas formerly it had been very important as he was working in a Community Forest, he was now in the west Highlands and did not see it as relevant.

Senior staff in urban areas also tend to commission their own research, particularly in relation to monitoring. This seems to be more prevalent than with other disciplines covered by Forest Research and may reflect a lack of awareness of SERG, or a belief that social research is so context specific that there is no point contracting SERG (see section on obstacles to using social research).

One further distinction that was made in several cases, was between the health benefits and other social aspects of forestry:

o *I think the health area is much more aware of the needs for properly well-recorded research to make cases to justify statements. Whereas I think the other parts of our programme … the challenge is the issues haven't had any baseline … it's been hunch .. but there's not been any sort of science behind it.* [Regional Director/Conservator]

The concept of social research was related to '**evidence'**, but only by social programme advisers. This terminology was not used by any operational staff including Regional Directors/Conservators and FDMs. However the need for it was implied by a wider range of respondents:

o *The fact is, it is very difficult to actually make an argument for things based on perceptions … to get credibility and win resources you need to have that science. Because they won't do it on what you think – experience is something that doesn't really matter much.* [Planner]
o *To me it's useful … doing funding bids, getting back-up information. So something like the health benefits of woodlands, it's really useful to have something solid that you can say, yeah, these are the figures.* [Development Officer]

Others implicitly recognised the value of 'evidence' by contrasting research with 'assumptions' about what people would like, or 'perceptions':

o *[We need] to determine what we do in our woods rather than assuming that this is what the community / visitors would like. Therefore it's highly valuable.* [Planner]

They also associated social research with '**monitoring and evaluation**':

o *For example green space in peri-urban areas is helping to get more people back into work … maybe you've got some facts and figures associated with that, that you can present to funders for example.* [Project Team Leader]

A wider spread of respondents linked social research to '**delivery**' (of public benefit, policy, sites). These respondents were from policy, senior operational and project management roles, and they tended to link social research in this case not to monitoring and evaluation, but to delivery methods and **processes**, such as stakeholder consultation and analysis:

o *Often it is the process of the research which is most valuable as it helps a variety of different parties achieve a greater level of common understanding (although not necessarily complete) - its greatest value can be in changing perceptions (and to some extent attitudes), unlike some harder sciences which can result in physical changes.* [FDM]
o *If you're engaging with communities … instead of telling the community we're going to build your visitor centre, we go to the community 'would you like a visitor centre? What would you like in a visitor centre?' so this is where people in social studies can come along and give us advice on how we would do that. [So we don't] go in ham-fisted thinking 'this is great, why don't you have this'.* [Woodland Manager]
o *In many ways [social research] is a fundamental part of sustainable forest management … If you don't get the consultation right, then you will have serious issues and problems. In [community forest] we involved FR in the consultation exercise.* [FDM]
o *[Name of researcher] was on the steering group and advised … so that was probably the main influence, main connection we had with the social research side – just a lot of advice through the whole project.* [FDM]

Others focused more on the usefulness of research outputs to 'dish out at events' and communicate with non-FC people (planners, local authorities, health board etc.):

o *It's almost a PR thing isn't it, a promotional sort of tool.* [Operations Manager]

Some respondents were willing to share some reservations about social research:

o *Where I think we get slightly less comfortable. Well, where I think people have their suspicions is they tend to see, you all being, university and sociologists and social workers … I think a lot of people think that baggage stays with them…* [Regional Director/ Conservator]

o *The problem I have with FC's social research is that we don't carry any weight. It is useful when we are doing a funding bid on a small scale .. but if I go to Government Office or the RDA and say the FC research have come up with this, they will go 'who?'* [FDM] [he clarified that this applied to *all* FR, not just SERG]

One FDM frankly admitted that the word 'social' for him had links to unemployment, 'on the social' being idiom in some parts of the country for 'on social security benefit'.

At least seven participants (ranging from rangers, woodland managers, FDMs, to specialist advisors) were quite open in stating that they **didn't know** what social research was useful for (see also section on obstacles to using social research). Two of these were FDMs. Responses were polite but vague:

o *I see generally that it's laudable and has value in terms of … getting the public more involved and engaged, but how that actually translates into specific benefits, tangible benefits that happen, is the bit I'm woolly on.* [Specialist Adviser, non-social]

o *I'm sure that what you are doing has a relevance and has some sort of impact but it's not that clear in my head at least.* [Operations Manager]

One perception was that social research is valuable for policy makers rather than woodland managers; another contrasted 'the policy guys' who are 'really dependent on using research' with his own pragmatic knowledge:

o *I bet you anything, about 80% or 90% of what […] and I do is with the knowledge and experience of our team.* [Planner]

Finally, the need to be able to **implement research findings** was mentioned by several participants:

- *It would be terrible to ask these questions and then not have the means to act on them* [Woodland Manager]
- *My main focus for a long time is not research for research sake or for academia but really for changing practice on the ground through delivery.* [Specialist Adviser]

Perhaps connected with this is the need to link up with what others are researching (see also section on social research: needs and relevance).

Perceptions of methods and approaches

To explore in more detail participants' opinions and experiences of social research, we asked them to focus on their views about different methods, including opinions of quantitative and qualitative methods, case studies and surveys, and ways in which they decide whether research is reliable or not.

Contrary to a preconception that policy advisers prefer to rely on quantitative data, and that this too might be more familiar to those trained in forestry, almost all participants who felt confident to comment on social science methods, showed a strong appreciation of the **combined merits of both quantitative and qualitative methods**. Several noted that the demand for quantitative often came from beyond the FC, for example in convincing government, or (particularly) health professionals. On balance, although several said that they had a personal preference they recognised the need for both:

- *[I] prefer qualitative – due to the richness and 'realness' of the results. [but I] recognise that more often than not quantitative evidence is required to put things into context and enable comparisons to be made.* [Programme Adviser]
- *Personally I am rather keen on statistical rigour but I accept that a few glossy case studies can be more effective in changing perceptions.* [Regional Director /Conservator]
- *It's a very short neat story to tell and say that was the success of the project. … but with some quantification … you need some statement that proves that that's the case* [FDM]

Whilst not a hard-and-fast rule, there was a distinct tendency for policy / programme staff to be more comfortable with qualitative data and case studies, and for operational staff to be comfortable with quantitative data:

- *I prefer the figures I have got to say. They just seem more solid than descriptions. [They are] certainly easier to understand and more concise … it seems to cut through all the wooliness for me; whereas qualitative you can read and read and read and still not quite know where you are going sometimes.* [Local Area Manager]
- *I just don't attach an awful lot of weight to [research] unless it's backed up by numbers but maybe that's my science background* [FDM]
- *I think with qualitative statements they become incredibly subjective because if … that's the way you think, you think 'Oh yeah look that just proves what I have been saying' [whereas] stuff that you don't really believe you kind of think well that's just …* [Recreation Manager]

This linked in with responses to a question about **scale of research**, and the value of case studies compared with widespread surveys. Even those who had not felt able to respond to the question comparing quantitative with qualitative methods felt able to comment here, and some staff showed a strong preference for local, small-scale, focused case studies. They wanted to know the actual thoughts and preferences of their public or community, rather than generalised tendencies.

- o *For us seeing is believing so you can say 'I did this in Glasgow and it worked'. And I am thinking, right that maybe should work in [town X] or wherever it is that I can relate it to.* [Regional Director/Conservator]
- o *There is a lot of value in case study research as it is real, deals with real humans and experiences and you can trust it.* [Programme Advisor]

Unsurprisingly, Programme Advisors, FDMs and Conservators/Regional Directors showed more preference for wider-ranging surveys but supported by case studies.

- o *It helps me to know what is happening elsewhere in the country because it generates additional ideas but small scale case studies are extremely powerful and very useful for us to take to other funders.* [FDM]
- o *Both have their roles – e.g. a local study on the economic impact of mountain-bike development is useful, but more useful if it is done in a framework which puts in the context of a national trend* [FDM]
- o *One side of it is case studies because that is real and you can relate to those. But I suppose seeing what is going around the country and what the trends are – not that you have to follow fashion – but if you know what other folk are doing …* [FDM]

Several of these respondents also pointed to a need for clearer understanding of existing knowledge, through critical reviews taking into account a range of international experience (see also social research: needs and relevance):

- *You could do a quick study and produce a research note, through a quick scan of work on [e.g. prisoners], and produce five key points based on worldwide experience. That would be helpful. I want light and quick key words and bullet points: two pages…*[Regional Director/Conservator]

This finding lends support to the value of quantitative combined with qualitative, but also suggests that if social research is to be valued at a local level, more communication is needed to explore and establish understanding of the roles and benefits of different research methods and the form and function of research outputs (see also section on obstacles to using social research and communication of social research). For example, most case study research is largely qualitative, supported at times by small surveys. Yet

those in favour of quantitative research were also most in favour of case studies. In fact it is noticeable that all participants felt able to engage with the question about case studies *versus* surveys, and often gave responses that were helpful in understanding their attitudes to quantitative *versus* qualitative research, but many were uncomfortable about answering a direct question on the latter theme. This suggests the importance of identifying the right focus and language/terminology to use when discussing social research with customers and partners.

The interviews also focused on how participants understand 'robustness' of research. This drew a number of comments about what makes social research reliable and trustworthy – or not. Several made comparisons with more classical forestry research, pointing to their reliance on statistical validity, but several senior operational staff expressed concerns about the validity of applying quantitative methods to social research questions:

- o *Social science tends to be more rooted in the qualitative … quantitative can have real problems [such as] the misuse of statistics* [FDM]
- o *I think that is one of the challenges of the whole area, ultimately there are things that, I wouldn't say 'anecdotal' but it's that sort of base, which from a science perspective is slightly challenging* [Regional Director/Conservator]
- o *Some things you can put numbers to it and some things you can't. I would have thought that with it obviously being the social side you can't, it's not so easy to put numbers to it.* [FDM]
- o *I like numbers and focus groups. [but] I'm never sure how representative they are .. you get a lot made of a single statement.* [FDM]

Two respondents mentioned a particular report, produced by independent consultants for an English region, that showed flaws in methodology, sample size and selection (see also obstacles to using social research). This relates back to the point made in the previous section, that regions / conservancies show more of a tendency to commission their own research (see also social research: needs and relevance). There is potential for SERG to advise on methodology and content of social research commissioned in other sectors of the FC in order to ensure robustness of results.

Several indicated that they would use their own experience in deciding whether to trust research:

- o *I use my own mind map to judge whether it 'feels' correct* [FDM]
- o *I think the obvious thing is you look at whether the conclusions that are in it look like they make sense, based on ultimately your own kind of perceptions. … you kind of think, does that seem right? … I would say as well, probably most foresters are coming from a fairly pragmatic, if you like, analytical type*

mindset … some views you may not be happy with [Regional Director/ Conservator]

Some expressed their concerns not only about the data (whether qualitative or quantitative) but also about its interpretation:

- o *[comparing the problem sympathetically to his own experience in research]: You have to stick your neck out and say 'this is what I think, this is the data and this is what I think it's telling us'.* [FDM]
- o *[researcher:* it's only as good as the data you've got] *or the interpretation. There is a lot of interpretation put on it.* [FDM]

Others however emphasised their ability to trust professional social researchers to sort out these dilemmas for them:

- o *To be honest I would rely on experts in research who would advise me on quality of the research.* [Programme Adviser]
- o *It's hard to understand the difference between the two terms qualitative and quantitative – we have people to do that for us don't we?* [Woodland Manager]
- o *Yes I'm the trained scientist if you like, so facts and figures are easier for me but I can adapt as long as I'm convinced that it has got the right method.* [Local Area Manager]
- o *Most folk … if they trust your judgment they grab it and run with it. If they know who you are they know what you have done, they can run with that.* [FDM]

Using social research in the Forestry Commission

The aim of this theme was to document where social science had influenced policy and/or practice, and the effectiveness of this contribution. A series of questions was developed to provide a greater understanding of the processes by which people working within the Forestry Commission use findings from social research. The questions were focussed around:

- examples of where social science research has been influential, and why;
- examples of research that wasn't so useful, and why;
- key obstacles to people using social research or other available 'evidence'.

Social research: needs and relevance

Participants were asked if they could give examples of social science research that had impressed them and influenced their thinking and practice. While not everyone could cite

specific research projects, several areas of research did emerge where research was seen to have an impact. The key areas included research that had explored: the link between trees and human health/well-being; the economic valuation of the public benefits of trees, woods and forests (TWF), children and natural play; and the development of tools to support community engagement. Respondents also highlighted **what they wanted from social research**, which included:

- evaluation of social programmes/activities;
- identification of best practice (e.g. engaging with different stakeholders);
- updated guide to social science methodologies (e.g. toolbox on involving people in forestry);
- longitudinal studies (e.g. in health research);
- assistance with analysis of data collected in districts and how to target efforts;
- overviews of relevant social research (across the UK and beyond) and work being conducted by other research agencies (see Page 10).

A key issue raised on numerous occasions was the difference between research that is nice to know and research that you need to know in order to be able to have a practical benefit and/or provide evidence to funding bodies and partners:

o *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 a point. You know, there is a lot for research for the sake of it. There needs to be a reason.* [Local Area Manager]

o *…if it works, if it makes our job easier then we love it. If it's just a question of collecting more data to be stuffed up somebody else's nose…with no result then we hate it.* [Beat Forester]

o *Will I need to know that?…If it's just 'oh, we've done this research on this and we've found it very interesting'. I'll think oh great, problem solved, good on you. But I don't have time to read it, it has to be made relevant to me.* [Programme Advisor]

o *…If you don't think it is going to make a difference to you, you don't read it.* [Regional Director/Conservator]

When discussing a particular recreational programme, one participant highlighted how:

o *…People have said, 'O.K., what sort of benefits has this actually delivered?' And there have been studies done on that and what sort of contribution it has made to the local economy. At the local level things like that are very useful because they help us greatly, both in terms of demonstrating it is worthwhile spending money on it but also in terms of engaging with partners about the contribution forestry is making.* [Regional Director/Conservator]

When presented with a range of SERG outputs, it was noted by several participants that they were already doing similar types of work highlighting a **potential dis-connect** between social research at Forest Research and operations on the ground, although this is not the case everywhere [see also perceptions of social science]. It was also apparent that the **visibility** of social research varied within the Forestry Commission. The roles of different individuals, teams or parts of the Forestry Commission are reflected in their structure and working practices and this can influence whether social research outputs are read and acted upon, a topic that will be explored next.

Obstacles to using social research

When asked to give examples of research that was less useful, participants could refer to any social research they had come across, not just from SERG. A common answer from participants was that it was difficult to remember studies that had not been useful although some did identify flaws in the robustness of social research [see perception of methods and approaches] such as poor use of research methodologies and low sample sizes. One participant registered his frustration with social researchers that had become involved in day-to-day problem solving and management issues instead of concentrating on their research. Another identified research on governance/policy processes where it was difficult to see how he could apply the 'academic' findings. There was also a suggestion that research should have some **added value** rather than producing findings that would be considered by many to be **common sense**.

When exploring what would stop people using available evidence, we identified 11 factors (Figure 1).
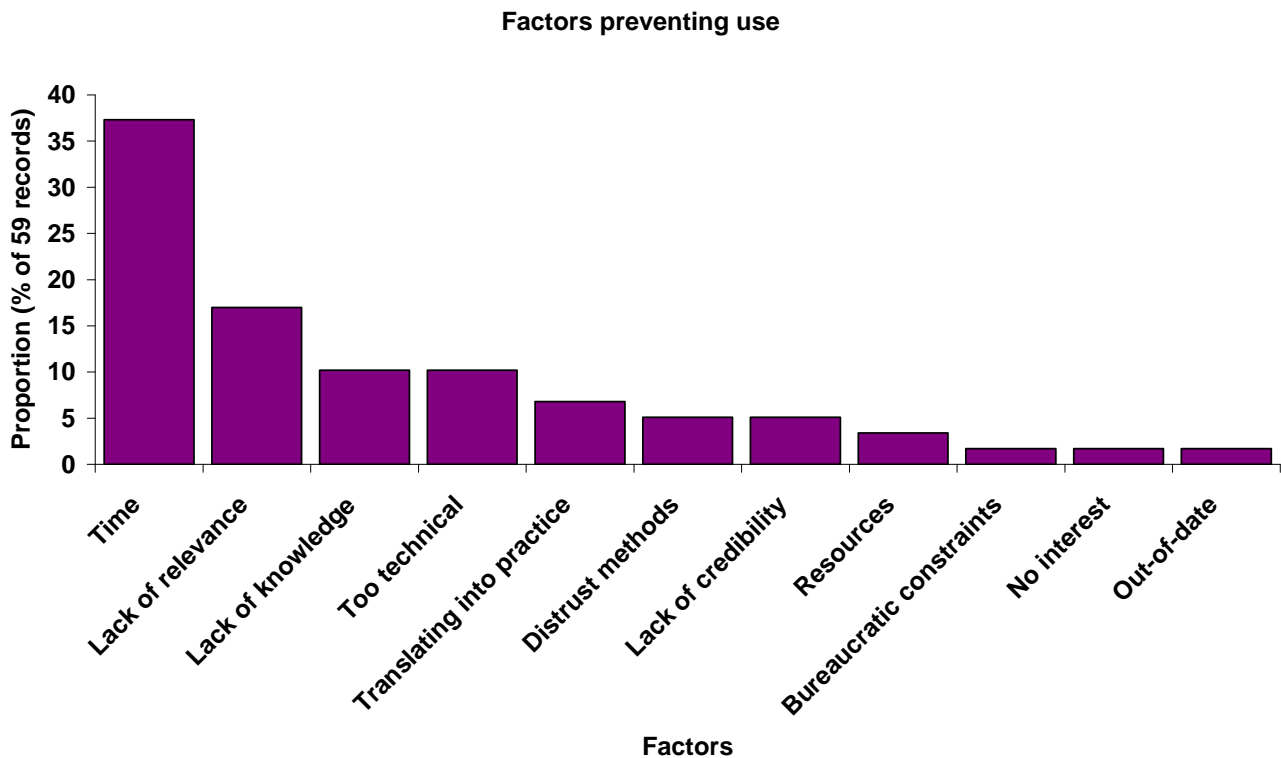
Factors preventing use

Figure 1: Factors that stop participants using available evidence (n = 59 records)

The majority (81%) fell into five categories:
- lack of time to access evidence;
- lack of relevance/transferability to people's roles;
- lack of awareness that SERG and FC/forestry focussed social research exists;
- format issues/ inaccessible language;
- difficulties with translating research into practice.

Time is clearly an issue for most people and, as noted above, social research needs to be relevant to people if it is to be acted upon. However, it is also necessary, as discussed below, for SERG to develop innovative ways of communicating in order to increase its impact and effectiveness:

> o *We are all limited in time and as loads of things compete for your attention…being worthy and having a good story to tell doesn't get you anywhere unless you grab somebody's attention and make them realise it is something that is going to be worthwhile to them. I think that's an issue we all face.* [Regional Director/Conservator]

Several participants emphasised that social research outputs would ideally include an indication of how the research can be **translated into practice**. **Language** is another

important factor that greatly affects the accessibility of research results as the following participants observe:

- o *It's not manageable, understandable chunks a lot of the time. It needs to be in absorbable bites that are tailored to specific audiences so that language is not … you're not using scientific, academic-type words, when you are talking to people who are working in policy or operations.* [Development Officer]
- o *It's really off-putting if you have read something and you think, 'well, that doesn't mean anything to me'. Either because of the jargon or because when you analyse it, it's not actually saying anything.* [FDM]

Despite increased efforts by the SERG team to consult widely on its research agenda, there is an issue with **visibility** both in terms of people knowing that there is a social team within FR, and also in ensuring that information about, and from, SERG cascades throughout the Forestry Commission. When asked what factors stopped them from accessing social research, two beat foresters said:

- o *Ignorance basically.*
- o *If we don't know it's there, it's hard to go and look for it.*

Participants that had interactions with FR and SERG reported positive experiences but there was a sense that for the majority of people, particularly on the operations side, there was some confusion over what social scientists can do. Many also expressed a desire to get to know who the social researchers are and their specialist areas.

- o *[What] I would like to see happening more is groups of your team coming out and spending time with my team and getting to know you face to face and having an afternoon's discussion.* [FDM]

Others felt that previously there had been missed opportunities for collaboration with social researchers:

- o *…I think often there are many missed opportunities for a project to deliver so much more because regions haven't been consulted…*[Team Leader]
- o *There's a real danger from our point of view that we're actually missing a lot of really good stuff because we don't know it's there and we're not getting a chance to be involved in it.* [Beat Forester]
- o *…the reason people aren't using this research, they say they're not aware it's been commissioned but I suppose people don't put any ownership on it, such missed opportunities because there has been no communication at the early stage.* [District Forester]

o *…as new people come into the teams, that's not part of the induction programme…with new teams, particularly in terms of the operational teams, people don't have..that's not accessible [points to a report]. A lot of people don't know this exists.* [Regional Director/Conservator]

Communication of social research

In this study we wanted to examine the interface between social science research and policy and/or practice. By discussing the content/style of social research communication with participants we hoped to document the **experiences of end-users** and to identify the most effective methods of communicating research. This is an issue that concerns all areas of the Forestry Commission in terms of how to communicate effectively both within the organisation and externally. Some of the points raised in the interviews may thus be useful to other colleagues. We asked questions about the following:

- What mechanisms do participants use to access information?
- What communication methods are most unhelpful?
- In what format would participants ideally like to receive information from social researchers?
- Do they feel able to communicate their needs to SERG?
- At what stage in the research process is communication most effective (e.g. planning, doing and dissemination)?

Communication pathways

Participants highlighted a range of media through which they either actively search for, or receive information.
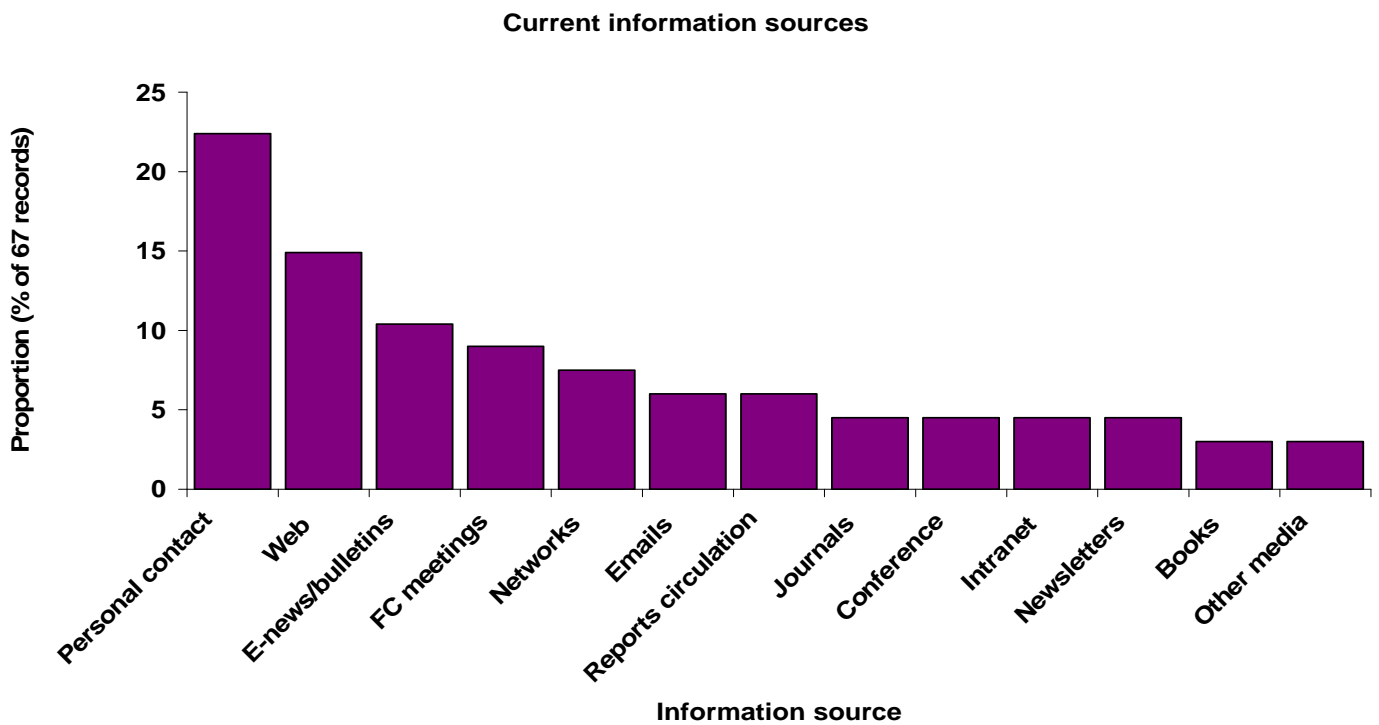
Current information sources

Figure 2: Current information sources used by participants (n = 67 records)

It is difficult to generalise about the best forms of communication because of the wide range of communication methods available and the variations within a single method that people might prefer at different times in their work activity. For example, when interviewed some participants (from a total of 67 records) said they preferred email bulletins with links, but others whilst liking emails felt that providing a link would mean they were less likely to access the information and an email attachment was preferable. However, the majority of records (57%) were for:

- personal contact through various forums such as telephone calls, meetings, presentations at workshops or seminars;
- the internet where you actively search for information;
- e-bulletins or e-newsletters that you receive by email;
- various FC meetings at local, regional and national levels.

Discussions indicate that while a range of formats are needed to reach wider audiences it is likely that social research will have a greater impact through an increase in **personal contact** between SERG researchers and Forestry Commission staff. Our findings suggest that increasing connections with relevant people at the district or regional level will enhance the relevance and effectiveness of SERG's work:

o *If you really want to make connections, you've got to get out and about I'm afraid.* [FDM]
o *Any information that comes, if it comes via your email, if it comes by letter, if it comes through OGB or whatever, it's just going to get glossed over unless it's particularly important to what you do at the time, but if it comes and you've made the time and it's then delivered physically with other people and there is a chance to discuss it...you just take it on board significantly more* [Area Manager]
o *...It's just that some people prefer, rather than wade through the document, they'll take it in more if they've got a couple of hours and it's communicated from those who have actually carried out the work and you can follow up with questions. And then if you want to take it further, you know who these people are...* [Regional Director/Conservator]

Although, as one participant pointed out, it is perhaps useful to also identify 'champions' that will support aspects of SERG's work:

o *Well I would recommend identifying key champions who you could then use, disseminate or to advocate some of the things that you are doing. I think that is a really good way of doing things. And you make sure that you give them good staff, you work in successful partnerships and you promote that.* [Regional Director/Conservator]
o *You need folk that are respected by their peers because if they are doing it then other folk will do it but you also need a few sceptics...to monitor whether they are actually tuned into it or not.* [FDM]

There was not a large response to the question on communication methods that are unhelpful but answers could be divided into methods and content. Again, it is hard to generalise with the methods because one person's preference (e.g. email attachments, web links or hard copies of reports) was disliked by another. However, in terms of content three key issues were raised:

1. Outputs should not be long, wordy or 'long-winded'.
   o *Well the ones that aren't to the point that go on forever, absolutely forever, you have filter through and find out the relevant bits. You just need to know the facts and move on* [Area Manager]

2. Outputs should avoid being too technical or 'academic'.
   o *I suppose the ones that are less useful really are the ones that are in such technical detail that I have kind of lost track of what's happening before I get far into them.* [District Forester]

3. Efforts should be made to update research findings or to remind end-users of the relevance of findings from past research so that they are not considered to be out-of-date or forgotten.

Nevertheless, as noted above, obstacles to accessing information such as the **relevance** of the research to people's jobs and having the time to read or keep abreast of new research, add to the difficulties of finding innovative ways to communicate without contributing to '**information overload'**. As one participant noted:

o *There is nothing wrong with information dissemination, it's fantastic. You know, if you want something, it's there but there is such a volume that you just really haven't got time to read it.* [Recreation Manager]

Effective communication is an issue involving all areas of Forestry Commission both internally and externally. The negative impact of devolution on communication between the different branches of the Forestry Commission in the three countries was raised several times. It was also noted that the external 'customers' of the Forestry Commission have radically changed from being primarily industry-based to include a range of different publics.

o *But I think one of the things that has changed hugely over the last 10 years is our customer base… If you go back several years it was about communicating with the trade, the industry, with contractors and with landowners in terms of grants and agents. That was about it. If you think how far we have come – our communications are with the whole of society…therefore what messages are we trying to get across to who, when, where [and] how?* [Policy Advisor]

Some participants and groups also reflected on their own communication pathways such as how information comes in, how it should be disseminated and who has responsibility. One participant noted:

o *I think it is very important from a communications point of view that if you have got an important message about something, the responsibility is really on you to think about how you are going to get that message across effectively than just sending out an email to everybody or sending out loads of copies of the publication.* [Regional Director/Conservator]

Participants in this study were also able to provide advice on their needs and how they would ideally like to receive information and when.

Ideal formats for communicating research

Figure 3 below highlights the main media types in which participants would like to receive research information from SERG
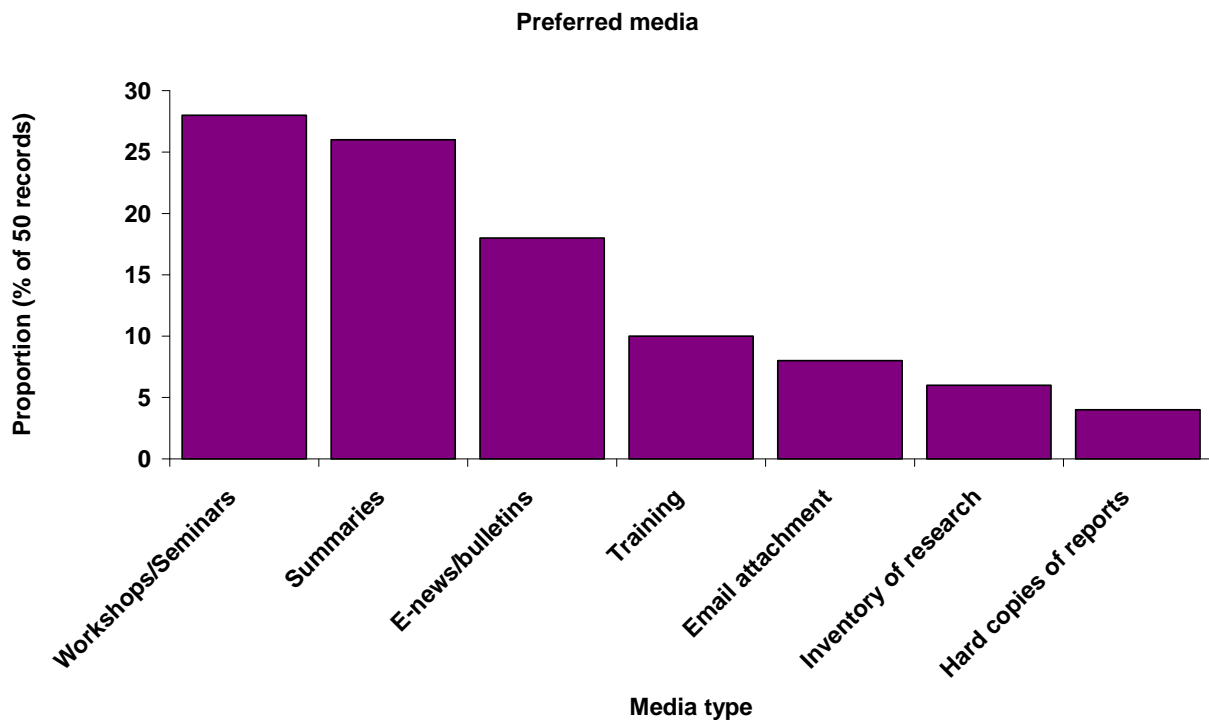
Preferred media

Figure 3: How participants would ideally like to receive information (N = 50 records)

The majority of records (72%) were related to personal interaction through seminar presentations, workshops and informal meetings, short summaries including executive summaries and E-newsletters or bulletins although all formats were considered important to various participants.

Discussions with participants highlighted the following requests:

- Research findings should be attractive and user-friendly e.g. written clearly with a range of evidence (photographs, diagrams, quotes from participants) and with key messages easily available early on in the report.

- Identifying our target audiences will allow SERG to ensure that research findings reach those who are most interested in the work and will be able to use it to guide and inform their own activities.

- It is useful if researchers can highlight how research findings are relevant to specific end-users.

- If at all possible, information provision on specific projects or programmes should be tiered e.g. short paragraph, 2 page project summary, 5 page research notes, and full report.

- E-newsletters and e-bulletins will be more widely accessibly if in two types of formats: (1) as an email attachment or link to a pdf in an email; (2) in html format where subject headings or links will take you to relevant sites.

- Face-to-face contact is an important aspect of communicating social research. SERG researchers were invited by many of the participants in this study to join them in the field to "*see what it is we are trying to do and how we are trying to do it*".

Understanding the research process

It was not always clear to participants, particularly those on the operations side, how it was decided what research SERG would do and where. Greater transparency of the research process, and enhanced visibility of social research and how it is commissioned within the Forestry Commission, can be helped through continued collaboration with FC staff at various stages of the research. When asked at what stage they would like to be involved in the research process, some participants were happy to just receive the findings at the end of the research, particularly if it was not relevant to their role. However, most expressed a desire to be involved at the outset, particularly if the research would potentially be located in their geographical area:

> o *I think it would also be more relevant to what we're doing out here, not just here in XXX but across the whole of the Commission, across all of the districts…you'll find that if we know what's up and coming, we can get a chance to be involved and take our various projects forward as case studies…*[Beat Forester]
> o *I rather like being involved at the outset as then there is a degree of ownership and support* [Regional Director/Conservator]
> o *I know this is not possible for all the studies that you do but if you are involved in the development of that particular research, I think you are more likely to use it in the future and promote it amongst your social circle.* [Development Officer]

o *I think at the beginning. Then you know what is going on, what kind of questions you are trying to attempt to answer…you are keeping people informed, it shows a courtesy in a way.* [Woodland Officer]

o *I think in theory it is useful to know what is going on at the start and understand what is happening in regard to research because inevitably when the publication or whatever comes out, it may be several years after that work was commenced. And there are two things to that. In the interim you assume nothing is happening and actually something is happening, which isn't helpful…Secondly, obviously, you might have had the ability to influence the shape and form of what eventually was done, which obviously you can't do once the thing has been produced. I think the downside is you're asking for greater commitment in time to the process, which people just maybe haven't got* [Regional Director/Conservator]

Overall, many participants in this study were enthusiastic about becoming more engaged with social research or collaborating with social scientists. However, it was acknowledged that this would require a greater time commitment.

Conclusions

1. The aim of this scoping study was to assess how social research is understood, received and used across a wide range of FC staff, and current or potential barriers to the access and use of social research findings. Overall, many of the participants were enthusiastic about engaging with social research and collaborating with social scientists. However, there were a range of responses from participants on what they perceived the value of social research to be and this was often related to their occupation or role they undertake within the FC. The key values were identified as:
   • allowing us [the FC] to understand the customers;
   • challenging our own assumptions about what the public wants;
   • facilitating a process;
   • providing evidence for policy-making;
   • providing evidence of delivery and outcome;
   • providing evidence for fund-raising and partnerships;
   • giving credibility to operational experience and knowledge;
   • providing advice on monitoring and evaluation.

2. However, it was also noted by a range of participants that they didn't know what social research was useful for and that:

- social science/researchers can have a negative image (e.g. too 'academic' without applied relevance);
- the term 'social' can mean different things to different people;
- the value of social research depends on its importance to one's job;
- the work of FR may not be well known outside forestry circles.

3. Questions on quantitative and qualitative methodologies revealed that most participants appreciated the combined merits of both. Many of the operational staff stated that they preferred quantitative data as it was easier to follow and understand (due to their forestry training) than qualitative reporting and they were able to judge the robustness of the results more easily. However, some staff also showed a preference for local, small-scale detailed case studies that helped to reveal the thoughts and preferences of their public or community. It was interesting how often people used the word 'real' when referring to case studies, which meant that research findings were felt to be more grounded in reality and relevant.

4. Programme advisors and senior operational staff were often concerned with understanding the wider context, identifying a preference for larger scale surveys supported by case studies and with an overview of existing knowledge at regional, national, and international scales. The need for repeat measurements was mentioned specifically in relation to health research, particularly as external partners in the health profession are often keyed into large-scale quantitative data sets.

5. Almost all participants in this study highlighted their expectation that social research should have applied relevance and be linked to FC objectives. Knowing how to translate research findings into practice was cited as a potential obstacle to using social research; other factors included time constraints and ease of reading and understanding research results.

6. A series of practical recommendations can be identified through this scoping study to reduce obstacles and barriers to the communication and utilisation of social research. Several key issues emerged in relation to participants' experiences and opinions of social research. One challenge for SERG is to increase awareness within the FC of the different kinds of social research that can be undertaken (to include the FC as well as FC/public interface) at different scales with associated methodological approaches.

Moreover, to increase potential use of social research the operational/policy relevance of findings could be made more explicit in outputs and other communication (e.g. through project summary sheets or at meetings/workshops).

7. One aspect of increasing the effectiveness of social research can include matching relevant research activities and methods to the needs of the different parts of the FC. For example, foresters may value the 'process' more than the 'products' of social research. As well as identifying the right audience for different research it is also important that the outputs include a clear statement about who the intended end user is so that the style, language and terminology used is appropriate and obvious for that audience. In addition, a clearer understanding of what people mean when they use certain terms (e.g. differences between public consultation, engagement or involvement) will be important for future identification of research needs and communication. It would also be useful to demonstrate the significant impact of SERG's work nationally and internationally to address any perceptions that FR's research may not carry weight (or may lack credibility) with funders and partners beyond the FC.

8. While there is overall support for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods it is clear that trust in the ability of researchers to conduct rigorous research is essential. There was a request for further clarification on how results, especially qualitative, are interpreted. Although most SERG outputs will involve an explanation about methods and analysis, in some cases, depending on the audience, a more detailed description could be provided. There is also a potential for SERG to advise on methodology and content of research that is commissioned externally by other sectors within the FC to ensure that the results are robust. How social research is identified and commissioned was also a frequent question. The processes of how research proposals are developed through consultation and reviewed through the PAG could be more explicit and this is the responsibility of country advisors.

9. There are a range of recommendations from different participants on their preferred methods of communication. Personal contact is one of the most favoured methods and, where there have been opportunities SERG members have visited and presented its research to policy teams and Forest Districts. This could be developed further and SERG is already compiling a database of people that have been consulted about, or involved in, research. Reports with short, understandable summaries highlighting key messages were a common request. SERG has produced 2-page summaries for almost all its projects, which have been well-received and are available on its website.

10. Since its inception, SERG has conducted a range of research and produced much valuable information but there is a risk that past research will be considered out-of-date if we do not flag up the continuing relevance of the findings and recommendations. It may be beneficial to identify 'champions' within the different sectors of the FC to assist in the wider promotion and dissemination of SERG throughout the organisation.

11. This report is intended to stimulate discussion about the role and approach of social research within SERG and FR. The findings will be explored further by SERG and the

PAG in terms of prioritising tasks based on resources available and identifying the most effective mechanisms for reaching and collaborating with a wider range of end users.