Evidence review summary: Land managers and public access in England

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CONTENTS

1 Introduction

The England Tree Action Plan (UK Government, 2021) incorporated an action to ensure that the provision of safe public access is a feature of as many woodlands as possible. Forest Research are managing a research project funded by the UK Government through Defra's Nature for Climate Fund programme to better understand, enable, and support public access to woodlands in England. Work Package 2 of this project explores how different groups of land managers might be encouraged and supported to provide public access to woodlands. This evidence review contributes to Work Package 2 by considering the following interrelated research questions:

1. What types of public access are the most acceptable, to which groups of land managers? Why?

2. What are the key barriers to providing public access and what solutions might overcome these?

3. What are the real and perceived social, environmental and economic/business implications for landowners of providing different types of access?

The evidence review draws on social science and economic evidence. The geographical scope is mainly restricted to England, although where deemed valuable other evidence has been included (this is made clear). No publication date limit was employed; however, due to legal changes, the review focuses on evidence from 2000 and later.

2 Evidence overview

In summary, we found little evidence engaging substantively with land manager perspectives on public access provision in England, and even less in relation to woodland. Existing evidence is mainly over 20 years old, meaning that further research may be overdue.

A very small number of studies have conducted empirical research specifically in this area; we draw on these extensively in what follows. Church, Ravenscroft, and Rogers (Church et al., 2005; Church & Ravenscroft, 2008) conducted questionnaires, interviews and group interviews with woodland owners in six case study areas in Southeast England. A report for the Forestry Commission (Sime et al., 1993) is frequently cited in other sources; however, we have been unable to find a copy. A recent report (Thompson, 2021) from an Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme 'test' in the Mendip Hills focuses on incentivising green infrastructure provision. The rigour of the study from a social science perspective is questionable; however, the report nevertheless contains helpful insights from land managers. Finally, a review article on public access to woodlands and forests (Molteno et al., 2012) includes a section on working with private woodland owners and primarily references the above sources.

Of further value is evidence relating more broadly to public good provision or multifunctionality in woodland management (Urquhart et al., 2010, 2012). One review (Lawrence & Dandy, 2014) considers the motivations and objectives of private landowners in the UK in relation to planting and managing forests, and further work reviews private land manager decision-making in relation to forestry (Dandy, 2012).

Beyond England, empirical research has looked at landowner engagement in the provision of upland footpaths in Scotland (MacKay & Prager, 2021) and farmland walking trails in Ireland (Howley et al., 2012), as well as land manager attitudes to public access provision in the Scottish countryside (Costley, 2001; Warren, 2002). This broader research is of value; however, the specific legal and societal context of woodland access in England mean that the applicability of wider public access literature should be caveated.

Finally, the British Woodlands Survey (Hemery et al., 2015, 2018, 2020; Nicholls et al., 2013) regularly contains data on woodland owners' motivations and objectives for owning woodland.

3 Public access to woodlands in England

3.1 Types of legal access

There are broadly three legal bases for public access to woodland in England:

- Public rights of way – Official public access routes including footpaths, bridleways, and byways, over which land managers have limited control and which impose certain responsibilities on the behalf of the land manager (UK Government 2024).

- Open access – The Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 designated large parts of England and Wales as open access, informally called 'right to roam' (UK Government n.d.). By default, open access does not apply to woodland, although land managers can choose to 'dedicate' land as open access, and it includes areas of wooded registered common.

- Permissive access – Where a land manager has permitted public access.

3.2 Public access provision

The 2018 British Woodlands Survey (Hemery et al., 2018, p. 16, not restricted to England) asked respondents (private woodland owners and managers) about existing public access provision. 34% reported providing no access, 72% did so by arrangement with users, 48% provided permissive paths, and 66% provided statutory access (Public Rights of Way). This was not a representative sample, multiple responses were permitted, and the authors note a methodological issue meaning that the totals for those providing some access and no access overlap. Therefore, these data only provide a rough insight to current access provision, rather than a reliable overview. It is worth noting that the public forest estate

provides a large proportion of the accessible woodland in England; in 2010, despite being only 18% of entire forest cover, the public forest estate provided 40% of accessible woodland (Independent Panel on Forestry, 2012, p. 54).

Little research has explicitly sought to gauge woodland owners' willingness to increase public access provision. The situation is unclear. One study found participants to be generally unwilling (Urquhart et al., 2010), however another found greater willingness among private (non-forestry) owners and public and non-profit owners than among other groups (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008).

4 Value, motivations, objectives

Evidence on land managers' attitudes to public access provision highlights the importance of considering land managers' motivations for owning woodland, their objectives for managing the woodland, and their values which underlie these (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2010; Molteno et al., 2012, p. 49; Slee, 2005, p. 230). Values, motivations and objectives appear to be the most important factors determining land managers' attitudes to and willingness to provide public access.

4.1 Grouping land managers

Several studies have sought to group woodland owners and managers by values and objectives (Ambrose-Oji et al., 2019; Church et al., 2005; Ingemarson et al., 2006, Sweden; Lawrence et al., 2010; Urquhart et al., 2012; Urquhart & Courtney, 2011). Across these studies, four broad categories can be discerned: commercial/financial, custodianship/conservation, individual interests, and multifunctional/multi-objective. Additional important management objectives include public amenity or public goods and sporting interests. (Multifunctional is not covered separately below, as it includes multiple of the other categories.)

4.1.1   Commercial / Financial

Across woodland owner groups, evidence suggests that most are not strongly motivated by business or financial concerns (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008, p. 9; Hemery et al., 2020, p. 14; Lawrence et al., 2010; Molteno et al., 2012). In the 2015 British Woodlands Survey, the only group ranking a business or income related motivation as the most important was forestry or timber businesses (Hemery et al., 2015, p. 12). There is limited evidence on how public access provision relates to commercial objectives.

4.1.2   Custodianship / Conservation

Objectives relating to custodianship, wildlife, and landscape are widely identified as the most important motivating factors for woodland owners (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008, p. 9; Lawrence & Dandy, 2014, p. 353). In the 2020 British Woodlands Survey, the median importance score (0-10) for 'protect/improve nature, biological diversity, wildlife habitat' was 9, while 'protect/improve the landscape' scored median 7 (Hemery et al., 2020, p. 14). In the 2015 survey, 'protect nature' was the highest-ranking motivation for charities, public bodies including local authorities, private trusts, and community ownership (Hemery et al., 2015, p. 12).

Public access can be seen to conflict with conservation concerns and land managers may look to 'protect' land from public access (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008, p. 4; Molteno et al., 2012, p. 52). A study by Urquhart and Courtney (2011) suggests nuance is required in this thematic area, finding that 'conservation' considerations do not always align with 'environmental' ones – the authors found that land manager groups may score highly on one and not the other. Further research ought to consider how different aspects of environmental/conservation concerns (e.g. biodiversity, flood management, mitigating climate change) may interact with public access provision.

4.1.3 Individual interests / Personal amenity

Many woodland owners are motivated by a desire for a retreat, a sense of privacy, or personal enjoyment (Hemery et al., 2015, 2020; Urquhart & Courtney, 2011). In the 2015 British Woodlands Survey (Hemery et al., 2015, p. 12), 'personal pleasure' was the highest scoring motivation for woodland ownership for the 'personal non-agricultural', 'personal agricultural', and 'business agricultural' groups. Various empirical studies have suggested that land managers may see public access as impinging on their privacy or ability to enjoy their woodland (MacKay & Prager, 2021; Sime et al., 1993; Urquhart et al., 2010; Urquhart & Courtney, 2011).

4.1.4 Public amenity / Public goods

Some land managers see themselves having a role in public goods provision. Those groups who do so may include community and farmer woodland owners (Urquhart et al., 2010), or (from a study in Scotland) 'non-private' owners (MacKay & Prager, 2021). Another study found that many public or non-profit woodland owners felt that their land rights bestowed a duty to provide public access (Church et al., 2005). The 2017 British Woodlands Survey found that large proportions of woodland managers recognise the importance of woodlands as places for people to exercise or that they make places nicer to live (Hemery et al., 2018, p. 15). However, when asked about motives for woodland ownership, reasons relating to public goods were middling compared to other motives, with 'Promote the health and well-being of the public' scoring a mean of 6.1/10 (2018, p. 14).

4.1.5 Sporting

Sporting interests (particularly hunting and shooting) are an important management concern for some woodland owners. Landowner Andrew Christie-Miller (2000) points out in the Quarterly Journal of Forestry that shooting poses the potential for conflict with visitors. However, there appears to be relatively little

evidence around how public access provision may fit with woodland owners who prioritise sporting interests.

4.2 Control

A key theme emerging from the evidence is control. Many land managers, particularly private land managers, strongly value having the freedom to control how their land is managed (Church et al., 2005, p. 5; Church & Ravenscroft, 2008, p. 14; Sime et al., 1993, p. 11; Urquhart et al., 2010, p. 13). Many land managers see public access provision, especially when tied to incentives which may impose conditions, as a threat to their right to or their ability to control what happens on their land (Dandy, 2012, p. 30; Lawrence & Dandy, 2014, p. 356).

5 Barriers and issues

The previous section discussed how public access fits with land managers' ways of approaching land management. We turn now to examine the realities of what public access provision can mean for land managers. This section focuses on the issues for those already providing public access or for those potentially open to doing so.

5.1 Economic implications

The economic costs associated with public access provision are a common barrier (Christie-Miller, 2000; Church et al., 2005; MacKay & Prager, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Urquhart et al., 2010). Direct costs include installing and maintaining public access infrastructure, potential premiums charged for public liability insurance, and costs associated with litter, vandalism and dogs. The latter tend to concentrate in woodlands close to urban areas and scenic hotspots attracting large numbers of tourists (Crabtree, Chalmers, and Appleton, 1994). Opportunity costs relate to income foregone from the land (e.g., if timber operations or recreational income must be curtailed due to public access) or from labour (foregone income from employing landowners' time in public access provision rather than other productive

activities) (Church et al., 2005; Gadaud & Rambonilaza, 2010). There is some evidence that public access provision may negatively affect land values, with exceptions for cases when it raises business opportunities (Addland, 2023; Buckley et al., 2008).

The economic implications of public access should be considered in conjunction with a focus on motivations and objectives. For example, from a study in Ireland, Howley et al. (2012) found that 50% of farmers would not provide public access for walking even with financial compensation above the costs of public access provision, suggesting that non-financial considerations are important. However, some groups of land managers are more likely to be willing to absorb costs.

5.2 Public liability

Many land managers are concerned about the risk of public liability from providing public access (Christie-Miller, 2000; Sime et al., 1993; Urquhart et al., 2010). The CRoW Act provided for a reduced level of liability for land dedicated as open access (Probert, 2005, p. 203), but it is not clear to what extent land managers recognise this and many land managers are reluctant to provide access in perpetuity as the dedication process requires (Molteno et al., 2012, p. 48). For permissive public woodland access, higher liability remains (Molteno et al., 2012) and therefore concerns around public liability may still be valid. Regarding public rights of way, the highway authority is generally responsible for maintaining the surface, while land managers must keep the route free of obstructions (UK Government, 2015b, 2015a). A land manager may be liable for injuries resulting from their negligence (Shropshire Council, n.d., p. 8).

Evidence suggests many land managers may not fully understand the public liability risks. Probert (2005) has argued that the perception of risk is likely higher than the actual risk. A study in the Mendip Hills found land managers to be unsure of their responsibilities, for example in relation to Ash Dieback or signage wording (Thompson, 2021).

5.3 Social issues

Many of the issues land managers raise in relation to public access are caused by the behaviour of visitors themselves. Williamson (2001) argues that many of these might be considered to be 'social' issues rather than issues caused directly by public access itself. Most of these issues relate broadly to public access to land rather than specifically to woodlands.

For land managers, the implications of these issues can include additional costs, conflict generation and impinging on their land management or business objectives. One way of thinking about these implications is that they may result from intentional action, from negligence or because of visitor ignorance. The first category (intentional) relates to actions specifically intended and includes theft, vandalism and potentially fire. The second category (negligent, or aware but unintentional) includes actions where visitors are likely aware they are creating an issue for the land manager but do so either because they do not care enough or are not careful enough. This includes control of dogs, littering, leaving gates open, damaging equipment or straying from paths. The third category (ignorance) includes actions where visitors do not realise that they are causing a problem. This includes control of dogs, interfering with livestock or disturbing game or other wildlife, damage to crops and straying from paths (including erosion).

5.3.1 Theft and vandalism

Theft does not appear commonly in the literature, while vandalism is more frequently referenced (Christie-Miller, 2000; Church & Ravenscroft, 2008; Costley, 2001; Sime et al., 1993). Church and Ravenscroft (2008) found nearly 80% of woodland owners had experienced some problems with vandalism. However, Warren (2002, p. 230) argues that both theft and vandalism are 'rarely associated with recreation' as they are criminal activities more common near urban centres.

5.3.2 Damage to property

Some studies note the issue of property damage, including to crops, walls, fences and gates (Warren, 2002) or to farm animals, crops and machinery (Costley, 2001).

5.3.3 Litter

Litter is widely listed as a problem for land managers (Christie-Miller, 2000; Church & Ravenscroft, 2008; Costley, 2001; Thompson, 2021; Warren, 2002; Williamson, 2001).

5.3.4 Dogs

Dogs are widely noted as a problem for land managers (Christie-Miller, 2000, p. 208; Costley, 2001; Nicholls et al., 2013, p. 37; Thompson, 2021, p. 30; Williamson, 2001).

5.3.5 Erosion and straying visitors

Several studies mention footpath erosion (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008; Costley, 2001; Warren, 2002), or the problems associated with visitors straying from designated paths (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008; Nicholls et al., 2013, p. 37 mountain bikers; Thompson, 2021, p. 30).

5.3.6 Fire

Fire is rarely mentioned. Where it is, it is noted only briefly (Christie-Miller, 2000; Warren, 2002), and Church and Ravenscroft found most land managers had not experienced problems with fire as a result of public access (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008). However, fire is likely to be an increasing concern due to climate change.

5.3.7 Other issues

Other issues include gates being left open, illegal vehicular access, disturbance of game birds (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008) and disruption to field sports (with reference to Scotland) (MacMillan et al., 2010; Warren, 2002).

5.4 Other barriers

Other barriers to public access provision include the cost, time and effort associated with grant applications and management (Dandy, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2010; Molteno et al., 2012; Urquhart et al., 2010) and concerns around public access being a permanent land use change (Molteno et al., 2012, p. 48; Thompson, 2021, p. 70).

6 Supporting public access

Little evidence has evaluated the impact of existing interventions to support land managers to increase public access provision.

6.1 Alignment with values, motives and objectives

Given the afore-stated importance of values, motives and objectives it follows that land managers may be most likely to support public access where it aligns with their values or helps further their objectives. Church and Ravenscroft note that to achieve public benefits, such as public access, incentives need to provide private benefits to the landowner – such as furthering their conservation or sustainability aims (2008, p. 14). Some evidence has shown that public access may bring benefits to land managers such as creating a sense of 'shared ownership' (Christie-Miller, 2000, p. 209) or in helping to 'deter wrongdoers – including deer' (Roberts, 2005, p. 135). It may be helpful to show land managers how public access can positively contribute to their management objectives.

6.2 Economic / Financial

Financial incentives alone are rarely an effective route to new woodland access provision (Church & Ravenscroft, 2008; Molteno et al., 2012, p. 51). Where economic gain is a key land management objective, public access provision is unlikely to be a good route to achieving this. However, where land managers are

willing in principle to provide public access, this usually entails a net cost, so financial support is necessary to overcome this barrier (Buckley et al., 2008).

A variety of studies have explored land managers' willingness to accept (WTA) compensation for providing public access (Bateman et al., 1996; Buckley et al., 2008; Howley et al., 2012; Tyrväinen et al., 2021; Vedel et al., 2015; Wamberg Broch et al., 2013). The only one of these in England (Bateman et al., 1996) is dated but found that while 63% of surveyed farmers initially stated they were unwilling to allocate 'land out of agriculture and into public access woodland' (p. 37), often due to concerns around irreversibility, 74% stated a WTA figure, suggesting it would be considered if financially expedient. Higher WTA figures were associated with greater current agricultural profitability of the land and smaller proposed woodland size.

6.3 Public education

The evidence suggests that supporting land managers (financially or with suitable communications materials) to provide information to educate the public may be a welcome incentive among some land managers (Christie-Miller, 2000; Costley, 2001; Thompson, 2021). However, in Church and Ravenscroft's study, landowners only rated the importance of 'grants for producing visitor information' as midway between 'quite important' and 'not very important' (2008, p. 12).

6.4 Support to manage access

Land managers may benefit from other support to manage public access. For example, in the Mendip Hills ELM scheme test (Thompson, 2021), land managers emphasised the benefits from access routes being created in the right place, thereby helping to direct or contain visitors. Suitable and up-to-date information provision on where and when different types of access are permitted can help limit misunderstandings between visitors and land managers (Warren, 2002, p. 234). In Church and Ravenscroft's study (2008, p. 12), the average score for 'Provision of

route markings and visitor management materials' was 2.73, where 3 = 'quite important'. This suggests that for some groups of landowners this could be an important incentive. Costley (2001) found 36% of research participants felt that payments for the time and effort spent managing public access were important. Sime et al. (1993) suggest that legal and financial support in relation to theft and vandalism would help land managers.

7 Methods

The publications reviewed were initially identified through searches in SCOPUS and the Forest Science Database based on the keywords below. Searches were run in April-July 2023 (and re-run in July 2024). The identified publications were supplemented by snowballing from reference lists and requesting evidence from key stakeholders. In total, 27 social science and 33 economics papers were reviewed in full.

Population	Geography	Key Themes	Secondary themes	Terms to explore
Land manager	UK	Public access	Walk*	Dedicat*
Landowner (Or Land owner)	United Kingdom	Permissive access	Horse	Incentiv*
Farm*	Brit*	to roam	Cycl*	Public good
Estate manager	England	Right of way	Bik* / Bicycle	Cultural ecosystem service / CES
Woodland manager	Wales	Recreational access	Camp	Cost
Landlord	Northern Ireland		Sport	Finance
	Scotland		Recreation	Willingness
				Loss
				Income

8 Key insights on research questions

The introduction outlined the three research questions guiding the evidence review. We return to these now.

8.1 What types of public access are the most acceptable, to which groups of land managers? Why?

We consider 'types' of public access to include the legal basis for access and the activities undertaken. There is relatively limited evidence explicitly considering woodland managers' experience of and perspectives on different types of public access. This warrants further attention.

Our evidence suggests that grouping land managers by their objectives is likely to be the most appropriate approach.

Broadly, those land manager groups which have an interest in providing public amenity (including community woodlands, public and non-profit owners) appear more willing to provide public access. Woodland owners motivated by personal amenity may be generally less willing to provide public access, while those with a focus on conservation may worry that public access may negatively impact on this.

Across all land manager groups, control is a key theme emerging in the literature. Many land managers see public access provision as impinging on their ability to control what happens in their woodland.

8.2 What are the key barriers to providing public access and what solutions might overcome these?

Barriers to public access provision include economic implications, concerns around public liability, and various 'social issues' such as litter, vandalism, dogs and erosion. It is not always clear how far perceptions of these issues reflect reality.

More importantly, a major factor influencing public access provision is the degree to which it impacts land management objectives or aligns with land manager values.

The evidence around solutions points to the importance of economic incentives but that these only go so far. Other solutions may involve public education or more direct support to manage public access. The greatest opportunity may be in helping ensure that public access can further (or at least not negatively impact) management objectives.

8.3   What are the real and perceived social, environmental and economic/business implications for landowners of providing different types of access?

As in the first question, there is little evidence breaking down the implications of different types of access. Broadly, the implications depend on land managers' objectives.

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