



Research Note

Supporting woodland managers in England to increase public access provision: Land manager perspectives

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This Research Note draws on survey data, land manager interviews, and an evidence review to identify opportunities for supporting woodland managers to increase public access provision in England. Attitudes towards public access are closely tied to woodland management priorities, with willingness to expand access depending largely on perceived impacts on these management priorities. If we can support land managers to ensure that public access does not impinge on their management objectives, or even helps further them, they may be more willing to provide public access. Although few woodland managers favour unrestricted 'open access', most are willing to allow public access in certain circumstances. Woodland managers often view public access as conflicting with economic and environmental objectives and personal amenity concerns (though public access can contribute positively to public amenity goals). However, some ways that research participants suggested public access can further management objectives included through public education on woodland/environmental management, building relationships and improving personal enjoyment, and diverting visitors from environmentally sensitive areas. Financial support may help cover costs associated with public access provision, but it is unlikely to convince those who are fundamentally opposed to increased access. Many woodland managers believe visitors lack sufficient understanding of woodland management and so favour public education, either on-site or in wider society. Advice or guidance in this area is likely to be of value to those already considering increasing public access.

Introduction

This Research Note shares findings from research exploring how woodland managers in England might be encouraged and supported to provide public access to woodlands. It focuses on identifying opportunities to increase public access provision, primarily by considering how to overcome barriers among those who are interested but have concerns.

We first examine woodland managers' attitudes to different types of public access. We then highlight the importance of attending to management objectives and consider how public access relates to different prevailing objectives. Next, we discuss some key areas where woodland managers might be supported to increase public access provision: economic factors and incentives, public understanding and education, advice and guidance, and influencing visitors' behaviour. In the conclusion, we seek to highlight key opportunities for and barriers to increasing public access provision across the range of management objectives.

Methods

The findings reported here are based on evidence from three sources:

- An evidence review exploring land managers' perspectives on public access to woodland, the implications of providing public access, and barriers to doing so. A [summary](#) of the review is available on the wider project [webpage](#).
- Nineteen semi-structured interviews with a range of woodland managers in England. Details of these interviews have not previously been published, and an overview is provided at the end of the document.
- Responses from a survey of land managers (274 woodland owners and 37 agents in England). Details of the survey methodology are available in the British Woodlands Survey (BWS) 2024 [report](#), which primarily reports on quantitative results. In this Research Note, we include quantitative results where directly relevant, but focus on qualitative data from open-text questions. Where we report quantitative results, these relate only to respondents managing woodland in England.

What is 'public access'?

Public access refers to legal or permitted public access to land. In England, public access can be provided through statutory Public Rights of Way or open access, or permissive access

(where the land manager agrees to permit access on their terms). Landowners or long-term lease holders can also choose to dedicate land for open access. We provide more detail on permissive and open access, and woodland managers' perspectives on these, in the following section.

What woodland managers consider to be public access is not always clear cut; some talk about any access to their land by members of the public as public access, even if unwanted or unlawful. In this Research Note, we focus on formally or informally permitted public access. We do not closely consider woodland managers' attitudes to and experiences of Public Rights of Way or statutory access land, as they have limited ability to influence the existence or use of these access types.

Attitudes towards different types of public access

Key messages

- Most land managers are willing to allow public access to their woodland in certain circumstances (permissive access).
- Few are in favour of dedication for statutory open access to their woodland.
- Even among woodland managers generally not favourable towards providing public access, many are willing to allow one-off visits or visits for specific reasons.

Open access

Open access refers to land over which the public can exercise a right to roam. By default, it does not apply to woodlands, although land managers can choose to 'dedicate' land as open access. Interviewees generally showed little interest in offering open access to their woodland, even where they were broadly supportive of public access. A key barrier cited by many was the perceived loss of control.

'My concern with open access would be, the issues that we face at the moment are controlled and limited to those areas and are manageable. And I think that would be the differentiator... it would become unmanageable because you'd lose that control and the predictability as to where people are and being able to manage the issues then.' – Estate manager interviewee, 80 ha

One woodland manager also suggested that open access can change the mindset of visitors.

'The other thing with open access is it's the mindset of the person that's using the access as well. So, if they've got the attitude of, "I can go anywhere", it also often relates to, "and do what I want", even if it's private land.' – **Sporting tenant interviewee, 2000 ha**

Despite these perceived barriers, six of the nineteen interview participants said they **may** consider providing open access, given the right circumstances. The conditions that constituted 'the right circumstances' were varied: one wanted an assurance that people would act responsibly; another sought clarity on what open access would mean for them, but said that it should not mean people could go anywhere; and a third said 'I could be bought', suggesting that they would do so with a sufficient financial incentive.

Permissive access

Permissive access is where land managers have granted permission for people to use the land, potentially for certain activities, or at specific times. Among our interviewees, only one expressed a desire for no public access at all. Fifteen either already offered permissive access or would consider doing so. We were unable to determine the willingness of the remaining three participants.

The survey indicated a broad willingness to allow limited public access to woodland. We asked respondents the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with a series of statements, on a scale of -5 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). 48% of woodland managers in England **agreed** to some extent that they would prefer to 'exclude all public access' (105 of 220 respondents scored between 1 and 5, while 67 respondents (30%) **strongly agreed** (scoring 5)).

The fact that over half of survey respondents did not want to exclude all public access (with a smaller percentage feeling strongly against doing so) and that so many of the interview participants expressed an openness to permissive access suggests that a large proportion of woodland managers are willing to provide public access in certain circumstances. A key theme emerging from both the interviews and the survey is that permissive access allows woodland managers to retain control over the access.

'The permissive access is much easier because we can change the rules. So, we can say, "no dogs", or "dogs", or whatever, "no traffic, no cars".' – **Sporting tenant interviewee, 2000 ha**

One-off/specific visits

Building on the above, two-thirds of respondents **agreed** to some extent that they would be 'happy to accommodate

one-off requests subject to notice' (143 of 218 respondents scored between 1 and 5, while only 22 (10%) **strongly disagreed** (scoring -5); additional analysis not detailed in BWS report).

'I would not want to provide open public access. I am happy to allow individuals or groups of individuals to occasionally visit my wood for educational/recreational activities under my supervision.' – **Survey respondent, 4 ha**

From our interviews, when initially asked to summarise the public access they provided, some woodland managers did not mention various one-off or specific instances such as school groups or volunteer sessions, instead these instances came up later in the conversation. This suggests they may not readily identify such visits as 'public access'.

Some woodland managers are keen to share their woodland, but only when they can retain a large degree of control. For example, one of our woodland owner interviewees (12.5 ha), who had earlier declared a reluctance to provide permissive access, expressed a desire for various recreational groups to visit, but only when she could be present. She said: 'I feel it's the right thing to do, but I don't want people just wandering around at liberty interfering with things.' While some participants were happy to accommodate requests for free, others mentioned providing access for paid-for activities, such as organised sporting events or birthday parties.

Although one-off/specific visits are types of permissive access, land managers may not initially associate them with permissive access provision. Our research suggests that there may be untapped potential for encouraging and supporting woodland managers to offer specific, organised visits to their woodlands, even where they may intuitively be reluctant to offer permissive access.

Informal access

Informal access is a form of permissive access. However, we have chosen to separate it because some woodland managers saw a distinction. It relates to situations where land managers may not explicitly permit public access but tacitly allow it in certain circumstances (such as for trusted locals). In our survey, one-third of respondents reported providing 'informal (not arranged, but tolerated)' access (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 14). Among our interviewees, several said they provided informal access.

‘Local people who know the wood will access the wood occasionally. Though they are “officially” trespassing, we are pleased to see them there (especially if their dogs are on leads!). We wouldn’t dream of stopping this kind of access unless it creates problems and providing these people accept the risks involved.’
 – Woodland owner interviewee, <5 ha

One interviewee (135 ha) thought that providing informal access helps ‘to prevent the creation of a right of way, while allowing occasional people to use it’. Another (multiple sites) noted that when informally allowing people into the wood, a woodland manager still has a duty of care and therefore doing so involves risk.

Land manager motivations and objectives

Key messages

- Understanding woodland managers’ objectives is crucial to understanding their perspectives on and experience of public access as well as what may support them to provide it.
- Economically oriented woodland managers perceive more negative impacts of public access and few or no benefits.
- Environmentally oriented woodland managers often feel strongly that public access negatively impacts environmental objectives, although recognise it may provide opportunities to educate visitors or to mitigate pressure elsewhere.
- Public amenity-oriented woodland managers typically favour public access provision but can be wary of receiving too many visitors.
- Personal amenity-oriented woodland managers generally see public access as impinging on their enjoyment or privacy, although some like to share the woodland on a limited basis.

Our evidence review showed that key factors influencing woodland managers’ attitudes to public access are their motivations for owning woodland, their woodland management objectives, and the values which underlie these. If land managers can be supported to ensure that public access does not impinge on their management objectives, or even helps further them, they may be more willing to provide public access.

Through the review, we identified five orientations which can help us understand woodland managers’ main management objectives (Table 1). These orientations are based on a

comparison of multiple studies that sought to segment or group woodland managers. Whereas many woodland managers may have one or two overarching orientations, some take an explicitly multifunctional or holistic approach. Although ‘multifunctional’ is therefore an important category, given it incorporates the other orientations, we do not focus specifically on multifunctional management in this Research Note.

Table 1 Woodland management orientations

Economic	Focusing on financial considerations or economic returns, primarily through timber production
Environmental	Concerned primarily with managing for wildlife, biodiversity, and conservation
Public amenity	Oriented towards public goods such as health, wellbeing, and recreation
Personal amenity	Motivated mainly by personal enjoyment or privacy
Multifunctional	Meeting all/most of the above categories

Survey respondents’ primary management orientation

From the survey data, statistical analysis of responses to a question about woodland management aims and motives (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 10) allowed us to attempt to identify individual respondents’ primary management orientations. Based on this analysis, we assigned respondents to one of these categories (Table 2). However, it is clear from the qualitative analysis of the survey that such an approach is too simplistic – in reality, in almost all cases, woodland managers’ objectives cross multiple orientations.

Table 2 Survey respondents’ primary management orientation

Primary management orientation	Number	Percentage
Economic	24	9%
Environmental	33	13%
Public amenity	72	27%
Personal amenity	70	27%
Multifunctional	63	24%
Total	262	100%

Interviewees’ management orientations

In the interview analysis, researchers identified objective orientations based on responses to interview questions specifically about management objectives (Table 3). Researchers could select multiple orientations, therefore the percentage total exceeds 100%. The fact that the researchers were unable to identify only one orientation per interviewee reflects the complexity of objectives.

Table 3 Interviewees’ management orientations

Management orientation	Number	Percentage
Economic	7	37%
Environmental	10	53%
Public amenity	3	16%
Personal amenity	4	21%
Multifunctional	5	26%
Total	19	N/A

Although statistical analysis of our survey data indicated some differences in attitudes towards public access based on objective orientations, the patterns are not clear. This suggests that, while objective orientations are an important influence (as shown by the evidence review), it may not make sense to look at attitudes to public access without considering the nuance of the land manager and woodland context, and the type of public access being considered. In what follows, we consider the four objective orientations (not including multifunctional) in turn and outline how public access may contribute to or undermine this objective.

Economic

Overall, land managers who are strongly motivated by economic objectives (mainly timber operations) tend to display little willingness to provide public access. They are generally unlikely to see any positive impacts of public access provision and, among our interviewees in this group, most would prefer not to have permissive access in their woodland. Negative impacts cited by this group include disruption to forestry operations, additional costs and workload, and liability concerns.

‘When they see things going on in the woods, they find it quite interesting, particularly if there’s big machinery involved. They

have no idea of the risks involved and ignore signage. I’ve had cyclists riding under the boom of an operating harvester. The operator was genuinely shocked. He was livid and just the prospect of what these people could have let themselves in for and the position that would have left him in... and the site was properly signed. It’s the sort of thing that sets the tone amongst operators and landowners.’ – Woodland consultant interviewee, multiple sites

‘Public rights of way are increasingly forcing a lot more ash felling because obviously you’ve got ash dieback all over the place and some of that has to get felled anyway because it’s dying and falling down... But when you’ve got a public access, you’ve got a duty to protect people’s wellbeing, that liability alongside those public accesses.’ – Woodland manager interviewee, multiple sites

‘And then we get claims from people where they say their mobility scooters have gone into the ruts or they’ve got stuck and they’re going to report it to the HSE [Health and Safety Executive]... Lots of frustrations there and lots of concern from a liability point of view would be the main limitation or the main thing that would put me off from opening any more permissive paths... What takes up a lot of time are things like the standard of maintenance of paths.’ – Estate manager interviewee, charity, 81 ha

Environmental

Woodland managers with a strong environmental or conservation concern often had some of the strongest negative views on public access. Important challenges frequently mentioned (and well-documented in the evidence review) were erosion, litter, and people disturbing wildlife.

‘People should not be put above nature in all woodlands. Those with a high environmental value should be assessed to ensure that nature is protected before we do even more damage to those with whom we share our countryside.’

‘It’s a really bad idea to increase access. The upland areas already are suffering from the increase in the English public going walking and damaging the landscape, through increased erosion, littering, damage to walls, fences, etc., indiscriminate camping, and littering/fires.’

‘Generally, people disturb nature. Keeping people away from important places is necessary.’

–Survey respondents, all under 100 ha

However, a few woodland managers highlighted ways in which public access may benefit their environmental objectives, for example through providing an opportunity to educate the public (generally on a small scale), taking pressure off nearby land (see section below on influencing visitors' behaviour), litter collection, and anti-social behaviour spotters.

'So, there's this constant, do we get more people in? You have to compromise somewhere, don't you? It's basically finding the right middle ground that's the right compromise. It's really important to show people what we're doing.' – **Woodland owner interviewee, 20 ha**

'Public passage can deter anti-social behaviour but that can happen from the public bridleway and permissive footpath – there is no need for unrestricted access.' – **Survey respondent, 5 ha**

Public amenity

Woodland managers motivated by public amenity provision are usually more likely to provide public access; for many, public access directly furthers this objective. However, even among those woodland managers very keen to provide public access, there can be concern about how to manage this effectively.

'I think it's important to let the local population have access to it and in perpetuity. I think it would be nice to leave it as a legacy when we're both gone and allow nature to be enjoyed by everyone in that locality.' – **Woodland owner interviewee, 15 ha**

'There are no public rights of way, which was a good thing from our point of view, in terms of flexibility and management, but we made it clear that we were very happy for local people arriving on foot, just to walk freely through the wood, and they did throughout the time we were there.' – **Woodland owner interviewee, 20 ha**

Personal amenity

Public access typically undermines personal amenity concerns (privacy, personal enjoyment), and most woodland managers in this group are not keen on general public access provision. Those motivated primarily by personal amenity are more likely to have smaller woodlands which mean the impacts of public access can be amplified. However, many strongly value the enjoyment woodlands can bring and some are happy to share this on their own terms. In fact, some woodland managers described how allowing public access to their woodland became a site for building community, thereby further contributing to their own enjoyment.

'One of the really special things about it, in our experience, which I'm not sure we actually anticipated, was meeting great people, really lovely people.' – **Woodland owner interviewee, 4 ha**

'Keen visitors may well start to participate in woodland work with me.' – **Survey respondent, 10 ha**

'We're getting to know people... our neighbours who live on the other side of the road from us, they're absolutely brilliant, they're really supportive. They actually advocate for us in the local community, which is great.' – **Woodland owner interviewee, 20 ha**

Economic factors and incentives

Key messages

- Most woodland managers appear not to be strongly motivated by economic gain from their woodlands.
- Financial incentives alone are unlikely to change woodland managers' attitudes to public access. Their efficacy is therefore likely to be limited in terms of encouraging those unwilling to provide public access.
- However, where woodland managers are willing to provide public access, financial support with costs can help.
- In some cases, it may be possible for public access to generate some income, but not all woodland managers are comfortable with this.

The evidence on the role of economic support in public access provision is mixed. Our evidence review found that most woodland managers are not strongly motivated by the economic potential from their woodland, and the results from our survey supported this (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 10).

'I do not make a financial gain from my woodland and don't want to – it's for nature.' – **Survey respondent, 3 ha**

This suggests that, for many woodland managers, financial incentives alone are unlikely to be an effective route to new public access provision (i.e. they are unlikely to change land managers' attitudes to public access). Indeed, when asked whether they would be interested in an economic incentive to compensate for providing public access in their woodland, half of survey respondents reported that they would not (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 21).

Nonetheless, throughout our research, there was a strong recognition among land managers that providing public access costs money; not only for instatement and maintenance, but for dealing with issues it can create (e.g. litter or property damage).

'The cost of establishment and maintenance is important to consider and support, but the costs of impacts caused by irresponsible access are arguably the most significant and most likely to put me off.' – **Survey respondent, 15 ha**

Theoretically, these costs could be met by the woodland manager themselves, money raised through public access, or public funding.

Most woodland managers are reluctant to provide public access at a net cost. In the survey, woodland managers in England mildly **agreed** that 'it is too costly for me to provide access' (mean score of 1.5 on a scale of -5 to 5) (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 21). The quote immediately below reflects the perspective of many, while the following quote recognises that some woodland managers are prepared to absorb the costs.

'From a land manager's point of view, having people in your woods brings additional burdens. And, if they're not compensated for, then all they do is cost money. So, it is difficult to recommend doing things which cost you money without bring any in.'
– **Woodland consultant interviewee, multiple sites**

'Essentially we are offering public access despite the costs in the hope of gaining some goodwill – though the benefits of that are not always apparent.' – **Survey respondent, 500 ha**

One possibility for making public access financially more feasible is to charge for access (e.g. through parking, an entry fee, or event costs). When asked about the potential for making commercial profit from providing public access, survey respondents typically said either that they did not want to, or that they would not be able to. However, some felt positively towards the idea if it were to help cover costs.

'We don't want to make money on the woodland. Feeling is that doing so would corrupt the goals of the woodland management.'
– **Survey respondent, 4.5 ha**

'I cannot really see any commercial profit in providing general public access, unless it is grant aided.' – **Survey respondent, 400 ha**

'I don't feel woodland owners should make a profit from public access, though if infrastructure is required it would be helpful for it to be supported.' – **Survey respondent, 11 ha**

However, some woodland managers do see opportunities for public access to bring in income.

'Large woods can provide commercial recreation. Pay and display for parking will do the job, toilets and cafe or food concession will help.' – **Survey respondent, 1 ha**

'I do not think that charging for access will be commercially viable on its own. Where access, albeit private, becomes interesting financially is when the access is marketed with another product; for example, holiday accommodation or simulated clay days.'
– **Survey respondent, 80 ha**

One interviewee spent three decades managing a 20-ha woodland, aiming to demonstrate an economically viable multifunctional woodland. They charged for vehicular access and for hosting a range of woodland activities. While they were able to make this work themselves, without their dedication the model did not survive when they stepped aside, passing it on to the next generation:

'But they had to appoint a manager and so it then became at arm's length, and it's just didn't work for one reason or another. The costs were too high and it didn't have... and it became too impersonal if you like, so it sadly didn't work. I think that the way we did it, was a very particular way, which is a little family business.'

When asked where public resources to increase public access should go, survey respondents clearly favoured incentive grants over funding for materials or for advice and guidance (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 21). Further, respondents broadly **agreed** that government should compensate for maintaining and establishing access (mean scores of 2.4 and 2.2 respectively on a scale of -5 to 5) (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 14). Despite this relatively high agreement, it should be noted that this does not necessarily mean respondents would be keen to provide public access, as quotes like the below illustrate.

'We have no plans to allow public access to our woods, unless this is forced on us by legislation. If that happens, we would want full compensation for the costs of allowing public access, including any damage caused by public access.' – **Survey respondent, 2 ha**

In short, compensation for providing public access is likely to be welcomed in recognition of the costs involved – but only among woodland managers who are already open to doing so. Public access provision may be able to generate some income, however this may be best suited to large woodlands.

Public understanding and education

Key messages

- Many woodland managers perceive poor understanding of woodland management and operations among visitors, which can lead to conflicts or issues resulting from public access to woodland.
- On-site information provision can help, but many feel the effect is limited, and some woodland managers would like financial or advisory support.
- A potentially more enduring approach is through wider public education. Land managers can contribute to this through engaging with visitors and the wider community.

Many woodland managers feel that members of the public poorly understand the nature of woodland management, the impact their presence and activity can have, or how to behave responsibly in the woodland.

In our survey (additional analysis not detailed in the BWS report), 36% of woodland managers in England (49 of 224) **strongly disagreed** with the statement, 'the public are generally aware of how to behave responsibly in the countryside' (scoring -5 or -4 on a scale from -5 to 5), with only five respondents **strongly agreeing** (scoring 4 or 5). Similar sentiments were expressed by several interviewees and reflect findings from our evidence review.

'The general public have a very limited knowledge of the countryside and woodland, and the resources needed to overcome this dearth of knowledge as well as the means to educate the public are overwhelmingly inadequate.' – Survey respondent, 35 ha

'We want and welcome people and have worked hard to improve access, but we need people to be better educated and more respectful of the land and landowners before encouraging it further.' – Survey respondent, 11 ha

As indicated by the respondent above, some woodland managers suggested that any increase in public access provision would require efforts to improve understanding among the public.

'[Increase in open access] would have to be paired with some really strong educational and communication work to get us there, as a culture.' – Woodland manager interviewee, multiple sites

Some survey respondents and interviewees noted the importance and value of signage to inform and educate visitors, with several survey respondents suggesting that guidance on good practice would be valuable. However, many felt that signs can be insufficient or ineffectual, with people ignoring or even removing them.

'Signs are useless. Education, education, education.' – Survey respondent, 70 ha

'People tend to go where they want to go, unless things are fenced off – signage on its own is not sufficient.' – Survey respondent, 10 ha

'More signage or communication methods that may work for others to get people to understand how they should access the site sensibly and responsibly. [When asked what type of advice/guidance would be useful.]' – Survey respondent, 9 ha

Improving public awareness and understanding on a wider scale is likely to be a task beyond individual land managers. Several survey respondents suggested that this should be prioritised in schools or through other institutions, and one noted the value of specific educational sites.

'I would like various organisations to try to educate the public who visit the countryside and may be new to doing so. People still have the phrase in mind "right to roam". Many don't know what a footpath is.' – Survey respondent, 200 ha

'Well-maintained "theme parks" with a high educational content are the best way to deal with urban visitors. Westonbirt Arboretum [managed by Forestry England] is an excellent positive model.' – Survey respondent, 2 ha

However, on a local scale, some land managers are taking on this role themselves, through directly engaging with visitors, or providing educational visits in their woodland.

'We manage to educate the public to woodland management by explaining what we are doing and why. We find that people understanding the woodland enhances their enjoyment of it and its value to them.' – Survey respondent, agent

'I would prefer to make access available solely to educational establishments for the purposes of informing the participants of the value of protecting natural habitats such as woodland.' – Survey respondent, 15 ha

Advice and guidance

Key messages

- Advice or guidance may be valuable for those land managers already considering extending public access provision.
- However, in general, it does not appear to be an important lever for changing woodland managers' likelihood to provide access.

Advice and guidance did not feature prominently in the evidence review as a potential enabler of public access. In our survey, two-fifths of land managers said that further advice or guidance on providing public access would not be useful (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 20), and it was seen as a less important use of public resources than incentive grants or funding for materials (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, pp. 20–21). This may be due to a general reluctance to provide further public access, meaning guidance is seen as irrelevant.

However, when asked how important different types of advice or guidance would be if they were considering increasing public access provision, participants ranked advice or guidance on grant applications as the most important, followed by advice or guidance on route markings and visitor management.

An interest in further advice or guidance relating to legal questions, public liability, and insurance was reported by respondents to the qualitative survey responses. One interviewee noted the value of advice relating to rights and responsibilities.

'A clear statement of where responsibilities and liabilities lie. It seems unreasonable to expect me to act as a public park-keeper at my own expense whilst shouldering an open-ended personal liability towards people on my land I have not invited and do not know.'

– Survey respondent, 9 ha

'Clear summary of the rights of a landowner vs the rights of the public, on footpaths, and on land close to footpaths, and on land where no formal public access is granted.' – Survey respondent, 2 ha

'It's one actually that's come up a lot because of the amount of usage that they get these days and particularly actually from Covid. So, it is something that we've taken advice on previously and it's something that we're quite active in managing them.' – Estate manager interviewee, 81 ha

Statistical analysis did not show significant differences between land manager groups relating to advice or guidance, and our qualitative analysis similarly shows no clear patterns.

Influencing visitors' behaviour

Key messages

- Many land managers seek approaches to managing visitors' behaviour – this interlinks closely with the above themes of funding, visitor education, and advice and guidance.
- Specifically, well-maintained paths can ensure visitors use the routes preferred by woodland managers and can divert visitors from particularly sensitive areas.

One of the concerns woodland managers expressed when asked about increasing public access provision is how they would manage or control visitors' activity. This concern reflects the desire to retain control over public access and it links closely with the three previous themes: influencing behaviour benefits from improving public understanding, funding for visitor infrastructure, and advice on topics such as route marking and visitor management.

'Different parts of my wood have different needs – mature woodland, newly planted woodland, wildflower beds, etc. So, I cannot allow indiscriminate access. I also want to have control on the frequency of visits, and the number of people.' – Survey respondent, 5 ha

Our survey showed relatively strong support for grants to support visitor infrastructure and for advice on route marking and visitor management. Our research has not focused on comprehensively exploring or evaluating techniques or strategies for managing visitors, however, two approaches have arisen which are worth highlighting.

Path management

Woodland managers differed over the extent to which they reported visitors straying from paths.

'Visitors tend to stick to the main routes through the forest.' – Survey respondent, 100 ha

'People tend to go where they want to go, unless things are fenced off.' – Survey respondent, 10 ha

In our survey, around half of woodland owners in England had experienced at least a few major problems with visitors in non-access areas (Hemery *et al.*, 2025, p. 17). To limit visitors' ability to stray from paths, some woodland managers use barriers such as brash, dead hedges, coppice, or allowing dense vegetation to grow. Another approach is ensuring that paths are

suitable and well-maintained. Several survey respondents suggested that financial support with fencing or advice and financial support for path surfacing would be beneficial.

Diverting people from specific areas

Some woodland managers talked about using well-maintained public access to encourage people away from sensitive sites.

'[Providing permissive access] partly to relieve pressure on other bits of footpath, so either to, yeah, spread the pressure of walkers, and particularly their dogs... but also, where people are not following paths, it's better for us to intentionally open up a pathway to them that goes where we want it to, rather than people not following paths in places we don't want them to.' – Woodland manager interviewee, multiple sites

'We use public access to try and keep visitors away from SSSIs – the results are quite mixed though.' – Survey respondent, 500 ha

However, several noted that such an approach incurs additional cost, may be difficult to enforce, or may simply not work, and is not feasible in smaller woodlands. Additionally, redirecting visitors may lead to displacing the effects of overuse, and many land managers pointed out that their whole woodland is sensitive, so this would not encourage them to provide access.

'The problem is, once people have access you won't realistically remove it.' – Survey respondent, 8 ha

'This doesn't work on a small woodland – a dog can cover most of the woodland as the owner walks through.' – Survey respondent, 4 ha

'They put a permissive footpath in through what is quite a nice bit of woodland, but it was longer and not a very obvious route. Both of those were permissive footpaths to try and discourage people from walking down the actual public right of way because we didn't really want them there, but both of those didn't work.'

– Woodland manager interviewee, multiple sites

Supporting woodland managers to better manage how the public behave in their woodland may give them greater confidence to provide public access. This may take the form of advice or guidance, or additional funding. However, shifting visitors' behaviour is likely to be more effective if visitors better understand the requests made of them. As one survey respondent (23 ha) said, 'It is better to lead visitors away from sensitive locations by explaining the importance of the protected area.'

'What we are trying to do is get across to people to say if you want to walk through this place, please walk on this path and these are the reasons why we want to keep the rest of the woods people free and dog free.' – Woodland owner interviewee, 20 ha

Conclusions

Our research has highlighted the importance of attending to woodland managers' wider motives and objectives regarding woodland management. Some woodland managers feel strongly against public access, often because of the negative impact they see it having on their management objectives. It is likely to be challenging for policy initiatives to change these perspectives.

Table 4 Summary of opportunities for and barriers to public access provision across different management orientations

Management orientation	Opportunities	Barriers
Economic	Support woodland managers to manage visitors to minimise impact on commercial operations.	In most cases, it is difficult for public access to contribute anything to this objective. There is therefore little obvious incentive to allow public access.
Environmental	Support woodland managers to control access to limit environmental impact. Look for opportunities to use public access to teach visitors about environmental objectives.	Many woodland managers with an environmental focus are keen to limit any public access.
Public amenity	Woodland managers are likely keen to allow public access so may need little support. Financial support and advice/guidance may help lower barriers.	There is a possibility that high levels of public access undermine public amenity.
Personal amenity	Encourage one-off/specific public visits, for example through creating links with the local community or groups.	Woodland managers in this category are unlikely to be amenable to much public access, which is seen to negatively impact personal amenity.

However, our research also shows that a large proportion of woodland managers are open to some degree of public access. Overall, the greatest opportunities for increasing provision of public access to woodland appear to lie in harnessing land managers' willingness to offer permissive access and supporting them to do so on their terms. Table 4 summarises the key opportunities for and barriers to increasing public access provision specifically related to the four management orientations.

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Interview methodology

We conducted 19 interviews with woodland managers, typically lasting around one hour, between November 2023 and February 2024. Fourteen interviews were by video call, two by phone, and three were in person.

The sampling approach sought to cover a wide range of woodland owners and managers. Based on findings from the evidence review, we aimed to include a range of demographics, different ownership types, and different woodland sizes.

Recruitment was primarily through our project collaborators, the Sylva Foundation, emailing an invite to their list of woodland owners and managers who have expressed an interest in participating in research. The use of a short screening survey (asking about woodland size, location, ownership type, age, and gender) allowed us to ensure a good mix of participants.

The interview followed a semi-structured approach, exploring participant and woodland background; management approaches; existing access provision; perspectives and experience with public rights of way, permissive access, open access, and informal access; and different activities or reasons for people visiting woodland.

Interviews were professionally transcribed and then coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software, following a pre-agreed coding framework.

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