

Community Perceptions of The National Forest

Alison Millward Associates, National Forest Company



THE NATIONAL
FOREST

Introduction

The research

In 2008 the National Forest Company commissioned Alison Millward Associates to undertake community perceptions research into the creation of The National Forest¹. Views were gathered from 200 local residents from urban, rural and former coalfield communities, to get their views on how the Forest has changed the area in which they live and its impact upon their daily lives.

Why do it?

Community involvement in the Forest's creation has been a key objective since its inception in 1991. Each year, around 23,000 adults are involved in Forest-related community activities and 40,000 children participate in environmental education initiatives. Maintaining community support and enthusiasm for the Forest is therefore a high priority.

In 2008, the NFC undertook a mid-point review of the National Forest Strategy 2004 - 14. An important part of this review was to gauge community views on the Forest's progress, how the landscape has changed and how local people are relating to the Forest. The NFC saw this as a means to help shape the future direction for community engagement in the Forest in ways which matter to local people.

Aims & objectives

- To generate a snapshot of community views on progress in creating the Forest and how the area is changing.
- To explore the potential to adopt new approaches to working with local communities.
- To enable the NFC to confirm its approach to community involvement in the National Forest Delivery Plan, 2009 - 14.
- To complement social research undertaken in the Forest in 2006² and citizens panels research undertaken in 2008³.

The Project

Description

The surveys were focused on three Forest communities at Moira/Donisthorpe (former coalfield villages), Swadlincote/Woodville (urban areas) and Walton upon Trent (a rural village). These were chosen for their high, medium and low levels of tree planting respectively, and because they reflect the different types of settlements and communities found within the Forest area.

Approach

The research involved a mix of on-street questionnaire surveys and focus group meetings. 202 people took part: 101 responded to the questionnaire survey and another 101 participated in 11 focus groups. A wide range of people were involved including: 10 year old children, teenagers, disabled youngsters and their carers, young parents, 50 plus groups, local interest groups, a parish council, a church group and retired miners. For both the on-street surveys and focus group meetings a selection of images from the Forest were used to help visualise some of the issues raised in the questions, such as accessibility, tree planting mix, events and activities.

Timescales

July 2008 to January 2009. The surveys were undertaken over a two month period in September/October 2008.

Budget

£16,435 including VAT.

Results

Outcomes

- Residents were delighted with the National Forest's creation; they appreciate the environmental transformation of the area, that has wiped away the pollution and dereliction of the past. Most respondents felt that the Forest had greatly benefitted their local area, making it a more attractive place to live; creating more places to visit and things to do; creating better places for walking; increasing local wildlife; improving facilities for children; bringing more tourists into the area; and helping to increase house prices. There was universal agreement that the new woodlands had improved the landscape for the better.
- Residents felt a deep sense of pride in the area as they watched it improve, and felt rewarded that they had helped to plant trees that are contributing to the Forest's creation. Several people described their emotional attachment, as they watched the trees grow that they had personally planted 5 - 10 years ago.
- People value being able to readily access the footpath system into the woodlands; use of woodlands was highly localised to areas within easy walking distance of homes.
- The vast majority of people, young and old, felt totally safe using the woodlands and commented on the friendliness of people that they meet when using the footpaths. Most people felt safe enough to use the woodlands on their own.
- Most people visited the new woodlands for walking, walking the dog, the scenery, taking the children out, watching wildlife, and cycling. A large amount of respondents rated the standard of tree care, path maintenance, information boards, car parks and personal safety as good (57%) or very good (27%).
- Over 75% of those interviewed rated the new recreation and visitor attractions as very good or excellent.
- Almost all respondents felt that it was either important or very important to create major new green spaces in new housing estates.
- When asked to provide their views on any negative effects, a small minority mentioned concerns such as increased visitor numbers in the area, leading to traffic congestion and an anticipated increase in the amount of litter.
- There was widespread support for the National Forest Company and the Forest as a whole; but the community also wanted to know more about the long-term strategy, the involvement of new and future generations and how the landscape will be protected in the future.



Applications

- Gauging community perceptions has helped the NFC to shape the National Forest Delivery Plan 2009-14.
- Findings from the research will guide the NFC's work with local communities over the next five years.
- Community perceptions studies provide a timely snapshot of public support for landscape-scale environmental and regeneration initiatives.

Further information

Dissemination

- Local media and promotion of the findings to specialist journals.
- NFC website and Forest Scene newsletter.
- NFC research review seminar 2010.

Links to published work

- ¹ *Community Perceptions of The National Forest* (2008). Alison Millward and Sarah Royal. Alison Millward Associates
- ² *Growing Places: A study of social change in The National Forest* (2006). Lancaster University, Forestry Commission, Forest Research and National Forest Company.
- ³ *Citizens Panel findings* (2008). National Forest Company.

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