

Principles of Public Engagement



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Paul Tabbush
Forestry and Social Research Services
Farnham, Surrey

For the **Social and Economic Research Group**,
Centre for Human and Ecological Sciences,
Forest Research
www.forestresearch.gov.uk/peopleandtrees

For further information about this document please contact:

Dr Bianca Ambrose-Oji: Bianca.Ambrose-Oji@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

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Summary

1. Public participation in environmental decision-making became a right in 1998 under the Aarhus Convention (Anon., 2000)
2. Space for discussion (deliberation) is therefore an important feature of public engagement in environmental decision-making
3. Managing public access in forests is very often about service delivery rather than environmental decision-making, and this requires a more-or-less continuous process of dialogue with people so as to make the best possible use of resources and to respond effectively to their needs for facilities and activities
4. Involving the public in any form of engagement process is based on the premise that the public will have some influence on the decisions being made
5. All participants should have free access to relevant expert knowledge
6. All participants should understand what the objectives of the engagement process are and how far they can expect to influence the decision making and outcomes
7. Care should be taken to ensure a shared understanding of the language used in proposals and discussions
8. Processes should be conducted according to clear rules and structures agreed by all parties
9. Stakeholder analysis should consider all those who might be affected by the decision, and the legitimacy of their stake and their ability to exert influence over the outcome
10. The methods of engagement with each stakeholder or stakeholder group should be chosen so as to give voice to all stakeholders taking into account the legitimacy of their stake, and not just according to their power and influence
11. Care should be taken to follow a logical set of steps in designing and delivering engagement processes, from clarifying objectives, conducting a stakeholder analysis, identifying and managing conflict, planning and implementing the engagement process, monitoring and evaluating and 'bringing the process to an end'
12. Monitoring and evaluation should be built in from the beginning. Monitoring and evaluating is the way in which individuals, groups and organisations learn from engagement activities and processes. Resources need to be allocated to monitoring and evaluation activity during the engagement planning stage.

1. Introduction

Sustainable Forest Management implies a commitment to the engagement of people in many aspects of forestry management, planning and delivery, and there has been a steady drive in recent years to include the public and third sector organisations - such as charities, trusts and community groups. This has been achieved in the context of new types of engagement in urban forestry and the regeneration of post-industrial areas, and through new projects to increase the relevance of forestry to people's everyday lives (e.g. forest education, increased access for recreation or health initiatives, using forests and woodlands as the sites for public events). The new [UK Forestry Standard](#) includes Guidelines on "Forests and People" for the first time: and the Scottish Parliament has endorsed [National Standards for community involvement](#) in Scotland. Devolution has led to country specific forest strategies which promote public engagement in culturally and context specific ways. The combined effect of promoting public engagement and the public demand for outdoor access and environmental quality means that there are higher expectations around public consultation and participation where local environmental and recreational resources such as woodlands and forests are concerned. Foresters are finding themselves less often in situations where they manage large woods and small populations, and increasingly in situations dealing with large populations and smaller woodlands. Foresters and woodland managers have become more practiced at involving people in decision-making processes. They have also become much more skilled at identifying different target groups and the diversity of people's needs and interests in woodlands and forests and understanding which tools and techniques work best.

This short paper explains the principles of public engagement. It draws on literature and Forestry Commission experience, and supplements the '[Public Engagement Toolbox](#)' (Ambrose-Oji *et al* 2011). The Forestry Commission Operational Guidance booklet on [Equality and Diversity \(Impact Assessments\)](#) is also relevant.

2. What is public engagement?

Experience in public engagement is evolving rapidly, and so ideas and definitions found in literature vary considerably. It may therefore be helpful to define some of the terms as understood here. Public engagement is understood in the context of 'governance', the process by which some part of government makes contact with civic society as part of its day-to-day business, in policy making and in making decisions. This is particularly relevant in the process of environmental decision-making, since changes to the environment affect people in ways that can be hard to predict. The roles of the Forestry Commission often include governance, but especially in urban areas there may be a stronger element of 'service delivery' in which aspects of forest access are discussed (continuously) with people so as to make the best possible use of resources and to

respond effectively to their needs. This element of service delivery is particularly strong in and around towns, but as (Konijnendijk, 2000) put it “Given the current changes within forestry at large, such as more attention for social and environmental values.... stakeholder participation, the difference between urban forestry and other types of forestry may indeed become smaller.”

The term ‘the public’ has attracted some criticism because it creates a divide between ‘them’ (the public) and ‘us’ (the decision makers). It also lumps people with very diverse views, values and resources into a single group. ‘Communities’ is possibly a better term, since it is plural, and recognises communities of place, who have an interest in a particular locality, and ‘communities of interest’ who share particular knowledge or interest e.g. in a woodland sport such as mountain biking, or in conservation and natural history such as butterfly or bird watching. The range of different ‘knowledges’ and expertise to be accessed in the various communities is particularly valuable to governance processes. ‘Community engagement’ is another phrase often encountered, with very similar meaning to ‘public involvement’ or ‘public engagement’, but it implies a more thorough exploration of the views and values of communities through some form of deliberative dialogue. The space for discussion (in other words ‘deliberation’); the extent to which issues are debated with ‘stakeholders’, is an important feature of the process. ‘Stakeholders’ have a ‘stake’; a personal or corporate interest in the outcome of the decision-making. They may behave as citizens, whose interest is in determining the public interest, but they may also behave in their own individual or personal interests. Engagement processes may be designed to deal with these different stakeholder perspectives. A process involving methods such as [citizens' jury](#), and [citizen's advisory committee](#) may be used to determine the public interest by encouraging open debate about public perceptions, needs and demands. A process using methods such as [consensus conferences](#) or [shared decision making](#) may be designed to reconcile the interests of stakeholders by reaching agreed compromises between public and other interests. Some forms of engagement may combine elements of both types of process.

3. Why involve people?

Public engagement in environmental decision-making became a right in 1998 under the Aarhus Convention (Anon., 2000). This right covers plans and programmes that affect the environment, and also policies and laws. The Convention sets out minimum levels of opportunity for participation and the procedures that must be followed. Public engagement leads to better decisions that take into account the opinions and knowledge of local communities and other stakeholders. Decisions are more legitimate if they have been made with the involvement of those concerned. The process also enhances public awareness of the issues and therefore acceptance of the decision and promotes trust in the public body responsible for it. The **aims** of public engagement are:

1. **Decision-making:**

To improve the quality and legitimacy of forest planning decisions; to ensure that they are based on the best possible expert and lay information and take account of the views of those who might be affected.

2. **Service Delivery:**

To provide the basis for more targeted investment and enhancement of services so that the public benefits of woodlands can be enjoyed to the maximum extent by all sections of the community.

There is clearly some overlap between these two aims or categories, in that decision-making might relate to service delivery, and some planning decisions will have incidental effects on service delivery. However, the pursuit of these two aims involves distinct processes. Much of the theory surrounding community engagement is based on improving governance (decision-making), rather than on improving service delivery. This derives from the requirement for participation in (sustainable) environmental decision-making established at the Earth Summit in 1992, carrying through to definitions of Sustainable Forest Management¹.

The activity of Forest Enterprise in managing public forests is very often about service delivery, and in many instances this is already highly developed and participative.

3.1. What characterises a good process?

Parts of government such as the Forestry Commission need to maintain a 'licence to operate' i.e. public acceptance of what they do. Failure to gain public trust results in a large demand for administrative time to answer complaints and objections and to deal with problems that otherwise might not exist at all. Trust can only be gained over a protracted period and by consistent responses that demonstrate a willingness to listen to community concerns and to act on them appropriately.

Most people can readily agree that a decision made by a local community, which takes account of local knowledge and local needs, is more **legitimate**, and will gain greater acceptance, than a decision reached by a National Government and imposed without local consultation. However, this leaves open the 'Not In My Back Yard' argument where local concerns and perspectives do not fit in with national plans and strategies - wind farms and waste-disposal facilities have to be placed *somewhere*. The important point is that if national decisions are to be imposed locally, this should only be done after proper local engagement, within the principles referred to here. If local opinion is to be set aside, this can only be done legitimately once every effort has been made to take

¹ e.g. see Lisbon Resolution L1, 1998; and the Bellagio Principles:
http://www.iisd.org/measure/principles/progress/bellagio_full.asp

account of local views and needs and once these have been acted upon as far as possible. Such action includes looking for win/win solutions, and for trade-offs and compromises. In the forestry context, this particularly applies to decisions relating to the location of woodlands, and the structure and function of these woodlands.

The International Institute for Public Participation (IAP2) has established the "IAP2 Core Values for Public Participation" for use in the development and implementation of public engagement processes, and these summarise the requirements for participative forestry decision making:

Core Values for the Practice of Public Engagement

1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public engagement seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public engagement seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public engagement provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public engagement communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

Similar sets of principles have been produced by other government agencies and civil society organisations including useful summaries from the UK [Local Government Improvement and Development](#) site and the [Californian Institute for local government](#).

Webler (1995) advocated general goals of fairness and competence which also serve as a yardstick for evaluation:

Fairness: 'not only are people provided equal opportunities to determine the agenda, the rules for discourse, and to speak and raise questions, but also **equal access** to knowledge and interpretations'.

Competence: 'shared social constructions of reality....understandings about terms, concepts, definitions and language use; the objectified world of outer nature (nature and society); the social-cultural world of norms and values; and

the subjective worlds of individuals **this is accomplished through the use of established procedures**'.

Based on this, evaluation of processes intended to engage stakeholders and local communities should address the following questions:

- Was the structure of the process clear?
- Whose agenda was being considered?
- Who was included/excluded and why?
- To what extent did the process result in social learning and capacity building?
- Was expert knowledge made available to all parties?
- Were the views of participants listened to and acted upon?

4. How to involve people - the planning of public engagement

One of the tool-sheets in the Public Engagement Toolbox deals with public engagement planning. This process has the following key stages:

- Clarify the **objectives** of engaging with people, and clarify the **project** or **decision** that is to be the subject of engagement.
- **Stakeholder analysis** involves the identification of those who have a legitimate stake in the project or decision, especially those who might be affected by the outcome. The analysis goes beyond this to consider the nature of each stakeholder or stakeholder group, and how best to approach them. The appropriate level of participation may also be chosen according to the IAP2 spectrum of public participation (Table 1).
- Identify **issues** and potential **conflicts** that might affect the engagement process, and the way that people are approached
- Prepare a **working plan and budget** identifying the resources needed to complete the process. This should include resources for monitoring and evaluation.
- **Implementation**. Making contact with people and making sure that their views are properly recorded and responded to. There should be an element of monitoring to include assessment of the quality of the process (see 'what characterises a good process' below).

- **Bringing the process to an end**, to include making it clear how people's views and needs will be taken into account, and also an evaluation of the whole process.

Project

The boundaries of the area to be discussed, and the scope for modifying decisions concerning this project need to be established and clearly understood by all parties before community engagement begins. Otherwise, a great deal of time can be wasted talking at cross-purposes, false expectations can be raised and mutual trust can be damaged. For example, at a meeting that set up a stakeholder group to deal with footpaths for a forest in North Wales, the network of footpaths was made clear using maps, the requirement for maintenance was stated, and the resources available to meet the need were detailed. This made clear the need for voluntary help to reach the access requirements of stakeholders.

Stakeholder analysis

This is the identification and detail of the people who might be affected by the project or decision. A thorough analysis will ensure that no-one is excluded who ought to be included, and it will also indicate the most effective ways of making contact with different groups of stakeholders. For instance, at Cranborne Chase in Dorset it became clear that *non-users* were an important group to contact concerning access to woodlands around Blandford Forum (Tabbush, 2004). A planning exercise by foresters working with urban woodlands and communities in Scotland used the [Stakeholder analysis tool](#) to illustrate how important it was to consider the influence, importance and legitimacy of each stakeholder or stakeholder group and decide how best to engage with these different groups and individuals over time (see Figure 1).

Issues and conflicts

In advance of community engagement, it is not possible or desirable to identify all the issues that might be raised. Indeed eliciting the issues that are important to people is an important aspect of public participation. On the other hand, where there are obvious conflicts of interest between stakeholders it might be better to address these in a structured way at a consensus conference, rather than pit people against each other at a public meeting, for example. In an example concerning Windsor Great Park, for instance, a conflict arose concerning the location of ancient trees which were seen by one party as part of the living heritage, and by another as inappropriately sited in relation to the historic landscape. Such issues are better resolved by negotiation with the parties concerned, so as to avoid conflictual statements of position at public meetings.

The plan

It is important to produce a written plan so that the strategy is clear to all in the management team, and so that resources can be identified, and allocated in a time-bounded way. This is also part of the construction of a 'competent' process (see below), and competency is vital to the maintenance of trust. One aspect of this is making it clear that managers have listened, and how they will act on the input they have received from participants.

Bringing the process to an end

It is not always easy to identify the end of a consultation process; the process often leads to the setting up of standing committees or management/review panels to carry the implementation of the decision through. However, the consultation will have taken up a good deal of time, often supplied on a voluntary basis and it is important to ensure that the stakeholders are clear that they have been listened to and that their interests and views have been taken into account as far as possible. Where it has not been possible to meet all their requirements, it should be clear that this position has been reached after reasoned debate, and the decision-making body's reasons for adopting the decision should also be clear. Participants should be thanked, and involved, as far as their willingness and circumstances allow, in the implementation of the decision.

Monitoring and evaluation

The exhortation to plan and budget for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) at the outset of a project or plan is often repeated but rarely acted upon. M&E is necessary to ensure that the lessons of experience are captured, so that subsequent processes can be improved, and also as part of the budgetary justification for future work. The M&E plan will also focus minds to define the desirable outcomes and establish criteria by which the outcomes of the project might be assessed.

5. Conclusion

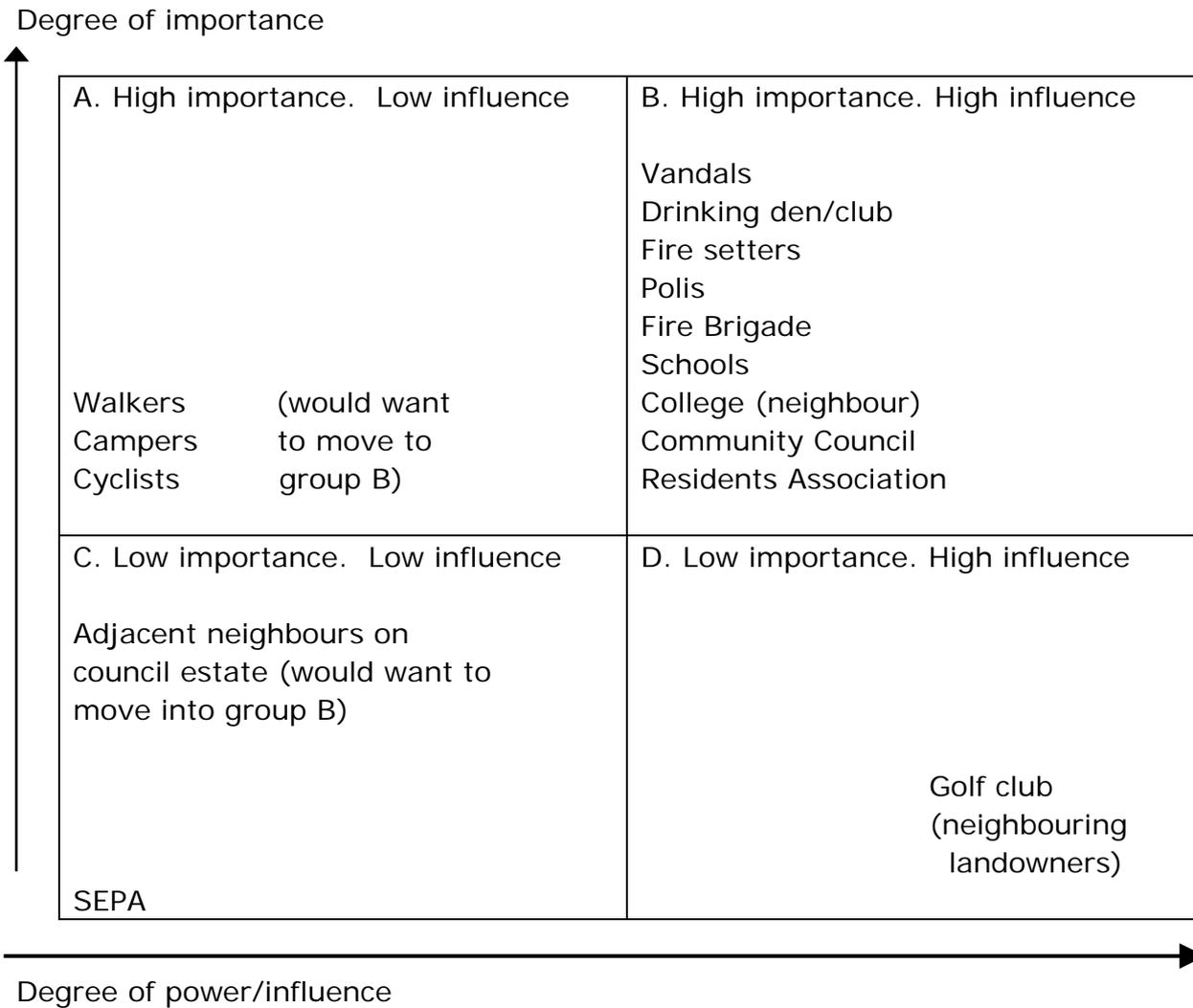
This paper has presented some basic principles and advice concerning the process of public engagement on the management of woodlands, drawing a distinction between engagement to understand and meet community needs for access, activities and facilities on the one hand, and public engagement concerning significant environmental decisions on the other. These environmental decisions typically cover the location and extent of woodlands and their structure and management. Examples are given in a companion document "Public engagement in urban areas - key lessons".

Table 1. Spectrum of public engagement

INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	PARTNERSHIP (or Collaborate)	EMPOWER (or Control)
Public participation objective				
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Obligations to the public				
To keep the public informed	To keep the public informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	Ensure concerns and aspirations of the public are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	To look to the public you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate their advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	To implement what the public decide

adapted from International Association for Public Participation 2004

Figure 1. Example of stakeholder analysis by importance/influence



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