

Forest Focus Group Findings



Background

The Central Scotland Forest Trust is an environmental regeneration charity. It receives sponsorship directly from Forestry Commission Scotland and works formally with a number of other partners including Scottish National Heritage, five Local Authorities (East Dunbartonshire, Falkirk, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire and West Lothian), Scottish Enterprise, and many others to create the Central Scotland Forest by implementing woodland planting and management, access and recreation works, community projects and landscape improvements.

The objective is to increase woodland cover in the Forest area to 340km² (22% of the area) and we have a vision for the Central Scotland Forest to be “an attractive place which enhances the lives, and life chances, of those living, working and playing there.”

In order to achieve the vision, Central Scotland Forest Trust has developed seven strategic goals, which are being progressed through three activity themes. One of these themes, ‘Social’, surrounds engaging communities in woodlands and greenspace in the area, as well as understanding what the community wants from them.

As modern ‘social foresters’, the Trust has adopted several innovative approaches and methods which have been very successful in engaging with many Forest residents across a range of themes and issues. Despite this, it is evident that some sections of the community have tended to remain relatively quiet in forwarding their views and opinions, or in getting involved.

In 2008, CSFT commissioned a piece of research targeting young people. This study piloted a technique using a check-list of key themes which were explored in focus group sessions.

Building on this study with teenagers, CSFT wanted to increase our understanding of the views of three other different user groups: single parents, retired people and horse riders. The work sought to engage with these groups and give them the opportunity to express themselves across a range of greenspace issues including describing what their ideal greenspace looks like.

This paper summarises the key findings from the 2009 research, noting relevant considerations for the development of greenspaces. Additional reports containing more detailed findings specific to each of the three user groups and a summary report are also available.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

| User group | Primary need to be met by ideal greenspace | Essential features |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Horse Riders | Off-road hacking, safe place to trot, canter and gallop | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusive areas to canter and gallop – no other users • Suitable surfaces (not tarmac or rough stones) • No gates • Signage |
| Retired | Place to go for peace, relaxation and social element (see other users) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate paths for walking on • Signage • Seating/resting perches throughout |
| Single Parents | Outdoor activity for children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities: swing parks, play areas, nature walks • Safe, child-friendly surfaces • Facilities: toilets, baby changing, picnic areas • Signage |

Use of Greenspace

There were some differences across the groups in terms of how they used greenspaces. Retired people generally considered a greenspace to be 'somewhere for me' that was quiet, peaceful and surrounded by wildlife. Parents viewed greenspaces primarily as places to take their children to play outside and interact with other children. For horse riders, greenspaces added variety to the horse's exercise regime and allowed them some relaxation outside the riding school and enjoyment of the local surroundings.

In terms of choosing a greenspace to visit, retired people took into account whether they had company and what they felt like doing that day. They were put-off from visiting areas by litter and vandalism. Sometimes, they felt vulnerable when using greenspaces in the evenings when they felt young people might be hanging around. The parents' decision-making process was determined by their needs at the time; ie whether they wanted a quick trip after school or a weekend day out. Although there was little planning involved, it was evident that the financial cost of visiting areas further afield was also a factor and they said that they tended to visit the same greenspaces out of habit. For horse riders accessibility, above all other considerations, underpinned the decision-making process. This was, in terms of both being able to get to the greenspace easily from the stables, and being able to ride safely through it once there.

Barriers from using Greenspace

Generally, respondents interacted well with other people using their local greenspaces. However, there were some groups of users (specifically dog owners, young people and quad bikers) that were identified as occasionally posing problems. In all cases these were small sub-groups of individuals rather than the whole group.

Horse riders were not generally perceived to be a problem by other user groups. However, riders themselves reported that they regularly encountered users who challenged their right to access a particular space, or who didn't show consideration (especially cyclists and dog walkers).

It was felt that these issues were generally a result of a lack of public awareness that horses might be using this area, and lack of knowledge as to how to behave when horses were encountered. A potential solution put forward was to improve signage with tips and advice on what to do when horses are encountered.

Figure 1. Essential Features for Horse Riders



Image sources: Forestry Commission Picture Library

There were a number of common barriers to using greenspaces which primarily related to poorly maintained areas and misuse of the space by others. Poor maintenance covered a variety of issues from poor upkeep of the pathways and facilities in the greenspace, to problems with litter and dog mess. Misuse included vandalism, young people using the area for drinking or loitering in children's play parks, and quad bikers using places they are not supposed to. It was evident in each user group that lack of choice enforces use of less than ideal greenspaces.

The Ideal Greenspace

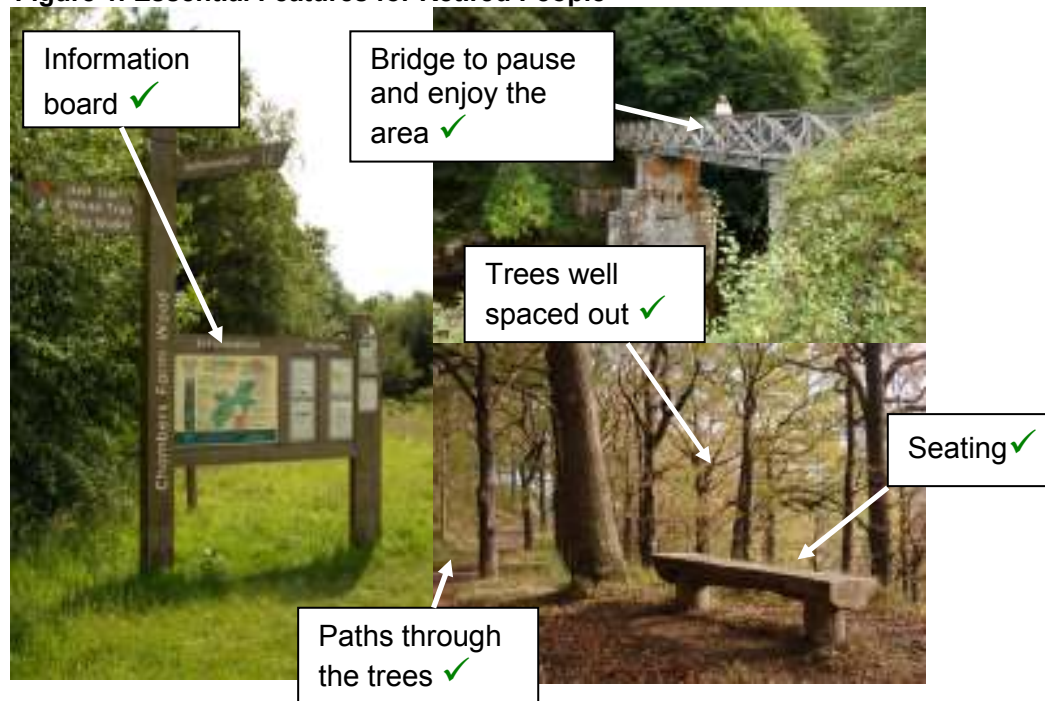
When asked to imagine their ideal greenspace, one common theme emerged from all three user groups; "a little bit of everything". This involved creating a place within a large area, containing a network of routes, options and activities that could be selected based on mood and the time available to spend in the space. Essentially, all three groups identified a set of common ingredients within their ideal greenspace that would provide the variety they sought:

- Woodland & trees
- Paths and mapped routes
- Water
- Open/grassy area
- Nature
- Quality signage
- Activities/play areas for children (parents and retired groups)

Although the core elements of the ideal greenspace were similar, the needs and priorities for each user group varied. For the retired and parents' groups, the ideal greenspace was based on favourite elements of places that already exist (eg large country parks). Horse riders created an ideal greenspace that most didn't currently

have, namely variety and space without worrying about hazards posed by other users.

Figure 1. Essential Features for Retired People



Source: Left and Bottom Right: Forestry Commission Picture Library/Isobel Cameron, Top Right: Forestry Commission Picture Library/Forestry Commission

As expected, quad bikes were excluded from everyone's ideal greenspace, but most other users were permitted on the condition that they behaved responsibly and gave consideration to others sharing the space. Interestingly, most respondents would prefer

horse riders to be on a separate route from other users and this feeling was reciprocated by horse riders.

Figure 3. Essential Features for Single Parents



Image sources: Forestry Commission Picture Library

Throughout all of the sessions, signage was clearly an important element of the ideal greenspace irrespective of the user groups. This was envisaged to include both maps and information boards at entrances to the greenspace, as well as route markers along pathways. For horse riders, signage to alert other users to their presence would be particularly beneficial in helping to overcome any unexpected encounters or conflicts.

Site maintenance was another issue that was identified as being particularly important to all respondents. In the group discussions, the primary responsibility was placed on the Local Authority to ensure that the greenspace areas were well maintained and usable. The 'ideal' suggested by respondents was to have park rangers or wardens patrolling the area but there may be scope to use technology such as text alerts in some instances to serve this function.

For horse riders in particular, access is a key issue and several mentioned that gates within local greenspaces often posed problems, even if they had been designed with horse riders in mind.

Clearly, the challenge facing Central Scotland Forest Trust and other regeneration agencies when considering greenspace development will be in providing that "little bit of everything". Inevitably in many greenspaces it will be impossible to meet the different needs of all users. It will, therefore, be important to consider each greenspace area individually in terms of who the core user group or target audience will be and what the space will primarily be used for, so that an optimum strategy can be developed.

This research was commissioned by the Central Scotland Forest Trust and undertaken by *Progressive*. For more information please log on to www.csft.org.uk and click on the link 'publications'.