Exploring attitudes, experiences and actions among private land managers towards public access in woodlands

Report of the British Woodlands Survey 2024

2024 BRITISH WOODLANDS SURVEY

Contents

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SYLVA FOUNDATION

Forest Research

Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

Survey population

467 responses
– 79% England
– 3% Wales
– 8% Scotland

Majority 87% were woodland owners.

56% of the privately-owned woodland area in Britain.

Total area represented 1.3Mha across Britain.

Litter was a significant problem for many woodland owners.

Provision of access

In England, 2/3 of land managers had public access in their woodlands.

Many woodland owners welcome one-off requests for access.

53% of woodland owners in England had statutory public access.

A majority provided permissive access to help link with public access.

1/5 of woodland owners in Britain thought that their woodlands were accessible via public transport.

Land managers in England were concerned that public access impacts biodiversity, particularly breeding birds and mammals.

Experiences and perceptions

Positive:

Visitors help keep an eye on the woodland.

Help support a community of people.

An opportunity to educate people about the natural environment.

Negative:

Most land managers in England (57%) believed that public access had a negative effect on commercial activities.

Dog fouling and dogs disturbing wildlife were a concern to many land managers.

54% of woodland owners reported minor inconveniences, and 27% a few major problems due to public access.

Land managers with strong pro-ecological worldviews more likely to believe that public accessing woodlands have a negative impact on biodiversity.

Barriers and opportunities

91% of land managers believed that access to woodlands generally was beneficial for human health and wellbeing.

Woodland owners were moderately influenced by public attitudes when managing wildlife.

Supporting and incentivising

Incentive grants prioritised over funding for materials, which was prioritised over advice and guidance.

7% in England had received grants promoting public access.

79% were not in favour of more advice and guidance.

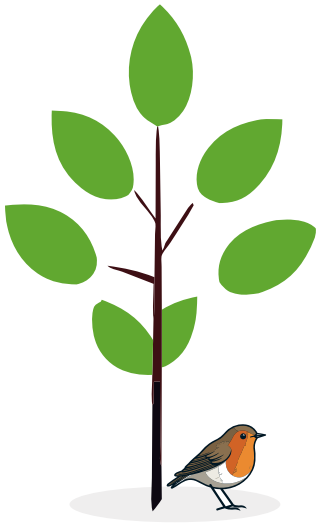
Land managers thought Government should provide compensation for providing access rather than charging the public.

Only 5% of owners would accept compensation less than the costs of providing public access.

Executive summary

Survey population

BWS2024 was commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) to explore attitudes, experiences and actions among private land managers towards public access in woodlands with a view to providing evidence to support policy development. An online survey was open to participants for 10 weeks during summer 2024 and promoted to landowners and tenants with woodland, agents, businesses (who own or lease woodland) and forestry professionals. A total of 467 usable submissions were received, 79% of which were from respondents in England, 13% in Wales and 8% in Scotland. Among all Land Managers (Owners, Tenants, Businesses, Agents), Owners (Owners, Tenants, Businesses) made up the majority (87%), the remainder were Agents (13%). The total land area represented by Land Managers across Britain was 1.3M ha, broadly evenly distributed across the three countries, which represents 56% of the privately-owned woodland area in Britain.



The principal aims for woodlands among Owners in England was to protect or improve nature or biological diversity, followed by personal pleasure, and to protect and improve the landscape. Land Managers' woodlands were mostly broadleaved or mixed woodland, with higher proportions of mainly coniferous woodlands in Scotland and Wales. About two-thirds of woodland Owners across Britain had a management plan in place, among which 69% said these were compliant with the UK Forestry Standard. Among all respondents, the majority held strong pro-ecological worldviews. Limitations inherent in any online survey mainly relate to representativeness, and to interpretation of questions and responses, but comparisons with previous BWS results support the view that in this survey (BWS2024) the response biases are limited.

Provision of access

In England, two-thirds of Land Managers had public access in their woodlands, 53% had statutory public access, while a wide variety of permissive or informal access was provided. A majority reported providing permissive access to help connect to public access. One-fifth (23%) of Land Managers in Britain thought that their woodlands were accessible via public transport. Woodland Owners reported that they provided many features to support access, especially paths, gates and signage. A majority of Owners in England reported that there had been access through their woodlands for at least 75 years.

Experiences and perceptions

There were contrasting attitudes towards public access to woodlands between Agents and Owners, with Agents viewing public access more favourably. A majority of Owners did not welcome people coming into their woodland, although many were willing to accommodate one-off requests for access. Land Managers detailed problems concerning public access to their woodlands, with a majority (54%) reporting at least minor inconveniences or worse. Litter was overall most often seen as a major problem, with 52% of Land Managers indicating that it caused a few major problems or worse. Land Managers in England believed that public access had a moderate negative impact on a woodland's biodiversity, particularly the disturbance of breeding birds and mammals, and the trampling of plants. Comments received expanded on these issues, were often forthright and passionate. Other comments highlighted the benefits of public access, among these were that visitors can help keep an eye on the woodland, support a community of people, and provide an opportunity to educate people about the natural environment. Most Land Managers in England (57%) believed that public access had a negative effect on commercial activities in their woodlands, and only 6% believed it had a positive effect (37% were unsure). Such a viewpoint was more apparent among respondents with strong pro-ecological worldviews.

Barriers and opportunities

Among Owners in England a wide range of reasons were offered by those without any form of access as to why they believed their woodlands were unsuitable for public access, including: conservation of wildlife and protection of biodiversity, safety and liability concerns, privacy and security concerns, practical land management reasons, size or suitability of the land, general negative views on public impact, and simply personal preference. Overall, public attitudes only affected woodland management practice to a moderate degree, mostly relating to managing wildlife. The majority (91%) of Land Managers thought that access to woodlands generally was beneficial for health and wellbeing in particular, while other important benefits recognised included its value for education and learning, nature and landscape connections, and promoting understanding and support for nature recovery or conservation. There was moderate support among Owners for the suggestion that the public should have access to a woodland close to where they live.

Supporting and incentivising

The survey explored access-related activities carried out in woodlands and the resources required to complete these by woodland Owners. The most frequent task reported was clearing paths, followed by litter collection and making repairs following vandalism. Most Owners completed this work themselves. Most Land Managers (79%) suggested that more advice and guidance offered to them on providing public access would not be useful, although specific topics were indicated by some respondents, especially concerning liability and legal issues. A minority (7%) of Land Managers in England had been in receipt of any grants promoting public access. Feedback on why the percentage was low revealed a range of reasons, including ineligibility, lack of awareness, bureaucracy, and grant payment amounts. We provided questions putting Land Managers in the role of a policy maker with limited resources. The majority favoured incentive grants more than funding for materials, while advice and guidance attracted the least support (less than half the value of incentive grants). Land Managers mildly disagreed with the notion that the public should pay for access, instead suggesting that government should compensate them for maintaining and establishing public access. Asked if an economic incentive was available to compensate the Owner for providing public access in their woodland, 49% were not interested while 30% might potentially be interested.

The BWS2024 results illuminate the multifaceted challenges of managing public access to private woodlands in Britain. A balanced policy approach that incorporates environmental priorities, public health benefits, and effective financial support will facilitate sustainable access, respecting both public interest and the unique responsibilities of woodland owners and managers. Further research could explore the impact of public behaviour, funding options, and ecological sensitivity on woodland access, informing policy refinements to support both environmental stewardship and public enjoyment of these green spaces.

Introduction

About the British Woodlands Survey

The British Woodlands Survey (BWS) gathers evidence about Britain's woodlands and those who care for them. The BWS provides an evidence base on which future policies and practice can be developed. The BWS is coordinated by Sylva Foundation, supported by a large number of organisations. Summary results are routinely published in a report and made freely available. Where possible data collected are also used to support peer-reviewed scientific research.

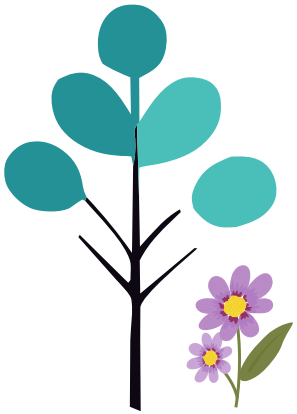
For more information visit: www.sylva.org.uk/bws

History of the BWS

The first British Woodlands Survey was held in 2012 which itself built upon a long-term series of surveys (from 1963 to 2005) undertaken by the Department of Land Economy at the University of Cambridge. The BWS is designed to be flexible, allowing one-off or repeatable surveys on specific themes, and general surveys, but always with the intention of regular engagement with a growing population of respondents.

To date the surveys completed include:

- BWS2012 – General Survey
- BWS2014 – Ancient Woodlands
- BWS2015 – Environmental Change
- BWS2017 – General Survey
- BWS2020 – Environmental Change
- BWS2021 – Oak Tree Health



About Public Access

There are multiple types of public access in England and Wales, including public rights of way, permissive access and open access land. In Scotland, legislation provides a statutory right of responsible access to most land.

Public rights of way (Statutory access)

These are linear routes that are legally protected and most are maintained by Highway Authorities. There are four types of linear public rights of way:

1. **Footpath:** For walking, running, and using mobility aids including scooters or powered wheelchairs;
2. **Bridleway:** For walking, horse riding, cycling, and using mobility aids including scooters or powered wheelchairs;
3. **Restricted byway:** for any transport without a motor and mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs;
4. **Byway open to all traffic (BOAT):** For any kind of transport, including cars, but they're mainly used by walkers, cyclists, and horse riders.

Open access land

Open access land are areas (including mountains, moors, heaths, and downs) over which the public can exercise a right to roam, originating in The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000. 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

Permissive access refers to routes or an area of land that a landowner has granted permission for the public to use. A landowner may also grant permission to a specific group of people to access some of their land, sometimes for a specific designated purpose.

Survey Scope and Purpose

Sylva Foundation was commissioned to complete this research project (BWS2024) by Defra under the Nature for Climate Fund to support the England Trees Action Plan (see more below) and the Woodland Action Implementation Plan (Defra 2023), working in collaboration with Forest Research.

Given historic engagement with stakeholders under the BWS across England, Scotland and Wales, researchers were also keen to gather information from respondents in Scotland and Wales to provide wider context and where possible to understand any differences within the different legal and social contexts. This is particularly the case in Scotland, where long-standing access arrangements were formalised in The Land Reform Act 2003 (Scotland) which gives everyone rights of access over land and inland water throughout Scotland. The Welsh Government funded the translation of the survey into Cymraeg to support responses from those in Wales.

The England Trees Action Plan (Defra 2021), published under a previous government, aimed to support access to trees and woodlands, with Action 4.3 committing to: 'Ensure the provision of safe and appropriate public access is a feature of as many woodlands as possible and work with landowners and woodland users to develop and implement a plan to improve the quantity, quality and permanency of public access to new and existing woodlands'. The Woodland Access Implementation Plan (England) sets out ambitions to support the delivery of this aim.

BWS2024 is part of a wider research project gathering evidence to understand and support public access to woodlands in England. Other work packages include: updating data and maps detailing accessible woodlands across England; and, exploring how to enable and encourage access to woodlands for diverse publics. Further detail can be found at the project webpage[1].

For these reasons, this report mainly focuses on presenting the results from respondents in England, and where necessary highlights data from respondents in Scotland and Wales where these provide helpful comparisons.

> "Ensure the provision of safe and appropriate public access is a feature of as many woodlands as possible."

1 www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/understanding-and-supporting-public-access-to-woodlands

Research method

The Survey

An online survey was opened to participants for 10 weeks (July – September 2024). People were invited to participate in a structured online survey, built in LimeSurvey, an open-source survey tool (www.limesurvey.org), Cloud Version 6.6.5. The survey was presented in English and Cymraeg. It was designed to operate on desktop computers as well as mobile devices such as phones and tablets. It was hosted online by Sylva Foundation at www.sylva.org.uk/bws.

The survey consisted of 151 questions in 11 groups, organised within sections of relevance to four distinct types of respondent: Woodland Owners (including tenants and other land managers); Agents; forest-related Businesses; and Professionals with an academic or policy interest in forests. Respondents were routed through the survey according to this categorisation.

Questions for the survey were developed through an iterative process, involving people with varied interests in public access. Some of the questions were adapted from previous survey questions on related topics published in the academic literature. The survey comprised a range of question types: multiple-choice, single-choice array, Likert scale, ranking, numerical input, and free-text comment. Very few questions were mandatory. The benefit to those taking part in the survey is that it improves the experience – feedback from previous surveys spoke of some frustration in being required to answer all questions, whether of interest or not to the respondent – and reduces the time taken to complete the survey. However, this clearly has some implications for analysis: numbers responding to each question vary slightly throughout the survey. In the following results section, the number of respondents is shown in brackets (n) to clarify this point. Where data from two questions are compared (for example, exploring differences between respondents in Wales, Scotland and England), data had to be provided on location in addition to data in the question under consideration, and the number of responses available for analysis is therefore slightly lower than the total number who answered each question. Limitations are explained in Box 1.

Box 1: Limitations of the survey

In conducting this type of survey research, there are a number of considerations to take into account when interpreting the findings.

The main considerations are:

1. The data reflects the views only of those who participated in the survey. We recognise that there are always those who do not or cannot engage.

2. The survey was only available to those willing to respond online.

3. We recognise the possibility of respondent-bias, particularly for those questions that attempted to ascertain economic costs, and biases related to interpretation of the framing of a question, such as complexities over timescales and other variable factors.

4. Although the survey took on average 40 minutes to complete (median 28 minutes), many respondents spent considerably longer on it. As with all surveys with non-mandatory questions, there was some evidence of survey attrition (lower response rates towards the end of the survey). Randomising questions, one of the best ways of reducing attrition, was not possible because of the complex routing devised to offer different questions to different types of respondent, although randomisation was used wherever possible within individual questions with multiple answers. However, attrition was lower than in some previous surveys, with 70% of the starting number of respondents still providing input at the last question which was available to all respondents (i.e. not subject to reduced participation owing to routing).

5. The results analysed are those received from respondents; with minor exceptions where there were obvious discrepancies, no attempt was made to verify data reported.

Statistical Analysis

The main variables against which many responses were explored further were: aims for management; presence of public access, and; woodland size.

We used descriptive statistics to describe responses, reporting counts, percentages and median values for the response categories of ordinal and categorical variables. Barplots have been used to describe these categorical and ordinal variables, and boxplots to compare the distributions across variables.

Analyses of New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) data were conducted by converting a respondent's NEP Likert answers to numeric values (1 to 5) and a mean calculated. Data from Agents and Owners were combined, and not analysed separately. Welch t-tests were performed to test if subsets of answers to specific questions exhibited significantly different NEP scores. Welch t-tests were chosen as they are more reliable for samples of differing sample sizes or sample variances. When t-testing a subset, the subgroup was tested against the overall group that did not include the subset to ensure that the assumption of independence was satisfied for the t-test. Tests involving subgroups of insufficient size (n<20) were omitted. For all tests and models a significance level of 0.05 was set.

"We used descriptive statistics to describe responses, reporting counts, percentages and median values for the response categories of ordinal and categorical variables."

Results

Survey Population
Characterisation of respondents

Frequency and distribution

The total number of people responding to the survey was 618. Among these, 151 provided no information about which category of respondent they were and were therefore excluded from further analysis, resulting in a usable population size of 467, hereon described as 'respondents'.

Respondents were distributed across Great Britain with most (79%) overall from England (Table 1), and in terms of region, from South-West England (Figure 1). They represented each of five categories:

- **Agent** (45) – described in the survey as Advisor/Agent: act on behalf of an owner of woodland (a single woodland property or multiple woodland properties).
- **Owner** (310)– Individual owner: own land containing woodland (a single woodland property or multiple woodland properties).
- **Tenant** (8) – Tenant: lease land containing woodland (a single woodland property or multiple woodland properties).
- **Business** (20) – Organisation/Business: own or lease woodland to support business operations.
- **Professional** (84) – Professional: professional or personal interest in forests and forestry in the UK.

The three woodland owner types (Owner, Tenant and Business) have mostly been combined for analyses and are simply termed **'Owner'.** In some instances, Agents have been added to the Owners, Tenants and Businesses) in which case we adopt the term **'Land Manager'.**

Table 1: *Geography of responses to the British Woodlands Survey 2024 by number of Land Managers, and woodland properties owned/managed.*

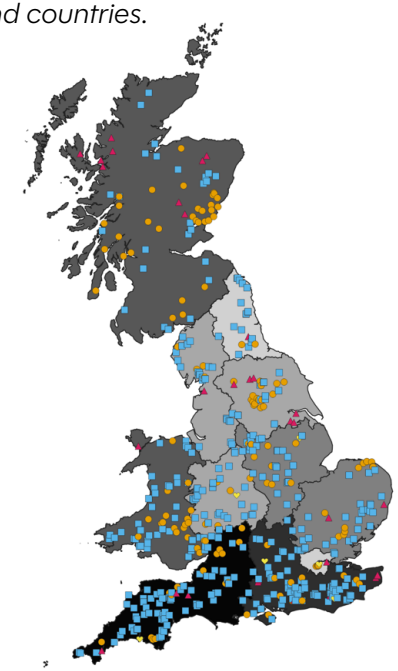
	Land Managers			Area of woodland owned/managed		TOTAL	
	Owners	Agents		Owners	Agents	All	
	n	n	%	ha	ha	ha	%
Wales	45	6	13	1,847	423,151	424,998	32
England	274	37	79	10,856	432,524	443,381	34
Scotland	26	7	8	49,725	40,4070	453,795	34
Total	***310**	***45**		**62,428**	**1,259,745**	**1,322,173**	
%	87	13		5	95		

* Some Owners and Agents own or manage land in more than one country, therefore totals reported for Britain are less than the sum of individual countries.

Figure 1: *Distribution and frequency of British Woodlands Survey 2024 respondent types (n=467) by regions and countries.*

Respondent Type			
	Agent		Business
	Owner		Tenant

Number of Woodlands Owned/ Managed by Respondents per Region
0
1-20
21-40
41-60
61-80
81-100
101+



Aims for woodland

Woodland Owners (including owners, tenants and businesses) were asked to indicate the relative importance of their aims for their woodland, each scored between 0–10. Figure 2 summarises the results, which indicate that *Protecting/improving nature or biological diversity* was ranked as the most important motive, (median 9; mean 8.1), followed by *Personal pleasure* (median 9; mean 7.8). The motivations ranked lowest in importance were *Non-timber forest products* (median 2; mean 2.6) and *Hunting/shooting* (median 1; mean 2.1). Scores were very similar to those recorded in 2020, but with an increase in the number of respondents who provided details of *Other* aims. Other aims reported were diverse, although two distinct categories emerged: *Education and Community Engagement* and *Research and Experimentation.*

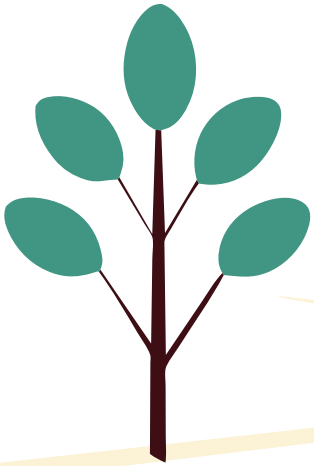
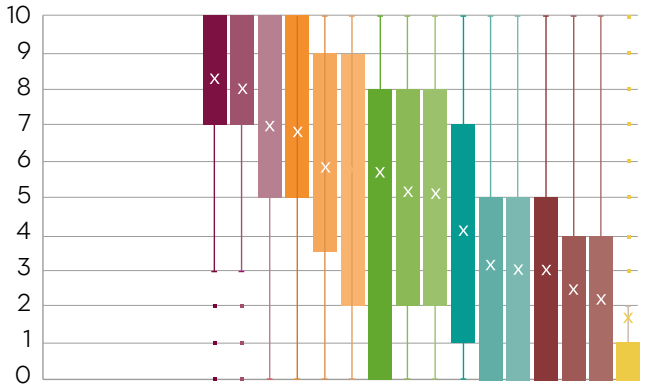


Figure 2: *Aims for woodlands among Owners (n=265) in England, where 0 is low importance and 10 high importance. The mean value is indicated by 'X', the shaded box shows the distribution of the upper and lower quartiles, the lines show the full range, and dots indicate outliers.*



Importance: low (0) to high (10)

- Protect/improve nature, biological diversity, wildlife habitat
- Personal pleasure
- Protect/improve the landscape
- My own health and well-being
- Provision of all ecosystem services generally
- Pass land on to my children or other heirs
- Recreation
- Carbon capture and storage
- Wood products (timber, bioenergy, woodfuel, etc.)
- Protect/improve water resources
- Capital growth/investment
- Screening – from noise, pollution, etc.
- Promote the health and well-being of the public
- Non-timber forest products (berries, edible fungi, nuts, etc.)
- Hunting/shooting
- Other

Collaboration and networking

Respondents were asked to provide information about their membership of a number of organisations. Responses of 421 Owners, Agents and Professional respondents across Britain are shown in Figure 3. The most frequently reported 'Other' organisations were: Arboricultural Association, Continuous Cover Forestry Group, National Coppice Federation, and Small Woodland Owners Group. 131 (31%) respondents did not declare membership with any of the listed membership organisations.

Owners were asked whether they currently collaborated with other owners, or would do so in the future, for a range of activities (Figure 4). Among future activities, 327 Owners were most likely to collaborate with others to *Share knowledge and expertise*, followed by to *Control pests and diseases*, and to *Achieve economies of scale relating to woodland management*. Overall, there was more desire for future collaboration across all activities than there was at the current time.

Figure 3: *Count of memberships held by respondents (n=421) in Britain to the British Woodlands Survey 2024.*

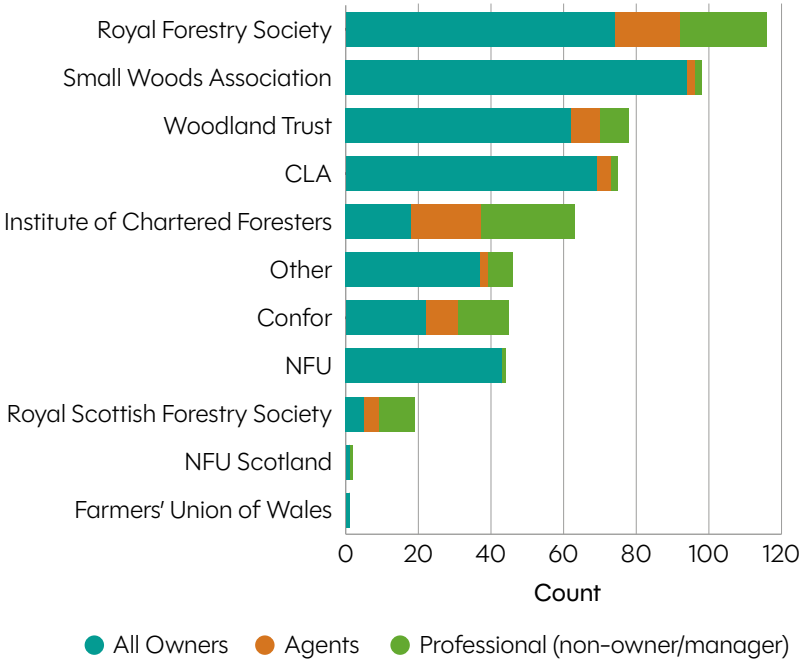
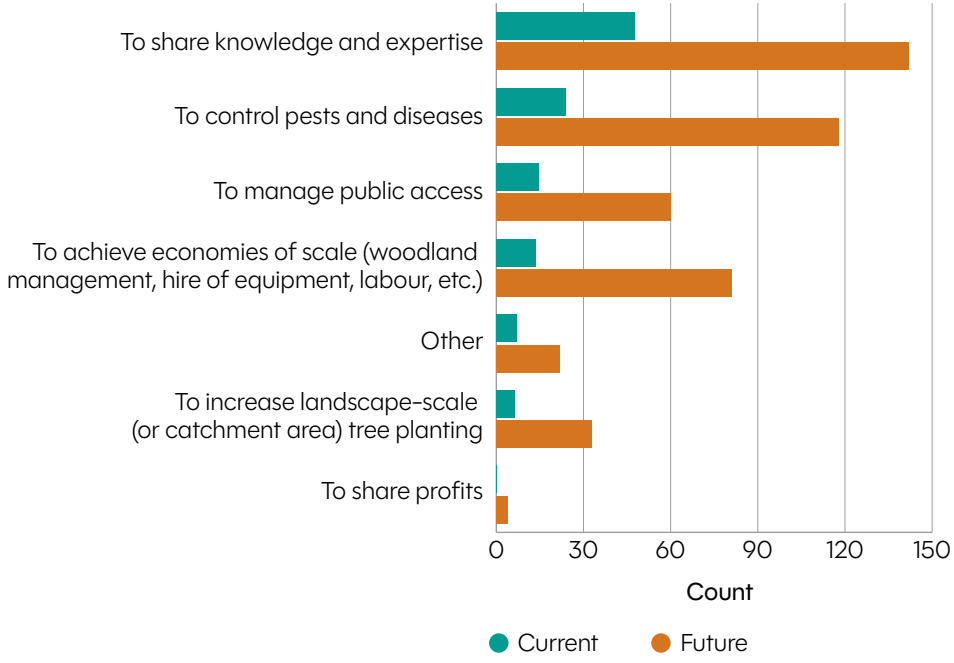


Figure 4: *Count of reasons for collaboration, current and future, among woodland Owners (n=327) in Britain.*



Ecological Worldviews

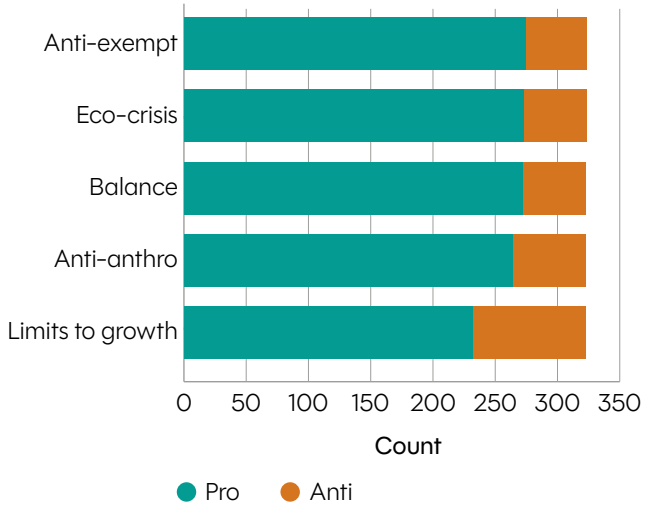
All respondents were asked whether they agreed/disagreed with a series of statements based on the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) scale developed by Dunlap et al. (2000). This is a well-established scale used by researchers to assess people's underlying ecological worldviews. It provides 15 statements (also termed 'items') eight of which are pro-ecological and seven anti-ecological, distributed across five discernible, but interrelated, 'facets': *Anti-anthropocentrism* (rejecting the idea that humanity has the right to rule over nature; Anti-anthro); the *Fragility of nature's balance* (Balance); the *Rejection of exemptionalism* (rejecting the idea that humans are exempt from the constraints of nature; Anti-exempt); the *Possibility of an ecocrisis* (Ecocrisis); and, the reality of *Limits to growth* (Limits). For a more detailed explanation, see Supplementary Material, Table 1: sylva.org.uk/bws).

A total of 323 respondents completed this section, which required all 15 questions to be answered. NEP scores could range from 1 to 5, where 5 is strongly pro-ecological. The mean NEP score was 3.94 (min. 2.0; max. 5.0) among all respondents, meaning that on average respondents held moderately strong pro-ecological worldviews (i.e. >3.0).

The proportion of respondents holding Pro worldviews was greatest for Anti-exempt facets (274), followed by Eco-crisis (273), Balance (272), Anti-anthro (264), and Limits to growth (232) (Figure 5).

NEP scores were applied subsequently to understand more deeply how respondents' ecological worldviews may have influenced their answers to a limited number of questions.

Figure 5: *Distribution of 323 responses in Britain to the British Woodlands Survey 2024 across the five facets of the New Ecological Paradigm, split by Pro vs Anti ecological worldviews.*



Characterisation of Woodlands

Woodland area

The sampling of BWS2024 represented an area of woodland owned or managed by Owners or their Agents totalling 1,322,173 ha (Table 1) which represents 56% of the area of privately-owned woodland area in Great Britain (Forestry Commission 2024). In terms of total area of woodland, respondents were evenly distributed across the three countries (Table 1), although the largest area among Owners was in Scotland.

A total of 326 Owners provided area data for woodlands they owned totalling 62,428 ha, ranging in size from 0.25 ha to almost 19,000 ha (mean 82 ha, median 3 ha). Forty-three Agents managing woodlands for others declared that they were responsible for managing 1,259,745 ha, ranging in size from 0.8 ha to 400,000 ha (mean 11,559 ha, median 342 ha). These figures are somewhat higher than in previous British Woodlands Surveys. It is important to stress that, as usual with BWS surveys, these are not inventory data, and cannot be verified independently, nor can we be certain that a very small number of woodlands are not counted more than once (i.e. reported separately by both an Agent and Owner).

Woodland type

Similar to previous BWS surveys, woodland type across Britain was strongly dominated by those with *Mainly broadleaved* (60%) and those reporting a *Mixture of broadleaved and conifer* (35%; where at least 20% of one type was present), while 5% of respondents had *Mainly conifer* (Table 2). The most recent national statistics for England, Scotland, and Wales (Forestry Commission 2024), describe private woodlands as comprising 63% broadleaves and 27% conifers (there is no mixed category), indicating that our survey response was broadly representative. Woodland type varied across the three countries with higher proportions of *Mixture of broadleaved and conifer* and *Mainly conifer* reported by respondents in Scotland and Wales compared to England.

Table 2: *Characterisation of woodland types (percentage) among respondents overall by the three countries.*

	Mainly broadleaved %	Mixture of broadleaved and conifer %	Mainly conifer %
Overall (GB)	**60**	**35**	**5**
England	66	32	2
Scotland	28	56	16
Wales	42	42	17

Woodland Management Standards

Among all Owners (Britain) who answered questions about management plans (308), 58% had a woodland management plan in place. This result is similar to the 59% reported in 2020 (Hemery et al. 2020). Among those who did have a plan in place, 69% of these were UKFS-compliant, 23% were not, and 9% were unsure. Table 3 presents results for Britain alongside those for each country which shows that England and Scotland were broadly similar, whilst Owners in Wales were less likely to have a management plan in place, with a minority (23%) of these UKFS-compliant.

Table 3: *Percentage of a management plan being in place among Owners, overall and across the three countries. When YES, the percentage of these management plans that were UKFS-compliant is shown in brackets.*

	Yes %	No %	Unsure %
Overall (GB)	**58 (69 UKFS)**	**38**	**3**
England	59 (72 UKFS)	56	16
Scotland	**62 (69 UKFS)**	38	3
Wales	43 (23 UKFS)	54	3

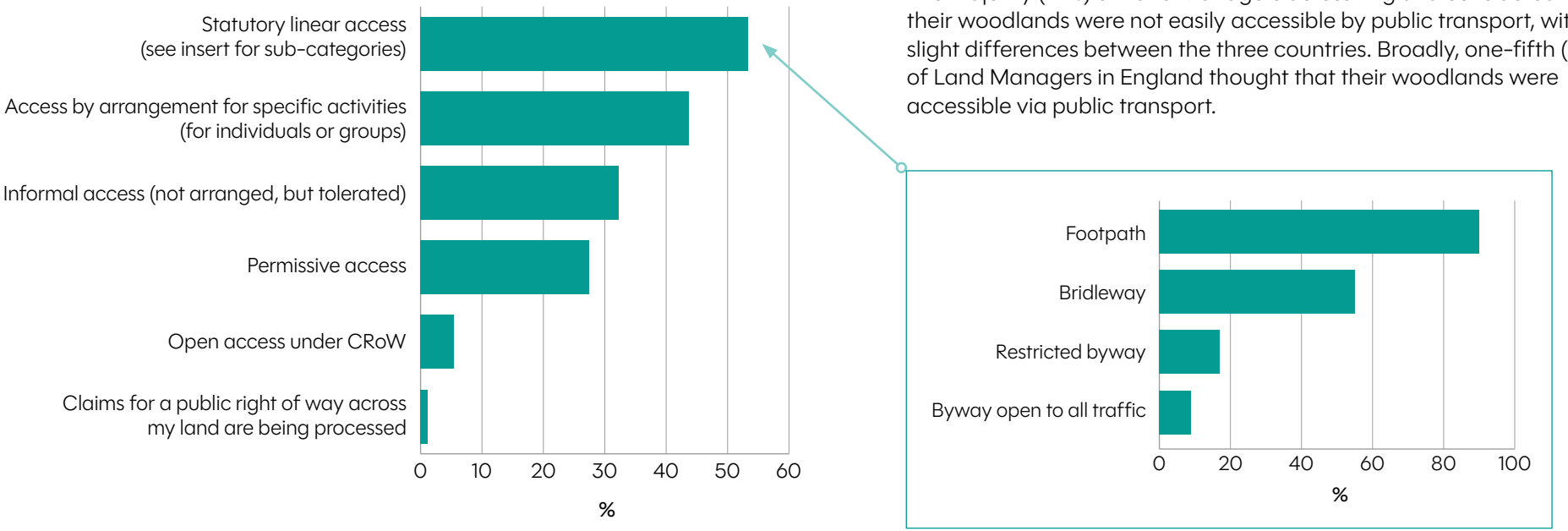
Provision of Access

Access types

In England, one-third (32%) of 245 Land Managers (Agent, Owner, Tenant and Business) reported that there was no access (statutory or permissive) to woodlands under their care. For the remainder, there were a wide range of different types of access, from statutory, to permissive or informal. Statutory linear access (footpath, bridleway, byway and BOAT) was provided by 53% of Land Managers, of which:

- **Footpath:** 81% on own land; 73% on adjacent land
- **Bridleway:** 53% on own land; 55% on adjacent land
- **Restricted byway:** 18% on own land; 22% on adjacent land
- **Byway open to all traffic (BOAT):** 10% on own land; 15% on adjacent land.

Figure 6: *Types of access in woodlands owned and managed by Land Managers (n=245) in England (% frequency). Inset graph shows proportions of specific statutory linear public rights of way.*



A majority (53%) of Land Managers in England had some form of statutory access (linear or open area), while a range of other access types were provided (Figure 6). Among 46 Land Managers who provided further details on permissive access they provided, they were most likely to currently offer a footpath (59%) or bridleway (28%). Among 43 Land Managers in England, 11 (26%) indicated that they had a formal agreement in place for dealing with permissive access, with the few who provided details mentioning: permissive horse riding, stalking/shooting; entrance on a payment basis; camping; access to Air BnB guests, and; access for owners of neighbouring woodlands.

Access history

Owners in England were asked how long there had been access (unspecified) in their woodland, and the majority (55%, of 155 respondents) reported that there had been access for at least 75 years (i.e. since the Rights of Way Act 1932). One-fifth reported that there had only been access for the last five years, and a similar proportion provided a range of time (9- 63 years) with a mean value of 28 years.

Access connectivity

The majority (71%) of Land Managers across England considered that their woodlands were not easily accessible by public transport, with only slight differences between the three countries. Broadly, one-fifth (21%) of Land Managers in England thought that their woodlands were accessible via public transport.

Land Managers were asked whether they currently voluntarily provided access for a range of connectivity reasons, and whether they might offer these in future. A total of 100 Land Managers in England reported providing access for at least one of the reasons, and 62 Land Managers reported that they might provide access in the future. A majority (57%) in England reported providing permissive access through a woodland that *Links with a public right of way outside the woodland, Providing access to link with a public road* (41%), and *Connecting with another accessible woodland* (28%). In general, there were fewer respondents reporting interest in future access provision, although 18% indicated an interest in increasing provision compared with the current situation, half of whom related to access that *Links with a public right of way outside the woodland.*

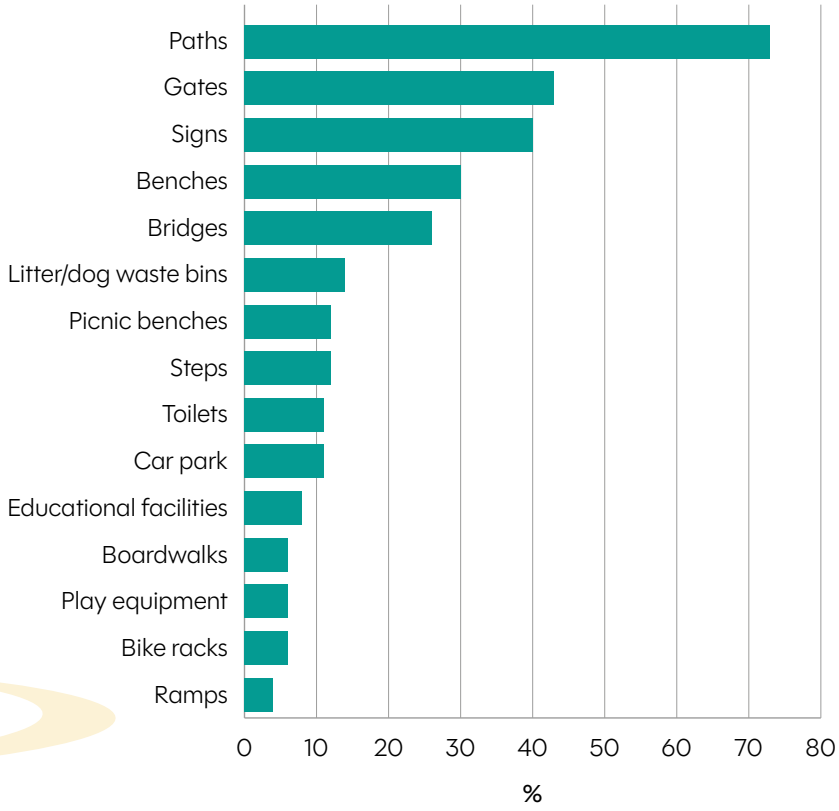
Among Land Managers in Wales (n=14), *Providing access to link with a public road* (50%) was the most frequent type of permissive access, followed by *Linking with other accessible woodlands* (43%), and *Providing off-road car parking* (36%).

> "Broadly, one-fifth (21%) of Land Managers in England thought that their woodlands were accessible via public transport."

Access infrastructure

Owners in England (n=245) detailed a wide variety of access infrastructure features that they managed to support public access in their woodlands. The majority of Owners (71%) currently provide *Paths,* plus 43% provide *Gates,* 40% *Signs* (Figure 7).

Figure 7: *Percentages of types of infrastructure provided by 245 Owners in England to support public access in their woodlands.*



Experiences and Perceptions of Access

Attitudes Towards the Public Accessing Woodland

Public access can take many different forms, both formal legal or permitted access through to informal access whether allowed or tolerated, all of which are distinct from people accessing land when they are not supposed to (*i.e.* civil trespass).

We explored the attitudes of Owners and Agents in England towards public access in their woodland by asking about their agreement (Likert -5 to +5) with five statements (Figure 8). Overall, there were clear differences between median responses from the 236 Agents and Owners who answered this question. Agents viewed public access more favourably and were strongly against *I would prefer to exclude all public access to my woodland,* whilst Owners were neutral to this statement. Conversely, a majority of Owners disagreed with the statement: *I welcome people coming into my woodland.* The one statement that Owners supported was *Willingness to accommodate one-off requests for access.*

Experiences with problems relating to the public in woodlands

We asked Land Managers in England and Wales whether they had experienced any problems relating to trespass in woodlands that they own or manage. Trespass can be considered a social issue rather than one inherent in public access provision, but can stem from public access provision (e.g. people straying off public rights of way). In England (n=288), the majority (54%) of Land Managers reported *Minor inconvenience* with trespass, followed by 27% *A few major inconveniences,* 13% *No problems,* 5% *Many major problems* and 2% *Very severe problems* (Figure 9). There were differences between different respondent types, with Agents twice as likely to report *A few major problems* with trespass compared to *Minor inconveniences,* whilst Owners were the opposite. Among Land Managers in Wales (n=41), fewer reported *A few major problems* with trespass compared to those in England. Proportionally, more than twice as many Land Managers in Wales reported *No problems* with trespass.

Figure 8: *Median values for the extent of agreement (+5)/disagreement (-5) for a range of statements concerning public access to woodlands among 236 Owners and Agents in England.*

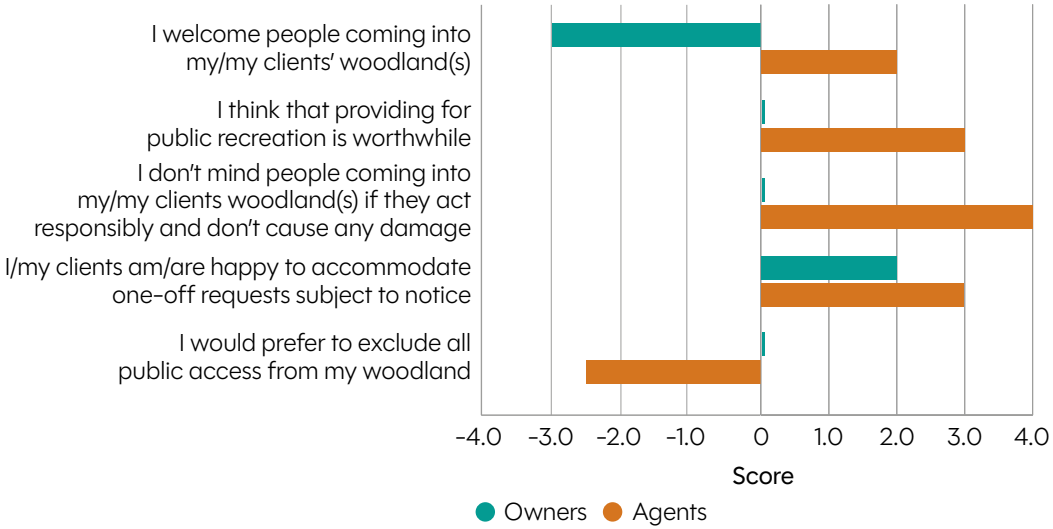
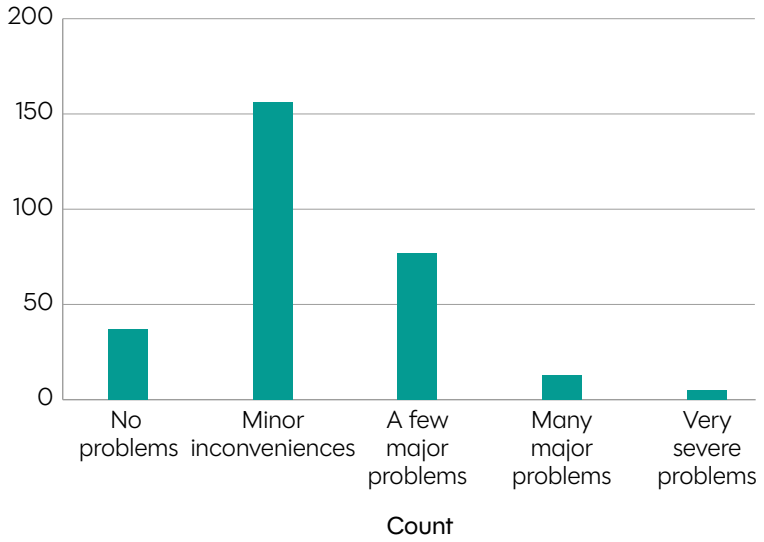


Figure 9: *Experiences of problems (count) relating to trespass in woods by 288 Land Managers in England.*



Among a range of factors provided to respondents which might have been considered a problem, *Litter* was most often seen as a major problem overall by Owners (n=144), with 52% indicating that it caused a *Few Major Problems* or worse (Figure 10). Other issues which were considered major to different degrees included: *Visitors in non-access areas* (51%), *Damage to property* (47%), and *Adverse impact on privacy* (41%). Conversely, among issues rarely considered a problem were *Insurance claims* (10%, combined major), *Claims about legal status of permitted routes* (18%), and *Pests and diseases* (21%).

In addition, 121 Owners and 20 Agents provided further information about impacts of public access on woodlands, both positive and negative. Among positive comments, respondents mentioned the sense of community and connection, such as "a wonderful community network" that it has supported for one respondent, and how the public provides the "eyes and ears reporting negative behaviour and safety issues". Public education and awareness was another positive theme, especially "more opportunity to educate [people] about the natural environment". Respondents also commented on how access to nature for health and well-being has benefits, and positive social impacts.

There were many negative comments received on a range of themes, including: environmental impacts, privacy and safety concerns, management challenges, financial and opportunity costs, and negative public behaviour. Comments are summarised further in Supplementary Material, Table 2: sylva.org.uk/bws.

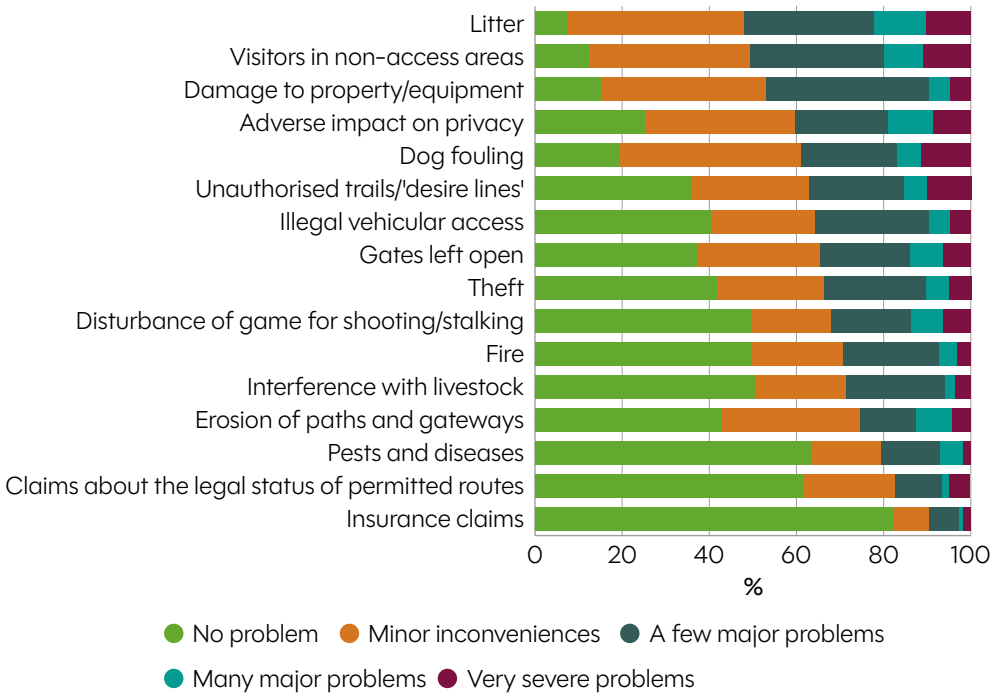
Many comments related to problems with dogs, attitudes of visitors, and the impacts felt by owners themselves, for example:

"Free-running dogs disturbing ground-nesting birds and wildlife, general disturbance of wildlife, interference with predator control, and danger to sensitive species."

"Public access reduces the social and health benefits to the owners themselves."

"Some visitors showing a sense of entitlement to access the land without understanding the responsibilities of the landowner."

Figure 10: *Problems arising from public access experienced by 144 woodland Owners in England, ordered by total 'major problems' (i.e. combined A few major, Many major and Very severe problems) expressed as percentages.*



Land Managers were asked whether they thought public access has overall positive or negative effects on commercial activities in woodland. Most respondents in England (57%) believed that it had a negative effect, and only 6% believed it had a positive effect (37% were unsure).

We asked Land Managers whether they believed people accessing a woodland affected its biodiversity. Land Managers in England believed that it has a moderate negative impact (mean -2.5: range -5 strong negative, +5 strong positive). *Disturbing breeding birds and mammals* was the main impact (152 respondents), followed by *Trampling rare plants* (103). *Disrupting ability to control pests* was cited by 93 respondents.

We explored whether respondents thought it might be beneficial in their woodland(s) to attract visitors away from wildlife-rich areas and into less sensitive areas. Among 176 Land Managers, one-third (32%) believed that it might be *Beneficial*, but otherwise there were divided opinions (c.22% each) between *Not beneficial, Neutral,* and *Don't know.*

We further explored all respondents' views concerning the impacts of people accessing a woodland, by analysing and comparing respondents' ecological worldviews. There were no significant differences in concerns expressed between those with different ecological worldviews.

Barriers and Opportunities Relating to Access

We asked Owners in England why their woodland may be unsuitable for the public to access, and 65 comments were received. All comments were made by those Owners without any form of existing access, while one comment was received from an Owner who had provided voluntary access but subsequently withdrawn it. Generally, the comments were negative towards public access for a wide range of reasons (Supplementary Material Table 3: sylva.org.uk/bws) which are summarised as follows:

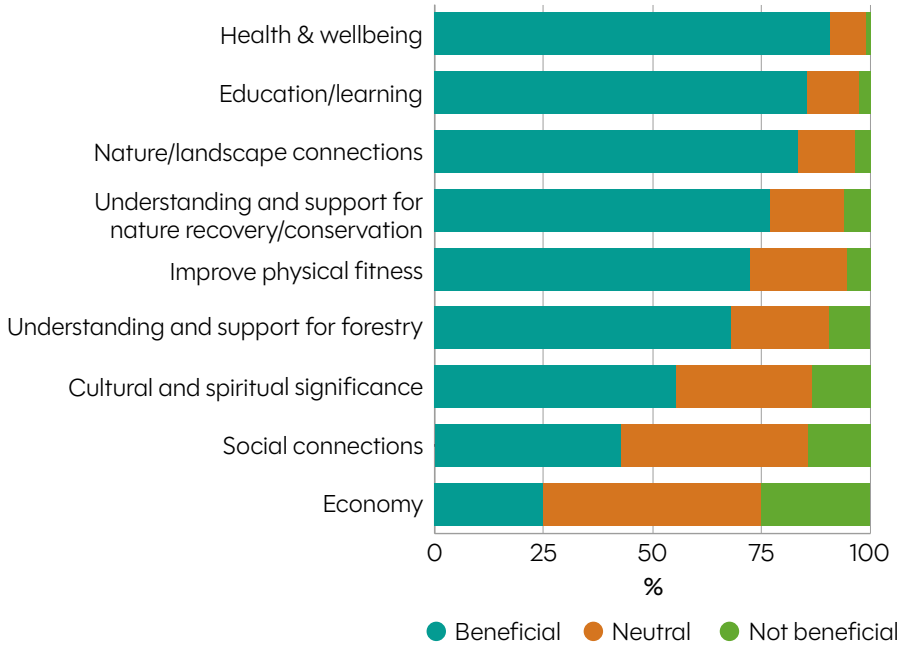
- Wildlife conservation and biodiversity protection
- Safety and liability concerns
- Privacy and security concerns
- Land management and practicality
- Size and suitability of land
- Negative public impact
- Personal preference

Six Owners from Wales provided comments, including geographic isolation, lack of public transport, steep and uneven slopes, and presence of fallen trees.

We asked how public attitudes may have affected woodland management activities in woodlands among Land Managers, ranging from (0) *Not at all* to (10) *A great deal.* Among all Land Managers in England, *Managing wildlife* was rated as the most affected, yet with a mean score of 5.4 this indicated only moderate influence, with other activities influenced even less, including: *Providing public access* (4.6), *Planting trees* (3.3), *Tree felling* (2.9), and *Extracting timber* (1.9).

We explored Land Managers' perceptions concerning the benefits for people to be in a woodland for a range of reasons. In England, most options provided in the survey were thought to be beneficial for people except *Economy* (only 25% of respondents thought it was beneficial) and *Social connections* (43%) (Figure 11). *Health and wellbeing* scored highest overall (91% thought it was beneficial), followed by *Education and learning* (85%), *Nature and landscape connections* (83%), and *Understanding and support for nature recovery/conservation* (77%).

Figure 11: *Perceptions among England Land Managers' (n=241) of the benefits for people to be in woodlands, illustrated as percentages.*



In terms of the importance of public access to woodland for different public groups, Land Managers in England believed it was most important for *Local education facilities* (7.2; where 0 is not important and 10 very important). *Interest group (e.g. wildlife, photography)* scored moderately highly (6.9), while *NHS-supported group* (e.g. 'social prescribing') scored 5.9, and *Community group/charity* scored 5.7. *Sports group* was thought less important (3.6).

We asked all respondents their opinion whether it was important that the public had access to a woodland under two options: Option 1 (at least 2 ha in size within 500 m); or Option 2 (at least 20 ha within 4 km of their homes). Overall, 254 respondents were of a neutral opinion. Agents were more supportive of both options (means 6.1 and 6.6 respectively; where 0 *Not important* and 10 *Very important*) than Owners (4.2 and 4.6). Professionals (n=54) were even more supportive, with means of 7.1 and 8.0 respectively.

We further explored responses to the same options by considering ecological worldview (NEP) among all respondents. Respondents with stronger pro-ecological worldviews were statistically more supportive of everyone having access to woodlands than respondents with lower ecological or anthropocentric worldviews.

All respondents were invited to submit one or more sentences of their own with similar aspirations by completing the sentence "Everyone [in the UK] should have access to...". In total, 217 sentences were provided. It was clear from the large number of suggestions made that the question captured the imaginations of respondents. Some of the suggestions lay outside the area of public access to woodland. Those that were relevant fell broadly into nine categories (Table 4).

Table 4: *Summary of themes derived from an invitation for all respondents to complete a sentence: "Everyone should have access to...".*

Theme	Explanation
Desired Types of Green Spaces	Preferences for specific types of accessible land, such as parks, rewilding areas, urban green spaces, or various sizes of woodlands.
Conservation and Environmental Priorities	Emphasis on protecting habitat quality, biodiversity, and minimising ecological disruption.
Accessibility and Proximity	Importance of proximity and accessibility standards, including walkable distances from homes to green spaces.
Public Behaviour and Respect for Nature	Comments about visitor conduct, advocating for respectful and responsible use of natural spaces, and protecting private property.
Education and Public Engagement	The role of public education and environmental awareness in fostering appreciation and responsible use of natural spaces.
Ownership and Control Over Land Access	Views on land ownership rights, public versus private access, and community-based management of green spaces.
Health and Well-being Benefits	Connection between green space access and mental/physical health benefits, like tranquillity, exercise, and general well-being.
Support and Resources for Landowners	Comments suggesting resources or incentives for landowners providing access, such as grants, management support, or compensation.
Broader Quality of Life Concerns	General considerations impacting quality of life, including housing, public services, clean air, and healthcare access.

Supporting and Incentivising Access

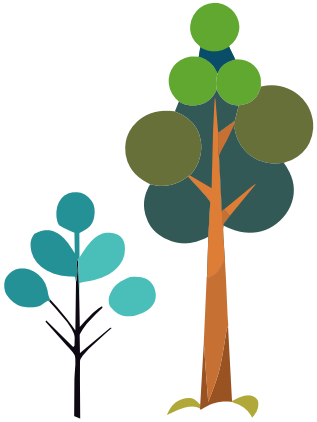
We explored connections between economic incentives with aims for management, presence of public access, or woodland size. In all cases, there were no statistically significant differences, meaning that none of these factors could explain responses about economic incentives.

Costs

Among those Owners who provided details of different facilities provided to support public access (p.15), we explored the costs of providing and maintaining these facilities both current and planned.

Owners were asked which activities associated with access they undertook currently and plan to undertake in future. In England, *Clearing paths, Litter collection* and *Repairs after vandalism* were the most frequent tasks both currently and in future. Among respondents with positive expenditure on public access infrastructure, mean establishment cost per ha was £668.28/ha (median: £25.24/ha).

Among 125 Owners in England who indicated they provided the labour for access-related work, most (41) answered that they completed it *Myself*, followed equally by *Family* (30) and *Contracted labour* (30). In Wales, again most did the work *Myself* (11), followed by *Family* (6), with only 3 using *Contracted labour,* in contrast with Scotland, where more respondents reported using *Contracted labour* (5) than either *Myself* (3) or *Family* (3). Of the *Other* sources of work across all nations, volunteers and community groups were most often mentioned.



Advice and Guidance

We asked Land Managers whether more advice and guidance on providing public access would be useful in general. Overall, 79% of all respondents in England answered that it would not be useful. Agents were more likely to find advice and guidance helpful (37%) than Owners (23%). Among those who were more inclined to favour advice and guidance, *Grant applications, Route markings* and *Visitor management* and *Development of access plans* were mentioned. In terms of specific advice or guidance mentioned, a number of comments were received (Supplementary Material, Table 4: sylva.org.uk/bws).

Grants and Incentives

We asked Land Managers in England whether they had received government grants to provide public access. Only 7% among 217 had received Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier funding, and 4% among 208 had received an England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO).

Among Owners who had not received any grants for public access, a number of reasons were selected. The majority (52%) answered *I am not creating new woodland,* while 34% replied *I have never heard of it* [either grant]. A smaller number (23%) answered, *The process is too bureaucratic.* 14% of Owners cited that they would prefer to provide access to *Only part of the woodland* (i.e. not all as EWCO requires). The same number (14%) thought that the grant was too small. A minority (11%) of respondents did not like the 30-year lock-in to providing public access. A minority (9%) believed that they were ineligible for any grants.

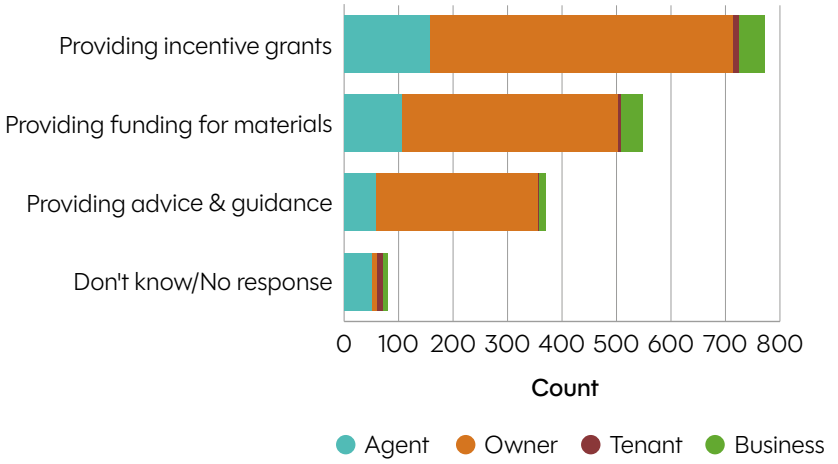
Land Managers were provided an opportunity to imagine a role as a policy maker with the ability to allocate limited resources (a total of 10 'beans') across *Providing incentive grants, Providing funding for materials,* and *Providing advice and guidance.* As Figure 12 reveals, among 252 respondents *Incentive grants* received the greatest allocation of resources, with a total score of 771 which was more than double (52% greater) the resources allocated to *Advice and guidance* (371), and 30% more (548) than *Funding for materials.* This further supports other findings which suggest that advice and guidance was considered a relatively low priority among Land Managers.

Land Managers in England provided an agreement score (Likert -5 to +5) for a range of financial statements related to providing public access to woodland. Overall, the option that *It is too costly for me to provide access* was mildly agreed with (mean 1.5). The strongest agreement was that *Government should compensate me for maintaining access* (mean 2.4), followed by *Government should compensate me for establishing access* (2.2). Land Managers were less inclined (1.9) to agree that *Government should pay me a sum in addition to establishment and maintenance costs for access.* Overall, respondents mildly disagreed (-0.3) that *Visitors should pay to access my woodland.*

Separately, we asked if an economic incentive was available to compensate a landowner for providing public access in their woodland, how likely they might be interested in taking this up (-5 unlikely, +5 likely). Overall, Owners (202) were unlikely to be interested (median -2.0), with 76 (34%) reporting that they were not all likely to be interested, with 22 (10%) Owners reporting that they were highly likely. Another way of exploring these data is to consider those unlikely to be interested (scoring -1 or less) compared with those who might be interested (scoring +1 or more): 49% were not interested cv. 30% might be interested in an economic incentive.

Owners were informed "In the past, a scheme has been proposed to enable landowners to increase/provide access to their land for walkers for specific and time-limited periods (*e.g.* certain times of the year, or limited to x years)." We asked how likely it was that respondents would participate in such a scheme. Among 200 Owners in England, 54% replied *Not likely,* while 23% were *Likely,* 16% *Unsure* and 7% *Don't know.* Among the 46 Owners who responded *Likely,* Owners thought it was most important that any such scheme should cover public liability in full, followed by that a scheme reimbursed maintenance costs for any route, and the importance that the scheme should follow the Countryside Code.

Figure 12: *Distribution of resources by Land Managers in England (n=252) acting as a policy maker.*



Least important was that the scheme should be time-limited (*i.e.* non-permanent). In terms of compensation, there was a 50:50 split between those needing compensation greater than costs, and those needing equal or less than the costs, but only 5% would accept compensation less than the cost.

We asked Land Managers that if they were to consider providing, extending or enhancing existing access, how important, if at all, grants would be to support a range of activities (Figure 13) and also how helpful it would be to receive different types of advice and guidance (Figure 14). Scores were assigned to these response options: Important=5, neutral=0, Not important=-5. The activities with the highest scores among 194 respondents were for grants to support *Ongoing maintenance* (765) followed by *Support for insurance premiums* (725). Among 173 respondents to the advice and guidance question, *Advice and guidance for grant applications* (570), and *Grants for producing visitor information and signage* (560) were most popular. Overall, least popular were *Grants for installation of additional visitor facilities (e.g., benches, parking, toilets)* (285), and *Employment of a ranger/ education officer* and *Provision of staff training* (130) and *Advice and guidance for visitor facilities* (-30).

Figure 13: *Preferences expressed (counts) for specific outcomes among Land Managers in England (n=194) for grants.*

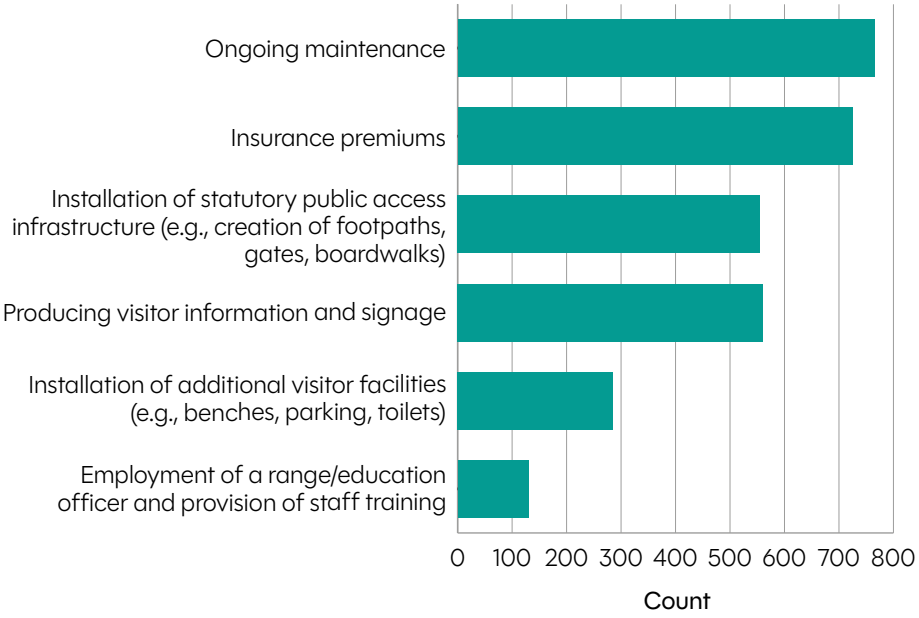
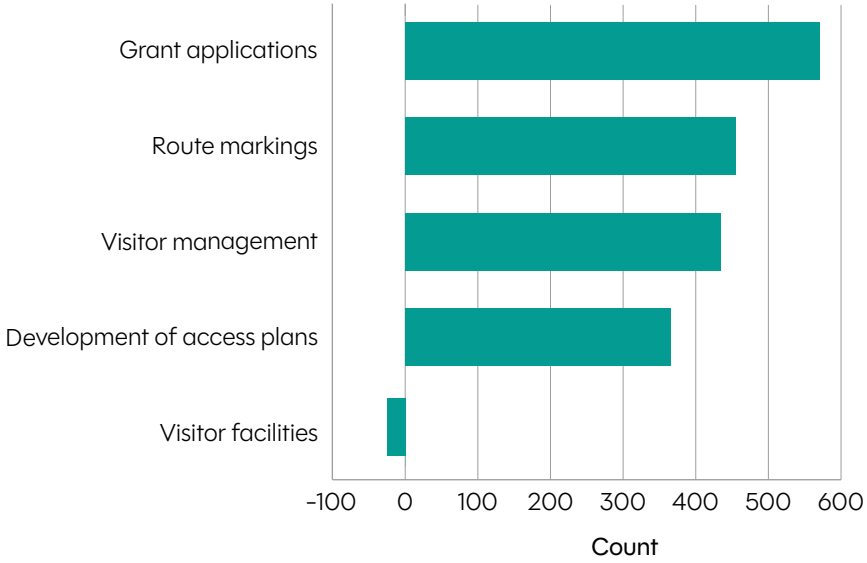


Figure 14: *Preferences expressed (counts) for specific outcomes among Land Managers in England (n=194) for grants.*



Land Values

Owners in England were asked to report the extent of their agreement with the statement *Access negatively affects the land value of my property,* using a score (Likert -5 to +5). The mean score (n=203) indicated moderate agreement (+2.2) with the statement. Comments received were wide ranging, themes included environmental impact; management, maintenance, and resources; public education and awareness; public rights and legal access, and; safety and liability.

Other reasons for providing public access

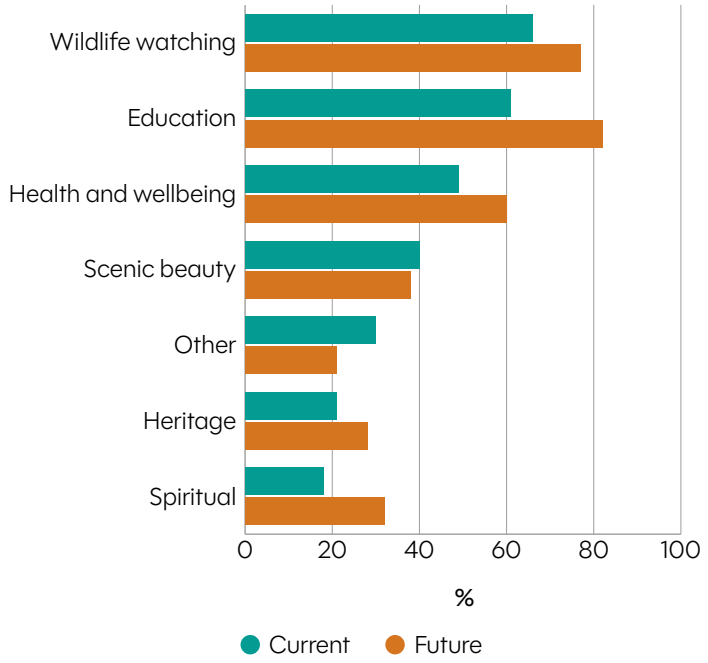
We asked Owners whether they currently, or might in future, provide access for a range of reasons. Currently among 198 Owners, *Wildlife watching* was the most frequent reason, followed by *Education* (Figure 15). In future, these two reasons were also highest but in reverse order. The reason most likely to change was *Spiritual*, which scored lowest currently but might rise in future to be more important than *Heritage* and *Other reasons.*

Agents believed that they could contribute strongly (mean 8.6; where 0 = Not at all and 10 = A great deal), but Owners were a little less convinced (6.9). We also asked the same respondents how much they believed their own woodland(s) could contribute. Agents scored lower (7.6) for woodlands that they managed than for woodlands generally, with Owners scoring even lower (4.9), providing a neutral score overall. Exploring the results for Owners (combined categories from all three nations) revealed that those in Scotland were significantly ($p<0.05$) more supportive (mean 6.5) of social prescribing than those in Wales (5.4) or England (5.1). Mean values were different between the nations, but only those between England and Scotland for the question of the contribution of Owners' own woodland were significantly different (using Welch's two-tailed t-test and p-value less than 0.05).

There were significant differences ($p<0.01$ and $p<0.05$ respectively) in mean NEP score between Land Managers who gave higher scores (8–10) compared with those giving lower scores (1–3) for both questions concerning current and future public access. This indicates that those with stronger pro-ecological views placed higher value on the benefits of woodlands generally, and also their own woodland in particular, than respondents with lower ecological or anthropocentric worldviews.

Land Managers were asked to rate the importance of access to their woodland(s) in relation to outdoor education for young people. Those in England considered that it was important for *Environmental awareness* (mean 6.3; where 0 = Not important and 10 = Very Important). Other reasons scoring moderately were *Understanding forestry and woodland management* (5.7) and *Mental health and wellbeing* (5.6), *Learning practical skills* (5.3), *Physical health* (5.1). Reasons scoring less well were *Encouraging people into a forestry career* (4.7), *Social skills* (4.0), and *Academic achievement* (3.8).

Figure 15: *Percentages of reasons why woodland Owners in England (n=198) currently or might in future provide public access to woodlands.*



Discussion and conclusions

With 467 responses received from Land Managers (agents, owners, tenants and businesses who own or lease woodland), and professionals across Britain, the British Woodlands Survey 2024 (BWS2024) offers a detailed insight into the attitudes, experiences, and practices regarding public access and social use of woodland. This discussion reflects on the survey findings across key themes: provision of access; experiences and perceptions of access; barriers and opportunities, and; support and incentives. These themes could help inform the potential pathways for policy development, aiming to balance public interest with the priorities of woodland stewardship.

Provision of Access

The provision of public access to privately-owned or managed woodlands presents a complex challenge, balancing the practicalities of land management with public interest in green spaces. Among our respondents, approximately two-thirds of Owners in England provide access, primarily through statutory rights of way or permissive paths maintained voluntarily.

The survey reveals that approaches to public access vary greatly, reflecting the diverse motivations of Owners. Those with strong environmental priorities often express reservations about introducing or extending access owing to its potential impact on wildlife and biodiversity.

These findings suggest a requirement for access policies that can reconcile public interest with environmental imperatives, noting that greater public connection to nature is needed to support investment in nature recovery and foster pro-environmental behaviours and choices including responsible behaviours when visiting woodlands. Further controlled or seasonal access (e.g. permissive seasonal alternative paths) may offer a viable solution, enabling public enjoyment while protecting sensitive habitats.

Experiences and Perceptions of Access

There were contrasting attitudes towards public access to woodlands between Agents and Owners, with Agents viewing public access more favourably. While many generally recognise the health and social benefits of access, they also report challenges arising from littering, property damage, and disturbances caused by dogs. Many of the issues Land Managers report reflect long-standing concerns and are not necessarily a direct result of public access provision. Nonetheless, these experiences can help shape Land Managers' attitudes towards public access. For those prioritising ecological conservation, these issues are of particular concern, as they feel public access may lead to habitat degradation and affect vulnerable or priority species. It is therefore perhaps surprising that there was little reported appetite for advice or guidance on how to manage these issues.

Our results indicate that negative experiences shape cautious attitudes towards public access, particularly for those Land Managers with ecological goals. Many highlighted the importance of educating the public on responsible behaviour in green spaces. A renewed emphasis on the Countryside Code could enhance public awareness, fostering respect for woodlands and potentially reducing the need for strict access restrictions. It is unclear what more might be needed to increase its uptake and impact among members of the public as this was beyond the scope of this research.

Barriers and Opportunities Relating to Access

Respondents identified several barriers to providing public access, ranging from practical management issues to ecological and financial concerns. For many Owners, unrestricted access is perceived as incompatible with their conservation and management objectives, particularly where sensitive wildlife or habitats are present. Liability issues, privacy concerns, and the financial costs of maintaining access infrastructure compound these challenges, requiring landowners to weigh the benefits of public access against its potential impact.

Despite these barriers, Land Managers also recognise the opportunities that public access can provide, such as supporting health and wellbeing, education, and community engagement. Policy measures that address these barriers, including incentives and practical resources, could enable woodland Owners to manage public access more effectively. Voluntary, seasonal, or restricted access arrangements were suggested by some respondents as potential compromises, which might allow for public enjoyment while safeguarding conservation priorities.

Supporting and Incentivising Access

The economic implications of public access emerged as a prominent concern among woodland Owners. Few respondents report receiving financial support for managing access, with existing incentive schemes – such as the public access aspects of Countryside Stewardship – reaching only a small proportion of Owners. Issues such as limited funding, complex application processes, and perceived insufficiencies in grants contribute to this limited uptake.
Many respondents expressed a preference for government compensation rather than charging access fees, noting the significant expenses involved in path maintenance, litter removal, and repair work. There was little appetite for advice and guidance on providing public access as part of any future support package, although specific areas were indicated by some respondents, especially concerning liability and legal issues.

The findings suggest that simplifying grant schemes and increasing funding amounts could make public access financially viable for more woodland Owners. It may help convince those who are potentially open to public access provision yet feel the commitment and undertaking to be too great. However, it may be unlikely to persuade those reluctant to do so because of the impact on management objectives. Enhanced support measures would not only alleviate the economic burden on private land managers, but could also encourage broader access to woodlands.
By addressing these financial concerns, government programmes could support sustainable public access to woodlands without placing undue strain on landowners and managers.

Conclusions

The BWS2024 results illuminate the multifaceted challenges of managing public access to private woodlands in Britain. A balanced policy approach that incorporates environmental priorities, public health benefits, and effective financial support could facilitate sustainable access, respecting both public interest and the unique responsibilities of woodland Owners and managers. Carefully designed policies and delivery mechanisms—encompassing public education, targeted incentives, and flexible access arrangements—will help ensure that private woodlands remain accessible and preserved for future generations. Further research could explore the impact of public behaviour, funding options, and ecological sensitivity on woodland access, informing policy refinements to support both environmental stewardship and public enjoyment of these natural spaces.

> “Carefully designed policies and delivery mechanisms will help ensure that private woodlands remain accessible and preserved for future generations.”

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