

Research notes

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“What about us?”

Diversity Review evidence – part two

Challenging perceptions: provider awareness of under-represented groups

Whilst previous research has shown that an individual's fear of prejudice or inexperience are barriers to using the countryside, there does not seem to be a parallel understanding within organisations.

Summary

As part of the Countryside Agency's commitment to the Diversity Review, set out in the Rural White Paper (2000), research was commissioned to examine how the policies, strategies and initiatives of countryside service providers addressed the needs of under-represented¹ groups. These typically include the elderly and people with disabilities, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people with low incomes and from inner cities, women and young people.

Many service providers take what they regard as an even-handed approach and promote 'Countryside for All': nobody is excluded, but equally nobody is specifically encouraged. However, the research revealed a lack of understanding and confidence in communicating with under-represented groups. Because diversity frequently falls within the remit of many different departments within an organisation, there is no clear lead or effective monitoring and evaluation. As a result, the needs of specific groups are often insufficiently understood and potential opportunities that inclusion would bring to both the user and provider are lost.

Main findings

Research method

The study carried out during 2004, involved five consecutive stages of research. A comprehensive review of policy, legislation and literature was followed by the compilation of a database of organisations involved in all aspects of countryside activities. Service providers included government agencies, local authorities, funding bodies and direct access providers. Almost 800 organisations were assessed over the degree to which they were aware of the need to address diversity issues, and on the basis of this, 97 respondents were chosen for a more in-depth telephone interview.

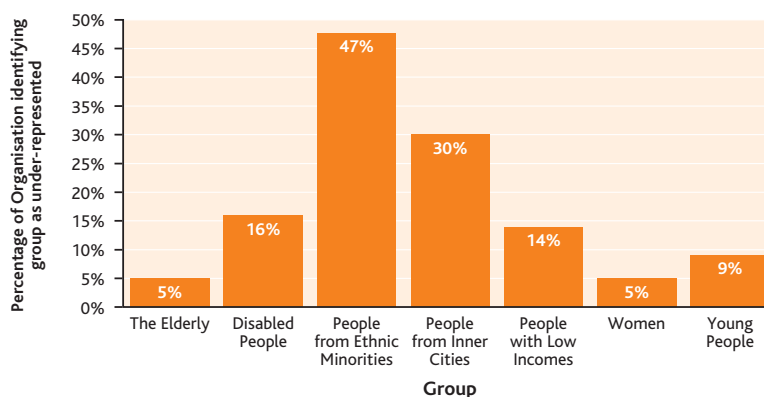
Service providers and local authorities from across England who responded to the survey were invited to a seminar designed to present the initial findings, encourage feedback and gather further data. Finally, site visits and in-depth interviews with staff at various management levels were carried out with ten service providers who had responded both to the initial survey and to telephone interviews.



Recognising diversity

Service providers identified three specific groups as under-represented: black and minority ethnic groups, people on low incomes and disabled people (see figure 1). Of the last group, almost 97% of respondents stated that they had addressed the changes required by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). However, many providers appeared to equate disability purely with physical impairment, rather than address the requirements of people with other disabilities. At the seminar, participants generated the greatest number of ideas when it came to enabling greater access to the countryside for disabled people, while little imagination and innovation was applied to other diversity issues. For instance, although most organisations were aware of the need to address their responsibilities under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000, few proposed meaningful action.

Figure 1: Service providers' perceptions of which groups are under-represented



Service providers need to understand that it is simply not enough to say: "We are open to all."

By purporting to provide 'Countryside for All', nobody is deliberately excluded, but those people who might benefit most from greater access to the countryside are not specifically included. Targeted action to encourage visitors from under-represented groups is required, a strategy most recently recognised in *Diversity and Equality in Planning* (ODPM, 2005).

In terms of overall approach, organisations were judged to fall into two categories:

- **Resource-oriented:** This assumed that an increase in visitors would potentially harm the resource, and so any attempt to attract a more diverse range of people was therefore restricted to existing visitor numbers.
- **People-oriented:** Here visitors were actively encouraged, but environments were nevertheless protected through careful site management. The few organisations that had adopted this perspective had typically instigated outreach and other inclusion work to encourage visitor diversity.

Policy and legislation

The review of policy and legislation (available as a separate report) suggests an imbalance between the aspirations of policy-makers and the reality of implementation. The existing situation reflects a deep-rooted lack of operational coordination in cross-cutting agendas, so that in multi-departmental organisations issues such as increasing diversity and access rarely falls to just one manager or department and so is never satisfactorily addressed. This is compounded by a poorly-developed terminology to describe suitable activities and environments, and a bureaucratic advisory structure that has yet to place sufficient value on overtly promoting a human rights agenda.

It was regarded by service providers as 'safer', in terms of avoiding unintended offence and embarrassment, to assume homogeneity in their visitor base, rather than differentiate between and address the needs of under-represented groups. There is ambiguity, confusion and even exclusion in the day-to-day language used to talk about under-represented groups. Some service providers revealed a lack of confidence in addressing under-represented groups, and so found it difficult working with them as potential users.

Although countryside service providers collect data from visitors, it only tends to identify which groups are absent rather than assess their actual needs.

Only when evaluation and monitoring takes place will it be possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of policies and actions, and at the same time assess change.

Data collection

In designing projects aimed at encouraging new visitor groups, organisations have failed to recognise or are unaware of previous research which has shown that fear of prejudice and inexperience by target groups are critical barriers to using the countryside. Visitor surveys alone cannot provide the information required to understand the composition and needs of the wider community, but they are essential to demonstrate that change is taking place. Catchment area surveys are one way of addressing this lack of vital information, but overall resources assigned to data collection have been inadequate.

Knowledge management

It was apparent that knowledge management within most service providers is unsatisfactory and incomplete. Communication is typically 'top-down', so that policy is created and then passed down to staff on the ground for implementation. While senior managers provided a holistic overview of organisational policies, site managers adopted a more pragmatic and problem-oriented approach, but there were few mechanisms in place to enable any constructive dialogue about equality and diversity.

Most respondents learnt about legislation informally within their organisations. Equality and diversity expertise appears to be typically embedded in personnel/human resource departments, with little overall coordination or formal training, and this function remains an intra-organisation issue that is not extended to service delivery.

Diversity drivers

A number of organisations did not actually believe there was a need to encourage a more diverse visitor base. Such attitudinal barriers reveal institutional prejudices and are a significant impediment to progress in this area. There are many drivers for institutional change, including legislation and regulation, financial and educational, and ethical and moral. It was clear from our research that legislative instruments play a crucial role. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) now amended (DDA 2005) and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) not only raised awareness, but are also major mechanisms of compliance.

However, organisations argued that red tape currently inhibits the promotion of diversity and hinders attempts to put positive projects in place, with complaints about the emphasis on meeting funding requirements rather than encouraging actual projects.

Evaluation

The role of evaluation and monitoring in the policy programme has not been appreciated. Even in the absence of evidence from catchment area surveys, awareness of diversity and under-representation was often closely linked to whether under-represented groups were thought numerically significant in any given area. Provision of services was often based on assumptions of homogeneity rather than actual needs.

Conclusions

The research found that four key areas need to be addressed if service providers are to improve their awareness of the needs of under-represented groups, and then go on to devise strategies and practices that meet both statutory obligations as well as issues of equity in encouraging and facilitating access to outdoor recreation:

- **Improving the language of diversity**

There is an evident lack of clarity and confidence in using the existing language of diversity, with little understanding or consistency in its use by service providers. The formation of a cross-cutting equality and diversity committee will enable the development of training and awareness programmes, as well as more general guidance on the use of language.

- **Establishing a champion for access**

A specific person is needed to champion diversity issues as they relate to access to countryside and outdoor recreational opportunities. Few service providers have in place a single person, team or even cross-departmental responsibility for initiating or co-ordinating equal access work. There is an urgent need for a national organisation to champion action to achieve increased representation in outdoor recreation and access. Natural England should assume this role. At the same time, the Disability Rights Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality should recognise that diversity and equality extends beyond employment issues and social support; recreational opportunities and access to outdoor spaces are an important aspect of quality of life that should be of concern and championed by them and the proposed Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

- **Improving communication and training**

There is a clear need for awareness-raising, legislative briefings, training and the exchange of best practice for all service provider staff, many of whom are ill-informed and unsupported. Information is currently disseminated through informal networks, and the interaction between site managers and senior policy makers in this field is often unsatisfactory. Communication must be improved within and between organisations (including national headquarters) by means of publishing briefing notes, organising annual events such as seminars and workshops, and employing innovative methods to disseminate good practice and provide a forum for discussion.

- **Implementing evaluation and monitoring**

Proper evaluation and monitoring is essential and should be a funding pre-requirement for projects. Catchment area surveys can measure needs and progress beyond current visitor information, while there is a compelling case for initiating Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets to encourage change as well as permit transparency and public scrutiny. Although such targets are voluntary, they complement Best Value Performance Indicators, which must be collected under the Local Government Act, 1999. It is recommended that one or more PSA targets are constructed to monitor progress in increasing diversity of access to the countryside, and so enable local authorities to measure the success of their strategies and learn from good practice.

This research was undertaken by the Environmental Psychology Research Group (EPRG) at the University of Surrey.

Source and references

Professor Uzzell, D., Leach. R., Kelay, T. 2004. "What about us?", Diversity Review evidence changing perceptions: provider awareness of under represented groups. Report to the Countryside Agency, Cheltenham. Available at www.surrey.ac.uk/psychology/EPRG

ODPM, 2005. Diversity and Equality in Planning. A good practice guide. Report by Herriott-Watt University. Available at www.odpm.gov.uk

- 1 The relationship between exclusion, participation, and under-representation lies in the distinction between people's observed behaviour and how people feel.
- Participation measures observed behaviour - it is the percentage of all people doing a certain activity who belong to a specific group.
 - Representation is a meta-statistic - it is the ratio of 'the participation of a specific group in a certain activity' to 'the proportion of that group in the background population as a whole'.
 - Exclusion expresses how people feel (their perceptions). Countryside Agency (2004)

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