

Wildlife and Countryside Link response to the Independent Panel on Forestry's final report

Wildlife and Countryside Link brings together 39 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK and manage over 750,000 hectares of land.

This response is supported by the following 14 organisations:

- Bat Conservation Trust
- British Mountaineering Council
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign for National Parks
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Friends of the Earth England
- The Mammal Society
- Open Spaces Society
- People's Trust for Endangered Species
- Plantlife
- Ramblers
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust

1. Introduction

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) welcomes the Independent Panel on Forestry's final report¹ and believes that the report should form the basis of a new England Forestry Strategy. Link urges the Government to implement the report's recommendations in full, under a clear, achievable timescale and in line with the detailed evidence that the report presents. Accepting the high level recommendations in isolation of one another risks misinterpretation and may lead to actions that damage biodiversity and landscape character. It is vital that the Government's approach to forestry is consistent with the principles and targets of *The Natural Choice* and *Biodiversity 2020*. In addition, the Government must identify new funding streams in order to implement the recommendations.

In the following section, we address the recommendations on which we have particular expertise and outline how they should be delivered.

2. Suggestions for delivery

Recommendation 1: We urge society as a whole to value woodlands for the full range of benefits they bring. We call on Government to pioneer a new approach to valuing and rewarding the management, improvement and expansion of the woodland ecosystems for all the benefits they provide to people, nature and the green economy.

¹ Independent Panel on Forestry, Final Report, 2012
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/forestrypanel/files/Independent-Panel-on-Forestry-Final-Report1.pdf>

Effective delivery of this recommendation would require:

- Implementing recommendations 4, 10, 19 and 20 in the Forestry Regulation Task Force report, *Challenging Assumptions, Changing Perceptions*²;
- Supporting the creation of new markets for woodland products, such as small scale production of woodfuel to improve the profitability of sustainable woodland management, and to utilise offcuts and brashings for which there are few alternative uses. However, measures would need to be taken to ensure that management for woodfuel production is beneficial for biodiversity – for example that veteran trees and dead wood are retained and adequate stands are allowed to develop to maturity. It will be necessary to guard against the danger of woodfuel management becoming too intensive, especially if demand and woodfuel prices rise, potentially leading to excessive removal of biomass;
- Supporting the creation of new forms of payments for the provision of ecosystem services, for example water quality through levies, existing environmental taxes and so on;
- Using England Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) payments to deliver ecosystem services, with a focus on outcomes rather than specific management prescriptions;
- Monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of forestry policy in delivering Government priorities for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, public access, the historic environment, landscape conservation and other ecosystem services;
- Continuing to support research and solution testing into priority species declines, climate change adaptation and mitigation, tree diseases and ecosystem services delivery by woods and forests.

Recommendation 6: *Government and other woodland owners to give as many people as possible ready access to trees and woodlands for health and well-being benefits – this means planting trees and woodlands closer to people and incentivising more access to existing woodlands.*

Increasing the quality and quantity of access to public and private woodland, without damaging their ecosystems, would require:

- The Forestry Commission (FC) continuing to prioritise grant aid to woodland creation schemes close to large centres of population, which currently lack such access;
- The FC regularly updating assessment of access deficiencies in relation to woodland, and using this data to inform decision making on priorities for new woodland creation at local level;
- The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) creating a form of fixed term permissive access for woodland, either for a set number of years or for the life of the forest / the owner;

² Forestry Regulation Task Force, *Challenging Assumptions, Changing Perceptions*, 2011
[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/DEFPB13661ForestryLo.PDF/\\$FILE/DEFPB13661ForestryLo.PDF](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/DEFPB13661ForestryLo.PDF/$FILE/DEFPB13661ForestryLo.PDF)

- Defra setting an aspiration to have a further one million people able to access new or existing woodland within five years;
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport offering support and investment to promote visiting woods as part of domestic and international tourism promotion;
- More schools taking the opportunity to become a forest school or offering an element of forest-based learning;
- Additions to the public forest estate being located close to centres of population that lack access to woodland, and supporting community woodland and other forms of community control of local green space.

Recommendation 9: *Government to ensure that land use creates a coherent and resilient ecological network at a landscape scale, by integrating policy and delivery mechanisms for woods, trees and forests in line with the principles set in the “Making Space for Nature” report.*

Effectively integrating policy and delivery mechanisms would require:

- Embedding biodiversity objectives into national forestry policy and delivery mechanisms, for example EWGS and agri-environment schemes;
- The planning framework providing better protection for all ancient and semi-natural woodland sites. Local Planning Authorities must be supported to fully evaluate such sites – for example, by using evidence from the National Ecosystem Assessment – so that local decisions do not undermine the national importance of ancient and semi-natural woodland;
- The FC being an exemplar of sustainable woodland management and wildlife conservation;
- Woodland management that uses evidence-based targeting, appropriate safeguards and the provision of management support and guidance to increase the rare and threatened wildlife associated with native woodland and open habitats;
- Existing biodiversity opportunity mapping and local knowledge informing woodland creation (using the principle of ‘the right tree in the right place’), and integration of woodland with other priority habitats as part of the wider ecological network;
- Aligning parallel exercises used to identify habitat creation opportunities (e.g. FC Woodland Potential Indicator tool and mapping of *Biodiversity 2020* habitat creation ambitions both focus on National Character Areas) and making use of existing data (e.g. Wetland Vision);
- Local Nature Partnerships and other community-driven environmental planning and land management schemes working at a landscape scale to strengthen local ecological networks by buffering and reconnecting native woodland and other habitats.

Recommendation 10: *Government funding through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to ensure that incentives for woodland management and creation are integrated with agricultural incentives, to achieve improved ecosystem outcomes on a landscape scale. Alongside this refocusing of CAP (2013-2020), we urge that grant schemes, such as the England Woodland Grant Scheme funded through the Rural Development Programme for England, should*

continue to be available to incentivise woodland expansion and management and other outcomes that are good for people, nature and the economy.

Effective implementation of this recommendation would require:

- Creating new and improving existing links between the agriculture and forestry sectors;
- Monitoring the effectiveness of funded options in delivering anticipated outcomes for biodiversity enhancement;
- Improving support for owners converting to agro-forestry;
- Implementing a measure that encourages a coordinated approach between neighbouring landowners when considering delivery of factors requiring a landscape scale approach;
- Linking funding to skill training and adequate labour resources;
- Targeting specific grants towards delivery of priority national and EU species, habitats and other public benefits, in particular those for which no market mechanisms currently exist.

Recommendation 11: *Government, working in partnership with the forestry and land management sectors, should proactively offer every woodland owner advice on multi-benefit woodland management, prioritising woods greater than five hectares, with a view to increasing the area of woodland with a current UKFS compliant management plan, from around 50% to 80% of the total, over about the next ten years.*

Effective delivery of woodland management advice to all woodland owners would require:

- Developing a 'Quick Start Guide' to help simplify the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS). This would particularly benefit owners of small woodlands (1- 100 ha), which make up half the UK's woodland cover;
- Providing encouragement to owners to go beyond the UKFS minimum to realise public benefits and Government's own biodiversity commitments;
- Encouraging more owners and managers of small / low-intensity managed native woods to become certified under the voluntary UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS), to support Government's commitments from the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development;
- Creating a simplified certification and application process for woodland management grants. This is particularly important for owners of small woods who find the process over complicated and time consuming, which can lead to a lack of engagement in the grant process and subsequent under management. These small woodlands also have potential for enlargement so involving the owners at this time could support future woodland expansion in the future;
- Working in partnership with Link to help develop consolidated, evidenced advice and targeting for national and EU priority sites, species and habitats.

Recommendation 12: *Government should reconfirm the policy approach set out in the Open Habitats Policy and Ancient Woodland Policy (Keepers of Time – A statement of policy for*

England's ancient and native woodland). This should be supported through incentives to private woodland owners and a refreshed commitment to delivery on the public forest estate.

Forestry has a critical role to play in meeting Government aspirations for non-woodland habitats, such as semi-natural grassland and lowland heathland. Effective delivery of this recommendation would require:

- Reconfirming the Open Habitats policy, which has significant stakeholder buy-in;
- Urgent and ambitious delivery of Open Habitats policy on the public forest estate, prioritising sites that maximise the national biodiversity benefits;
- Prioritising the restoration of the FC managed area of damaged, but repairable lowland heathland. This would enable the UK Government to meet most of its own targets for the restoration of this habitat. But, if these areas of potential continue to be restocked with conifers, the limited conditions required for re-creation could be lost forever.

To ensure there is no further loss of ancient woodland in the future, we recommend that the FC:

- Updates the Keepers of Time action plan (last version 2006-2011);
- Makes an explicit commitment in a published Planted Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) strategy for the public forest estate to restore 35,000 ha of PAWS in England;
- Stops grant aid restocking with conifers on PAWS sites in any circumstances and facilitate restoration of PAWS in private ownership;
- Halts any future disposals of PAWS unless the site is restored or there is an active restoration plan in progress.

Recommendation 16: *Government to commit to an ambition to sustainably increase England's woodland cover from 10% to 15% by 2060, working with other landowners to create a more wooded landscape.*

There are certain places where more woodland is especially welcome, for example where existing sites can be extended to contribute to a more ecologically coherent network at a landscape scale. Wherever possible, native woodland creation should take place through natural regeneration and follow ecological guidelines. Effective delivery of this recommendation would require:

- Using the principle of 'the right tree in the right place', to maximise benefits and avoid damage to biodiversity, landscape, water and other public goods;
- Creating Woodland Expansion Zones so as to concentrate effort into key agreed areas with adequate funding (a shared understanding of where creation can make a difference);
- Using the new Nature Improvement Area (NIA) processes to support woodland expansion for biodiversity;
- Streamlining application procedures for establishment of small woodlands especially on farms to make it less onerous, one of the demotivating factors among landowners;

- Continuing to support the work of Woodland Carbon Task Force in analysing new funding streams and land availability;
- Using the incentive of endorsement under the Woodland Carbon Code to encourage government departments, companies and individuals to invest in woodland creation, in cases where those departments, companies and individuals have demonstrated that they have already taken all possible steps towards preventing avoidable emissions and reducing remaining emissions;
- Ensuring grant schemes for woodland creation have effective environmental impact assessments to ensure that no wildlife-rich open habitat is lost, such as bog, heathland or species-rich grassland.

**Wildlife and Countryside Link
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