

Study of the Public Forest Estate: Futures Workshop

Wednesday 2nd December 2009

Introduction, Background and Context

The Study of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate (PFE) in England aims to consider the “future long-term sustainable role for the public forest estate and make recommendations about any necessary changes to improve its ability to deliver relevant priorities in the government’s Strategy for England’s Trees Woods and Forests and contribute to other government objectives”.

The Study enlisted the Tomorrow Project¹ to facilitate a discussion to explore the factors and issues that may influence the future changes and development of the Public Forest Estate. The discussion took place at a 1-day workshop with PFE Working Group members, Forestry Commission representatives and independent consultants (Annex 1 contains a list of participants).

The thoughts and opinions expressed in this report were generated at the workshop and do not necessarily represent the views of the Forestry Commission.

¹ The Tomorrow Project - an independent charity undertaking a programme of research, consultation and communication to help individuals and organisations think and learn about the future of people’s lives over the next 20 years.

Executive Summary

Members of the PFE Study Working Group, Forestry Commission representatives, representatives from other organisations and a number of independent consultants joined together to consider the future issues and drivers that will influence the Forestry Commission (FC) Public Forest Estate in England (PFE) over the next 20 years. The purpose of the event was to think about the role of the PFE now and in the future, and how its value to society will vary with changes to the economy, the environment and society. The group discussed the key opportunities and threats that may arise, and reflected on what this would mean for how the PFE focuses its resources and develops in the future.

Results from the day found that:

- The main drivers going into the future will revolve around changes to the environment, economy, society, public needs and politics. The role of the PFE will need to change in response to these.
- Its potential value to the public (socially, economically and environmentally) will generally increase in the future.
- The changing layers of discourse about land–use and climate change require a high level of demand for the PFE to be permanent, resilient and managed to high quality.
- A move from process-driven governance to issues-driven governance requires the adoption of a culture of flexibility, localism and willingness to undertake partnership work.
- The PFE must continue its role as an exemplar in demonstrating public benefits, and promote itself for its ability to both create and deliver policy efficiently and effectively.
- In the face of the inevitable financial difficulty all public sectors will be facing, the PFE must evolve to focus on its key targets, shedding areas of work as necessary within its current remit, and incorporate more crosscutting delivery. Its long-term viability will be tested by its ability to react to changes in government finances.
- The emerging growth in the woodfuel market provides a vital opportunity for the PFE to engage with the public and private owners providing both the natural resource itself and the skills required to enter the market.

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Session 1 – Round the table view

Participants presented their brief thoughts on the following question;

“What do you think are going to be the major issues over the next 20 years and beyond, and what do you think are going to be the main drivers that will affect them?”

The following points outline the key messages, within the themes presented.

The environment

- The overarching theme of over-consumption, and the issues surrounding climate change and carbon will not change in the next 20 years. The PFE must be prepared to have the stamina to continue to drive this forward over a long time scale.
- The main drivers for action will be centred around the sustainability agenda, focussing on natural resource efficiency, a low carbon and low energy economy, and woodfuel.
- There will be further strain on the country's environmental capacity due to an increase in population. This will subsequently result in increased pressure on land use. The resulting debate may look at the PFE in a different way.
- A change in land use may have an effect on the country's cultural heritage. The PFE will play a role in inspiring people to re-connect with nature.
- Embodied water will be an emerging problem, which will require everyone to look at and reduce the quantities used in production.
- The PFE will be seen as a substantial carbon sink, and will have to act as an exemplar in reducing carbon outputs – it will have to ‘walk the talk’. This will be through an investment in natural capital and demonstrating existing public benefits.
- The PFE will need to put a value on the ecosystem benefits and goods derived from it, and present this in a way that inspires the public to appreciate its worth.
- The climate change imperative may require the PFE to take ownership of all woodland and forests in the UK.

The economy

- Politics and the general financial position of the country will largely dictate the future viability of the PFE, and its ownership. We will be reliant on the government's willingness to pay for public benefits. The PFE's test will be its ability to react to changes in government finances. The financial situation may also change the public's perception of sustainability, and thus focus on how the PFE delivers economic benefits.
- The increased value of wood and other forest products as a resource may change the public and government perception of the PFE.

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- East Asia may dominate the global economy and thus have a significant impact/sway on how the PFE is run.
- The future of the PFE depends on adequate finance. It is unlikely that the PFE will be given more money, but it will be expected to still deliver benefits efficiently. This will need to be paid for through the commercialisation of the estate, and attracting the right resources.
- The PFE will have to access and respond to the movement towards ecosystem services, embracing the emergence of a consumerist construction of nature.
- The PFE may need to consider the infrastructure that it could provide to the owners of the other 82% of woodlands not on the PFE. Such support for woodland creation and maintenance would include equipment, advice and ecosystem services.
- The PFE should be mindful that ecosystem services involve commodifying nature, which will inevitably change the character of and relation to nature. It is not a holistic method of quantifying public benefits.

Society

- The focus should be on harnessing and capitalising on people power. Utilising people's emotional connection to and goodwill for trees and woodlands will be a powerful tool in influencing political decisions.
- The PFE needs to connect with the two groups of society least involved at the moment; those who have a 'non-attitude' and don't know the issues, and those that have a 'despairing attitude' and thus become apathetic.
- The methods by which the PFE has previously communicated and engaged the public must change dramatically, in line with the advancement of alternative media, such as social networking. The depth and nature of interaction seen during the recent public consultation may not be repeated again in the future.
- The public will be driven by the amount of leisure time they have; the local availability of activities and resources; health issues; and the pressure of land use and increased housing requirements.
- The PFE will need to move woods close to people, into deprived areas. In doing so the PFE will need to define what 'urban woods' are and how their placement, quantity and productivity will be managed in the future.
- The PFE will need to recognise each individual member of the public and their background, and understand how localism and governance influences and shapes this. It needs to be less elitist.
- An ageing population will shift the focus from leisure to health. There may therefore be a lot of "reluctant" visitors, and increasing demand for basic access.
- The unknown future challenges for society will be dealt with through a strong quality of resilience on the PFE, which in turn will help to maintain cultural identity within society.

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- The PFE should focus on the owners of the 82% of woodlands not on the PFE to provide public benefits and contribute to dealing with the larger issues in the coming 20 years.

Public benefits

- In order to continue to deliver an increasing number of public benefits the PFE will have to be a different kind of estate that cannot be static. Resilience through flexibility. This will mean reflecting on, and re-analysing several long-held assumptions: having a better understanding of our core values in the 21st Century; what woods and trees mean to people now; and who or what is the 'public' and what are their values and relevance?
- The delivery of public benefits will be based on scale and the skills of the PFE's in-house expertise.
- The PFE must focus energy on demonstrating its existing public benefits!
- Leisure and recreation have been a reliable tool to engage and communicate with the general public, but this soon need to change to delivering more widespread messages of the public benefits associated with the estate.

Political pressures

- The potential changes in government will undoubtedly result in great changes in public land ownership.
- A "political mire" over the next 20 years will change people's focus on sustainability to that of economic/financial benefits provided by government services, including the PFE.
- A dramatic increase in forest planting will result in a conflict of interest for land use. The PFE may need to pursue new avenues of land use, i.e. agro-forestry. The Forestry Commission must be flexible in delivering this, and not become too prescriptive in doing so.
- The PFE may be used as an important 'test bed' for the government on how to enable and encourage the public to make rapid changes in their lifestyle.
- The future of international politics will dramatically change how this country is run. The UK's international strength may reduce, with the PFE's hands being tied in many situations.
- Asian countries will take the lead, and the PFE may be driven by their demands. It may, for example, need to replace large areas of tree stock with bio-engineered fuel stock.
- Restrictions may be made on international trade, resulting in reduced access to natural resources for the PFE and UK as a whole.

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- An increase in collaborative partnership work is on many other organisations' agenda. Becoming involved in this would facilitate the PFE taking part earlier in the decision-making processes.

Other issues

- Transport and localism will influence decision-making on the placement and infrastructure of urban woodlands.
- The PFE must increasingly be seen as a sustainable asset (i.e.: environmentally, socially and economically) and continue its exemplar role in delivering these benefits.
- The PFE is excellent at meeting all of these issues, and if large targets for afforestation in the UK are set, the PFE must sell itself as being able to deliver them in interesting ways.
- Technology will play a large role in decision-making in the future, and the PFE must evolve in line with this. For example, wi-fi enabled forests.
- The PFE must always be mindful that the future will not be a rational extension of what is happening now, or what has happened in the past.
- Resilience and adaptability are our most fundamentally important tools in an uncertain future. To develop these the PFE needs to understand the characteristics of being able to succeed in an unpredictable future.
- The next generation will have a very different set of values, and thus the concept of the PFE will have a very different meaning.
- Over the years there has been a changing discourse; from products, to services, to sustainability, and now to climate change. These are layered discourses. The climate change discourse is now shifting towards stewardship and resource use.

Session 2 – Debate on individual inputs

A number of defining points were picked out of the first session's discussion, which seem to be most pertinent and relevant to the original question.

Changing layers of discourse

There is a narrative of changing layers of discourse about land-use and climate change is one more layer to be accommodated. There is a high level of demand for permanence, resilience, and high quality.

Main drivers - sustainability, and a low carbon and low energy economy

Climate chaos and energy crisis will be the setting for the future. We need to consider how we engage with people in a way that picks up on their values, e.g.: recreation may be directly important for many people with climate change of less direct importance.

Resilience and flexibility

This is key to the PFE in its ability to deliver benefits to an ever-changing society, economy and environment. There is a need for localism focus and partnership working, based upon issues-driven governance, not process-driven governance.

Self promotion

The PFE needs to sell itself and the benefits it delivers to a wider range of people in society, reflecting a changing society and a move towards localism. The overarching need to plant more trees may stabilise the FC's roles of policy creation and delivery, which is increasingly rare for a government department

Exemplar role for the PFE

It must continue to develop its expertise in demonstrating public benefits, demonstrating the value of ecosystems services and sustainability, and its role as an asset of providing a large carbon sink for the UK.

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Economic situation and public finances

This is key to PFE activity. There will inevitably be a lack of funding to deliver its, and the governments targets. This may throw into question the future of publicly owned woodland and thus the PFE itself. The PFE therefore needs to remain aware that "Cash is king". It will require evolving business cases, with focus on cross-cutting delivery. With less funding altogether the PFE will need ways of managing woodland that absorb less management capacity and allow others to do more on the PFE more cheaply. If it is to deliver within budget and to a high success, the PFE will need to assess and then shed areas as necessary within its remit of work in its transition to a viable business model.

Session 3 – Workgroup discussions

The meeting then split into three groups each focussing on either changes to the economy, society, or the environment and the climate to consider the following two questions:

- What will changes in the economy / society / environment and climate change mean for the future value of the PFE?
- How should the PFE prepare for these changes?

Economy

“What will changes in the economy mean for the future value to society of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate?”

- There will be changes to the delivery models available to the Public Forest Estate with greater opportunity for delivery by the Third (voluntary) sector and/or through social enterprise – this could **increase** the value of the estate to society.
- The move to a carbon economy is likely to increase the value of trees *per se*. This will certainly **increase** the value of the estate to government as an intervention tool and may also increase the value of the estate to society but this is less clear.
- Inputs to local economies will become increasingly important. As much of the estate’s activity (e.g. timber and recreation enterprises) is locally based the value to society of the estate is likely to **increase**.
- Increasing pressure on public funding could result in a skewed commercial model on the estate and reduced public benefits from the estate – the value of the estate to society would **decrease**.
- Diminishing personal income and increasing age profile – increases the value of free at the point of delivery access on the estate;
- Increasing commodity prices:
 - this could mean more income (dependent on exchange rates)
 - the estate is already harvesting its (softwood) increment – the estate has more value if it helps woodlands in other ownership to produce material.

“How should we prepare for these economic changes?”

- Specifically in preparation for the carbon economy the PFE (and Forestry Commission more generally) needs to:
 - Actively take part in developing carbon trading mechanisms;
 - Leverage its current competencies and develop new ones;
 - Develop wider influence beyond the estate;

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- Recognise that the organisation running the estate can change at a faster rate than the land of the estate can – this could mean incentivising others and having a wider influence beyond the physical boundaries of the estate.

Society

“What will changes in society mean for the future value to society of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate?”

The following changes would be likely to **increase** the value to society of the Public Forest Estate:

- The pressures associated with an increasing population and internal net migration towards the South Eastern part of England;
- Health issues of an ageing population and obesity among the young;
- Increasing social polarisation;
- Need for greater food security, including more food grown locally;
- Questioning the scale of personal debt ‘borrowed against the future’, a challenge to traditional economic models, and a growing recognition of people’s need for an experience of the natural environment;
- Increasing price of carbon-based fuels, leading to a need for woodfuel;
- Possible individual carbon budgets.

“How should we prepare for these social changes?”

- Help address the health needs of the aged and young alike, and seek funding from mainstream health budgets.
- Help mitigate tensions of social polarisation through volunteering.
- Help meet the need for food security by providing allotments and/or community orchards on the Estate for locally grown food. Be ready to play a part if there is a large scale ‘mobilisation’ to grow food locally.
- Recognise challenges to existing economic models, but also value the non-economic benefits of the Estate in economic terms to win resources for the good work of the Forestry Commission.
- Support people’s resilience by providing educational opportunities. Help people satiate material desires and the needs to experience nature by providing shopping experiences on the Estate.
- Help people experience nature by providing opportunities to encounter wildlife, and enjoy escape, challenge, adventure and tranquillity.
- Demonstrate the ecological benefits of the Estate.
- More generally:

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- Build PFE's resilience and adaptability to respond to various pressures;
- Identify and fill the key evidence gaps that relate to these trends;
- Communicate the PFE as a provider of a wide range of benefits and a trusted manager of valued assets.

Environment and Climate

“What will changes in the environment and climate mean for the future value to society of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate?”

- The PFE will have to consider the possible options of how people will respond – whether they engage or become apathetic. For those that recognise the importance of forests, their appreciation and support of the PFE will **increase** as the climate changes. For those that don't appreciate woodlands and forests, the PFE may seem an asset of limited use and a waste of public money, and appreciation will **decrease**.
- There is currently a lack of certainty about the possible effects of climate change, and a lack of alternatives for the majority to engage with to make a difference. The PFE must create the infrastructure to engage all streams of society for it to remain worthwhile if its value is to **increase**.
- The method through which change is characterised is important. At this current time it is clear that recycling and energy efficient lighting are minimal gestures with minimal effect, however planting tree's is neither inconvenient nor out of the question. The PFE must emphasise that woodland-based solutions are less energy-intensive, and therefore highlight the **increased** value of the PFE.
- There must be a defined difference between forests and green open space. Forests can hold a greater number of people and provide broader benefits than simply open space without woodland.
- We have to be aware of the increased risk of catastrophe, including mass losses from *Phytophthora*, red-band needle blight, increased pests and diseases, and drought. For the value of the PFE not to **decrease** we must be better prepared to manage these unknown risks.
- We have to look beyond the PFE's 2% ownership [of all land in England] and realise that on the grand scale this has very little impact. It has more value as a leadership model – and should work to provide infrastructure for the other 82% of woodlands not on the PFE, by initiating markets, providing expertise to other public bodies, etc. The PFE will gain acknowledgement of **increased** value through its knowledge, skills, culture and brand.
- The PFE will need to question whether its multi-functionality role is a benefit as the requirements to meet government targets on specific issues intensifies. It needs to decide if it should, for example, just focus on planting conifers.
- In times of crisis it is important to remember that positivity motivates people – value placed on timber as a natural resource, recovery of heathland bird populations etc. The PFE must work with this knowledge to **increase** its value to society.

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- The PFE must have resonance for the general public. It needs to convey what climate change will actually mean for them in 20+ years, through effective, modern mediums of communication. It must be delivered in an easy and accessible format, based on the basic day-to-day lives of the public, which will involve adapting infrastructure.
- The value of what the PFE is providing may change as there becomes a scarcity of food (and therefore all natural resources). The PFE will need to strategically adjust its outputs to meet public requirements, for example, perhaps planting fruit trees or all energy crops. It must also make firm statements on its vision of the role of woodfuel.

“How should we prepare for these environmental and climatic changes?”

- Partnership working is fundamental. The PFE must develop cross-sector collaborative partnerships with all bodies within local/regional geographic areas to deliver individual benefits and meet local policy targets. These must focus on methods of working rather than the technicalities of doing so, in order to create a stable base with which to deal with climate change, land use, water issues etc.
- It must create governance structures that are able to cope with uncertainty.
- The PFE must maintain and build its flexibility and adaptability, with particular focus on PFE land-use (currently less forest and less high-yielding tree species). It must also build this adaptability into the people who work for the PFE, and how they engage with the population.
- It needs to look at the big scale – not just individual species or woodlands, but landscape scale and habitat connectivity for example. The whole (of the PFE) could be multipurpose, but each individual forest specialised. Single purpose woodlands all serving as a grand multipurpose body.
- The PFE must understand that not all of the population share the values of sustainability, low carbon lifestyle changes and climate change mitigation. It must develop new ideas and methods of understanding these changing values, and find ways to engage all levels of society, while at the same time supporting those that do continue to share these values.

Summary of the Plenary Session

Following the presentation of each groups' discussions, a number of overarching comments were drawn from the day.

- All the messages are saying that the PFE needs to make changes. The business case needs to be robust and relevant.
 - There are themes; flexibility, adaptability to change, resilience.
- While the Study did not set out to simply justify the current situation the evidence collated for the Study so far has demonstrated the value of the PFE and how it is making a positive difference. The focus needs to be on promoting and marketing the outcomes of what the PFE has achieved and ensuring that changes build on the current positive contribution.
- There needs to be a refined understanding of how each discourse overlaps with the others, and how it may play out in other parts of the business.
- There are currently trends for less trees on PFE land and scrutiny how a future PFE will remain highly relevant to the carbon debate by locking up more carbon, or encouraging other mechanisms to do this needs to be looked at. This may involve re-distributing assets and acquiring more profitable assets.
- The estate does not necessarily have to change physically. Changing the objectives that are set and how they are delivered and presented may be more important. It is a language of carbon, and its' presentation that needs to develop.
- The current presumption is that public understanding and ownership is necessary for the delivery of public goods. The question we perhaps should be looking at, is this a construct that fits society in the 21st century? Maybe there is a need for a new definition of 'public', in relation to how public interaction with the land has changed.
 - People place a high degree of value on public ownership and the current characteristics of the PFE. Their needs of the PFE are the same as privately owned woodland, but they **expect** more. The PFE needs to meet these expectations.

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Appendix 1 – Workshop Participants

Tayo Adebawale	PFE Study Working Group Chair, FC Commissioner	
Hilary Allison	Wildlife & Countryside Link - Woodland Trust	PFE Study Working Group member
Diana Bradford	Independent consultant	
David Cross	Forestry Commission	
Lynn Crowe	Sheffield Hallam University	PFE Study Working Group member
Dominic Driver	Forestry Commission	PFE Study Working Group member/Project Board
Simon Hodgson	Forestry Commission	England National Committee/Project Board
Averil Horton	Independent consultant	
Brian Mahony	Forestry Commission	PFE Study Working Group member
Robin Maynard	Forestry Commission	
Penny Phillips	Forestry Commission	
Helen Pontier	Defra	
Marcus Sangster	Forestry Commission	
John Vaughan	Forestry Commission	
Joe Watts	Forestry Commission	PFE Project
William Weston	Forestry Commission England	England National Committee
Richard Worsley	Tomorrow Project	Workshop Facilitator