

Background

Introduction

The Practice Guide has been written to give practical expression to the policy priorities outlined in Keepers of Time¹. The seven policy principles commit the Government² to:

- Protect ancient woodland from loss
- Increase the contribution ancient and native woodland makes to our quality of life
- Increase opportunities for enterprise and employment
- Improve ecological condition
- Conserve rare, threatened and priority species
- Protect cultural value and veteran trees
- Improve landscape context

The approach taken in the new Practice Guide differs from most existing guidance in its overall rationale and its underlying principles. We have attempted to move away from a prescriptive and process focused approach to one based on achieving future outcomes, addressing key threats, enhancing the uniqueness and specific values of the woodland, working at a landscape scale and safeguarding socio-economic value. Together, these five principles form the foundation of the document under which a more detailed tier of advice and guidance is provided.

The Practice Guide will fit below existing UK level standards and guidance. The UK Forestry Standard sets out the framework for sustainable forest management. The UK Forest guidelines sit under the standard and set out how forestry in the UK will meet the standard, this practice guide is the England expression of the UK guidance.

The England practice guide provides more practical and specific guidance on how to protect and enhance the diverse values of ancient and native woodlands and the public benefits they provide. The Practice Guide is designed to summarise and update the eight A5 booklets on Managing Semi-natural Woodland (published by FC in 1993). It will sit alongside the Handbook on Native Woodland being written by Forest Research. Whilst it is generic guidance for all types of ancient or native woodland, it also stresses more than previous guidance the need to tailor management to the specific character, history and special features that makes every woodland unique.

What's new?

There are a number of specific outcomes and guidelines in the document which represent an evolution from existing guidance. These specific changes reflect recent policy developments and our greater understanding of issues such as climate change, landscape ecology and cultural heritage. We are particularly keen to receive feedback on these 'new' elements and this is reflected in the questions section below. A bulleted summary is given below to help stakeholders more easily distinguish some of the more significant new elements:

¹ Keepers of Time: a statement of policy for England's ancient and native woodland. Defra, Forestry Commission England, 2005. <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/keepersoftime>

² The most important delivery bodies will be Forestry Commission England and Natural England.

- It is proposed that practitioners must **monitor the impacts of management** against the agreed outcomes for the site. For small sites and simple operations, monitoring can be through simple observation whereas on more complex sites some form of quantitative monitoring will be required.
- It is proposed that **managers have identified the desired outcomes** which management operations intend to achieve.
- It is proposed that existing and 'future' **veteran trees** must be identified and conserved
- Greater emphasis on PAWS restoration through **gradual techniques** rather than clear-felling, and on protecting irreplaceable features.
- It is proposed that **species composition** should be moving towards site native species but there is flexibility to have non-invasive non-native species within the canopy on sites where it is appropriate.
- A less dogmatic insistence on the use of **natural regeneration**, and an acceptance that on most sites a mix of planting, regeneration and coppice regrowth will be the best and most cost effective way of achieving the desired composition and structure.
- It is proposed that there should be flexibility to retain or plant a higher proportion of **non-native tree species** where the species is regarded as having **cultural significance** e.g. sycamore on certain sites in Northern England.
- We are proposing moving away from the presumption of site-based provenance as a requirement and asking practitioners to consider **mixes of provenances** (including local) so long as they are suited to the site type as a climate change adaptation strategy.
- There is **explicit encouragement to restore PAWS** to native woodland, but no compulsion. Where owners wish to continue growing conifers they will simply be obliged to avoid any further loss of biodiversity through careful species selection and thinning.
- There is encouragement to **enhance the timber producing** potential for future generations where this does not conflict with other objectives (this does not imply grant aid, but does accommodate obligations to use registered seed sources).
- Much greater flexibility on **stocking densities** is proposed. These should reflect the desired outcomes for the site. Where low stocking densities are proposed these must be justified on ecological or cultural grounds e.g. extension or restoration of wood pasture system or presence of wildlife communities which would benefit from an open structure.
- There is a strong presumption against the creation of permanent **open space in ancient woodlands** to reflect the policy principle in Keepers of Time of 'maintain extent of ancient woodland'.
- Greater flexibility on **open space** (aim to achieve at least 40% canopy cover) is also proposed for newly created native woodland as it is recognised that in certain urban and peri-urban situations significant open space may be desirable for reasons such as visual impacts or security.
- It is proposed that **problem species** must be managed, as these are often a key threat to the value of ancient and native woodlands. Management should be at a landscape scale if the species are operating at this scale.
- The needs of **priority and notable species** will be taken into account, and specific management may be required if they are rare or strictly protected.
- It is proposed that **new woodlands** should be created where they complement existing woodlands or other semi-natural habitats and where they are likely to contribute to the ecological functionality of the landscape.