



# A Strategy for Open Habitat Policy Delivery on the Public Forest Estate.

Forest Enterprise  
England 2013



20<sup>th</sup> December 2013



## 1. Summary

This strategy is an update of the widely consulted draft dated 12<sup>th</sup> October 2011. It has been updated following the Government Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement published in January 2013.

The strategy presented in this document provides the framework for planning the restoration of open habitat from existing forest across the Public Forest Estate (PFE) in England. The Open Habitat Strategy is intended to guide open habitat restoration and management over the next ten years (2013 to 2023) with an interim review of its effectiveness and appropriateness proposed for 2018.

It addresses the key recommendation of the Independent Panel on Forestry in its Final Report (2012) that the PFE be “an exemplar in large scale open habitat and ancient woodland restoration across the public forest estate”.

The publication of this strategy is one of the commitments made in the January 2013 policy statement which called for Forestry Commission England to:

“Publish a strategy for Open Habitat Policy delivery on the Public Forest Estate to set out the future priorities for development and management of open habitats across the Estate.”

The core components of the Strategy are:

1. Maintain the extent and to maintain and improve the quality of the existing area of open habitat across the FC estate, comprising some 42,600 hectares of land in total.
2. Work towards the intended restoration of the 11,060 hectares of open habitat proposals found within current Forest Plans, subject to revision and potential redeployment in light of the principles in the Forestry Commission (FC) document ‘When to convert woods and forests to open habitat in England’ dated March 2010 [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats) and the guidance provided by this strategy.
3. The Dorset lowland heathlands were identified in 2009 as the single additional national priority area not fully addressed in existing plans. Here an extensive and ambitious programme of additional open habitat restoration from former woodland and plantation has been developed



since 2009 and incorporated into the areas of planned open habitat within agreed Forest Plans. This programme will further the creation of a resilient and sustainable landscape of open heath, mires, pools, patches of scrub, woodland and forestry across Purbeck as a major contribution to the aims of the Wild Purbeck Nature Improvement Area.

4. In all Forest Districts we will ensure that remnants of vulnerable and isolated open habitat, such as lowland meadows, calcareous grasslands and heathlands are identified and retained. Additional open habitat restoration will be considered if it contributes to extending existing core areas of open habitat or increases the connectivity of existing open habitats. Additional open habitat will normally be found from within the existing total area proposed within existing Forest Plans for the duration of this plan, redeployed at revision or review of Forest Plans as appropriate.
5. Staff time and financial resources should be concentrated on ensuring existing and proposed open habitats are of a high quality as a priority, ahead of creating additional areas.
6. In all forests open habitat restoration will be consulted on, proposed and approved through the Forest Plan process, to ensure full engagement with all the issues and consultation with the public and Civil Society organisations.
7. There is no policy requirement for compensatory planting to take place to justify habitat restoration in agreed Forest Plans for wildlife conservation across the FC estate. However, wider landscape changes will certainly be considered if partnership projects can be developed to offset forest loss on the FC estate through twinned forest creation and habitat restoration funded by support from other bodies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In order to meet the commitment to publish this document in 2013, this document assumes the Dorset Forest Plan will be approved as currently submitted. (Approval is expected in January 2014). This document will be amended as necessary once approval is confirmed.



## 2. Introduction

This strategy has emerged from the Government policy on the creation of open habitat from existing woods and plantations 'When to convert woods and forests to open habitat in England' ([www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats)). This policy was widely consulted upon in 2009 and endorsed in 2010. [It is referred to as the 'Open Habitats Policy' throughout this document].

Following publication of the Government Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement in January 2013 the strategy has been reviewed and updated and made publicly available through publication on the FC website ([www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats)).

This strategy aims at consistency with 'Biodiversity 2020', the England Biodiversity Strategy, which calls for the extensive restoration of habitats of all kinds and more, bigger and less fragmented areas for wildlife.

It also aims to address the key recommendation of the Independent Panel on Forestry in its Final Report (2012) that the PFE be "an exemplar in large scale open habitat and ancient woodland restoration across the public forest estate".

This strategy uses data from the report 'Open habitats and open habitat potential on the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England' dated May 2009 by Jonathan Spencer and Rachael Edwards.

Restoring more open habitat from Forestry Commission woodland in England could have a considerable positive impact on the public benefits from the current landholding. However, and equally importantly, woods and forests make a significant contribution to the UK Government's commitments for reducing carbon emissions (by producing timber and sequestering carbon in forest soils), and providing other ecosystem services such as soil and water conservation, and are valued parts of the landscape.

Open habitats can be costly to maintain compared to woodland, not only due to the loss of future income from timber and wood fuel resources but also from the ongoing management costs associated with preventing succession to woodland. The subsequent costs of management and changes in the carbon accounting of the FC estate landholding as a whole are thus important aspects of any land use change and need to be considered. Such considerations are important elements in the development of this strategy.

The production of Forest Plans is the process for managing the often competing interests of wildlife, people and landscape in the design and sustainable management of the Public Forest Estate. It is through these plans that the shaping of the estate is understood, owned and managed at the Forest District level by



local staff, external organisations and the wider public. Ownership of open habitat restoration at this local level is an important theme running through both the Open Habitats Policy and wider Government thinking. Balancing the aspirations for nationally valued habitats and the aspirations and interests of local communities is essential.

Forest Plans are guided by national policies such as the 'Keepers of Time' policy on ancient woodland conservation and restoration, the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) and the independent UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). This strategy for open habitats sits with and is complementary to the above documents.

The Forest Plan will remain the single mechanism for local planning and delivery of changes of landuse from forest to open habitats, (together with any associated Environmental Impact Assessment if necessary).

## 3. The Forestry Commission Estate in England

### 3.1 Current open habitats across the FC Estate

Of the **253,700 hectares** that comprise the current Public Forest Estate landholding in England some **42,600 hectares** is existing open habitat.

Most has remained open since the land was acquired in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The largest areas are comprised of the open forest of the New Forest (some 13,000ha.) and the extensive areas of unplanted upland heaths and bogs of Northumberland and North Cumbria.

The remaining area, while significant at some 10,000ha, is widely spread across the landscape with many important areas of upland and lowland heath, fen, limestone pavement, grassland and open water having been retained within the forests, often with the support of local wildlife organisations that have long recognised their intrinsic biodiversity value. Other large areas, such as the lowland heaths and acid grasslands of Thetford and Sherwood Forest or the limestone pavements of Cumbria have been more recently restored by the Forestry Commission from former conifer plantations.

Notable examples of open habitat across the Public Forest Estate include:

- the species rich grasslands and lowland heaths of Thetford Forest in East Anglia, home to many red data book listed species of vascular plants, insects and birds;



- the Crown lands of the New Forest in Hampshire;
- the lowland heaths of Purbeck in Dorset, home to the sand lizard, smooth snake and rare invertebrates such as the heath tiger beetle;
- the calcareous springs with spreads of tufa (freshwater limestone deposits) in the North York Moors, the only English haven for the incredibly rare barred green colonel soldier fly;
- the extensive upland heaths and mires of Kielder Forest and the East Cumbria moors;
- The limestone pavements of Cumbria.

The above areas all have various Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA) designations due to their important assemblages of nationally and/or internationally important habitats and species.

Since the year 2000 the area of open habitat has considerably expanded as restoration programmes for heathland, blanket bog, upland heath and limestone pavement have progressed adding some **9,000 hectares** of open habitat to the original open land retained since the areas were first acquired by the Forestry Commission.

## 3.2 Planned Open Habitat Restoration

There are currently some **11,060 hectares** of forest in current Forest Plans across the Public Forest Estate where there are plans for further restoration of open habitat. It is possible to assess the anticipated habitat type of areas of forest planned for restoration prior to its expression by studying geology, soils and past and present vegetation cover.

The planned area of open habitat is mainly composed of land likely to become lowland heaths (with some smaller areas of lowland raised bogs) throughout East England, the New Forest and Dorset (**together some 3,700 hectares**) and acid grassland, upland heath and blanket bog in the northern Forest Districts (**together some 7,000 hectares**).

The remainder (**some 360 hectares**) is made up of smaller areas of potential purple moor grass and rush pasture, calcareous grassland and fens scattered throughout the country.

Of the **11,060 hectares** of remaining open habitat planned for creation, **24%** is expected to produce Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority habitat. The remaining



76%, mostly moorland, blanket bog and acid grassland in northern England, is being created for a wide variety of often complementary reasons. These include:

- Clearance of forest in the uplands adjacent to restored mires and bog, where forest is being cleared due to its adverse hydrological influence on the key priority habitat. (In Kielder forest this amounts to nearly 3,000ha).
- For landscape reasons around the margins of forests (often required to meet the needs of the European Landscape Convention).
- Connecting habitat between areas of existing priority habitat.
- Improving the aquatic environment along stream sides. (The planned increase in open space within 50m of a stream in Kielder Forest alone is approximately 2,000ha.).
- Habitats created for many BAP species, such as the Hen Harrier and Blackgrouse.

**Figure 1: Existing and Planned open habitat on the Public Forest Estate (as at 31-03-2013).**

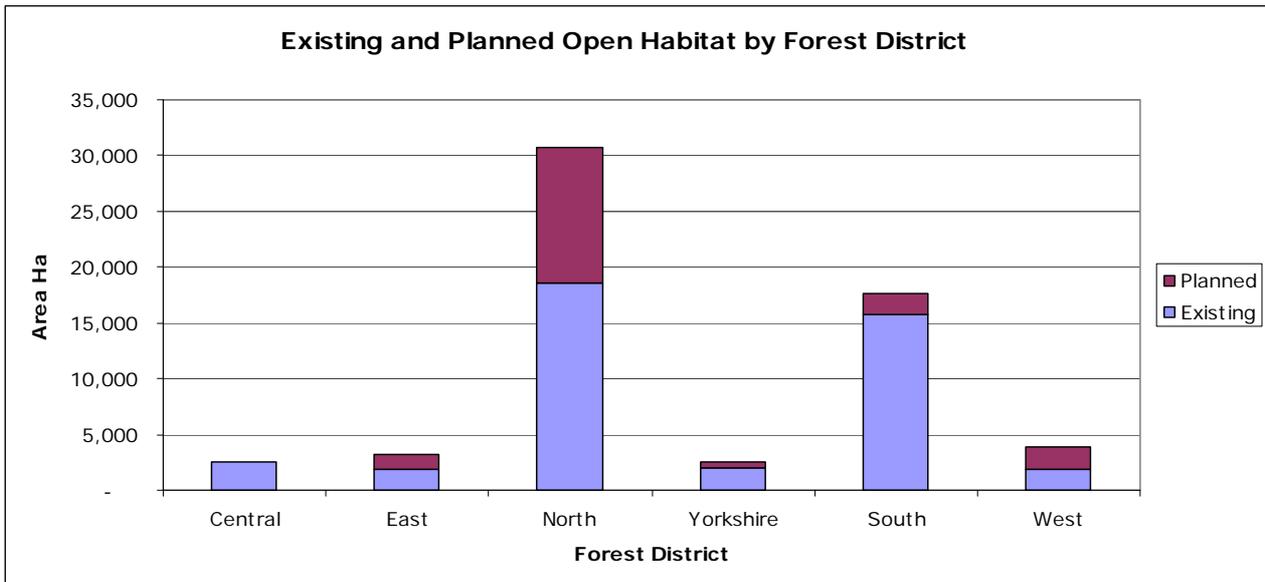
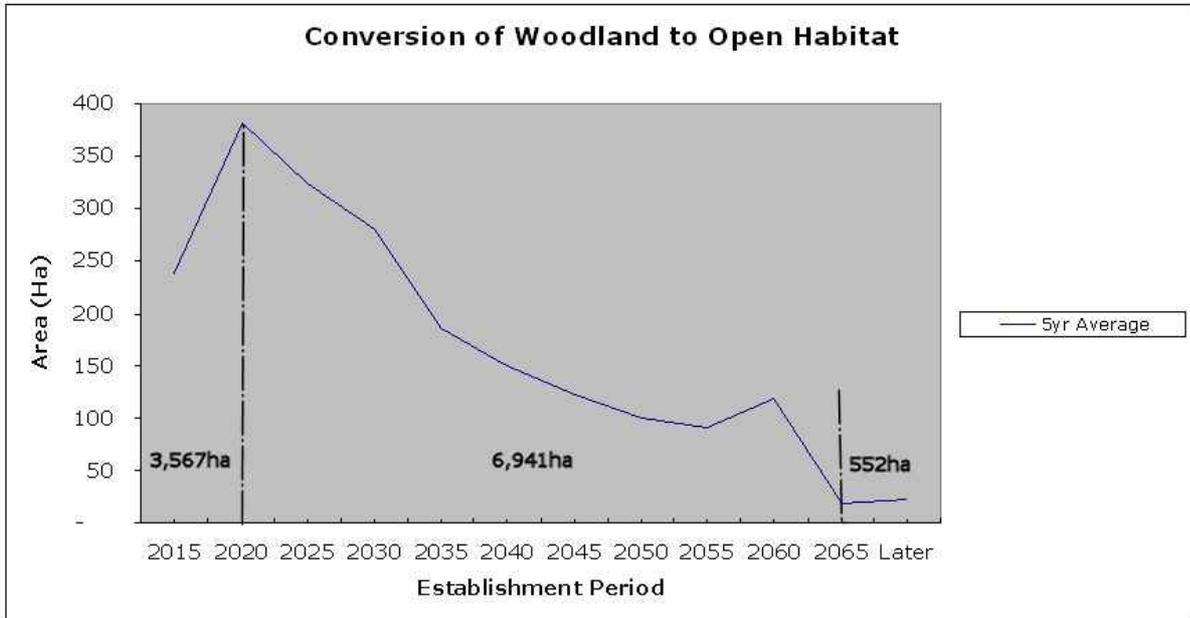




Figure 2: Planned open habitat on the Public Forest Estate over time.



The majority of the area to be created by 2020 is priority habitat, including more than 2,000 hectares of lowland heath and mire, while the area of open habitat planned for delivery between 2020 and 2065 is dominated by areas of forest within the hydrological catchments of mires and along courses of streams in northern England due to be harvested at commercial maturity and not replaced.

### 3.3 Remaining Potential Open Habitat

The 'Open Habitats and Open Habitat Potential on the FC Public Forest Estate in England' report of May 2009, documented the results of extensive work to identify potential areas of open habitat across the FC estate. This amounts to a total of 54,474 ha. For the purpose of this Strategy all the habitats have been grouped to give four main categories:

#### Lowland Heath and Lowland Acid Grassland

Some 32,050 ha of the total potential across the FC estate consists of potential lowland heath and lowland acid grassland. This is 45% of the potential habitat of this type in England and if all were restored would increase the total area of this habitat by 45%. [Of the total potential area, 11,000 ha. is on leasehold land, and 21,000 ha. is on freehold land].

#### Upland Heath

17,739 ha of the total potential across the estate consists of upland heath. This is 7% of the 244,000 ha of upland heath already present in the uplands of England. [Of the total potential area, 5,000 ha are on leasehold land, and c. 13,000 ha is on freehold land].



## Blanket Bog

1,794 ha of the total potential across the FC estate consists of blanket bog. This is only 0.7% of the 255,000 ha of blanket bog already present in England. [Of the total potential area, 358 ha. is on leasehold land, and 1,438 ha. is on freehold land].

## Other Habitat types

Forest Enterprise England currently manages 2,336 ha of other types of open habitat and the restoration of an additional 1,359 ha is proposed in existing Forest Plans. These habitats consist of wetlands, purple moor-grass grasslands, upland hay meadows, lowland grasslands and other small areas. These areas vary considerably in their importance, with most of the key areas having been restored as parts of major programmes of action over the past decade. Nevertheless some 2,891 ha of potential additional areas of all these other habitats exist on the FC estate. [Of the total potential area, 1,436 ha. is on leasehold land, and 1,455 ha. is on freehold land].

**Table 1: Summary of existing, proposed and potential habitat types on the FC estate in England (Spencer & Edwards 2009)** *Note that the figures in this table are derived from the 2009 study and a considerable area has already been restored to open habitat. This is most notable in the area of proposed habitat restoration in column 4, where the 12, 415 ha total is now c. 10,600 ha as a result of the ongoing habitat restoration programme.*

Habitat type	Existing total England area (approx.)	Existing FC area & as % of existing England total area (ha)	Proposed FC area & as % of existing England total area (ha)	Potential FC area & as % of existing England total area (ha)
Lowland heath & acid grassland	72,000	17,314	3,831	32,050
		24%	5%	45%
Upland heath	244,000	10,191	7,271	17,739
		4%	3%	7%
Blanket bog	255,000	6,204	346	
		2%	0.1%	1,794
Other	N/A	2,336	967	0.7%
<b>Total</b>		<b>36,045</b>	<b>12,415</b>	<b>54,474</b>



## 4. The Government's Open Habitats Policy

The Government Policy, prepared by the Forestry Commission, 'When to convert woods and forests to open habitat in England' is underpinned by three principles namely 'the right tree in the right place, the right habitat in the right place and the right change at the right pace'.

The policy provides a framework for decision-making at the local level and identifies when conversion from woodland to open habitats would be supported by the FC (section 5.2.1).

Sites where the FC may support the conversion of woodland to open habitat include:

1. **Extending or buffering high quality habitat.** When the new open habitat will extend or buffer areas of high quality existing open habitat, and there is evidence that fragmentation of the current habitat is having a detrimental impact on the wildlife in that habitat.
2. **Connecting high quality habitat.** When the new open habitat will form a viable wildlife link between areas of high quality open habitat (improving 'connectivity') and there is evidence that lack of connectivity is having a significant detrimental impact on the wildlife in that habitat.
3. **Designated areas.** When the woodland is growing on a site with a national or international conservation designation, such as a site designated under the Habitats Directive for Annex 1 habitat types, as a Site of Special Scientific Interest or National Nature Reserve and the woodland adversely impacts on its open habitat characteristics.
4. **Grazing.** When the new open habitat will extend or link areas of open habitat to allow a practical grazing area to form, and there is evidence that conservation grazing will be established and maintained once the open habitat is created.
5. **Threshold sizes.** When the new open habitat will add to the current area of open habitat to form a patch of continuous or well-connected open habitat that is significantly more viable in the long-term. Minimum desirable patch sizes identified in Habitat Actions Plans can be used as a guide and are shown in Table 2 below.
6. **Opportunities for species of conservation concern.** When there is evidence that converting the woodland to open habitat presents significant opportunities to enhance species of conservation concern.



**Table 2: Guideline minimum viable patches of open habitat**

Open Habitat	Threshold patch size target in habitat Action Plans (ha)
Lowland meadows	2
Upland hay meadows	2
Lowland calcareous grassland	2
Lowland dry acid grassland	6
Purple moor grass and rush meadow	2
Upland heathland (moor)	Target not set
Lowland raised bogs	Target not set
Blanket bog	Target not set
Fens	Target for 2 new landscape scale wetland complexes in England
Reedbeds	
Lowland heathland	30

One of the key aims of the policy is to make sure that the open habitats restored under it provide a significant contribution in terms of the biodiversity they support, and in time generate more wildlife rich landscapes that have long-term benefits for people.

Substantial elements of the Public Forest Estate meet many of the criteria listed. There could therefore be a case for significant conversion of woodland and forestry to open habitats on some key areas of the estate.

A balance must however be maintained between creating open habitat, maintaining woodland cover and ensuring that the resulting landscape can be sustainably managed into the future.

It is not a requirement of the open habitats policy to carry out compensatory planting schemes when embarking on open habitat restoration, except in circumstances where benefits to biodiversity are low (which is unlikely to be of relevance to any planned restoration on the Public Forest Estate). However, it is a requirement of the policy that there be no net loss of woodland, and no net loss of productive plantation, in England.

FC Grants and Regulations are responsible for approving Forest Plans and it will be their role to ensure that National rates of open habitat restoration do not exceed current afforestation rates and to approve Forest Plans as appropriate.

Although levels of woodland creation are currently low, it is not envisaged that this will constrain open habitat restoration proposals (on or off the FC estate). This Strategy has been prepared on that basis.



## 5. Strategic constraints and strategic priorities

The FC estate is committed to the open habitats policy. However, Forest Enterprise will need to balance delivery against all of its objectives, and manage the estate within the financial constraints of the business and Government funding. We will therefore restore and maintain open habitat where it can provide most benefit in terms of wildlife habitat and public benefit. Where large areas of key priority habitat already exist (such as upland heathland) or where other organisations are better placed to manage open habitats, the Public Forest Estate is not best placed to contribute to further programmes of habitat restoration and subsequent management.

In areas where the Forestry Commission controls a high percentage of the potential habitat type and where management is already a core part of Forestry Commission activity, the Forestry Commission is in a very strong position to contribute to habitat restoration and cost effective management.

A significant part of the FC estate is Leasehold. Leasehold terms and conditions vary but most are for 'forestry purposes' only. Forestry Purposes can be taken to mean managed in accordance with the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS), the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS), and Government forestry policy. While the FC estate can at a National level remain within the requirements of UKFS & UKWAS with some extensive areas restored to priority open habitat, it could fail the 'forestry purposes only' requirement at an individual lease level if substantial parts of the lease area were restored to open habitat. This potentially restricts the amount of open habitat that can be restored on leasehold parts of the estate.

Within the four main habitat types, FC can contribute very little more beyond what is already proposed to the national total of Blanket Bog (all our un-restored area amounts to only 0.7% of the total existing area). This habitat type is therefore not a priority for additional restoration on the FC estate.

Our total potential area of upland heath amounts to 7% of the total existing area, of which we currently manage 4%. We are not major managers of this type of habitat at the national level. The areas of this habitat type already proposed for restoration often have other reasons for restoration, in addition to purely biodiversity value, so this restoration needs to continue. However, this habitat type is not a priority for the FC estate to restore more than that already proposed.

However we currently manage over 17,000ha or 24% of the total existing lowland heath and lowland acid grassland habitat, and existing proposals will create an additional **3,831 ha**. The 32,050 hectares of potential area is 45% of the total restorable area of this habitat type in England. **Lowland heath and lowland acid grassland habitat is where the Public Forest Estate can make its greatest contribution, and it will therefore be our national priority for**



**additional restoration.** Lowland heath is also where we can use our existing staff skills and can manage at a scale that is comparatively cost effective.

The relatively small areas of other habitat types are not a national priority, but when Forest Plans are revised, the boundaries of these areas should be reviewed to maximise the value of these habitats within the Forest Plan. Small isolated remnants or potential areas with no opportunities to connect to existing/proposed areas are not a priority for restoration.

## 6. Strategic Delivery of Open Habitats

### 6.1 Internationally Important Open Habitats

Our open habitats of international importance, as determined by their EU designation as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's) are:

- The Dorset and New Forest Heaths
- The Border Mires of Northumberland and East Cumbria
- The Limestone Pavements of North West England
- The Tufa Fens of the North York Moors

**The Purbeck heaths were the only one of these areas where in 2009 we had potential to increase an internationally important habitat on any significant scale. A significant increase in heathland area is now planned within the recently revised and agreed Forest Plans.**

Completing the restoration of the small remaining areas of un-restored upland bogs and mires, limestone pavements and tufa fens is an equally important priority but will be on a much smaller scale due to their limited additional un-restored presence on the FC estate. Note though that a lot of future open habitat restoration in North Forest District (some 3,000 ha in all) consists of the restoration of critical hydrological catchments supporting internationally important bogs, while generating non priority habitat.

In the Internationally important areas designated as Special Protection Areas (SPA's) where the designation is not for the habitat but for the birds that use them, it is the populations of birds that are key. In the Breckland and Sandlings SPA's of East Anglia and the Thames Basin SPA a rotational clearfelling and re-establishment of woodland is required, and these areas are currently all being maintained in 'favourable' or 'favourable recovering' condition through this type of forest management. The most appropriate way to protect and enhance the flora and invertebrate features of the SSSI (features of national rather than international importance) is considered by Natural England and by research undertaken by the University of East Anglia to be through a network of interlinked



corridors within the rotationally clearfelled forest. (Approximately 20% of these areas are managed as permanent open space in the form of wide sandy corridors). In these areas, the key priorities will be the maintenance of populations of the scheduled bird species, improvement in the quality of the habitat within the corridors, and through increasing the connectivity of isolated populations.

## 6.2 Nationally Important Open Habitats

The habitats of National importance, demonstrated by their designation as SSSI, or their close association with nearby designated sites or associated species, have been identified as:

- The Haldon Hills of Devon
- The dry heathlands of Cannock Chase and Sherwood
- The wet heathlands of Laughton Forest in Lincolnshire
- The Upland heath of the Long Mynd in Shropshire

In these areas the maintenance of existing areas and improvements in the quality of open habitat will be the key objectives, alongside completion of the existing proposed areas of habitat expansion. To ensure that the most appropriate areas are restored, the location of open habitat will be reviewed at each Forest Plan review. No significant net increases in the overall total national open habitat area beyond that already planned are proposed though redeployment of areas should be carefully considered in consultation with interested parties at Forest Plan reviews.

## 6.3 Proposed Areas elsewhere and future opportunities

In these areas open habitats form an important and integral landscape scale component of the Public Forest Estate. The FC will ensure that remnants of vulnerable and isolated open habitat such as lowland meadows, calcareous grasslands and heathland are identified and retained. Open habitat restoration should only be considered if it contributes to extending existing core areas of open habitat or increases the connectivity of existing open habitats. Any additional areas of open habitats must be found from within the existing national total area proposed to be open within existing Forest Plans.

Wider landscape changes on the FC estate, beyond the open habitat restoration described in this Strategy, will be both considered and encouraged if partnership projects pursuing forest creation in tandem with habitat creation can be developed. This will help to off-set increased forest removal on the Public Forest Estate and allow further delivery of Government ambitions for both habitat and forest creation across the country.



## 7. The financial challenges

Open habitats are usually more costly than forestry to manage and maintain. When open habitats are restored from forestry, not only are long-term incomes from timber or wood fuel reduced or removed, but additional costs, (mainly associated with preventing the inevitable succession of open habitat to woodland) are incurred. Once priority habitats have been restored, the FC would like to maintain them in good condition.

Under this Strategy the FC has a desire to restore and maintain large areas of open habitat. However, we are constrained by having to work within the confines of the existing budget provision: if we create more open habitat we have to manage the increased area within the same budget, or ideally at a lower overall cost. In order to deliver more area for the same or less expenditure we must take account of the following:

1. Priority will be given to restoration and maintenance of SSSI in sustaining favourable and recovering condition in the distribution of staff and cash resource.
2. Larger areas of open habitat support cost effective operations, both during the initial phase of restoration from forestry and for the management of the resulting open habitat.
3. Open habitat restoration needs to be addressed at a landscape scale, and opportunities to work with other organisations should be explored and undertaken wherever practical.
4. Areas will not be felled in advance of economic maturity, except in exceptional circumstances.
5. Operations should be undertaken at a scale and frequency that optimises the operational costs against the desired outcomes. This could mean for example that birch regeneration needs to remain uncut on some areas until it reaches a size where it can be cut at no net cost due to the production of firewood, etc.
6. Combining necessary forest operations with open habitat management operations to reduce overall costs should always be explored.
7. Options to lease or otherwise devolve management responsibilities to other groups (or individuals) able to claim Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) or other grant funding should be considered and taken where appropriate.



8. Opportunities should be taken via third party participation to use grant funding to address capital works, particularly on sites likely to be able to claim HLS once restored, where restoration and/or fencing may be eligible for payment.
9. Opportunities to twin proposed large-scale open habitat restoration projects with other landscape scale projects (including woodland creation adjacent to the FC estate) should be taken wherever possible.

## 8. Guidelines for lowland heath habitat creation

1. Wherever possible new areas of open habitat should extend, connect or consolidate existing open habitat.
2. Existing open areas should be connected to create as large and functional an area as possible for open habitat species. Wide open forest rides, utility lines and temporary open space such as clearfell and young conifer crops can all provide useful linkages and create important habitat for many open habitat species.
3. Areas of low potential timber production (low yield class of existing crops) should be favoured as timber income foregone will be lowest. Areas of low yield class are usually of low fertility and restore more easily to heathland and acid grassland than areas of higher fertility.
4. Restoration programmes should be targeted at forested areas where the greatest contribution to the conservation of rare and threatened species associated with the planned open habitat type is anticipated. Particular attention should be paid to species with limited capacity for colonising new areas of habitat such as plants and invertebrates.
5. The establishment of new open habitat (i.e. those not extending or connecting open areas) should generally only be considered when:
  - they form a stepping stone between other more widely separated areas of open habitat and where further connections can be made with other areas of open habitat (including forest rides and temporary open habitat) in the future.
  - they are large enough to independently deliver open habitat that can be cost effectively grazed or managed in the long-term. (See minimum viable patch sizes in table 2)
6. Areas of open habitat (created either through extending original areas or creating new areas) should be at a scale that promotes strong and robust

populations of associated plant and animal species and cost effective restoration and management.

7. Large core areas of open habitats should operate within a complex mosaic of different habitat types so that pockets of shrub, scrub and woodland cover, wide rides, fire-breaks and glades as well as transitional open space such as young conifer crops and clearfells can be accommodated.
8. Opportunities to create bare ground habitat and sandy banks for invertebrates and reptiles as well as shallow ponds and wet areas should be taken wherever possible to create the diversity of niches now accepted as being so important for most "open habitat" species.
9. The current programme of open habitat restoration within Forest Plans should be reviewed at Forest Plan revision time in light of the open habitat policy and the principles in this strategy. This review should ensure that the restoration of open habitats maximises the potential delivery of the desired outcomes of the policy and the Public Forest Estate strategy. All proposals must achieve a balance between constraints and opportunities for the area, and be responsive to local stakeholder views.
10. In some situations past open habitat restoration projects will not have delivered good quality wildlife habitat. Sites that have been restored but have proven to be ineffective, or too difficult to maintain as open habitat will not necessarily be maintained as open habitats. They may be allowed to revert to scrub - an important habitat in its own right for a range of declining species such as turtle dove and nightingales, or returned to productive woodland. Decisions for reversion to scrub and woodland will be considered as part of the Forest Planning process. Where opportunities allow, an equivalent area of open habitat should be restored elsewhere within the same Forest Plan or habitat of a higher priority for restoration should be created in another Forest Plan within the Forest District.
11. Areas of temporary open space such as clearfell sites, young conifer and broadleaf crops, managed coppice, and scrub woodland will lie outside the remit of the open habitats strategy (and will not be recorded as open habitat on the sub-compartment database). Evidence suggests that these habitat types are nevertheless extremely valuable for a host of "open habitat" species including adder, nightjar, woodlark and smooth snake and should be planned to connect and enhance open and wooded areas whenever it is practical, thus increasing the total area of viable habitat available for a range of species.
12. The open habitats policy states that wildfire is likely to be a greater risk on open habitats than in forests, particularly on lowland heath. Opportunities to minimise risk by breaking up contiguous areas (without losing the benefits of connectivity) should always be considered at the forest design plan stage. It may be possible



for example to separate areas of heathland by watercourses, forest roads, etc, as well as woodland areas within the overall management unit. Particularly vulnerable areas near public highways or other high use public areas may be better kept wooded than cleared. (The production of Fire Risk Maps and regular liaison with the Fire Service may also be desirable).

13. Areas where there are realistic opportunities for valuable short to medium term alternative uses (e.g. gravel extraction), followed by long term restoration to open habitats, should not be restored to permanent open habitat in advance of this alternative use. This particularly applies if it is considered likely that this restoration would make the realisation of significant income from the alternative intermediary use less likely.

## 9. Monitoring and evaluation

1. The review of all open habitat proposals will take place as part of the normal Forest Plan review process across the Public Forest Estate. As with any other Forest Plan change, all significant changes will require public consultation. Evaluation of the effectiveness of delivery at the Forest Plan level is an integral part of the Forest Plan review process.
2. Monitoring of the amount of open space at a National level will be undertaken at five yearly intervals (the first being in 2018) from an examination of habitat type in the FC Sub Compartment Data Base, all areas being compared with the baseline contained within the report 'Open habitats and open habitat potential on the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England' dated May 2009 by Jonathan Spencer and Rachael Edwards.
3. The distribution of open habitat should be reviewed in 2018 to ensure that the existing and planned open space remains in keeping with current policy, and is achieving the maximum practical National contribution to Bio2020 and its ambitions across the country.
4. The 2018 National level review of this strategy will need to take account of the new Public Forest Estate Management Organisations mandate with respect to Open Habitat delivery, and should include examination of methods and costs of management, including the proportion of areas managed by third parties or with funding from third parties.



## 10. References

- Independent Panel on Forestry. Final Report. July 2012  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-panel-on-forestry-final-report>
- 'Open habitats and open habitat potential on the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England' dated May 2009 by Jonathan Spencer and Rachael Edwards.  
[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf/$FILE/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf)

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December 20<sup>th</sup> 2013

## Annex 1. Defining lowland heath habitats on the Public Forest Estate

The term "open habitat" is commonly used but what does it actually mean in practice for the Forestry Commission?

Wooded habitats are defined as having at least 20% woodland canopy. All UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitats have nationally agreed definitions: [www.ukbap.org.uk/library/UKBAPPriorityHabitatDescriptionsfinalAllhabitats20081022.pdf](http://www.ukbap.org.uk/library/UKBAPPriorityHabitatDescriptionsfinalAllhabitats20081022.pdf)

SSSI Common Standards Monitoring states that scrub and woodland should not represent more than 5% for grasslands and lowland bogs and 15% for dry lowland heaths. If locally important species depend on scrub then up to 25% can be allowed for the unit to achieve favourable condition. This strict vegetation standard has been designed for use across protected sites designated for certain open habitat or species interests.

The FC agrees that some open habitats do need to be managed on a prescriptive basis, for example when the site is an SSSI, is small and isolated, or supports particular rare species dependent on specialised habitat that can only be maintained through frequent and targeted management. However the FC believes that when considering the creation of larger areas an economically sustainable approach based on scale and the harvesting of marketable materials is far preferable to a rigid approach based on percentages of woodland cover, and can deliver quality habitats and wildlife more cost effectively.

Importantly the prevailing approach to nature conservation is now more widely recognised as failing to deliver the recovery of both habitats and widespread, but nonetheless threatened BAP species. Natural England (ref. J. R. Webb et al, Natural England 2010) analysed the habitat niche requirements for each BAP species to identify how species requirements can best be integrated into habitat targets. Their analyses suggests that for species conservation to be effectively integrated into a habitat-based approach much greater emphasis needs to be placed on creating niches, rather than managing habitats generically. Their study found that for open habitats such as heathlands and grasslands the critical factor is structural diversity brought about by dynamic process; in essence, management that disturbs and delays succession in such a way that a number of different states can be found present at any one time. Any management technique that promotes homogeneity is generally detrimental for many UK BAP species.



So, to effectively contribute towards the England Biodiversity Strategy, the FC must ensure that structural and habitat variation within and between the restored open habitats and the surrounding landscape is maintained.

The FC will practice a more dynamic and flexible approach to the planning and management of open habitat on many lowland heath areas than it is required to do on formally designated areas. The result will be a more diverse mixture of predominantly open landscape consisting of heath with scattered shrub, scrub and woodland components, alongside bare soils, recently harvested heather and gorse, patches of wetland, grassland and mire.

WEBB, J.R., DREWITT, A.L., & MEASURES, G.H., 2010. Managing for species: Integrating the needs of England's priority species into habitat management. Part 2 Annexes. *Natural England Research Reports, Number 024*. <http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NERR024>

## Annex 2. How much heathland in Dorset?

The following text, taken from earlier drafts of the Open Habitats Strategy, are the principles used to guide the amount of heathland proposed within the Forest Plan for this most important area of the PFE for the expansion of Open Habitats:

The FC needs to balance the desires of all stakeholders and the sustainable management of the estate. The balance between forest and open habitats also needs to take account of the individual characteristics of each site, and can only be determined by detailed work on Forest Plans. However, the following are considered to be broad guidelines that are applicable across the Dorset heathland area of the FC estate that has the potential to be restored to high quality lowland heathland and acid grassland:

- All woodland blocks should have at least the 20% open space considered acceptable within a 'standard' forest.
- No woodland blocks should be entirely cleared of woodland (at least 20% woodland would mean forestry was a not an insignificant element).
- Given the importance of the area, and the concentration of FC commitment in this geographic region, somewhere in the order of 50 - 60% permanent open habitat across the whole area (including roadsides and rides within the woodland areas) is considered to be a realistic long term aspiration (but subject to public consultation and widespread acceptance as part of the Forest Plan process).

The open habitats policy suggests a rough 'thirds' principle, with a third permanent open habitat, a third permanent woodland, and a third temporary woodland or open habitat on a 10 to 15 year rotation of vegetation management.



(This fits with the commonly used landscaping principle that a one third/two thirds split is often found to be most visually acceptable to the majority of people).

END