

## **Towards a new Public Forest Estate management body Response from the Ramblers**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 The Ramblers welcomes the opportunity to respond to the document '*Towards a new public forest estate management body*', particularly given the statement in paragraph 3 of the document that 'nothing in this document is fixed'. We hope that our views are helpful in informing the final proposals for the new Public Forest Estate management organisation (PFE MO).

1.2 The Ramblers is at the heart of walking in Britain; working to promote walking and protect the places where people walk. We are Britain's walking charity, making it easy for everyone to walk, whether in countryside, cities, hills, coasts and on or off the beaten track. We have a grass roots network of over 25,000 volunteers who work tirelessly for a walking Britain. For over 75 years we have helped to build and protect Britain's 140,000 mile long path network, run over 45,000 walks a year, and campaign for better walking routes and more walking opportunities.

### **2. Summary of our views**

2.1 The Ramblers is concerned that the current proposals do not meet all of the recommendations and principles set out by the Independent Panel on Forestry (IPF). Critically, recommendation 28 of the IPF's report must be taken forward so that the PFE MO has an overriding purpose to sustain and maximise the public value of the estate, in terms of wildlife, access, recreation, education and cultural heritage. To do this the government needs to enable the PFE MO to become an exemplar in each of these areas, as recommended by the panel and demanded by the public.

### **3. Status of new body**

3.1 While we welcome the clarification in paragraph 12 of the document that the new organisation will operate within the public sector and at arm's length from government, more detail is needed on what a 'statutorily-based Public Corporation' would entail, particularly in terms of public accountability, transparency and scrutiny.

### **4. Remit, functions and duties**

4.1 As the organisation's statutory objectives and duties would be set out in primary legislation, it is important to get them right at the start, as in practice, once the legislation has been amended, there will be little opportunity to change it in the foreseeable future.

4.2 The organisation's overarching legislative duty and mission must be to realise the estate's full value (current and potential) for people and nature. While we understand the need for the body to have greater freedom to manage its resources and for the estate to become more economically sustainable, we are very concerned about the prominence given to income generation within the proposed objectives and supporting rationale; this

must be repositioned as a means of delivering public benefit rather than as an end in itself. The reference to the 'economy' should be deleted from the mission.

4.3 We are concerned by the reference to 'balance' public, nature and economic benefit in the overarching objective. Instead, there should be a legislative safeguarding duty to ensure sustainable management of the estate and to prevent commercialisation overriding the public value of the estate.

4.4 The configuration of the PFE MO offers an opportunity to ensure that the full range of ecosystem services provided by the PFE, including cultural services and non-material benefits such as recreation, physical and mental health, tourism, aesthetic appreciation, spiritual experience and sense of place, are reflected in the income generation balance sheet, as well as timber value and other cash tangibles.

## 5. Funding

5.1 The government should commit to long-term public funding for the PFE MO. This is appropriate given the wide range of public benefits delivered for relatively little public money.

5.2 Long-term public funding would help to reduce the risk of commercialism taking precedence over public benefit.

## 6. Accountability

6.1 The PFE MO should be directly accountable to the public for the delivery of its mission and its management decisions. This could be achieved in a number of ways including scrutiny inquiries to which the public would be invited to submit evidence e.g. by the Natural Capital Committee, the Public Accounts Committee or the Environmental Audit Committee. The appointed Guardians will play an important role in public accountability. Such processes will help to ensure best value for public money and, importantly, instil public confidence in the body's operations and decisions.

6.2 A culture of transparency and openness should be encouraged from the outset. These principles should be embedded as core organisational values and placed at the heart of decision-making on issues of significant public interest such as disposals and acquisitions.

## 7. Guardians

7.1 Guardians should represent the full range of public interest in the public forest estate, including access and recreation, and should be appointed on a non-partisan basis. They should be vested with a power to veto land sales that they consider would erode the estate's integrity or public value. Consideration should be given to Guardian appointees sitting on the PFE MO's Board, in order to bring a public perspective.

Ruth Chambers, Policy Consultant Tel: 07971 102 156 [ruth.chambers@ramblers.org.uk](mailto:ruth.chambers@ramblers.org.uk)  
Justin Cooke, Senior Policy Officer Tel: 020 7339 8528 [justinc@ramblers.org.uk](mailto:justinc@ramblers.org.uk)