

Protecting, improving and expanding our woodland assets in the West Midlands and the benefits they deliver.

A Response from the Chairman of the West Midlands Regional Advisory Committee

The West Midlands has been well served by the work and contributions of its former West Midlands Regional Advisory Committee. This was made up of committed hard working members drawn from industry, land owners and the wide range of organisations with an interest in and contribution to make in the protection, improvement and expansion (PIE) of our forests and woodlands. They were strong advocates, excellent communicators, and experienced practitioners and indeed covered all aspects of our sector. A key role, undertaken by this group in this last year, has been in their strong advocacy of PIE and the benefits. They have championed this cause at external meetings and other bodies in which they are involved. They have provided effective challenge to proposals and consultations and, in turn, made suggestions and thoughts known to FC staff in a supportive and very constructive manner.

Two key priorities driving our agenda over the last twelve months has been to emphasise economic growth, as well as skills and training, and how forestry and woodland can contribute to these. We believe strongly that emphasising the relevance of the PIE agenda to economic growth and employment opportunity is vital, both to achieving the objectives and gaining effective and wide engagement across all sectors and organisations. During the year, we met jointly with our NW counterparts, to really explore the opportunities and help map out priority areas for woodland creation and improvement. As Chairman, I was also directly involved in meeting with landowners and their agents exploring commercial challenges and opportunities directly related to delivering the PIE agenda.

We have also worked hard and followed initiatives in promoting the direct link between urban and rural forestry and woodland interests. We have been a stakeholder in the very exciting developments in Birmingham which emphasise the health, social and environmental benefits and, most recently, have seen established a new forestry research facility at Birmingham University privately funded. We have helped develop new ways of working and exploring why forestry matters across so many areas of our lives and communities and in particular emphasising the important links between rural and urban forestry and initiatives.

Perhaps I might slightly more specifically highlight just three areas or examples. The first relates to a Midlands Woodlands for Water Initiative. This has strong engagement from the EA and the two regional flood and coastal protection committees, as well as other related bodies. Pilot work has proved the importance of woodlands in the water agenda in terms of improving water quality, flood protection and other environmental benefits. As Chairman of the FWAC, I am championing these developments on behalf of the EA and FC and am pleased to report plans for further partnership funded developments as part of an approach of supporting natural solutions especially to flood protection, a key challenge in many parts of the Midlands and of course nationally. This has gained direct engagement from local authorities involved and, by so doing, put the importance of woodlands and forestry very much on their agendas.

A further example returns to the topic of urban forestry. A member of our committee is the lead in developing the multi benefits of trees in Birmingham. It is part of a multi focussed project looking at all developments proposed in the city against a matrix of requirements including healthier communities, environment, greening, addressing urban heating and other factors. Birmingham is a city taking a strong lead in this area not just nationally but globally. We also have strong direct links to the work of community forests and strongly advocate their benefits. A member of our committee

is a Trustee of the Community Forest Trust bringing together the interests of a number of such forests nationally and their contribution to the PIE agenda.

A third example is the initiative taken by the WM in partnership with the NW, in undertaking a survey and review of education and training opportunities across the two areas. This was carried out at no cost, but by voluntary effort, and revealed some key gaps and opportunities which were fed into national thinking and have resulted in key outcomes. For example an organisation in the West Midlands forged a link with a NW training provider to provide an innovative training package on line resulting in the take up of a significant number of apprentices by organisations. Developments continue and it highlighted the link between the PIE agenda and employment and training opportunities.

These are just three examples of the many contributions made. Undoubtedly there are many challenges in resourcing, tree health and other areas but the opportunities remain strong and the essential review of national forestry policy and implementation provides a real platform for innovative and creative solutions. This requires strong local representation and advocacy and this is, and will continue to be, provided by the FWAC. Recently a major study of the Marches area in Shropshire and Herefordshire has revealed what an engine for growth woodlands and forestry can provide, the opportunity to bring underutilised areas into production and for public benefit and the creation of economic conditions for expansion, truly delivering on the PIE agenda.

Briefly looking to the future, and especially 2014, we welcome the tremendous opportunity offered by the creation of the West Midlands Forestry & Woodlands Advisory Committee (FWAC). The FWAC's mandate and membership has been enlarged over the previous WM RAC's. The new body provides a strong platform to really make things happen, to empower the sector and communities and help grow a really strong woodland culture.

The FWAC has an enormous breadth and depths of networks and influence. It can provide the strong representation and advocacy needed and, within the time members offer, can certainly help drive and deliver the PIE agenda in the Midlands to achieve the best possible outcome in terms of growing the economy, building a resilient society, protecting and enhancing the natural environment and maximising benefit to society and local communities.

John Moverley
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