

Wildlife and Countryside Link red lines for the new Public Forest Estate management organisation

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together 41 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together our members have the support of over eight million people in the UK and manage over 750,000 hectares of land.

This document is supported by the following 14 organisations:

- Bat Conservation Trust
- British Mountaineering Council
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign for National Parks
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Friends of the Earth England
- Open Spaces Society
- The Mammal Society
- National Trust
- Plantlife
- Ramblers
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust

Link does not support the current proposals² for the new Public Forest Estate management organisation (PFE MO), because they do not meet all of the recommendations and principles set out by the Independent Panel on Forestry (IPF). The Government must ensure the overriding mission for the new body is to realise the estate's full potential value to people and nature. To do this it needs to enable the PFE MO to become the "exemplar" in wildlife conservation, ancient woodland and open habitat restoration, cultural heritage, access provision and community engagement the panel recommended and public demanded.

Link sets out four red lines below, which need to be met in the formation of the new PFE MO, to enable it to maintain and enhance the level of benefits to wildlife and people:

Fit for Purpose Remit: the overarching legislative duty of the new PFE MO must be to realise the estate's full potential value to people and nature, in line with IPF recommendations. Income generation needs to be explicitly repositioned as a means to enhancing public value, not an equal and outcompeting objective. The income generation balance sheet should be revolutionised so that it encompasses the full range of ecosystem services that the public forest estate provides, not just the timber values. There must be a legislative safeguarding duty to ensure sustainable management of the estate (such as appropriate timing and methods of management operation) and prevention of commercialisation damaging the current and potential wildlife and public value.

Clear Accountability: the new body must be directly accountable to the public for its management decisions and delivery of its mission. It must make transparent, evidence based decisions and have its management investments scrutinised by the

Natural Capital Committee (or its successor) to ensure sufficient funding is being provided for sustainable growth of natural capital, and the best public value for money is being achieved. It should also be accountable to the National Audit Office in the normal way. The “Guardians” should represent the full range of interests for the estate, and have the power invested to prevent land sale decisions that degrade the estate’s integrity for maintaining and enhancing its value to the public and nature. There should be a transparent policy on disposals and acquisitions.

Commitment to Long Term Government Funding: the PFE must continue to be part funded by central government on the basis of its order of magnitudes of return in public value for relatively little public money. Funding will be at a level commensurate with its mission to enhance its value to people and wildlife, and will prevent perverse decisions being made to plug funding gaps, such as land sales, or income generating activities that degrade wildlife habitat or high quality access.

Works with other Landowners/Managers: there should be a duty to cooperate with other landowners/managers and providers of public benefits, to deliver a net national gain in public and wildlife value. There should be a first refusal community right to buy if land is being sold by the PFE MO. Forest Enterprise is currently ineligible for directly accessing the limited amount of EU Rural Development grants that support private woodland owners and managers to deliver public benefits. This principle must be retained in the PFE MO, to avoid dramatically reducing the support available for delivery of wildlife, access and other public value in the 82% of woods and forests in other ownerships.