

## **KEY MESSAGES FROM INITIAL ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE LONG-TERM ROLE OF THE PUBLIC FOREST ESTATE (PFE) IN ENGLAND**

### **Nature of involvement in the Public Forest Estate**

62% of responders are individuals. Other responses are from categories such as local community groups, forest industry bodies, and non-Governmental organisations in about equal numbers.

The national perspective dominates, 442 responses have a regional focus. For the most part, regional responses are not significantly different to the national picture. The key exceptions are:

- A higher prioritisation of “Attracting visitors and tourists” in Yorkshire & The Humber and to a lesser degree in East of England.
- Producing timber is a higher priority for responders with a South West focus.
- London tends to be a special case.<sup>1</sup>

### **Diversity**

Those in the 35-64 age groups are over represented as are males, who represent 60% of those who gave information on gender. People from black and minority ethnic groups are under represented with 99% identifying themselves as white compared to 88% in the general population.

### **Key drivers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Responders identify climate change as the biggest threat and the Estate acting as a carbon sink as the biggest opportunity. They identify the size of the Estate and the trusted brand of the Forestry Commission as strengths on which to capitalise.

There is broad consensus on the benefits that the Estate can best deliver:

- Provide places for wildlife to live.
- Plant woods and forests to help combat climate change
- Improve and protect the landscape
- Provide places to walk in.

There are three that are not supported by the overwhelming majority:

- Provide sites for windpower
- Provide places for events such as outdoor concerts, sporting events, and festivals.
- Provide minerals for extraction.

Many of those who commented further felt that it was difficult, impossible, or undesirable to pick out a selection of benefits at a national scale.

---

<sup>1</sup> To be discussed at Regional Advisory Committee Chairs and Commissioners meeting 11 Nov 2009.

## **Paying for the Public Forest Estate**

38% feel the net cost of the public forest estate is low, 19% that it is about right, and 40% do not know. 3% feel it is high. There are two main arguments for this latter point of view:

- \* The Estate is overly concerned with the production of timber and is therefore not fulfilling its responsibility to deliver public benefits with apparent failure to fulfil biodiversity potential and respond adequately to climate change the main issues.
- \* Such a large potentially productive estate should not require any central Government funding.

There is broad support for most of the commercial opportunities presented up to certain limits based mainly on perceived environmental damage, impact on access and enjoyment, and achieving balanced objectives. Over 50% would support “Timber for all purposes, e.g. construction, wood as a renewable fuel”. Over 40% would support each of “Payments for ecosystem services (e.g. storing carbon, reducing flooding) if a mechanism for such payments is developed”; “Leisure businesses such as Forest Holidays, catering, cycle hire, forest shops”; and “Renewable energy – wind and water power”. 77% say they would not support “Housing and other built development”. There is a general feeling that the Forestry Commission should retain overall control and accountability. Within these aggregates there are diverse views, e.g.: with some supporting and some opposing charging for access.

Multiple alternative ways of generating income are suggested. These fall into three categories: leisure, recreation, and education; woodland management and renewable energy; and finance and taxes. On the latter, a number feel that the Public Forest Estate should be funded wholly by Government. There is also a notable volume of comments calling for the Public Forest Estate to generate income from service provision to others or through greater fluidity in its land holding, e.g.: leasing land to others, selling land to safe purchasers and reinvesting in other land. A minority of people say that the Estate should not be used to generate an income.

## **Size, location and type of land**

The overwhelming majority of people indicate a desire for the Public Forest Estate to increase in size. Additional comments include the need to consider the quality of benefits delivered rather than the absolute areas of forest. The majority of major stakeholders and individual responders support the growth of the Public Forest Estate and its role in the expansion of green infrastructure and ambitious woodland creation. They see the Public Forest Estate as a valuable resource, not just in commercial terms, but also in environmental and social terms.

The consensus is that the Estate has broadly the right composition. Environmental NGOs are the most likely to argue for significant repositioning and changes to the type of land on the basis of biodiversity needs, access, and supporting and regulating ecosystem services such as water management.

The majority of responders express significant concerns about the disposals policy, particularly relating to protection of social and environmental benefits. A number of conditions for disposal are recommended, including conditions of sale and selection of purchasers. There is a general desire that any disposals are used to generate receipts for acquisitions elsewhere particularly of land for tree planting close to population centres and on low quality agricultural land.

## **The priorities**

### **Moving to a low carbon economy.**

57% feel that this is an important consideration when making decisions about the Public Forest Estate, 21% that it is overriding. Only 3% feel that it is not important. A minority of responders challenge that the Public Forest Estate has a significant role on the basis that woodland has little potential to reduce carbon emissions in the UK.

### **Helping society adapt to climate change**

Full analysis not yet available but early indications are for a focus on education including knowledge transfer and on non-motorised transport links.

### **Helping wildlife adapt to climate change**

There is a consensus that the Public Forest Estate has a leading role to play in helping wildlife cope with climate change. A range of action points are presented based mainly on the potential for landscape scale semi-natural habitats, connectivity, and quality of habitat management. Note that a significant number of the responses are challenging about the current contribution of the Estate.

### **Supporting delivery of Government policy on other land**

32% feel that the focus for the Estate in working with others should be in setting up co-operative working, 21% on catalysing landscape scale working, 20% on managing land in other forms of ownership, and 18% on making Estate infrastructure available to others. 6% feel that the Estate should not be used in this way. There is clear support for the Public Forest Estate to be used for research, particularly relating to climate change although some indication that such use should have limits, e.g.: concern about use for Short Rotation Forestry trials.

There is a general theme that the Forestry Commission is highly respected and should continue to be a leader by setting an example through best practice, making sound business decisions and developing strong environmental policies. Opinions diverge on the role of private enterprise. Some are concerned about loss of public control and accountability and erosion of standards with others seeing major opportunities for both public and private benefit through involvement of the private sector. There is also a desire from many responders for the Estate to be permitted to manage its own affairs with less interference from Government.

### **Local participation in decision making**

There are eight times as many responses saying yes as saying no. Further analysis not yet available.

## **Using the Public Forest Estate to generate social benefits**

Opportunities were identified through education and provision of recreation often in partnership with others. Key issues identified included partnership working, the financial burden of social provision and the equity of availability of green infrastructure. There were opposing views at a much lower frequency suggesting that social benefits should not be a priority.

## **Improving the experience for the visitors**

Free access on foot is the clear priority, followed by low intensity infrastructure (e.g.: way-marked trails) option. Major leisure infrastructure and facilities for specialist interests are not priorities.

There is consensus that it is appropriate to charge for certain activities on the Public Forest Estate, especially where these involve management and maintenance costs. There is a strong body of opinion that certain activities should be free, notably access related, e.g.: the British Horse Society ran a campaign against perceived discrimination against equestrians due to charging for access permissions. For the most part, all agreed that access on foot for the purposes of walking should be free. There is a willingness to pay for ancillary services, such as car parking.

## **Supporting jobs and business development**

More than 10% of responders select each of the following: “Enhancing local quality of life”; “Knowledge transfer and training”; Attracting visitors and tourists”; and “Producing timber”.

Partnerships with the private sector are generally supported, but at the same time, there is concern about the Public Forest Estate becoming controlled by the relationships it forms with the private sector.

Some responders describe timber as “core” business. Others add leisure activities to this. Equestrians and cyclists are vocal throughout in requesting development of paths, access and promotion of leisure both as a public benefit and also for business development. Some responders identify “attracting visitors and tourists” as key while others do not see this as a direct role for the Public Forest Estate. There is a strong desire for education and training for both knowledge transfer to the forest industry and also for the general population.

## **Reality check**

The largest group of responders indicate that their choices would make little impact on net costs, this is often on the assumption of stimulating additional revenue generation. For many responders there is an assumption of continued or increased levels of public funding.

When asked what was the one costly thing they would prioritise the majority of respondents simply state, “Plant more trees!” Other replies focus on expanding green infrastructure, maintaining and protecting existing forests, and enhancing access facilities.

## **General comments**

There appeared to be general acceptance that the priorities and key questions identified covered the correct range of issues.

## DIGEST OF RESPONSES FROM SELECTED KEY STAKEHOLDERS

**British Horse Society (BHS):** Focus on free access for equestrians and other informal users. Support for charging for car parking. Generally positive about other aspects of woodland management. BHS ran a “hostile” campaign encouraging people to respond against charging for access by equestrians.

**British Trust for Ornithology:** No response

**Carbon Trust:** No response.

**Central Council of Physical Recreation (CCPR):** No response.

**Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment (CABE):** Focus on green infrastructure for climate change adaptation and to combat urban deprivation. Generally positive.

**Confederation of Forest Industries (ConFor):** Costs are increasing while public funding is going down, greater commercialisation would create unfair competition with the private sector, therefore need to focus on simpler prioritisation and more efficient operations. Provide opportunities for greater private sector involvement in management. Focus on harvested wood products to support moving to a low carbon economy.

**Country Land and Businesses Association (CLA)<sup>2</sup>:** Ideological support for privatisation but recognition this is not an option at the moment. Supportive of range of benefits but concerned about costs - such a large Estate should not operate at a loss. Climate change and health are the key opportunities. Timber production is a high priority. Support for commercialisation but concern about inappropriate competition. Pressure to allow lease buy back and expectation that the Estate will decrease in size.

**Department for Communities and Local Government:** No response.<sup>3</sup>

**Department for Energy and Climate Change:** No response.

**England Access Forum:** No single response but a range of responses from 11 local access forums (LAFs) e.g. North York Moors LAF focus on access on foot, horseback, and bicycle and on landscape. Recognition of need for timber.

**England Forest Industries Partnership:** Recognition of range of benefits. Focus on activities that provide economic benefits particularly to the private sector and rural development. Importance of security of supply of timber. Greater involvement of the private sector in management would enable more cost effective public benefit.

**English Heritage:** Positive about current delivery and trends. Cautious approach to commercialisation based on environmental limits, particularly potential damage to condition and access to historic features. Opposition to minerals and built development and caution about too great a focus on climate change. Current size and location is well balanced.

---

<sup>2</sup> North England regional section of CLA submitted a response in time but the National team were late with their response. Only the North regional response will appear in the summary report. This digest is from the national response.

<sup>3</sup> Other Government departments do not usually respond in public.

**English National Parks Authorities Association:** No response.

**Environment Agency:** Expand woodland area. Increase size focussing on acquisition and woodland creation in urban areas, for carbon capture and woodfuel. More continuous cover. Tree planting on poor agricultural ground.

**Institute of Chartered Foresters:** Responded but not yet available for analysis.<sup>4</sup>

**Kronospan Ltd:** No response.

**National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs):** Positive<sup>5</sup> about current delivery and trends. Mention of legal requirement to take account of purposes of AONBs (and National Parks). Limits to windpower, minerals extraction, opposition to woodland removal for built development. Long-term sustainable woodland management is the most important thing. Continue repositioning close to population centres. Call for closer working with AONB teams.

**National Trust:** Responded but not yet available for analysis.

**Natural England:** "Natural England recognises the substantial contributions that have been made by the public forest estate including:

- improving biodiversity;
- ensuring that woodland design and management takes more account of landscape character; and
- providing significant access provision (including through the dedication of much of the estate under CRoW Act provisions) and other recreational opportunities.

We believe therefore that a continuing government commitment to a public forest estate is desirable to ensure that these gains are maintained and developed. We do also support the principle that the public forest estate should evolve, be open to new ways to generate income (and therefore employment) and be more dynamic in what land it owns and manages so that its focus can be on maximising public benefits and ecosystem services and playing a leading role in supporting climate change adaptation. We also recognise the role the public forest estate has in guaranteeing timber supplies and its important relationship with the private sector; home grown supplies of wood for fuel, construction, paper etc are likely to play an important role in future development of a sustainable low-carbon economy."<sup>6</sup>

## **Regional Advisory Committees**

**East of England:** Proposals in the consultation lack vision, should be about mechanics of expanding the Public Forest Estate. Concern that disposals policy is marginalising the Estate. Need for leadership from Forestry Commission via the Estate. Focus on benefits of woodland and woodland creation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Some of the key stakeholder responses were made via the on-line form and not all of these have been extracted at time of writing.

<sup>5</sup> Closely reflects the overall aggregate position.

<sup>6</sup> Extract from covering letter. Our strong collaboration with Natural England should be noted.

**North East England:** Value for money is good but hard to make judgement without more information on efficiency, noted North East is a net financial contributor. Linkage of commercialisation to net public benefit. Size must increase. Generally content with disposals policy. Desire for better balance between income and reinvestment in the region.

**North West England:** Public Forest Estate is the “bedrock” of forestry. Concerns about Operational Efficiency Programme. Desire to increase in size. Focus on repositioning to urban areas - open ground for tree-planting. Use scoring system to decide priority areas for disposal. Renewable energy supported, concern at woodland loss for windfarms. Focus climate change adaptation on urban areas, reducing flooding also important. Sale for development OK to fund initiatives.

**South West England:** Support for range of commercial opportunities, concern about asset sales to relieve short-term pressures and desire for more strategic focus and evaluation of what happens to woods that have been sold. Desire to increase the size. Timber production linked to climate change. Green infrastructure role should be further developed.

**West Midlands:** Opposition to disposals to defray short-term revenue shortfalls or generate income for Treasury. Concern about built development except for “eco-towns”. Maximise benefits of current land-holding rather than increasing size. Large scale forestry is important. Moving to a low carbon economy is overriding. Should be hard-nosed about what can be delivered.

**Yorkshire & The Humber:** Key purpose to protect and expand woodland. All commercialisation opportunities legitimate within limits based on balance. Estate should increase, woodland creation for green infrastructure, biodiversity and to reduce flooding. Knowledge transfer to others with similar aims.

**East Midlands:** Not yet available for analysis.<sup>7</sup>

**South East:** Public estate provides added benefits. Must not oversell surplus land for financial targets. Caution about commercial activities limiting general access. Size should stay about the same but change geographical coverage. Focus on urban fringe and afforestation on marginal agricultural land. Against woodfuel from the Estate because no available increment. No to more involvement of local people in decision making. Major leisure infrastructure top priority for access..

**London:** No response.

**Regional Development Agencies (RDA):**<sup>8</sup> Several examples of RDA investment in forestry that requires a strong and sustainable Public Forest Estate. Agree with analysis of key trends. Can make contribution to health but should not be a primary driver. RDAs likely to prioritise planting woods, woodfuel, timber, supporting innovation and research, and green infrastructure as well as green jobs. Net cost very low compared to benefits, concern at shift to less financially viable model. Caution about built development, mineral extraction and selling surplus land. Size should increase via woodland creation, mention of food security. More in urban areas, leases appropriate, also timber production where

---

<sup>7</sup> Submitted via online survey, in the process of extracting it for publication.

<sup>8</sup> Response collated by David Hunter, North West Regional Development Agency. Late response so will not appear in the summary report.

market failure. Cross-agency landscape scale working. Caution about charging for access.

**South West RDA:** Concern about minerals extraction. Consider more urban fringe and less upland forestry. Linkage of woodland creation to food security. Moving to a low carbon economy is overriding, Estate's contribution to regional targets through woodfuel, carbon storage, timber, and non-motorised transport could be significant. Focus on linking business development to the private sector. Support for windpower.

**Ramblers Association:** Regional response only.

**Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors:** No response.

**Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB):** Recognition of some progress towards biodiversity targets but challenge to the rate, extent of ambition and quality of delivery. Opposition to continued holding of wooded land solely for timber production or other single uses such as carbon sequestration. Focus on native woodland with greater diversity of habitats. Focus on conversion to open habitat. Size should stay about the same. Opposition to disposals of high biodiversity value sites unless to a "safe purchaser". Recognition of some role for forestry in moving to a low carbon economy but other mechanisms are more significant. Offer of help to plan windpower development to avoid negative impact on birds. Connectivity and enlargement of semi-natural habitats key role.

**UPM Tilhill:** Net cost seen as high. Concerns about competition with private sector. Opposition to commercialisation that reduce area of forestry. Greater private sector involvement in management but with Forestry Commission retaining overall control. Size should stay about the same, should dispose of remote woodlands, acquire woods that provide a mix of benefits – not just urban fringe. Consider selling groups of woods to provide strategic resource for the private sector. Mentions challenge of low numbers of people studying silviculture.

**Woodland Trust:** Wish to compare Public Forest Estate delivery more directly to other forms of intervention before assessing value for money. Opposition to any form of development on ancient woodland. More flexible on secondary woodland but no net loss. Discussion of various business models – flexible and imaginative approach advocated. Size should stay about the same but composition should change significantly via "inspirational acquisitions" to drive key government agendas and a focus on access provision and native woodland. All plantations on potential open habitat should be removed. Opposition to sale of ancient woodlands, review retention of income generating woodlands to generate greater receipts. Woodland creation should be a priority. Limited support for woodfuel with scepticism about assuming biodiversity benefits. Strong support for role in habitat networks and landscape scale habitats.

The Woodland Trust ran a "friendly" campaign among its members to promote responses supporting their point of view.

**Wildlife and Countryside Link:** No response.

## SHORT QUESTIONNAIRE

In parallel with the main consultation document Forestry Commission released a ‘Short Questionnaire’, which was promoted at visitor centres and Forestry Commission offices. The objective was to increase the reach of the consultation, particularly to recreational users of the Public Forest Estate.

The quick questionnaire mirrored question 3 in the main consultation. It asked people to select the five most important benefits for the Public Forest Estate from a list of possible benefits.

Responses to the short questionnaire and main consultation are similar (Fig 1). 2,287 responses were received with excellent coverage across England (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 1: Number of responders to the short questionnaire choosing the benefit as one of their top five most important benefits for the Public Forest Estate.**

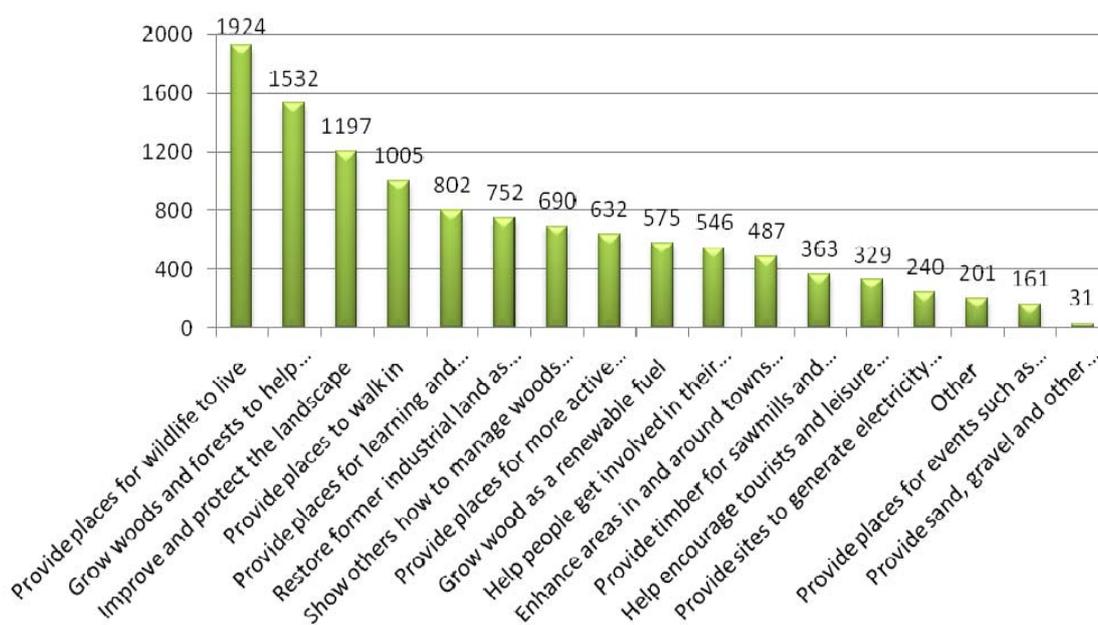


Fig 2:

