

Restoration of
open habitats
from woods
and forests:
Policy development
step 1 of 9:
fit progress to date into a
policy cycle.

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Restoration of open habitats from woods and forests: Policy development step 1 of 9: fit progress to date into a policy cycle.

What is this about?

This document sets out step one in a nine step process (Annex 1) that Forestry Commission England (FCE, “we, us, our”) is following to develop Government policy on restoration of open habitats from woods and forests in England. See www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats for further details.

We are taking an open approach ensuring good corporate governance and communications through the involvement of key stakeholders, a web-site¹, a consultation exercise, and participation in relevant forums.

Background.

Through the England Biodiversity Strategy² and A Strategy for England’s Trees Woods and Forests (ETWF)³ the Government has committed to developing and delivering a policy on restoration of open habitats from woods and forests and a restoration strategy for the Forestry Commission estate.

In the past few years together with the help of many stakeholders we have held workshops, listened to opinions and expert judgement and gathered a lot of information. There are a number of principles⁴ on which there appears to be agreement or which are pre-defined by relevant overarching Government policy or strategy:

- Government objectives for biodiversity and habitats are the principal drivers of the policy along with landscape and cultural heritage as secondary drivers.
- Desired outcomes will relate to biodiversity, landscape, and cultural heritage.
- All of the Government’s aims for England’s woods and forests need to be taken into account.
- Long-term viability of woodland and open habitats is important.
- Lowland heath is the most testing issue but we must ensure that the policy works for all relevant types of open habitats.

¹ www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats.

² DEFRA (2006) Working with the grain of nature – taking it forward: Volume I. Full report on progress under the England Biodiversity Strategy 2006, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/biodiversity/biostrat/index.htm>

³ Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (2007) A Strategy for England’s Trees, Woods and Forests, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/rddteam/forestry.htm> .

⁴ These are developed further in the “Process for developing policy” document at www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats .

We have now reached the stage where we can start to propose policy options. To enable us to develop and appraise options rationally we need to fit the work done so far into a cycle for effective policy making. This paper does this by identifying the problem that makes policy development worthwhile, desired outcomes (including possible outcome indicators) and other issues to take into account. It then sets out some policy options.

The problem.

The current situation is that significant areas of priority open habitat have been and continue to be restored from woods and forests and key species appear to be responding positively. Restoration occurs both as smaller patches within woods and forests and more extensive removal of woods and forests. While there are further opportunities for such restoration, these can involve difficult judgements over potentially conflicting public benefits. At the moment there is no national Government policy that sets out how these judgements are to be made. As a consequence, there is a risk of uncoordinated activity, inconsistent decisions, conflict, and variable quality of restoration processes and outcomes. Therefore, a clear policy is needed to guide such decisions.

It is important that we get this policy right. Open habitats are valuable for their biodiversity, contribution to the landscape and cultural heritage. Many are also vulnerable and have declined significantly over the past few hundred years.

However, the land-use from which open habitats would be created under this policy, woods and forests, is often itself valued for the benefits it provides and contributes to several Government objectives. Get it wrong and we could end up with a landscape that makes a lower net contribution to public benefit and a process that generates conflict over decisions about removal of woodland.

Get it right and decisions about restoration of open habitats from woodland would be made according to a clear policy and desired changes in key species, habitat quality, landscape, and cultural heritage would be delivered. The process would contribute to a landscape that delivers greater public benefit now and in the long-term. This is what success would be like. To be successful, we need to work out:

- How to deliver Government objectives for priority species associated with open habitat and for open habitats themselves through restoration from woods and forests.
- How to work out the appropriate contribution of woods and forests to relevant biodiversity and Habitat Action Plan (HAP) targets (Annex 2).
- How to promote delivery of Government objectives for landscape and cultural heritage through restoration of open habitats from woods and forests.
- How to do this as part of delivering the Government's five aims for England's woods and forests as set out in ETWF and other relevant documents:
 - **A sustainable resource.** To provide, in England, a resource of trees, woods and forests in places where they can contribute most in terms of environmental, economic and social benefits now and for future generations;

- **Climate change.** Ensure that existing and newly planted trees, woods and forests are resilient to the impacts of climate change and also contribute to the way in which biodiversity and natural resources adjust to a changing climate;
 - **Natural environment.** To protect and enhance the environmental resources of water, soil, air, biodiversity and landscapes (both woodland and non-woodland) and the cultural and amenity values of trees and woodland;
 - **Quality of life.** To increase the contribution that trees, woods and forests make to the quality of life for those living in, working in or visiting England;
 - **Business and markets.** To improve the competitiveness of woodland businesses and promote the development of new or improved markets for sustainable woodland products and ecosystem services where this will deliver identifiable public benefits, nationally or locally, including the reduction of carbon emissions.
- How to maintain alignment with Keepers of Time, our statement of policy for England's ancient and native woodland⁵.
 - How to use the implementation mechanisms at the Government's disposal.
 - How to achieve a balance between the contribution to delivery through the management of the Forestry Commission estate, other publicly owned land, and other mechanisms such as public funding, regulation, and guidance.
 - How to facilitate constructive engagement by diverse stakeholders with potentially conflicting views; from foresters who have to participate in a forestry policy that involves deforestation to conservationists with a focus on priority species who have to engage with multi-objective forestry.

Desired outcomes and indicators.

The outcomes (changes in the real world) that we will deliver with this policy relate to biodiversity, landscape (including people's enjoyment of landscape), and cultural heritage. In order to evaluate the policy in terms of delivery of outcomes we will develop a set of indicators. Possible indicators are presented below; they may change as we follow the policy development process. These indicators should be reasonable proxies for the outcomes, which are often very difficult to measure directly in the short-term. Dependent on the final policy we may return to these to develop targets. The meaning of the outcomes and their relationship to the indicators (e.g.: whether the indicators can demonstrate cause and effect) will be developed further in Step 3, "collate the evidence".

The desired outcomes (with associated indicators) of this policy are:

⁵ Forestry Commission England and DEFRA (2005), Keepers of time, a statement of policy for England's ancient and native woodland, <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/keepersoftime>

Biodiversity and habitats.

Outcome 1, habitats:

Ecologically robust open habitats with secure long-term management regimes in place.

Possible indicators:

- Total hectares of open habitats restored and/or recreated from woods and forests since 1994.⁶
- Number of open habitats above a threshold patch size.
- Mean patch size of open habitats.
- Rate of restoration and/or recreation of open habitats from woods and forests.
- % SSSIs designated for open habitat characteristics in unfavourable condition due to woods or forests⁷.
- % of open habitats restored from woodland and forestry with Higher Level Stewardship or other equivalent resourced management plan in place.
- We will develop an indicator that combines patch size and connectivity: the extent to which open habitats are connected to each other or by land through which priority species can move.

The open habitats of relevance are lowland meadows, upland hay meadows, lowland calcareous grassland, lowland dry acid grassland, upland heathland (moor), lowland raised bogs, fens, reedbeds, blanket bog, and lowland heathland (Annex 2).

Outcome 2, species:

The declining trend in populations of key open habitat species is reversed.

Possible indicators:

- The population of open habitat birds in England and their trend.
- The populations of open habitat butterflies in England and their trend.
- The populations of other key priority species associated with open habitats and their trend.

Landscape.

Outcome 3, quality of life and landscape:

Changes in landscape due to restoration of open habitats from woods or forests improve the quality of life of people who experience that landscape.

Possible indicators:

- Nature and extent of responses to public consultations on restoration proposals.

⁶ Date of publication of the UK Biodiversity Strategy.

⁷ Progress will result in the figure going down.

- Proportion and number of deforestation proposals for restoration of open habitats referred to Regional Advisory Committees.
- Changes in number of visits to restored landscapes, before, during, and after restoration and during establishment.
- Changes in perception of enjoyment by users of restored landscapes, before, during, and after restoration and during establishment.

Cultural heritage.

Outcome 4, history:

People now and in the future can learn through direct enjoyment of the outdoors how history has shaped the landscape.

Possible indicators:

- Number of interpretation projects for open habitats restored from woods or forests that include landscape history.

Outcome 5, preservation:

The condition of historic features in open habitats restored from woods and forests improves and key cultural and designed landscapes are retained.

Possible indicators:

- Proportion and number of historic features in good condition in open habitats restored from woods and forests and compared to the number and proportion prior to restoration.
- Proportion and number of historic features that are accessible before and after restoration.
- Number of open habitat projects that are aligned with landscape strategies for cultural and designed landscapes.

Other issues to be taken into account.

There are other issues that need to be taken into account when appraising options alongside the impact on the desired outcomes. These issues arise from Government's aims for England's trees, woods and forests other than biodiversity, landscape and cultural heritage as identified in ETWF. An additional Government agenda of relevance is storing and reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. As for outcomes, possible indicators to allow us to evaluate the impact of the policy are also set out.

In addition to these issues the financial and administrative burden on Government and other landowners and managers of any policy option must be considered.

Issues for consideration (in addition to burden) about restoration of open habitats from woods and forests are presented below, organised according to ETWF aims:

A sustainable resource.

Issue 1, financial viability:

Would management of the landscapes that result from restoration of open habitats be financially viable in the long-term, including open habitats, associated woodland, and remaining woodland elsewhere?

Possible indicators:

- Net cost of managing land.

Any calculation should include loss of timber income, reduction in planting costs, reduction in some land maintenance, (e.g.: reduction in roads maintenance), increase in vegetation management costs, other costs such as grazing, and other income opportunities if known. These costs should be presented both as gross costs and net of any public sector grants, (e.g.: Higher Level Stewardship, England Woodland Grant Scheme).

Issue 2, woodland cover:

What are the implications for our international commitments to sustainable forest management including maintaining net woodland cover?

Possible indicators:

- Net change in canopy cover.
- Net changes in woodland area (as defined by having or having the potential to have 20% canopy cover).

Climate change

Issue 3, carbon:

What would be the effect on Government targets for reducing carbon emissions as part of combating climate change?

Possible indicators:

- Net emissions of carbon during restoration.
- Effect on ability of the land on which restoration is taking place to sequester carbon in vegetation and soils.
- Effect on carbon balance of loss of product substitution by timber and woodfuel from England's woods and forests.

Natural environment.

Issue 4, native and/or ancient woodland:

What would be the effect on our ability to keep to commitments in Keepers of Time on area of native and/or ancient woodland?

Possible indicators:

- Gains and losses of native woodland associated with open habitat restoration projects.

Issue 5, woodland biodiversity:

What would be the effect on conservation of priority species associated with native and non-native woodland habitats?

Possible indicators:

- Population and population trends of woodland birds and other priority species⁸.

Issue 6, water quality and yield:

Is there any potential significant effect on nitrate run-off, scavenging of airborne pollution, water yields, or flooding?

Possible indicators:

- Changes to woodland cover in areas identified as sensitive for water management.

Quality of life.

Issue 7, local community and other user concerns:

What would be the effect on the level of people's positive engagement in woods and forests (including the effect on woodland owners and those working in forestry)?

Possible indicators:

- The cost to Government of dealing with controversial proposals for landscape change.

Issue 8, access and recreation:

What would be the effect on rates of use and benefits received by users?

Possible indicators:

- Changes in the numbers of users that can be absorbed by the landscape without significant reduction in quality of experience or negative impact on land management.

⁸ Such as some bat species and red squirrels in some areas.

Business and markets.

Issue 9, timber:

What would be the effect of changes in timber production on stability of timber supply, confidence in the timber producing and processing sectors, and ultimately on economic activity in the timber producing and processing sectors?

Possible indicators:

- Change in timber production.
- Change in net annual increment of woody biomass.
- Indicator to be developed from survey of confidence of timber producing and processing businesses to be developed as part of the FCE Corporate Plan indicators, focussing on businesses producing or processing timber grown in woods and forests on potential lowland heath.

Issue 10, rationalisation of low public and private benefit forestry:

Are there opportunities to help woodland owners remove forests that they no longer want to have on their land that have low public benefit and replace them with higher public benefit land-uses of equal or greater use to the landowner?

Possible indicators:

- Intentions of woodland owners, frequency of plans for restoration of open habitats and confidence about being able to proceed.

Policy options

Policy options exist along several gradients. The most significant of these are amount of open habitat restored and extent to which activity is centrally directed at a national level (Fig. 1). Financial cost is another key gradient. Below we set out a range of possible policy options. The options are about different approaches and means of decision making, rather than simply different amounts of open habitat restored. However, where possible an indication of the likely amount of open habitat restored is given in relative terms.

We believe that the options represent a reasonable range of possibilities. They are not a set of rigid policy statements from which we will choose the best but a basis for moving the process forward towards rational appraisal of policy on which we can consult. The process may include amending, combining, or dropping options or developing new ones.

There are a number of factors that all policy options are likely to have in common. For example: landscape scale approach, requirement to consider impact on greenhouse gas emissions, at least some reference to Biodiversity Action Plan targets, and guidelines on preservation of archaeological features. These will be analysed further in the next step on implications for delivery mechanisms.

The policy options to be taken forward to the next step in the process are (in no particular order):

Option 1: Driven by national targets for open habitats.

If Government adopted this policy it would make the following kind of policy statement:

“We will identify a target and timescale for the number of hectares of open habitat restored from woods or forests. We will promote the conversion of selected woods and forests to open habitats through removal of recent regeneration or felling at economic maturity of plantations. We will make decisions about which restoration proposals to support via integrated local processes based on maximising open habitats without unreasonably detracting from other Government objectives for woods and forests. We will monitor progress towards the target and secure and/or redeploy resources if progress is not quick enough to deliver the targets in time.”

This option emphasises delivery of HAP targets and creation of habitats that are in accordance with definitions of “good condition”. The amount of habitat restored depends on the target set. However, the policy is likely to result in a large proportion of the HAP targets being delivered from restoration of woods and forests rather than from other land uses.

Option 2: Open habitats are important but woods and forests come first.

If Government adopted this policy it would make the following kind of policy statement:

“We view open habitats as part of a wider wooded landscape. We will not be driven by national targets but will work with land managers to identify potential sites for restoration based on agreed national criteria designed to minimise negative impact on objectives for woods and forests. We will target top priority sites as resources allow. We will test these potential sites against national targets for open habitats and monitor progress towards desired outcomes by regular measurements of indicators of these outcomes.”

This option is likely to result in a reduction in the current rate of restoration of open habitats from woods and forests, although woods and forests would still make a significant contribution to HAP targets.

Option 3: Compensatory planting.

If Government adopted this policy it would make the following kind of policy statement:

“We will identify a target and timescale for the number of hectares of open habitat restored from woods or forests. We will promote the expansion of woods and forests to create space to allow wholesale restoration of open habitats from woods and forests without net loss of woodland and with minimal impact on other Government objectives for woods and forests. We will only support deforestation where the landowner has ensured creation of

woodland that compensates for the deforestation. At a national level, the rate of restoration of open habitats will be limited by the rate of woodland creation.”

This option could result in some increase to the current rate of restoration of open habitat from woods and forests but only if enough resources can be found for the associated woodland creation.

Option 4: Open woods and forests fit for the future.

If Government adopted this policy it would make the following kind of policy statement:

“Woods and forests and open habitats should be managed together in landscape scale units in which change is embraced rather than seeking to create or preserve fixed areas of habitat which meet strict definitions of habitat type and condition. We will support land managers to manage land in this way. Where this includes deforestation we will make local integrated decisions based on maximising net public benefit. We will identify targets for outcome indicators (including but not simply a target for amount of open habitat restored). We will secure and/or redeploy resources to allow progress to be made. We will monitor progress towards targets by measurement of indicators of these outcomes and set up an inclusive process to agree whether progress is reasonable.”

This option moves away from the application of targets based on rigid definitions of good condition and static interpretations about what is appropriate in the landscape. It is likely to result in shifting mosaics of open patches in woods and forests, open canopy woods and forests, and fully open habitats. There would probably be considerably more open habitat overall (perhaps using a more encompassing definition) but its location and condition would be dynamic and delivery of HAP targets might be hard to demonstrate.

Option 5: Local level decision making.

If Government adopted this policy it would make the following kind of policy statement:

“We will support planning and decision making at a local level in regional or sub-regional frameworks. We will secure and/or redeploy resources to facilitate proposals that are in line with such local decisions. We will promote those projects that come forward locally that will add most value to biodiversity conservation and provided that other issues can be mitigated in that locality. We will monitor progress by measuring the contribution of the locally led projects to national scale outcome indicators.”

This option is heavily influenced by the complexity of the decision making process and focuses on identifying local priorities and facilitating processes for local decision making rather than applying a national scale policy. The amount of open habitat restored from woods and forests depends on local reaction and there may be wide geographical variation. Some areas may have fairly high levels of restoration and others may have only limited or slow changes in land-use.

Option 6: Open habitat critical natural capital.

If Government adopted this policy it would make the following kind of policy statement:

“We will support the restoration from woods and forests of critical natural capital⁹ that has been converted to woodland or forest from priority open habitats. Forest and woodland will play a significant role in restoring these habitats because the open habitat plant and animal communities have often survived and woods and forests tend to alter the soil and seedbank less than other land-uses. We will promote the conversion of woods and forests with these characteristics to open habitats through removal of recent regeneration or felling of plantations, normally at or near economic maturity. We will map the area of open habitat critical natural capital on a national basis, agree timed targets, and monitor progress towards restoration. We will redeploy resources if progress is not quick enough to deliver the targets on time.”

This policy is likely to result in a large proportion of the potential open habitat under woods and forests eventually being restored. It has some commonality with Keepers of Time.

Comparison to current practice.

It is instructive to compare these options to current practice, although simply retaining current practice does not appear to be an option. A statement that summarises current practice would be along the lines of¹⁰:

“We view open habitats as part of a wider wooded landscape. We respond to proposals from land managers who have identified potential sites for restoration. We work with proposers and consultees to find compromises in contentious cases and approve projects when there is no longer sustained objection from statutory or local consultees. If an acceptable compromise cannot be found we refer decisions to higher governance levels. We will monitor the amount of open habitat restored and feed information into national reporting mechanisms. Support for restoration of open habitats is targeted and if the rate of woodland loss approaches the rate of woodland creation across England as a whole we would have to reconsider support for restoration of open habitats from woods and forests.”

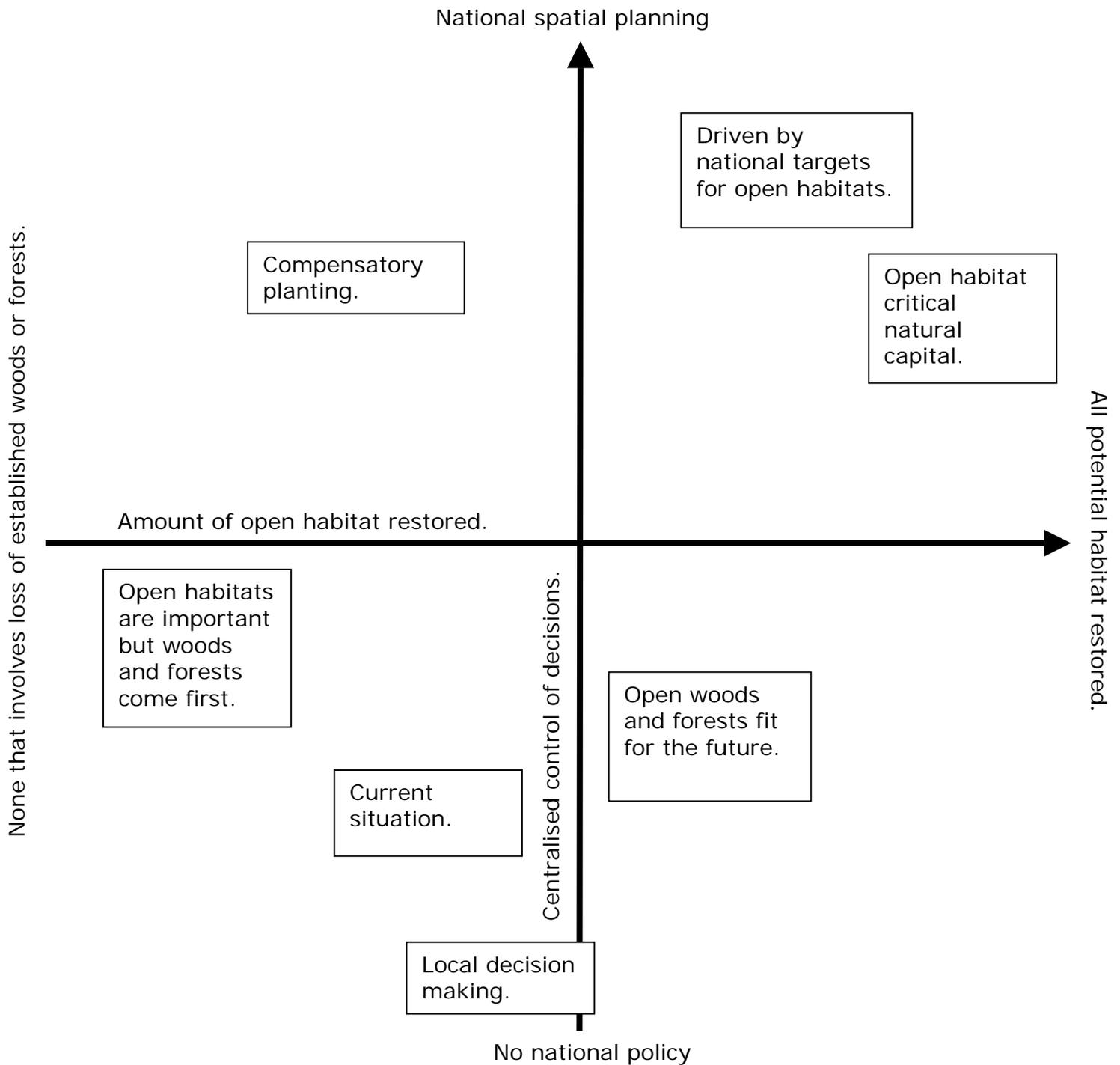
Next steps.

The next step is to work out implications for delivery mechanisms of each option and to summarise the evidence about the impact of policy options on the desired outcomes and other issues for consideration. This information will then be used to appraise the options including activity at stakeholder workshop.

⁹ Critical natural capital is the non-renewable part of our natural asset base. Land that has been converted from a priority open habitat to another land use but retains significant elements of the soil and seedbank of the original habitat can be regarded as critical natural capital.

¹⁰ Note that this is a not a statement of current policy but an outline in policy language of current practice as it has evolved in the absence of a specific national policy.

Figure 1: Mapping of options for a policy on restoration of open habitats from woods and forests.



Annex 1: Summary of policy development process.

See www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats for further details.

Step	Mechanism	Output	Timescale
1. Fit progress to date into a policy cycle.	Forestry Commission England (FCE) to use work to date to produce a paper to define the problem, desired outcomes including indicators of outcomes and other issues for consideration, and set out policy options.	Paper	June 2008.
2. Work out implications for delivery mechanisms and collate evidence.	Leads for each delivery mechanism to work out implications. FCE to set out summary of evidence.	Papers collated by FCE.	August 2008
3. Plan evaluation.	Stakeholder workshop.	Workshop report by FCE.	September 2008
4. Appraise options.			
5. Consult	Formal public consultation.	Consultation report.	Launch October 2008, finish January 2009.
6. Make a decision.	Options paper to be submitted to Ministers by FCE.	Submission to Ministers.	February 2009.
7. Produce policy document	FCE to draft. Timescale dependent on publication of ETWF Delivery Plan and Ministerial response.	Published document	March 2009
8. Set up delivery mechanisms.	Depends on policy decision but will include a plan for the FC estate.	Depends on policy decision	Depends on policy decision.
9. Launch policy	Launch at an outdoor event: both the policy and the strategy for the FC estate.	Launch event.	Depends on policy decision.

Annex 2: UK Habitat Action Plan (HAP) proposed targets (Ha) for England relevant to a policy on restoration of open habitats from forestry. ¹¹

Figures in brackets are the percentage that each target represents of the total current habitat area (i.e.: of the maintenance target).

Open HAP with targets to which removal of woods and forests may contribute..	Maintenance, i.e.: total area of habitat to be maintained.	Achieve condition by 2015, i.e.: habitat in condition defined as unfavourable to be brought into condition defined as favourable.	Restoration by 2015, i.e.: recovering vegetation defined as pertaining to that open habitat where it has been partly lost..	Expansion by 2015, i.e.: habitat to be created from established land-uses other than that habitat.	Potential habitat under plantation	Potential habitat under native woodland
Lowland meadows	7,282	6,078 (83.5%)	481 (7%)	256 (3.5%)	0	0
Upland hay meadows	870	830 (95.4%)	48 (5.5%)	72 (8%)	0	0
Lowland calcareous grassland	38,687	32,036 (83%)	726 (2%)	8,426 (22%)	0	c.20,000 (scrub)
Lowland dry acid grassland	20,142	17,295 (86%)	285 (1.4%)	276 (1.4%)	c.300	c.3,000
Upland heathland (moor)	220,000	To be confirmed			c.20,000	N/A
Lowland raised bogs	11,200	7,466 (67%)	1,000 (9%)	-	c.500	N/A
Blanket bog	240,000	To be confirmed			c.5,000	N/A
Fens	11,200	7,466 (%)	1,000 (9%)	-	0	?
Wet reedbeds	5,200	4,680 (90%)	-	-	0	?
Lowland heathland	58,000	47,000 (81%)		7,600 (13%)	c.60,000	c.20,000
TOTAL	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	85,800	43,000

For lowland heathland, the HAP targets combine “achieving condition” and “restoration” under the “achieve condition” target because there is often little distinction between operations for condition and restoration. As part of the policy process, we need to resolve how to work out the contribution of woods and forests to these targets. Lowland heath presents the most testing problem because of its extent, biodiversity value, value of timber grown on some former heath, proximity to populations and discrepancy between hectares of extant and potential habitat, much of which is on publicly owned land. For all HAPs, the expansion targets appear most relevant to this policy. We need to work out the boundary between “restoration” and “expansion” and align the way in which we use these words.

¹¹ HAP target figures from p93 and 96 of DEFRA (2006) Working with the grain of nature – taking it forward: Volume 1 Full report on progress under the England Biodiversity Strategy 2002 – 2006, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/biodiversity/biostrat/index.htm>