

Restoration of open habitats from woods and forests in England: developing Government policy: summary of progress to date.

What is this about?

This document sets out progress to date in a nine step process (Annex 1) that Forestry Commission England (FC, “we, us, our”) is following to develop Government policy on restoration of open habitats from woods and forests in England.

We are involving stakeholders and communicating each step openly through a website¹ and participation in internal and external forums. We will also be running a formal public consultation on the proposed options.

Background.

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

So far, we have established principles for the process, defined the policy problem, identified a set of outcomes, set down policy options and collated the evidence. Summaries are presented below.

Anyone with comments⁴ on this document is invited to contact:

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www.forestry.gov.uk/england

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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 Please note that this is not a formal public consultation but you are welcome to provide feedback. We are planning to launch a formal public consultation on the policy options in October 2008.

Principles.

- 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.

The problem.

Open habitats are valuable for their biodiversity, contribution to the landscape and cultural heritage. Many are vulnerable and have declined in the recent past. However, the land-use from which open habitats would be created under this policy, woods and forests, contributes to several Government objectives. We therefore need to get the policy right or we could end up a landscape that delivers less public benefit overall.

Outcomes (organised by ETWF aims).⁵

A sustainable resource.

Financial viability: Management of the landscapes that result from restoration of open habitats is financially viable in the long-term, including associated woodland and remaining woodland elsewhere.

Commitments on woodland cover: The UK Government is able to demonstrate fulfilment of international commitments to sustainable forest management, especially maintaining net woodland cover.

Climate change.

Resilient ecological communities:* Communities of key open habitat species that can adapt to climate change.

Carbon balance: Woods and forests continue to make an appropriate contribution to the UK Government's commitments for reducing carbon emissions.

⁵ Several of these were initially expressed as issues but we have changed them all to outcomes to facilitate comparison. Those initially expressed as outcomes are marked *, they remain the key drivers.
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Natural environment.

Positive trends in populations of species:* The declining trend in populations of key open habitat species is halted and if possible reversed.

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.

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

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

Commitments on native and/or ancient woodland fulfilled: The Government is able to keep to commitments in Keepers of Time⁶ on area of native and/or ancient woodland.

Desired trends in woodland biodiversity are not compromised: Any improvement in trends in populations of priority species associated with native and non-native woodland habitats is not compromised.

Water quality and yield maintained: There is no significant negative effect on nitrate run-off, scavenging of airborne pollution, water yields, flooding, or other water quality factors.

Air and noise pollution abated: There is no significant negative effect on the role woods and forests play in ameliorating air and noise pollution.

Quality of life.

Positive engagement by local and other users: People's positive engagement in the landscape they use, particularly their local landscape is maintained or enhanced (including engagement of woodland owners and those working in forestry).

Access and recreation: The rates of use and benefits received by recreation users are maintained or enhanced.

Business and markets.

Timber sector confidence: Any effect on timber supply has little impact on the confidence in the harvested woods products producing and processing sectors meaning that economic activity in the sector is not curtailed.

⁶ Keepers of Time is the Government's statement of policy on ancient and native woodland, see <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-6h3fvs>.

Rationalisation of low public and private benefit forestry: Opportunities are provided for woodland owners to remove forests that they no longer want that have low public benefit and replace them with higher public benefit land-uses of greater use to them. These opportunities do not result in perverse incentives to remove low private but moderate public benefit woodlands and replace them with something of lower public benefit.

Policy options⁷

In no particular order.

- Option 1: Driven by national targets for open habitats.
- Option 2: Open habitats are important but woods and forests come first.
- Option 3: Compensatory planting.
- Option 4: Open woods and forests fit for the future.
- Option 5: Local level decision making.
- Option 6: Open habitat critical natural capital.

Evidence.

The policy context: ETWF commits us to, “Develop a clear rationale to guide removal of inappropriate plantations and woodland where other key [Biodiversity Action Plan] habitats can be restored and where the benefits of doing so outweigh the environmental and social costs.”

The question: What is the net impact of changing the current landscape of woodland and forest and open habitats into a landscape with some less woodland and forest and some more open habitat?

The change: Restoration of open habitats from woods and forests could involve 1,000s to 10,000s ha of pine or spruce plantation, wet woodland or birch; 100s to 1,000s ha per year. It will involve some element of deforestation to land with 5-15% canopy cover. It may result in mosaics of woodland and open space dependent on policy. The new open habitat will be managed for biodiversity with some private sporting in the uplands. It will cost between £0.7M and £4.2M per year. The landscapes that result will be more costly to manage.

⁷ These are likely to be altered and reduced in number as we go through the process.

Overview of likely impact of restoring open habitats from woods and forests (draft for workshop 26th Sept 2008)

ETWF theme	Outcome	Likely impact	Comments
A sustainable resource.	Financial viability.		Net cost of management £200ha per year.
	Keeping to Government commitments on woodland cover	 / 	Negative if net deforestation – threshold rate of restoration 1,100ha yr-1?
Climate change.	Resilient ecological communities.		Mosaics of woodland and heath may be useful.
	Carbon balance.		Reduction in long-term average carbon store of 192tCha-1.
Natural environment.	Positive trends in populations of open habitat species.		Mosaics of woodland and heath may have beneficial impact for most species.
	Quality of life and landscape.		Provided landscape design guidelines followed.
	Learning about landscape history.		Interpretation will do the job.
	Preservation of historic features.	 / 	Positive if guidelines followed, negative if not.
	Commitments on native and/or ancient woodland.		Because of policy framework and retention of some woodland in most projects.
	Desired trends in woodland biodiversity not compromised.		Provided we can be respond to local conditions. Need to resolve wet woodland.
	Water quality and yield maintained.	 /  / 	Little national impact. Local impacts vary.
	Air and noise pollution abated.		Trees only play significant role locally via screens.
Quality of life.	Positive engagement by local and other users.	 / 	Negative if projects do not use high quality local engagement.
	Access and recreation.		Except temporary conflict with ground nesting birds.
Business and markets.	Timber sector confidence.		Regionally negative. 8% reduction in timber supply in Central and Southern zones.
	Rationalisation of low public and private benefit forestry.	N/A	A possible feature of the process.

Key: Negative impact:  Positive impact:  Little impact:  Small = local.

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.	Including stakeholder workshop.	Workshop report by FCE.	September 2008 (Workshop 26 September)
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.