

Independent Panel on Forestry Call for views Response from Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership 22 July 2011

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership welcomes this opportunity to input into the consultation on forestry and woodland policy. This response draws on content from the AONB Management Plan and a discussion by the AONB Partnership on 14 February 2011.

Question 1 – What do forests and woods mean to you?

The Shropshire Hills AONB has slightly higher than the national average cover of woodland generally and of ancient semi-natural woodland, and these are a vital element of the landscape. There are many small woodlands, along with larger predominantly conifer plantations, parkland and wood pasture, and small orchards, and numerous hedgerow and veteran trees. Riparian woodland, typically composed of Alder and Willow is extensive in length along river valleys and functionally very important to the health of the river ecosystem.

Many smaller woodlands are neglected, and their condition is slowly declining. Limiting factors include difficult access, little tradition of active woodland management among some farmers, and the perception that non-intervention is best. While non-intervention will be appropriate in some cases, many woods in fact benefit from some felling to maintain habitat diversity and ground flora. Some upland woods suffer from uncontrolled grazing, which prevents regeneration and inhibits ground flora.

Question 2 – What is your vision for the future of England's forests and woods?

Forest and woods should be expanded sensitively, providing a range of environmental, economic and social benefits.

Ancient semi-natural woodlands are a precious and irreplaceable resource and need to be protected and managed. Those in unfavourable condition (including Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS)) need to be restored.

Woodland creation should be used to deliver improved ecological connectivity and resilience in the landscape, and link with Green Infrastructure planning where appropriate. Riparian and wet woodlands in particular need to be expanded and managed.

All woods should be sustainably managed, with appropriate levels of extraction and safeguarding long term values and environmental benefits.

Where woodland and forestry felling is taking place, opportunities should be sought to improve design and landscape sensitivity of plantations. Reversion to open habitat should be targeted to locations where landscape benefits and potential for high value habitat (e.g. heathland) are greatest.

Any new or replacement coniferous planting should follow the highest standards of design guidelines in relation to landscape and amenity, nature and heritage conservation and resource protection.

In particular, expansion of local woodfuel supply chains can be linked to improving management of small woodlands.

Question 3 – What do you feel to be the benefits of forests and woods to:

a) You personally;

(excluded as this is an organisational response)

b) Society as a whole;

Forests and woods provide key elements of the landscape, habitats for wildlife, are valuable places for heritage (many features being undesignated), and are very important for recreation. The extent of open access within woods is significant, including much de facto access not protected by law, e.g. for horse riders. Forests can provide relatively robust sites for recreation and take the pressure off more sensitive locations. The practicalities of parking provision, transport, etc are crucial to recreational enjoyment by the public.

c) The natural environment; and d) The economy?

These two aspects should not be separated. Ecosystem services delivered by woods and forests including water management, air and soil functions and carbon storage, also have huge and largely unvalued economic benefits.

Question 4 – We would like to hear about your suggestions of practical solutions and good practice which can be replicated more widely.

In the Shropshire Hills AONB we run a Woodlands project offering advice and grants to landowners, see <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/looking-after/projects/woodlands-project/>. The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership has also become a leading specialist in the area on management of riparian woodlands, see http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Alder_Coppicing.pdf.

Many local woodland owners manage in good practice, and the support of the Forestry Commission for grants and advice is very valuable (the established local knowledge of officers on the ground being crucial to the latter).

The Small Woods Association based just outside the AONB at Ironbridge offers an important network and advisory services to owners of small woodlands nationwide. This is especially important as many woods are being broken up into smaller units and being managed by owners with sometimes little previous knowledge or experience.

Question 5 – What do you see as the priorities and challenges for policy about England's forests and woods?

Government policy needs to recognise the broad range of benefits delivered by sustainable multi-purpose forest and woodland management, and both keep in place and enhance measures and instruments which maximise these benefits. Climate change mitigation and adaptation are key challenges and will intensify pressures on land use.

The Public Forest Estate is a crucial resource for delivery of these benefits, along with continued incentives for private woodland management. Long term Forest Design Plans provide an excellent means of both forward planning and accountability in relation to public assets or investments. Agri-environment schemes such as Higher Level Stewardship have an important role in relation to private woods in addition to the English Woodland Grant Scheme.

The results of the consultation carried out by government in 2009 on the public forest estate demonstrate clearly the importance of state forests, both in environmental and social terms, and in helping to stabilise and underpin the timber processing sector through reliable supplies. Many of these findings are still highly relevant, and there is a case for better stability in relation to government policy on forestry and woodlands.

A programme of continuing to protect existing valuable woods and increase coverage of native woodland should be linked with a concerted effort to re-connect people with woodlands, encourage their sensitive use and enjoyment, and foster a renewed tradition of woodland management and skills. There are many opportunities for and examples of successful community involvement in management of woodlands.