

Independent Panel on Forestry – Call for Views

Response from Sarah Walters, co-owner of Alvecote Wood

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Background

My husband and I own a woodland just outside Tamworth on the Warwickshire/Staffordshire border that we are managing for wildlife and community groups. This comprises 11 acres of ancient semi-natural mainly oak woodland, together with an adjacent 9 acre arable field into which we have planted 4500 trees to create a new woodland for wildlife, together with creation of three large meadows and five wildlife ponds. The site lies adjacent to the Coventry Canal. We are in receipt of grants from the Forestry Commission, and are recognised as a Local Wildlife Site and Site of Importance for Nature Conservation by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust. We are not open to the public all the time, but hold open evenings on Tuesdays, and open days once a month, as well as opening for use by community groups such as scouts and forest schools.

I would like to respond both as a member of the public and also a woodland owner and manager. I will not respond to all of the questions, but would like to respond to Question 3c, Question 5, and Question 2 in that order.

Question 3: *What do you feel to be the benefits of forests and woods to a) you personally, b) society as a whole, c) the natural environment and d) the economy?*

Forests are a key part of the ecosystem, representing the natural state of the English landscape without intervention by humans or domestic animals as established at the retreat of the last ice age. As such they support a very wide range of species and are absolutely critical to biodiversity. Therefore, woodlands and forests need to be treated as the natural state of land to which humans have made changes, rather than an isolated habitat: almost all land in England is modified forest. Therefore, I do not think that woodland and forests can be seen in isolation, but as part of a suite of natural habitats; an extremely valuable part of that suite, but only one element in our natural landscape.

The most valuable types of forests are clearly the ancient semi-natural woodlands (ASNW), in existence since 1600, but often much further back in time than this. These woodlands are valuable, not only for the diversity of species they currently support, through their large mature trees, diverse scrub habitats and characteristic ground flora, but *for the seedbed underneath* which contains the potential to regenerate the diversity of plant species resident therein. Few people understand that the seedbed is of almost as much value to the future of woodlands as the current standing trees and plants themselves. For this reason, *plantations on ancient woodland sites* (PAWS) have great value, since they retain the potential to regenerate the woodland that once stood there before it was felled and replaced with conifers or other commercial species. Newly-planted woodlands do not have the same potential as these ancient sites.

Superficially, some areas of ASNW may be seen to be of greater “value” than others: they may contain rare species, a very wide variety of species, support BAP priority species, or other key indicators. However, ASNW may also be valuable to the natural environment because it is locally rare, or more importantly because it is an island that could be reconnected to other areas of ASNW, allowing species to flourish and spread, and maybe colonise more recent

woodland in due course. As such, all ASNW, even that which has been heavily-modified by grazing, such as ours, is valuable. And irreplaceable.

Forests and woodlands should not be looked at in isolation, but as a network that needs to be linked and managed as a coherent whole. In particular, they need to be seen as one with hedgerows, which are the vital connecting corridors, as part of a living landscape. Through such corridors, species such as dormice and bats can move between wooded areas. Without them, the woods are discrete, but with them they are a continuous network. Thus, even recently-planted woods are important in maintaining this network.

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

Following from the above, woodlands, the connections between them, and habitats between them, need to form the core of environmental policy in the UK. At present, there is insufficient "joined-up" policy for the natural environment, with different parts addressed by the Forestry Commission (EWGS) and Natural England (Stewardship schemes). This is complicated by the fact that at least 85% of English woods are in private ownership, and often not managed at all, or well. It is *management by humans* that has created the diversity of habitats both within and outside of woodlands.

Therefore the priorities for policy regarding English woods and forests should be

1. **Environmental policy.** The artificial division between woodland and other natural habitats needs to end. Woodland policy should be part of an over-arching environmental policy that is overseen by a single, coherent organisation rather than multiple organisations as at present. An organisation that pulls together woodlands and forests, other habitats and crucially farms and farm subsidies, and ensures that all habitats are managed with wildlife and biodiversity in mind is key: this does not mean that farms and forests cannot be profitable or produce high yields, but that the implications of their activities for wildlife are considered when awarding grants and subsidies.
2. **Protected status.** All ASNW and PAWS should have a special protection status analogous to SSSI that would limit development on these sites to a greater degree than under current planning legislation. However, it should be easier for those who own and manage woodlands according to appropriate standards to live on-site to work there: planning legislation should permit mobile homes and tool-stores constructed with minimal ground disturbance more readily under these circumstances while maintaining the prohibition on permanent housing.
3. **Hedgerows** should also come under such protection and under planning controls to prevent their removal without compelling reasons to do with conservation or disease prevention, rather than development. It is crazy that they are excluded from the remit of the FC and should be included in any organisation overseeing forestry and woodlands in future.
4. **Increase proportion of woodlands that are actively managed.** Privately-owned woodlands, as well as those owned by charities, community groups, councils and other organisations need to be brought into high quality management: this does not mean they have to be uneconomic and sustainable wood production is vital for wildlife. Support of small and large landowners to do this is key: this needs to be a combination of education, advice and grants. A single forestry standard may not be applicable to both huge commercial plantations and small woodlands managed for wildlife, therefore there needs to be a simple set

- of forestry standards applicable to small sustainably-managed woodlands that are easier and more appropriate for small woodland owners to attain.
5. **Securing public access while protecting wildlife:** there is a tension here. In large woodlands, human activities affect only a small proportion of the site, giving wildlife large areas of refuge, but in small woodlands, a very small fraction of the area may be away from paths and away from the influence of human visitors. Thus wildlife may be deterred from using these woodlands if there is a lot of human activity, and some restriction of public access while retaining educational activities and access needs to be possible. At present, FC grants do not distinguish between woods that allow restricted access from those that allow no access; this situation needs to change. A higher rate of grant support for those owners who provide some access (specific days, hours, for groups or schools) needs to be introduced so that public access to woodlands is increased without detriment to wildlife. This needs to cover infrastructure, costs of increased staffing, and other costs associated with provision of public access on a restricted basis. A lot more needs to be done to make privately owned woodlands more accessible to the public, and this would make a start.
 6. **Increasing renewable timber production:** commercial operators and larger charities may not be interested in the smaller woods that constitute not only the largest proportion of English woodlands, but also those where sustainable management through coppicing can make a huge difference to value for wildlife. The challenge is to bring these woodlands into productive management where timber processing and extraction is beyond the means of owners, and not commercially viable. This can only be done through a grant scheme administered via the Forestry Commission.
 7. **Maintaining and expanding high quality research:** Forest Research performs extremely valuable research not only into tree diseases, but into all aspects of forestry, assisted by their access to large forests in public ownership. Linking the NERC with Forest Research and stimulating research in other woods in different forms of ownership is important, for example including woods with FC grants in research. However retaining a large public forest estate is also essential for high quality research.
 8. **Ownership:** the majority of woods are privately-owned. Public forests need to be retained, particularly any that are ASNW and PAWS. There is a good argument for expanding the FC public forest estate, to include purchase of woodland of particular ecological importance, as well as taking into ownership pieces of ecologically important woodland that the owners cannot be persuaded to manage under Woodland Management Plans to an acceptable standard. Private owners need to be encouraged and assisted to put into place woodland management plans. Consideration should be given to transferring to FC management, woodland that is publicly owned but not well managed e.g. some Local Authority owned woodland, and woodland on Defence estates if not managed to a high standard.

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

Woodlands will not be seen in isolation, but as networks, or connected corridors and part of a whole living landscape. Therefore, woodlands (and hedgerows, which are vital connections between them) need to be part of an over-arching environmental policy, supported by an organisation that focuses on woodlands in the whole natural environment, and brings together EWGS and ELS/HLS schemes. I would see the merger of FC and Natural England as the obvious way to achieve this. The FC (or replacement overarching natural environment organisation) should have a remit to oversee the management of *all* woods, not just those in public ownership, and woodlands that are of local, regional or national habitat importance, as well as those where existing access is threatened, need to be

taken into public ownership, or have their stewardship overseen, by the FC. The role of the FC would expand to include oversight of management of and provision of advice to all woodland managers, regardless of ownership.

Woodlands will be protected, regardless of ownership, particularly ASNW and PAWS. ASNW and PAWS needs to be granted special protection status with the expectation that all ASNW and PAWS will be brought into appropriate management as priority. There should be an expectation that no ASNW or PAWS will be disturbed for development in future and the presumption should be against any damaging development. Protection needs to be extended to hedgerows so that they cannot be removed without permission, particularly where they link areas of woodland.

Privately-owned woodlands will be progressively brought into management by a combination of grants, advice, and education. First of all, private woodlands need to be brought into management for both wildlife and sustainable timber, with access to markets for those with very small quantities of timber, wood or woodland products, perhaps through local co-operatives or initiatives such as MyForest supported by the Sylva Foundation. Grants to support management, plus monitoring of quality of the work to ensure this is done to a high standard are needed. *The FC already does an excellent job of this, and should continue to do it*, but the process of application for grants needs to be made more user-friendly for those small woodland owners who are not familiar with making public-sector funding applications. Woodland creation grants should include grants for creation or restoration of hedgerows to link areas of woodland together.

Access to all woodland, including private woodlands needs to be improved. Retention of public ownership is critical to maintaining high quality public access, but in addition to that, private woodland access needs to be extended where this will not damage the habitat. Grants need to support infrastructure and safety, and recognise the efforts of those who have restricted opening, as well as those who open all the time. This will produce community benefits, improve the educational and recreational value of the woodlands, and also improve management if grant support is conditional upon management plans being in place. A condition of awarding a higher rate of grant for providing partial access (restricted by area or times/dates or by group) could be inclusion in a database of woodlands accessible over the internet to allow people to search for woodlands they might visit, or which might offer facilities they are seeking. VisitWoods.com currently provides only a partial list that is not regularly updated.

A lot of woodland and wooded areas are currently managed by local authorities and voluntary groups or charities: sometimes this management is excellent, but sometimes it is not. Therefore, all woodlands, regardless of ownership or FC support, need to be able to access expertise of the Forestry Commission and all publicly-funded woodlands, whether the source is central (FC) or local (local government) should be managed according to accepted forestry standards, but these standards will be appropriate to the size and type of woodland, rather than an over-arching standard as at present. FC should take over management of public woodlands not managed to a good standard. This would amount to an increase in the remit of the FC to oversee the management of ALL woodlands, not just the public forest estate. All woodland and conservation projects receiving public money should be managed to appropriate standards, have access to expert advice, and monitoring to ensure public money is not wasted as sometimes occurs at present.

The public will need to be well educated in the need to manage woodlands and forests: many who visit our woods do not understand that cutting trees down

and opening up space is critical to the benefit of many species, until we show them the benefits during our guided tours and open days. Increasing access to all kinds of woodlands, and increasing the proportion of local authority and other local woodlands that are well managed will help with this.

All children should have access to woodlands and the rural environment through Forest Schools schemes which at present are only available to some, and in many cases only operate in the school playgrounds. Visits to woodlands and farms need to be seen as an essential part of the school curriculum, rather than an optional extra.