

## EFRA Inquiry – Tree Planting and Woodlands

### Executive summary

We welcome every opportunity to engage with governments on the development and implementation of tree policy in the UK. We have a huge opportunity in this time of climate and nature crisis but the stakes are high and the risks of getting it wrong cannot be ignored. The Institute works across the breadth of the sector, giving us, through our members, a unique perspective on the challenges. The priority areas as we see them are as follows.

- 1) Skills: there is already an urgent need for more skilled staff in the forestry and arboriculture workforce. The necessary scale of change in terms of targets must be reflected in professional delivery capacity at all levels and in all settings.
- 2) Sustainable business: we must develop sustainable business models. Growing and managing trees needs to be more financially appealing for land owners and others in the supply chain, whether the outputs are ecosystem services, timber, renewable energy, improved farming or green infrastructure.
- 3) Strategic read-across: these ambitions need the political will to drive them forward and explicit read-across to other policy developments and departments. There are multiple objectives including carbon, biodiversity, economic and social, and we must mitigate the risk of a false dichotomy emerging between productive forestry and biodiversity. There is a spectrum of opportunity associated with good forestry, and the concept of multi-functional forestry must be more strongly promoted and adopted.
- 4) Science: the approach must be evidence-based. It is essential to learn from previous approaches, what has worked and what has not, in England and beyond. Some citations and examples are given here but we urge further engagement. The Institute can be a source of expertise and exemplars of what success looks like.

### What the Institute has to offer

The Institute of Chartered Foresters is the Royal Chartered body for foresters and arboriculturists in the UK. We represent a huge breadth of membership and this diversity and range of expertise is one of our greatest strengths. We have 1,900 members who practice forestry, arboriculture and related disciplines throughout the UK, in the private sector, central and local government, research councils, universities and colleges, rural and urban settings, practical forestry and consultancy, at all scales from the individual tree to large estates, and in all specialisms including conservation, recreation, wood production and urban planning.

Our ambition is to influence policy for the benefit of the profession, the environment and society, through ongoing engagement with members, member representatives, stakeholders, policymakers and the public. The Institute is committed to working with government in the design and implementation of a successful approach, supporting a flourishing forestry sector that delivers for climate, nature, people and economy.

### Our response

#### **1) Are the UK Government's targets for increasing forestry coverage, and tree planting, for England and the UK sufficiently ambitious and realistic?**

The targets for forestry coverage are rightly ambitious. Britain is the second biggest importer of timber in the world after China – that needs to change. However they are only realistic if

there is real change across government. It's vital there is strategic read-across between objectives and interventions across government – England Tree Strategy, Nature Recovery Networks, Environmental Land Management, planning reforms, skills strategy, immigration policy, etc. We need an integrated approach to land use and the forestry sector needs explicit commitments to work to and plan for.

The scale and urgency of the climate and nature crises require a huge step change across all industries. It is obvious, but worth emphasising, that unless something changes targets will not be achieved. If the balance of incentives and regulatory burden remain broadly as they are, no one will do anything different. Simply repackaging the offer will not have much effect once people see through it.

The skills shortage is critical. Without the right people with the right skills, we will not only fail on meeting targets but risk damage, to the industry and the environment. We must be clear that tree establishment is much more than just planting. It is not enough to have an army of volunteers putting trees in the ground – those trees will not flourish without properly skilled forestry workers to maintain and manage them. This is particularly acute in our towns and cities, where woods and trees have the biggest direct impact on people's health and wellbeing. This vital green infrastructure is at serious risk due to arboricultural skills shortages and underfunded local authorities.

We need to stop the polarisation of debate, whether on conservation vs productive forestry or forestry vs farming – these are false dichotomies. When managed properly, woodlands can play a key role in supporting the rural economy AND biodiversity AND storing carbon, AND water regulation and landscape. There are big wins for climate and nature with bringing more woods into active management. This is a huge opportunity. However clarity is needed urgently on support in place so that the benefits are clearer to communities and land owners and managers.

## **2) Are the right structures in place to ensure that the UK-wide target for increasing forestry coverage is delivered?**

The simple answer is no. The most pressing delivery issue is skills and labour. With the aging forestry workforce and lack of new entrants there are huge risks, not only with knowledge gaps in existing roles but a desperate need to attract new workers. There is barely capacity even for current planting and maintenance, let alone for meeting the targets. The necessary scale of change in activity must be reflected in professional delivery capacity at all levels and in all settings. The sector has long been aware of this issue and produced a skills action plan which needs to move forward. Right now we are working hard with DEFRA to find solutions as well as encouraging them to work with the Forestry Skills Forum<sup>1</sup> whose membership spans the sector. Government needs to address this challenge in its skills strategy and in immigration policy.

ELM is still in development and we know that the uncertainty around future incentives is offputting. The Institute is concerned that the scheme will once again be too bureaucratic to appeal to enough people<sup>2</sup>. It is also clear that the Forestry Commission does not have appropriate capacity and resource. Competition for land use is an issue, land values are too

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rfs.org.uk/media/442100/forestry-skills-study-report-for-england-and-wales-2017.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.charteredforesters.org/2020/07/forestry-sectors-response-to-elm-scheme-proposals/>

high for forestry and there are disincentives like permanent land use change<sup>3</sup>. We need to attract farmers and other landowners – currently trees are not an attractive enough prospect. This needs incentives and a good process, sustainable business models like harnessing new climate finance and markets for ecosystem services. But it also needs knowledge exchange and culture change.

### **3) How effective is the co-ordination between the four nations on forestry issues, including biosecurity, plant health and other cross-border issues?**

UK-wide working will be critical for the success of all four nations' ambitions. Devolution in forestry can be a barrier to coordination – initiatives funded by one government body are often limited to that nation. Cross-UK working is particularly important for skills and standards, where we need a coordinated push to promote forestry careers, develop the existing workforce and grow their skills.

The sector has a good track record for partnership working but knowledge exchange is now very poor between public bodies. Perhaps the recent Science and Innovation Strategy can be a starting point. Plant health has been a rare success story in cross-border terms – lessons can be learned from this, as well as from the Woodland Carbon Code and the UK Forestry Standard itself. As a UK-wide organisation we are used to cross-border working, lately with a series of webinars on EU Exit that brought together organisations and individuals from England, Scotland and Wales.

### **4) Why were previous ambitions for increasing tree planting in England not met and what lessons should be learned?**

Any strategy needs to look at what we have first<sup>4</sup>, including in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. There is real opportunity to learn from past successes such as England's National Forest, Central Scotland Green Network, community forests<sup>5</sup> and Coed Cwmru's work planting on farms in Wales. The National Forest Tender Scheme worked well and achieved planting at the level required, but it was dropped. The Forestry Commission and DEFRA need to be challenged more about learning from previous efforts.

There are some obvious obstacles such as those evidenced above – insufficient funding and incentives, too much bureaucracy, and regulatory disincentives like permanent land use change. We must make trees and woodland commercially attractive to land owners and managers, for both creation and management, and we must join up the funding landscape – ELM, the Woodland Carbon Code etc.

Perhaps less obvious is the ongoing divide between forestry and farming. This must be addressed, not just by facilitating knowledge exchange but by supporting change in culture and way of life. The main barrier to large scale tree planting by farmers is cultural – farmers want to be farmers not foresters. We need to support change and reduce the perception that not farming is failing. Part of this is tied up in concerns about food security that could be addressed with a better approach to land use. Agriculture and forestry are so often seen in competition – there is too much divide between the sectors. We as a sector need to challenge these perceptions and engage more with farmers, perhaps offering a free visit or

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rfs.org.uk/media/710684/woodland-creation-opportunities-and-barriers-020620-embargo-3-june.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-panel-on-forestry-final-report>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/1693/Community-forest-governance-RER.pdf>

advice for every farm. This is a genuine opportunity to make links with wider land use community and get forestry into the mind-set of other sectors. It would also help to identify individuals who have successfully integrated forestry into their farming enterprises, as in Scotland, and push for culture change across government agencies.

We also need to promote the environmental and other benefits of using home-grown (biosecure) timber and wood products. Government needs to help on procurement policy to stimulate demand-side pull. Timber-framed housing still remains the exception rather than the rule in England, in spite of its clear advantages for embedded and operational carbon.

There is a huge amount of evidence and expertise to tap into – another example is the 20 year review of the South West Forest Scheme<sup>6</sup>. We need to make sure the learning happens and policy is based on a sound evidence base, drawing heavily on Forest Research and having regard to the science and innovation strategy for forestry in Great Britain. We then need quantified commitments and a system of monitoring and reporting based on the evidence to measure its success. The Institute can be a source of expertise and exemplars of what success looks like.

**5) In relation to increasing forestry coverage in England, what should the Government be trying to achieve? For example, how should the following policy objectives be prioritised?**

- Mitigating or adapting to climate change;
- Promoting biodiversity and nature recovery;
- Increasing biosecurity and plant health;
- Improving human well-being and health;
- Protecting natural and cultural heritage;
- Food security;
- Creating commercial opportunities from forestry, tourism and recreation; and
- Any other priorities?

The England Tree Strategy consultation questions arguably forced these distinctions too much. All these priorities can be met with the right interventions because they are all interlinked. Of course we need to set objectives and develop a plan for achieving them, but spending too long weighing up the relative value of the multiple goals risks delay and inertia.

**6) Are the right policies and funding in place to appropriately protect and manage existing woodlands in England? How will prospective changes to policy and legislation effect this?**

As above, to protect and manage existing woodland, we need to make it pay. But most importantly of all we need to embed the UK Forestry Standard across all policy interventions involving trees. It is the authoritative, common standard and a huge asset for the sector<sup>7</sup>.

Any land management proposals that involve deforestation without replanting of new woodland in the locality should be rejected unless there are compelling reasons to go ahead. Climate change is the biggest crisis facing the natural environment, we must mitigate against losses. Targets are just numbers, we must also assign value to trees in policy and public understanding. For example we could consider making it a legal requirement for all local

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.drcompany.co.uk/latest/review-of-south-west-forest-scheme-20-years-from-planting/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://forestrycommission.blog.gov.uk/2020/07/17/right-tree-right-place-right-reason/>

authorities to have tree strategies embedded in local plans or place requirements on developers to manage trees properly.

The nature and scale of policy changes even just from EU Exit are unprecedented – biosecurity, labour market, trade deals, land use policy, etc. It will be ever more important to keep collaborating and working internationally, as the Institute is doing.

### **Conclusions**

We are pleased to be working productively with DEFRA to support them in meeting these significant challenges. We urge colleagues across government to continue to engage with us and we offer to convene members from across the sector to gather expertise and evidence. We would welcome further engagement from the Inquiry Team to discuss anything raised here or any other matters emerging from the work.