

Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy 2021

The Institute of Chartered Foresters welcomes the opportunity to shape the Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy. The dual climate and nature crises will demand a coordinated effort from all sectors, crucially including careful stewardship of our natural resources. This way we can deliver the transformational change that is needed.

Peatland sites for timber production and forestry in general are the subject of much debate across the UK, and this is particularly important in Northern Ireland. A key issue is the scope for future afforestation on shallow peat soils. We are all keenly aware of the role forestry must play in helping to meet climate change targets but sustainable, multi-purpose woodlands can and should deliver as well for biodiversity, timber production, environmental protection of water and hydrological impacts, landscape benefits and recreation.

About the Institute

The Institute of Chartered Foresters is the Royal Chartered body for tree professionals in the UK. It represents a huge breadth of membership and this diversity and range of expertise is one of its greatest strengths. It has around 2,000 members who practise forestry, arboriculture and related disciplines in the private sector, central and local government, research councils, universities and colleges throughout the UK. The Institute regulates standards of entry to the profession. It provides support to its members, guidance to professionals in other sectors, information to the general public, and educational advice and training to students and tree professionals seeking to develop their careers.

Its members include officials of the Northern Ireland Forest Service, private consultants, contractors and entrepreneurs, academics and employees of charitable bodies. Through its members throughout the UK and Ireland the Institute possesses a wealth of practical experience, scientific knowledge and policy expertise. This was gained managing extensive areas of peat in these islands under coniferous and broadleaved forests and open land for timber, wind farm infrastructure, water management, biodiversity and bog restoration, research, field sports and public access.

Our Recommendations

Evidence and balance

We agree broadly with the scope and vision of the strategy. However, it is crucial that it is coordinated across government within Northern Ireland in terms of land use policy and draws on evidence and good practice from across the UK. Research efforts are trying to keep pace with our need to mitigate the climate and nature crises without unintended consequences. Utilising existing research, evidence and decision support frameworks from elsewhere in the UK on the management and restoration of peatlands is important, including the growth rates necessary to ensure forests on peat provide a positive carbon balance. We must also not forget

the pivotal role of the UK Forestry Standard as the reference standard for sustainable forest management across the UK.

As an Institute our membership is diverse, encompassing conservation interests and large-scale private forestry. We would support the decision not to plant where it is not appropriate, but we also know that woodland is an appropriate land use for some peatland habitats. We must follow the evidence in making decisions about what, where, when and how to plant. We have seen particular challenges in Scotland and refer to the recent cultivation guidance published by Scottish Forestry. We must manage existing resources responsibly and look at the issue holistically and from a land use perspective.

Consultation and collaboration

If new measures are brought in, governments must consult properly over appropriate timescales, mitigations, incentives and processes. There are lessons to be learned from England here. For example, in Northern Ireland where much would be done with agricultural ploughs and on a relatively small scale, we need to consider investment in equipment and giving sufficient lead time for changes to be accepted and implemented. Above all, policy and process must be communicated well.

It is also important that we dispel any mistrust between government, forestry and agriculture. In recent years there has been increasing polarisation in debate, particularly between environmental NGOs and private forestry interests. We all need to work together. This will necessarily include education of farmers about the worth of peatland habitat, opportunities for woodland creation, access to incentives and the constraints for these, and woodland management skills. However, land managers must also understand the importance of, and have access to, the appropriate advice from professional foresters.

Linking policy and practice

Just as forest policy in Northern Ireland was and is anchored in the wider government policy for Northern Ireland, so this strategy would be strengthened if the links to the Programme for Government (PfG) (Northern Ireland Executive 2021) were clearer. It will be a missed opportunity if the strategy relies mainly on UK commitments for biodiversity and climate change to make the case.

In the absence of a single land use policy and strategy for Northern Ireland, and as very few areas of peat are not already subject to some form of productive land use, perhaps better progress could be gained by restating policies on agriculture, forestry, renewables and energy to encompass climate change and biodiversity issues, including the specific issues affecting organic soils and peats, rather than focus on peatland as a separate strategy. We accept that there is a role for government to coordinate actions across the separate land use policies, mitigate the consequences for carbon storage and biodiversity, and we think this would help connect peatland issues into the PfG.

The large number of proposed objectives and priority actions for a relatively small policy area are more likely to reduce focus, incur excessive cost, and make targets for “all peatlands” unachievable. Issues with the current policy tools need to be looked at before proposing to make significant changes, and as above we need appropriate consultation with the land use sectors.

The Institute believes that the scale of peatland resource and its limited global distribution in relation to population offers the people of Northern Ireland an opportunity to harness its excellent academic resources to take a lead on a global issue. There are opportunities to address the problems that agriculture, forestry and renewables are facing in their ambition to deliver sustainable services, and find ways to improve hydrology, carbon and water storage, biodiversity and economic productivity.

Concluding comments

As the representative body for tree experts across the commercial, public and voluntary sectors, the Institute is keen to work with government to develop the strategy further, to develop an effective implementation plan and to ensure that meaningful links are maintained with related strategies and lessons learned from across the UK. We can offer our expertise and experience in the development, signposting and promotion of good practice, qualifications and careers in the tree professions. We would welcome a discussion with DAERA about how to achieve our shared goals and offer to convene expert members and stakeholders to provide advice.