



Institute of  
Chartered  
Foresters



## ICF and CIEEM position paper

# Management of Existing UK Woodlands: An Opportunity for Green Prosperity

### Executive Summary

The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) and the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) are calling on governments and agencies across the UK to bring about an urgent step change in the sustainable management of existing woodlands. Our organisations jointly represent the full breadth and depth of professional expertise in forestry, ecology and environmental management.

For decades there has been failure of policy to increase the proportion of woodland under active management. Woodland creation has been the too-narrow focus of policy in recent years, with existing woodlands remaining a huge, missed opportunity. We need all types of woodland, recognising that some are better for biodiversity, some for producing essential timber and wood products, and others for recreation and wellbeing.

All the benefits that woodlands provide – for biodiversity, recreation, timber, flood alleviation, health and wellbeing, soil health, carbon sequestration, cooling cities, resilience to climate change, reducing air pollution, shelter for livestock, food production – are delivered much more effectively when the woodland is appropriately managed.

However, many of those purposes do not have any funding associated. Ownership of woodlands is fragmented, and landowners do not have the knowledge, incentive, or confidence to understand and act on the natural capital value of their woodlands. We need urgently to prioritise helping private landowners to bring more existing woodlands into sustainable management by increasing the pace, breadth and scale of ambition in policy, legislation and financial incentives.

ICF and CIEEM represent the breadth and depth of professional expertise in forestry, ecology and environmental management. We urge governments and partners to commit to urgent action and to working with us to enable our woodlands to deliver for nature and people.

### Definitions

**Woodlands:** We define *woodlands* as any type of woodland or forest (conifer, broadleaf and mixed woodlands), including ancient woodland, semi-natural woodland. We recognise that the objectives and management requirements for these different habitats vary greatly and could be entirely protective.

**Management:** We make a distinction here between *management* and *intervention*. Management refers to the active oversight of a whole site to ensure the woodland and any activities deliver the intended benefits in accordance with UK Forestry Standard (UKFS). Intervention means a specific activity or group of activities intended to meet a woodland management objective. The approach to

management depends on the objectives, which are different for each site and each landowner, whether primarily environmental, social, or economic outcomes. A woodland can have a management plan for non-intervention, for observation of specific features or protection of specific habitats – it does not necessarily mean felling trees.

UK Forestry Standard (UKFS): This is the basis for good practice management. It is “the reference standard for sustainable forest management across the UK, and applies to all woodland, regardless of who owns or manages it”<sup>1</sup>. Work is underway to review the UKFS, with an updated edition expected in autumn 2023.

## Introduction

We support UK Government commitments to increase tree cover to deliver the land use sector’s contribution to achieving net zero by 2050. However, we are concerned that woodland creation targets have eclipsed consideration of existing woodlands. This is a missed opportunity and one that will undermine the achievement of net zero ambitions.

Despite most policymakers and landowners being aware of the many significant benefits that well-managed woodland provides, there has been a failure over successive decades to increase the proportion of woodland under appropriate active management. Though there are different approaches to measuring the figure and different figures across the UK, the proportion of woodland not actively managed<sup>2,3</sup> has not meaningfully improved for the last 40 years. The Independent Panel on Forestry (IPF) report in 2012<sup>4</sup>, informed by 42,000 responses and representations from 60 national organisations, stated an unequivocal ambition to increase the proportion of woodland under management to 80% over the following ten years, saying that “the policy challenge is to get the right incentives, infrastructure and support in place; and for both new and existing woodlands to be managed in the right way, for the long term”. The issues are identified and debated at length, but little has changed<sup>5</sup>. Since most UK woodlands<sup>6</sup> are in private (non-state) ownership, such incentives, infrastructure and support need to be focussed on private landowners.

Woodland creation targets and tree planting have been the somewhat narrow focus of recent years as governments respond to net zero ambitions. To its credit, the England Woodland Creation Offer is the first example of genuine payment for ecosystem services (as opposed to that same public money paying for capital plus income foregone, with no guarantee of delivering those natural capital benefits). However, it has taken five years for ‘public money for public goods’ to start to become a reality and is by no means fully formed. Improving existing woodland is a cost-effective way of bringing in eligible areas as well as delivering on other targets such as carbon sequestration, water management and wood production. However, landowners and other stakeholders need motivating. One way to achieve this would be to integrate woodland management into the vast programme of agricultural transition across the UK presents an opportunity for farmers to capitalise on benefits while delivering ecosystem services.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uk-forestry-standard>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/woods-into-management-forestry-innovation-funds>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forestry-commission-key-performance-indicators-report-for-2022-23>

<sup>4</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/183095/Independent-Panel-on-Forestry-Final-Report1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183095/Independent-Panel-on-Forestry-Final-Report1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Betts, A. and Claridge, J. 1994 *New Markets for Old Woods: Proceedings of a Conference at the University of Surrey* April 1994. The Forestry Authority for England, HMSO, London, UK.

<sup>6</sup> <https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/12/FS2022-combined-29sep22.pdf>

The State of UK Woods and Trees Report<sup>7</sup> reviews threats and drivers of change in woodland including climate change, development, pollution, diseases and damaging agents such as deer and grey squirrels. Just 9% of native woodlands in England and Wales are currently in good ecological condition, as low as 7% in Britain. Those in poor ecological condition are characterised by low levels of deadwood, few veteran trees and a lack of open habitats within woodlands, as well as insufficient diversity in tree age and species. Consequently, woodland wildlife has decreased and one third of all woodland species are in decline.

In addition to the failure of policy to address woodland management specifically, across the environmental professions there is a skills crisis, with an urgent need to expand and diversify the workforce. There is a shortage not just in professional foresters and ecologists but also in contractors to carry out the work<sup>8</sup>, education providers to train the next generation and no reliable pipeline for new entrants to these sectors.

Where woodlands differ from many other land uses is timescale. It takes time to make sustained change and time for the results of policy changes to be borne out, but there is no evidence of improvement in the number of existing woodlands in good condition or in sustainable active management. The pace of change needed to make a positive impact on existing woodland matters. The climate and biodiversity emergency are having a detrimental effect on woodlands far quicker than woodlands can naturally adapt and respond<sup>9</sup>. Even as recently as 20 years ago, woodland objectives were being set in climatic conditions that do not exist now, and in the absence of the developing evidence base on climate that now exists. The longevity of woodlands, the lead time for planning them and the long-lived ecosystems they support are of course what provides the benefits. However, this is seen as a restriction by farmers (whose crops are often a one-year rotation, where forestry is a minimum of 30 years) as well as the tax implications involved. Some of the most valuable habitat takes over 100 years to develop, but this is the opportunity to provide thriving biodiversity and genuinely sustainable wood for future generations.

We need all types of woodland, recognising that some are better for biodiversity, some are more suited to supplying essential products to prevent deforestation and reduce reliance on carbon-heavy materials, and others providing opportunities for recreation and wellbeing while still offering different types of habitats for wildlife.

The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) and the Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) are calling on governments and agencies across the UK to bring about an urgent step change in the sustainable management of existing conifer, broadleaf and mixed woodlands. Our organisations and our members have a deep understanding of the benefits of trees in terms of wood, wildlife and wellbeing. We know that these benefits can be realised with different incentives and options for different management priorities, depending on the context, scale and type of woodland. We must help more private landowners to assess and sustain their woodlands by increasing the pace, breadth, flexibility and scale of ambition in policy, legislation, advisory support and financial incentives.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/state-of-uk-woods-and-trees>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.charteredforesters.org/resource/cant-see-the-skills-for-the-trees-critical-shortages-in-forestry-workforce-skills-put-climate-targets-at-risk>

<sup>9</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/872285/Climate\\_Change\\_Full\\_Guide.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/872285/Climate_Change_Full_Guide.pdf)

## Benefits

All kinds of forests are needed for a sustainable future. Of course, the natural capital benefits they provide will vary dependent on composition, age and objectives, but all forests can meet multiple objectives and deliver ecosystem services if managed well, according to the UK Forestry Standard. The demand for timber and wood products is escalating both nationally and globally, and while we import 81% of our timber needs, we are offshoring those needs to other countries. Timber is essential for a circular economy, reducing global deforestation, reducing imports and replacing carbon-heavy materials like steel and concrete. Bringing more woodland into management also creates more green jobs<sup>10</sup>. The Natural Capital asset value of UK woodland is estimated to be £351.4 billion<sup>11</sup>.

There is a huge volume of research on the benefits of trees and woodlands<sup>12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19</sup>. All the benefits that woodlands provide – for biodiversity, recreation, timber, flood alleviation, health and wellbeing, soil health, carbon sequestration, cooling cities, resilience to climate change, reducing air pollution, shelter for livestock, food production – are delivered much more effectively when the woodland is appropriately managed. The timescales for newly planted woodland to reach maturity and provide the same quality, magnitude and array of ecosystem service benefits as existing woodlands is at least decades<sup>20</sup> to hundreds of years and is predicated on the assumption of being able to control many threats along the way.

The biodiversity value of woodlands cannot be overstated. As complex, multi-dimensional habitats, woodlands provide a wide range of habitat niches and support a significant range of species<sup>21</sup>. This may be particularly true of ancient and semi-natural woodland, but there is still significant biodiversity value in actively managed coniferous woodlands<sup>22,23,24</sup>. Our native woodlands are incredibly important for wildlife – for example, the two native oak species support over 2,000 species of plants, bryophytes, lichens, birds, insects and other species<sup>25</sup>.

Woodlands primarily managed for biodiversity can also contribute to the UK's 30x30 commitment. This commitment refers to efforts by the global community to protect 30% of land and sea for

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.confor.org.uk/media/79582/forestry7000greenjobsandlowcarbongrowthjune2012.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/woodlandnaturalcapitalaccountsuk/2022>

<sup>12</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/183095/Independent-Panel-on-Forestry-Final-Report1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183095/Independent-Panel-on-Forestry-Final-Report1.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/woodlandnaturalcapitalaccountsuk/2022>

<sup>14</sup> <https://rfs.org.uk/insights-publications/rfs-reports/bringing-woodland-into-management/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/download/why-we-need-more-trees-uk>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/publications/quantifying-the-sustainable-forestry-carbon-cycle-report-download-page/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.carbonbrief.org/guest-post-the-state-of-carbon-dioxide-removal-in-seven-charts/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/trees-and-timber-task-force-recommendations>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.soilassociation.org/causes-campaigns/regenerative-forestry/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://cieem.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Carbon-and-habitats-paper-v3.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://forestrycommission.blog.gov.uk/2022/10/19/why-woods-are-so-important-for-nature/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.confor.org.uk/media/247794/confor-biodiversity-forestry-report.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.britishwildlife.com/article/article-volume-32-number-6-page-420-429/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/a-look-at-the-biodiversity-of-a-conifer-plantation-managed-as-irregular-high-forest>

<sup>25</sup> <https://catalogue.ceh.ac.uk/documents/22b3d41e-7c35-4c51-9e55-0f47bb845202>

nature by 2030, as set out in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework<sup>26</sup>. The UK is one of more than 100 countries to have committed to halting the decline of biodiversity and destruction of nature by 2030<sup>27</sup>. The commitment is included in the Environment Act 2021 targets<sup>28</sup>. There has however been an alarming lack of progress since the commitment was first made in 2020<sup>29</sup>. Whilst the commitment is at the UK-level, each country is delivering on this pledge independently, with the Scottish<sup>30</sup> and Welsh<sup>31</sup> governments also agreeing to the 30x30 target.

Further, many of the benefits interact with each other in a virtuous circle. Woodlands can genuinely deliver for climate, nature, people and the economy.

## Barriers

Woods are genuinely multi-purpose, but many of those purposes do not have any funding associated. As with the benefits, the barriers to management are well known<sup>32,33,34,35</sup>. They broadly fall into the categories of funding, knowledge and attitudes to ownership and management of woodland.

While adhering to best practice can provide an economic return, this return is not always viable and depends on the scale of operations. Government support needs to match economies of scale and provide long-term support for the landowner to access woodland previously deemed unviable. It should also recognise that feasible returns can also be environmental or socio-economic.

There are no easy steps for landowners to understand their woodland and its value (whether social, environmental, tax or timber) or to implement plans to improve habitat and resilience. This makes it difficult for owners to identify management objectives for their woodlands. Ownership of woodlands is fragmented – many woodlands are small, and it is not always viable to manage them in isolation, whether for timber or for conservation. Tree heath issues are a major impediment, as well as increasing climate-related events such as catastrophic windblow. Woodlands have been heavily damaged by diseases such as ash dieback<sup>36</sup> and tree pests and diseases are increasingly rampant<sup>37</sup>.

Many owners are not foresters and may not naturally engage with the Forestry Authorities or traditional forestry businesses. Lack of knowledge about the complexity of sustainable, modern forestry is certainly a barrier, especially to options other than commercial forestry. However, research increasingly shows that knowledge and attitudes of landowners play a significant part<sup>38,39</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-commits-to-protect-30-of-uk-land-in-boost-for-biodiversity>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/delivering-on-the-environment-act-new-targets-announced-and-ambitious-plans-for-nature-recovery>

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/WCL\\_2022\\_Progress\\_Report\\_on\\_30x30\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/WCL_2022_Progress_Report_on_30x30_in_England.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/30-30-and-nature-networks/30-30-explained>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/oral-statement-nature-biodiversity-and-local-places-nature>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regional-woodland-restoration-innovation-fund>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/trees-and-timber-deep-dive>

<sup>34</sup> <https://sylva.org.uk/bws>

<sup>35</sup> <https://rfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/woodland-management-missed-opportunities.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> <https://sylva.org.uk/ash-dieback-is-predicted-to-cost-15-billion-in-britain/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/climate-change/risks/pests-and-diseases/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://sylva.org.uk/bws>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/review-landowners-attitudes-to-woodland-creation-and-management-in-the-uk/>

Even when owners actively want to manage their woodlands, there is a lack of confidence<sup>40</sup> in how to go about it. There is not sufficient trust or engagement between land use sectors, or enough accessible advice from professionals – part of the skills challenge.

Meeting the skills challenge has its own barriers<sup>41,42</sup>. There is a lack of awareness among pupils, parents and careers advisers of the range of careers that forestry, ecology and wider environmental professions can offer and not enough in school curricula. Many college courses are geographically sparse, there are not enough apprenticeships and those that exist are either inaccessible or hard for small providers to deliver. In forestry, along with an ageing workforce, there is not enough higher education provision and a vicious circle of low demand and low provision. Salaries in forestry and ecology are generally low, and both are poorly representative of the diversity of our society.

## **Opportunities**

There are clearly a multitude of benefits that could be gained from managing woodlands appropriately. This does however require the necessary incentives to be in place to empower landowners, many of whom want to do more, to capitalise on the benefits. There are opportunities across the UK nations to incentivise woodland management, ranging across the spectrum from large land holdings to small woods. We need incentives that allow landowners to recognise the value of their woodlands, to increase their natural capital or improve the ecosystems services they provide. There are several areas of opportunity for this work.

### *Empowering landowners*

Many landowners want to do more but do not know where to start. The first step is empowering landowners to capitalise on the benefits of bringing their existing woodlands into management. This includes training and upskilling to give them the knowledge, but also linking them with the appropriate professionals to support them and funding this intervention. Working with landowners can help them recognise the value of their woods and consider what they want them to be, at which point the type and level of advice and support they need can be identified. This needs to be collaborative, so that landowners play an active role rather than having priorities or interventions dictated to them. The limited existing support that nonetheless genuinely works involves local actors and forums, a client-led focus, advice without bias or agenda, trusted partners and ‘translation’ of a complex array of options.

### *Bringing in small woodlands*

The existing grant regime is failing to capture small woodlands, for which ownership and management by many landowners is borderline viable due to economies of scale. We are currently missing out on the type of landowner who has a small wood behind their house or in the corner of their holding but does not have the time, knowledge, or confidence to decide what to do with it. More than 40% of woodland in England is privately owned in 'small' parcels below 20 hectares (and a considerable amount in parcels a lot smaller than this). That is a significant total area which for which modest funds, made available to each landowner for a woodland management plan and selective interventions, could make a big difference relative to the size of the woodland.

### *Collaboration*

Facilitating more landscape scale collaboration would enable landowners without significant resources to remove that entry barrier created by the economies of scale issue discussed above.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.charteredforesters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Small-Woods-ELM-Test-and-Trail-Report.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.charteredforesters.org/forestry-skills-crisis-puts-climate-targets-at-risk>

<sup>42</sup> <https://cieem.net/a-crisis-in-our-sector/>

Access to advice from professionals on woodland management (for all the various benefits) is essential. There is a need not only to break down barriers between land use professionals but further to train foresters and ecologists in the challenges faced by landowners and farm businesses.

#### *Local markets*

We need to enable small businesses to enter wood production, whether expanding the limited range of species that large sawmills will take, helping with transport or energy costs to make it economical to mill, funding new equipment or stimulating markets such as for firewood. Certification is important but is very expensive for the smaller scale.

#### *Agricultural transition*

The UK is undergoing the biggest change to land use and management in more than a generation. There is a golden opportunity in the transition to new agricultural support mechanisms as the Common Agricultural Policy is phased out across the UK nations. This is our chance to incentivise activities that genuinely help the environment, as well as an opportunity for farmers to capitalise on their existing woodland. The England Woodland Creation Offer is the first system that genuinely delivers payments for ecosystem services, and we must extend this ethos to woodland management.

#### *Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)*

From the end of this year BNG, by which any 'large' new development in England must offset their habitat loss by 10%, is an opportunity for increased woodland management for woods which score 'poorly', that might be single storey, planted 20 years ago. BNG money could pay for thinning and underplanting with appropriately shade-tolerant species – potentially a good source of income for uneconomic interventions.

#### *Skills*

Many school leavers have little, or no knowledge of the range of careers forestry and ecology can offer. Including more relevant content in the school curriculum would help, as well as raising awareness with careers advisers, and getting a pipeline of school leavers, graduates and career changers into environmental sector. At a time of increased public interest in the environment, this is an area of significant opportunity to expand, upskill and diversify our workforce.

Just as there is nothing in this paper that has not been proposed before, there are plenty of examples of interventions that have worked in the past<sup>43</sup> that we can learn from.

### **Actions**

We are pressing for firm commitment from governments, thorough exploration of the following options and an urgent move to action.

#### *Targets*

- Set a binding target for sustainable woodland management.
- Set local targets and facilitate collaboration to meet them; decentralise decision making and fund allocation.

#### *Funding*

- Develop a grant environment that better reflects the fact that the woods that are the least managed have the most opportunity but the worst access.

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<sup>43</sup> [https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/2009/Link\\_position\\_statement\\_Woodfuel\\_Strategy\\_03Jul09.pdf](https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/2009/Link_position_statement_Woodfuel_Strategy_03Jul09.pdf)



- Link active management with tax relief<sup>44</sup> or government incentives, whether through sustainable farming schemes or independently.
- Consider a mandatory (funded) woodland management plan for every holding in receipt of government funding.
- Consider inheritance tax relief for putting a management plan in place.
- Offer easily accessible £5,000 grant for any woodland smaller than 20 hectares to develop woodland management plans and selective felling/thinning.

Government funding might be able to kickstart the work, but eventually it needs to be independent from grants, which means it needs private investment:

- Consider carbon markets for existing woodland, not just woodland creation (while being careful to avoid creating perverse incentives).
- Build a portfolio of options for attracting private investment.
- Enable stacking and bundling of multiple funding sources if delivering multiple public benefits (though must be able to show additionality).

#### *Communication and research*

- Public bodies to work more closely with professional bodies and support better communication with private sector, bringing landowners and professionals along with them.
- Better support research, for example into the carbon value of old, unmanaged woodlands<sup>45</sup>.

#### *Empowering landowners*

- Empowering the landowner to understand the value of what they have, and the professional to provide the advice they need.
- Facilitate the provision of free, accessible professional advice, funded by government<sup>46</sup>.
- Facilitate sharing of good practice and case studies.
- Run training courses regionally targeted at woodland owners.

#### *Education and skills*

- Include more forestry and ecology in school and college curricula.
- Support land management courses and better integration between existing courses.
- Increase funding for training new starters in the sector.
- Facilitate better link up between farming, forestry, environmental management and ecology to develop transferable skills in how to value a woodland for all its attributes and natural capital benefits.

#### *Professionals/professional bodies*

- Clearly and publicly acknowledge the critical role of professional expertise in forestry, ecology and wider environmental management.
- Consider whether to work towards a system where all woods to be managed by an appropriately qualified professional – while at present there are not enough chartered professionals to do this, support for systems of earned recognition is growing.
- Consider cross-certification between chartered bodies.
- Maintain high standards – non-competent people carrying out this work is a high risk.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/woodland-owners-tax-planning>

<sup>45</sup> <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/2688-8319.12197>

<sup>46</sup> <https://sylva.org.uk/pies>



## Conclusion

In this paper we have presented governments and partners with what we believe to be an urgent case and potentially an easy win for governments' climate and nature ambitions. This challenge is not new – nor are most of these solutions. ICF and CIEEM jointly can give governments of the UK access to balanced, professional expertise from across the spectrum of forestry, ecology and environmental management. We need to see a firm commitment from the governments of the UK to take this programme of work forward, and we are eager to discuss and facilitate its delivery wherever possible, for nature and for people.