

EFRA Committee Call for Evidence - Future of England's uplands

Call for Evidence – June 2026

About us

The Woodland Trust is the largest woodland conservation charity in the UK, with over 1,200 sites in its care covering over 29,000 hectares. Access to its woods is free. The Woodland Trust has over 500,000 supporters. The Trust wants to see a UK rich in native woods and trees for nature and people. It has three key aims:

- i. protect ancient woodland, which is rare, unique and irreplaceable;
- ii. restore damaged ancient woodland, bringing precious pieces of our natural history back to life;
- iii. plant native trees and woods with the aim of creating resilient landscapes for people and wildlife;

The Woodland Trust has extensive experience of working with other land managers and stakeholders on the ground in the uplands to deliver nature conservation projects, as well as managing a large number of our own sites. We are therefore pleased to have this opportunity to share our insight and expertise.

To what extent do the current Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes and other support like the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) schemes support financially and environmentally sustainable land management in the uplands?

1. The Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme is intended to change the way farmers receive subsidies. The BPS, which was allocated purely on the basis of how much land a farmer had, is being phased out but land managers are able to apply for ELM grants based on the idea of public money for public goods.
2. However, calculation of payment rates for ELM has tended to be based on income foregone plus costs. This appears to be moving away from the original vision for ELM. For many upland farmers, the income lost may be comparatively small, yet the cost of delivering actions can be high, especially when dealing with difficult terrain or making changes to farm management, for example switching from sheep to cattle.
3. For example, Defra have previously tried to limit the use of Countryside Stewardship wood pasture options (WD4, WD5 and WD6) in the uplands on the basis that the payment rate was based on an income foregone calculation in a lowland setting. It was considered that the income loss for an upland farm would be zero, however this did not take account of costs of making changes to farm business practices, such as reducing stocking levels or switching to cattle. It also didn't take account of the multiple environmental benefits provided by wood pasture schemes in the uplands, such as biodiversity recovery, carbon sequestration and flood mitigation. Defra eventually created separate upland wood pasture schemes and later announced parity between lowland and upland payment rates. This will provide some support for upland farmers but highlights that calculating

ELM payments on the basis of income forgone will not provide an incentive for farmers to change to more sustainable land management practices.

4. The Woodland Trust has worked closely with a number of commoners and other land managers in Cumbria to restore or establish wood pasture. Agreements have tended to be characterised by grazing cattle at suitably low levels, although we have also used fencing and individual tree cages to help protect newly planted trees from browsing pressure. Trees can be highly beneficial both for habitat recovery and for building resilience in the landscape. We have seen that newly created wood pasture has developed diverse and beneficial habitat structure within a few years.
5. It is important to note that our experience in Cumbria is based on long-term collaborative work with farmers, land owners and statutory agencies, to change land management approaches in order to restore the quality of habitats and the ecological functioning of ecosystems, while assisting farmers to make a living. This has taken 25 years or more and was based upon sound expertise, good data and collaborative planning and action. Commoners and other land managers received 1:1 advice on the best approaches for both the habitat and their farm business, as well as support to access government grants and other financial support. Because of the nature of Commons and the potentially wide range of views and perspectives from individual commoners that should be taken into account, investment in an independent facilitator can be beneficial.
6. The Woodland Trust's work in the uplands highlights the importance of good quality, independent advice to help upland farmers adopt land management practices that are both financially and environmentally sustainable. Defra have previously been reluctant to direct much of the ELM budget towards advice, although we understand they are currently working to develop a national advice service. Support for this will be essential to helping farmers in the uplands adapt to a changing climate, ensure the future of their farm businesses and harness the potential for the uplands to deliver for the environment. Given the time taken to reach agreements, as well ecological timescales, long-term agreements of minimum 10 years but possibly longer will also give farmers the certainty they need to feel confident changing farming practices.
7. There is high potential for public goods delivery in the uplands and designing ELM to really pay for the delivery of ecosystem services such as flood mitigation, clean water and natural regeneration would provide a genuine opportunity for upland farmers to make a viable income through land management changes.

How might land use and business changes in the uplands impact rural communities?

8. Taking a business-as-usual approach to land management in the uplands will undermine the ability of rural communities to withstand climatic shocks. The

CCCs' recent report on climate change, *A Well-Adapted UK*, highlights the range of risks associated with climatic changes including a severe risk to the viability of farming. The report predicts that high-quality farmland may fall from 40% of land (in England and Wales) to 10% by 2050. It recommends that, at a minimum, the UK should prepare for global warming to reach 2°C above preindustrial levels by 2050, and the weather extremes that would come with this (Climate Change Committee, 2026).

9. But the impacts from changing climate and weather are already being felt by farmers today (Hanlon et al., 2021). Farmers in England were expected to lose over £800 million in revenue due to the impacts of the hot and dry spring and summer in 2025 (2025 prices). Over a million hectares of open, semi-natural habitats in England are potentially at risk from wildfire today, and the UK experienced the largest wildfire in living memory in 2025, burning over 11,800 hectares of moorland and woodland in Scotland. Without additional adaptation, under a 2°C global warming level in 2050, days with 'very high' wildfire danger in the summer in the UK could double. Managing pests and pathogens will also become increasingly costly across all land use types. For example, the increase in parasite outbreak (*Haemonchus contortus* roundworm) in lambs due to higher temperatures is projected to affect between 61% and 66% of lambs in the UK, depending on the nation, by 2050 (Climate Change Committee, 2026).
10. A survey conducted by the NFU of 538 members revealed a similarly stark picture: 78% saw an increase of severe weather events, 68% increase in drought, 56% increase in flooding, 70% reported increases in heatwaves and heat stress, 55% increases in new or exotic pests and disease. Taken together this equates to a circa £40,000 in financial loss per affected business in the past decade due to severe weather events (NFU, 2025).
11. Agro-forestry is the deliberate integration of trees and shrubs into farming enterprises to benefit from resulting ecological and economic interactions. Uptake of these ideas is becoming more common amongst the agricultural community and research into adapting farms against climate change published by the MET office and ADAS suggests that agro-forestry can be effective in reducing impacts of climate change at the farm level (Ffoulkes et al., 2023). Across many farm types and landscapes, evidence suggests that these practices can offer 'win-win' outcomes in many scenarios, helping farmers mitigate and adapt to climate change; restore rural biodiversity and ecological processes, whilst maintaining or enhancing farm productivity and income.

12. A key benefit of agroforestry for upland farmers is in the higher welfare and productivity afforded to livestock.
13. Agroforestry in the form of windbreaks, hedgerows or in-field silvopasture are useful interventions for microclimates management in livestock and crop production systems, affording both protective shelter in cold weather or high winds, and shading during summer or heatwaves (e.g. Bird et al., 1998; Tamang et al., 2010; Martins et al., 2021; Atkin-Willoughby et al., 2022; Amorim et al., 2023). Shelter reduces wind speed and therefore reduces evapotranspiration of water from grass. In dry springs and summers – increasingly frequent even in upland areas – this can be a critical factor in continuing grass growth. The shelter increases soil temperature in the early spring and late autumn, extending the growing season for grass. These protected areas have shown a 20% increase in average annual pasture growth. This is particularly important in upland livestock areas, reducing the need for supplementary feed at a critical time in young animals' development.
14. The value of many tree species as browse – including ash, lime and willow - is increasingly recognised, and can provide a supplement of metabolizable energy, fibre, protein, vitamins or essential elements (Emile et al., 2016; Kendall et al., 2021). Silvopasture can service specific nutritional needs; for example, the use of willow fodder to meet high cobalt and vitamin B12 requirements in finishing lamb (Walker et al., 2022). Tannins, and other secondary metabolites provided by tree or plants, modulate immune responses in ruminants and may reduce parasitic burden and the need for chemical treatments (Lira et al., 2008; Rodríguez-Hernández et al., 2023). Introducing tree fodder has the potential to reduce GHG emissions from enteric fermentation, urine or wastes (Ramírez-Restrepo et al., 2010; Stoate et al., 2024).
15. Provision of trees also increases the thermal comfort of livestock and reduces the incidence of hypothermia and heat stress; this can directly translate into productivity and financial benefits such as increased liveweight gain (Burgess et al., 2019), reduced mortality (Jordan et al., 2020), increased fertility and milk yield in dairy cows (Jordan et al., 2020; Martins et al., 2021), reduced wintering feed or housing costs (Smith et al., 2016). Trees enhance animal stimulation, decrease stress and encourage natural feeding, self-medicating, grooming and roaming behaviours (Woodland Trust, 2015; Burgess et al., 2019). Sheltered environments give farmers the opportunity to keep stock on the land in all weathers, reducing the demand for investment in animal housing and providing a warmer 'maternity unit'. Agroforestry can also support farmers to transition to hardier domestic

livestock breeds, meaning more time on pasture for livestock that are better suited to cope with extreme weather.

16. Trees can also play an important role in managing disease outbreaks by encouraging less livestock clumping and acting as barriers in shelterbelts to separate animals (Burgess et al., 2019).

17. Even modest increases in tree and hedge cover can dramatically increase water infiltration and reduce runoff. This has two implications for water management

- Water which infiltrates into the soil in tree belts or hedgerows is less likely to carry potential pollutants into watercourses, such as sediment, organic matter, faecal organisms and nutrients. This saves the farm by reducing lost resource and potential fines, and also has positive implications for water treatment costs further downstream. Silvopasture increasing soil permeability can result in a longer grazing season. Assuming 40% soil moisture content as cut off, research at the NI research centre at Loughgall showed an extended grazing season under agroforestry compared to open pasture of 5 in spring and 12 in Autumn.
- By increasing infiltration, the rate at which rainwater reaches streams and rivers is slowed. The effect is to reduce peak flows in the watercourse and potentially reduce flood risk downstream.

18. The Pontbren project is an excellent example of the benefits of agroforestry for water management in the uplands. 10 neighbouring farmers in Powys banded together to improve infiltration rates and manage runoff. When tree planting began, only 1.5% of the group's land was woodland. Ten years later, 120,000 new trees and shrubs have been planted, 16.5km of hedges have been created or restored and nearly 5% of the land now has tree cover. This has been achieved with no loss of agricultural productivity. Subsequent research has shown the strategically planted, narrow, fenced shelterbelts across slopes capture surface runoff from the pasture land above and allow it to soak more rapidly into the soil. Water infiltration rates inside the planted area were 60 times those on the pasture

10 metres away.

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