

Written evidence submitted by National Association of AONBs (TPW0069)

Introduction : National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) is the collective voice of the AONB Partnerships and Conservation Boards and represents the AONB Network on issues of strategic national importance. We recognise the many benefits of trees and woodland and the management of woodlands and forestry for multiple purposes. We work through our management plans that provide useful tools to develop a partnership approach and achieve consensus. Within National Landscapes we see landscape character as the framework for integrated planning and design of new woodland and tree planting to ensure that new and existing woodlands and trees contribute to creating resilient, multi-functional landscapes

Creating space for nature: The Landscapes Review

The value of AONBs with respect to nature recovery has been recognised by the 2019 Landscapes Review [Glover Report]:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

Proposal 3 is relevant : *'Strengthened Management Plans should set clear priorities and actions for nature recovery including, but not limited to, wilder areas and the response to climate change (notably tree planting and peatland restoration). Their implementation must be backed up by stronger status in law.'*

AONBs, through their discrete spatial designations, their diverse partnerships and their broad management plans (encapsulating cultural, ecological, social and economic elements of landscape character) are in a unique position to take forward a partnership approach. However, there is a risk in too narrowly defining the issue as one that is solely about woodland. An approach could include woodland but might also be defined more broadly to encompass nature recovery (and therefore reduce duplication and draw upon other professionals such as landscape architects, ecologists and hydrologists). As such, a body can consider broader landscape issues in their wider sense (see below) where different data sources can be pooled to avoid damage to other important habitats whether these are species-rich grassland or blanket bog. We would welcome to work with colleagues in the forestry Commission to share local knowledge and consider sensitive sites and species within designated landscapes.

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

The Colchester Declaration

AONBs have taken up the challenge to address the 25 Year Environment Plan and assist with the development of the Government's Nature Recovery Network. The potential for AONBs to positively contribute to ambitious targets in these areas was announced at the NAAONB's Landscapes for Life Conference in July 2019, where the Colchester Declaration was made:

https://landscapesforlife.org.uk/application/files/7815/6326/2583/The_Colchester_Declaration.pdf

Through the Colchester Declaration AONBs are committed to creating 36,000ha of new woodland by 2030

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

Previously structures for promoting woodland creation have been subject to a postcode lottery – the proposals of the England Tree Strategy whilst seeking to promote ad-hoc partnerships does not fundamentally address this issue with many areas of the country that could radically expand woodland creation not having (supported) structures in place.

The NAAONB supports a partnership approach. AONBs are existing partnerships around which action can coalesce to ensure planting the right tree in the right place for the right reason. There are examples of good collaborative practice (see our prospectus) . We have worked with our colleagues in the National Parks over the summer in meetings convened by National Parks England and have much in common as the wider family of National Landscapes.

For example, the three AONBs in the Northern Uplands: Nidderdale, North Pennines and the Forest of Bowland have worked alongside the two National Parks of the Yorkshire Dales & Northumberland to produce valuable woodland opportunity mapping as part of a broader Natural Capital Investment Plan together as part of the Northern Upland Chain Local Nature Partnership

<http://www.nuclnp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/North-Pen-Woodland-6pp-Brochure-AW-10.pdf>

At the scale of a single AONB, Nidderdale AONB has recently launched its own woodland opportunity mapping which is an important tool to scope woodland creation within the AONB. The resources for these initiatives have to be found (often externally) and increased central resources (as outlined within the Glover Review) need to be found if this approach is to be rolled out nationally.

<https://nidderdaleaonb.org.uk/about-us/nidderdale-aonb-projects/woodland-opportunity-plan/>

We see the partnership approach within the strategy as essential, but recommend that it is defined more broadly to encompass **nature recovery**. Specifically the England Tree Strategy needs to be co-ordinated alongside the Nature Recovery Network and the evolving Peatland Strategy.

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

Whilst there is a focus on economic levers, the failings are as much about the failure to encourage and facilitate a 'culture' of woodland management within the land management sector. Ultimately, woodland creation tends to be carried out by third parties (notably the Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trusts or Community Forests) on private land. There has not been a 'woodland culture' whereby woodland is created and managed by landowners as part of the farm business.

Concepts such as Agroforestry are practised so much more successfully in other countries notably Scandinavia. 'Agroforestry' should be broadened from plantations replacing crops to embrace individual trees planted in pasture fields can significantly enhance both landscape and biodiversity value.

Currently land values can act as a barrier to the conversion of agricultural land to woodland, resulting in an apparent depreciation of a capital asset. This will need to be addressed before planting on this scale will be seen as a viable economic option for land managers.

Finally, resources do matter. The obvious scaling back of resources to the Forestry Commission from 2009 and lack of resources with the wider natural environment sector do play a part.

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?

When scoping woodland creation and tree planting there is a need to consider the need to maximise **environmental gain** in its widest possible sense; that draws upon the natural capital approach and includes the whole range of ecosystem services, whilst not ignoring the cultural services that draw support for our work from the public.

- Mitigating or adapting to climate change;

Whilst there is an undoubted benefit in woodland creation, we should not ignore the climate mitigation benefits of other land uses or other land management practice. For example, the carbon sequestration of active blanket bog or salt marsh or indeed the potential to de-intensify existing pasture to get the additional benefit of improved biodiversity and carbon capture.

- Promoting biodiversity and nature recovery;

No site is a 'blank sheet of paper'; even what may appear low nature value sites can be home to some of our rarest species that can have a limited ecological niche or has the potential a high quality habitat such as grassland or heathland and so it is with woodland creation. There have been notable mistakes made that have led to the loss of irreplaceable habitats including species-rich grassland, heathland and blanket bog. There are also examples where woodland creation has severed existing grassland corridors and prevented opportunities for creating new links and networks.

Other tree-focused habitats can provide many of the benefits of woodland alongside potentially greater biodiversity benefits (such as edge habitats, scrub and wood pasture) or natural flood management benefits (such as willow carr or wet woodland). Extending grant aid down to these lower density planting, more akin to the 30% cover which is the actual original definition of 'Forest' (think New Forest, Ashdown Forest, etc) would encourage more land managers to plant trees, because the agricultural use would not be stopped completely and encourage the edge habitats and blended habitats that better support nature recovery.

Natural regeneration: a powerful driving force for adaptation

We need to consider different ways of achieving establishment including (managed) natural regeneration. Our concern is that in the clearly articulated need for action that other opportunities to create better environmental outcomes are neglected.

Traditional woodland creation ('trees and tubes') certainly has its place and can deliver immediate impact, however a longer term natural regeneration approach can reduce both landscape impacts; reduce the risk of importing disease and non-natives and maximise ecological benefits in some of the more sensitive protected landscapes if planned for. Indeed recent interest in 'rewilding' has shown there is an appetite for new approaches amongst the wider public. Connectivity between woodland helps ensure resilience of species to climate change through movement across the landscape.

- Increasing biosecurity and plant health;

We recognise the risk to our existing tree stock and plant health issues. The strategy recognises the risk associated by ash dieback but perhaps not the true scale of the impact. For example, the ash is the most common tree in the Kent Downs AONB. This landscape is now at significant risk. The AONB has used the cultural response to highlight the extent of the loss. <https://www.kentdowns.org.uk/our-projects/the-ash-project/>

- Improving human well-being and health;

Research carried out by the University of East Anglia and funded by Forest Research has identified the significant benefits from physical exercise in woodland including relieving high blood pressure and obesity, as well as mental symptoms of stress and depression¹.

There are concerns that new generations have become detached from nature in their everyday life. Yet outdoor play and learning is essential to children's health, development and well-being. This has been described as a nature deficit crisis.

To match the scale of this crisis will require resources that are probably beyond the one agency. The natural environment has real opportunities to address issues around obesity and yet will need to make tangible links between Clinical Commissioning Groups and Public Health England. Whilst there is much discussion examples of actual funding and resources are limited to case studies. Rolling these case studies out nationally will require resources and capacity to deliver. For example, Forest Schools are part of an exciting new movement of nature-based communities, where trained practitioners nurture learner-led exploration and discovery, nurturing meaningful experiences for positive lifelong impacts. This initiative has often struggled when school budgets become limited.

- Protecting natural and cultural heritage;

We should recognise the value of cultural capital - the rich cultural and historical resource represented by landscapes. The success of AONBs is in part due to the

¹ Henwood, K. (2001) Health & wellbeing : Tangible & Intangible Benefits of Woodland, University of East Anglia. Presentation to the The City in the Woods- the Future of Urban Trees in Britain.

great popular support for our treasured landscapes. These are, at heart, cultural landscapes guided by human intervention over centuries. Some of these protected landscapes are precisely valued for the wide open views and rolling countryside that may not be able to accommodate significant planting without a fundamental shift away from its reason for designation. For example, pre-enclosure field patterns seen in many parts of the country. Here the management plan is key to understanding how woodlands can enhance this landscape sensitively.

Woodland is a key element of many landscapes and as generally uncultivated land with a rich history that goes beyond the lists of currently known archaeology. This historic environment is at risk through modern mechanised extraction.

- Food security

Woodland creation is but one land use with the production of food being central to land use in this country. This has traditionally pushed woodland creation to the more 'marginal' (economically-speaking) that often is important habitat that was not being recognised historically. The nature of farming will radically change in the years to come through the passing of the Agriculture Bill and the new Environmental Land Management scheme. Twelve AONBs are working together to run a collaborative test and trial across multiple landscapes in England. We hope to prove the business case for nature recovery at a farm scale.

- Creating commercial opportunities from forestry, tourism and recreation; and

We note that 'using a natural capital' approach timber values are about 8% of the benefits provided, there is perhaps a 'forestry' bias running through the woodland creation agenda that focuses on timber and the forestry trades and professions. Many of the (above) challenges require the input from many professionals, volunteers and landowners outside the immediate forestry profession. For example, developing the kind of social forestry projects championed by AONBs (see below).
NAAONB Social Forestry Pilot Project: *Changing the culture of woodland management*

In 2013 the NAAONB commissioned a report which identified social enterprise approaches as an increasingly important mechanism for delivering health and well-being benefits, environmental enhancement and economic outcomes.
https://landscapesforlife.org.uk/application/files/6415/6378/3952/Social_Forestry_Pilot_Project_-_Oct_2013.pdf
<https://www.thenews.coop/88467/sector/retail/areas-of-outstanding-national-beauty-team-up-with-wood-co-ops/>

Many of the solutions to woodland management where woodland is small and difficult to access are necessarily best built over time locally. Developing this woodland culture where landowners would require investment in local partnerships to develop local markets and the supply chain that makes woodland management viable. AONBs are in a good position to develop these relationships. Examples include:

- Blackdown Hills AONB has supported Neroche Woodlanders, a community benefit society founded to increase community participation in management of the public forest estate.
- Dorset AONB is working closely with Axewoods Co-op and Prime Coppice Working Woodland to link volunteers and customers around woodland management the wood fuel market.
- Arnside & Silverdale AONB is working with the Coppice Co-op, a coppice workers co-op based in North Lancashire and South Cumbria. The AONB has part-funded the development of the co-operative's wood fuel business and regularly uses the Coppice Co-op as a contractor. <https://www.arnsidesilverdaleaonb.org.uk/what-we-do/projects/community-energy-project/>

Social enterprises are “triple bottom line” organisations, and have proved in a wide range of sectors that they can deliver these benefits both directly, or by supporting the operation of other economic factors.

- Any other priorities?

A landscape approach

The ‘landscape’ approach embedded within the management of National Landscapes and articulated within management plans is a crucial element of what makes the AONB offer so important. Landscape goes far beyond just amenity. The European Landscape Convention defines landscape as “ an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”

The importance of landscape context needs to recognise landscape character, local landform, geology, soils and drainage conditions in fitting new woodland and trees appropriately into the landscape by providing structure, pattern, scale, and reflecting historic or cultural associations and traditions that also help to create local landscape character and a distinctive ‘sense of place’.

The 'landscape approach' is the foundation for AONB Management Plans. Many AONBs and National Parks have delivered against woodland creation targets alongside other landscape restoration measures. For example, the starting point for visual enhancement has been a full landscape appraisal as part of the National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiative. <http://lei.nationalgrid.com/>

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?

Management of woodland has been sadly neglected over recent years. There should be funding support that recognises the value of managing existing woodlands for their multiple public benefits. This regime needs the resources for follow up and, if

necessary, enforcement. The management of existing woodland should be a priority to maximise the benefits of what we already have.

Where there are productive woodlands there needs to be increased effort to grow timber that can be used in construction and other long-term uses that will help to maximise the long term carbon fixation benefits of forestry.

Increasing tree cover across England cannot be considered without support for the wider infrastructure associated with its management, harvest, and its passage to market. This may mean greater directed support for forest industries, skills training, and incentives to promote the use of locally grown timber and wood in construction, fuel, charcoal, hurdles etc

Summary

In summary we share the desire to increase woodland creation and protected areas are enthusiastic about the opportunities that this would present. We would work with others on the principles of the 'right tree, right place for the right reason'. We believe AONB Management Plans are vital to developing a partnership approach and achieving consensus within our areas.