

Evidence in relation to tree planting and woodlands

My name is Fiona Fyfe. I am a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute, with over 20 years of professional experience. I am a specialist in the field of landscape character assessment. I work throughout the UK, and many of my projects are in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

I would very much like to see 'landscape character' and the status of 'protected landscapes' (i.e. National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) given prominence in national afforestation policy.

Natural England defines Landscape Character as *A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes on landscape different from another, rather than better or worse*. It is an effective tool in guiding positive change, whilst respecting and enhancing the special qualities of landscapes which create their unique 'sense of place'.

England's landscape diversity is one of its greatest attributes. The framework of National Character Areas (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-character-area-profiles-data-for-local-decision-making/national-character-area-profiles>) reflects England's extraordinary variety of landscapes, resulting from variations in natural features such as geology; cultural features such as settlement styles and field patterns, and also perceptual qualities such as views and tranquillity. Landscape Character Areas can also be identified at much finer grains, for example at County, District, National Park or even Parish level.

There is a tremendous opportunity for increased tree cover to enhance landscape character and diversity. So many landscape features are related to trees, for example ancient woodlands, orchards, riparian (riverbank) trees, wet woodlands, forests, copses, hedgerow trees, parkland trees, scrub, and so on. The patterns and species of trees, as well as where they grow (for example in a wood or along a river) all contribute to landscape character. New tree cover which responds sensitively to the existing landscape context has the potential to enhance landscape character and diversity, as well as helping to meet climate change targets, reduce flooding, enhance biodiversity, and many other benefits. Landscape character-based studies can also help in the identification of suitable sites for new large woodlands, even in some areas which may currently be lacking in tree cover.

Conversely, tree planting which is not sensitive to landscape character (for example blanket tree planting over large areas which obliterates existing landscape patterns and features) can result in loss of landscape character and diversity. It may introduce a uniformity of feature which lacks local variation or response to local conditions of soil, topography or history. It therefore simply looks 'wrong'. It may also result in inadvertent loss of valuable non-treed habitats, and non-designated cultural features such as historic field patterns.

I would therefore like to see a greater emphasis on using landscape character as a framework for understanding which types of tree cover should be promoted in any particular area, and how new tree cover can be designed to fit in with its surroundings. As an example of how this can be achieved in practice, I am currently producing guidance for Devon County Council entitled 'Right Tree Right Place: A Landscape Approach' which aims *to increase tree cover in Devon whilst enhancing landscape distinctiveness and diversity, respecting the past, retaining productivity, and safeguarding valuable habitats.*

I am also concerned by the potential impacts of insensitive afforestation on our national protected landscapes of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). These landscapes are considered to be worthy of the highest levels of protection, but this is not always afforded in practice. Insensitive tree planting - although carried out with the best of intentions – could be highly detrimental to the valued qualities of these unique and rare protected landscapes and the biodiversity and cultural heritage which they support.

Of course National Parks and AONBs can and should play their part in increasing tree cover, and many if not all of them are developing strategies to do exactly that. However, it should always be done in a positive way to reinforce their landscape character and special qualities.

I would be pleased to provide more information on how landscape character can inform tree planting strategies, should you require it.