

Written evidence submitted by the Forestry Commission (TPW0087)

Question: *The England Trees Action Plan aims to streamline regulatory processes and strengthen environmental controls. What steps have you taken to achieve both aims, and how will you ensure that streamlining does not lead to weaker environmental controls?*

1. We are streamlining regulatory processes and strengthening environmental controls to make it easier for people to create and manage great woodlands by planting the right trees in the right places for the right reasons. We are doing this not by weakening our controls but by streamlining our regulatory processes, to ensure they are proportionate to the level of risk to the environment in each case. Consistency is maintained by using the UK Forestry Standard as our benchmark. For example, we have:
 - incorporated as much as possible of the regulatory process within the grant application process, allowing us to provide any Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) decision at the same time as the grant offer;
 - provided more comprehensive, granular, and up to date spatial data to allow applicants and regulators to screen for broad environmental constraints early in the process;
 - improved EIA guidance and forms, being published online (gov.uk);
 - allowed users of our felling licence online system to reuse their information for future applications and to monitor their applications' progress;
 - strengthened our guidance on afforestation and peat and on bird surveys;
 - agreed better ways of working with Natural England where our regulatory processes interact.
2. We plan to go further. For example, we plan to expedite applications for a licence to fell trees where this has overriding biosecurity or public safety benefits (such as specific cases of ash dieback) by exempting them from the normal process of publication on a public register. The England Trees Action Plan also announced that we will Reform the felling licence system and controls, introducing greater flexibility, improving clarity around felling controls and UK Forestry Standard requirements, and improving our enforcement capability.
3. Achieving the full potential to streamline regulatory processes whilst strengthening environmental controls would require legislative change.

Supplementary: *We have been told that your organisations require more resources to improve service delivery and help reach the woodland cover targets. If so, what extra resources do you need and how would they be deployed?*

1. In 21/22 we have seen an increase in funding which has enabled us to recruit staff who are primarily focused on developing and launching our new grant offer and improved regulatory offer. Going forward we need continued funding for these roles in order to support the delivery and management of the grant schemes.
2. We also need many more woodland officers, woodland creation officers and other delivery roles to interact with landowners to explain how woodland creation and management can help them meet their objectives, as well as supporting them in working through the grants and regulatory processes.

3. All of this requires confirmation of adequate funding through the Spending Review as early as possible, so that we can prepare to recruit and deploy new resources quickly. We also need confirmation of capital funding, which broadly supports the payment of grant monies itself, beyond 21/22 so we can confirm to our stakeholders in good time that the NCF offer will carry on into future years.
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Additional written evidence

In addition to this answer, we'd like to provide additional evidence in relation to questions asked from the previous panel for consideration by the Committee.

1. On the level of woodland creation ambitions and confidence in successful delivery:

The woodland creation ambition of 7,000ha by end of this Parliament is challenging, but achievable. There was only c. 2,000ha of woodland creation each year in the past two years, but the landscape for future woodland creation has fundamentally shifted with:

- the recently launch England Trees Action Plan;
- an unprecedented level of support - and funding commitment by government - for tree planting, through the £640m Nature for Climate Fund;
- a series of new grants launched this year, in particular the new England Woodland Creation Offer, underpinned by robust economic analysis of land use change. This offers payment for woodland creation costs as well as contributions for the delivery of public benefits;
- the Forestry England leasehold Woodland Creation Partnership, which provides certainty of income through long term lease of land on which Forestry England will create and sustainably manage woodlands;
- a growing 'delivery coalition' of NCF delivery partners (Community Forests, Woodland Trust, Forest of Cornwall and Great Northumberland Partnership), and the wider spectrum of stakeholders keen to support the delivery of the ETAP

We are seeing early signs of positive uptake, with over 150 EWCO applications received and first agreements now issued. There has been a very high level of interest in the Forestry England leasehold offer, with lease negotiations about to begin and with landowners having expressed interest for over 700ha of land in total. While there are still many dependencies and much work to be done for these proposals to become new woodlands, this is a promising start.

2. On the need to ensure there are markets for the woodland products that will reach maturity in the future:

Through upskilling of the whole sector, including our own workforce, we want to encourage the design of woodlands that can be financially self-sustaining to ensure they will deliver long term public benefits. In parallel we are working to support the development of existing and new timber markets, for instance through the 'Routes to market for ash timber Innovation Fund', or ETPA commitment to support an increase use of timber in construction. We are also seeking to encourage the development of ecosystem services markets through a number of initiatives, including: the UK Woodland Carbon Code, that accredits amounts of carbon captured by woodland creation project;; the Woodland Carbon Guarantee, which guarantees a future price for carbon units sequestered if project carries wish to sell them to government at fixed point in

times; and work with Defra Biodiversity Net Gain and Green Finance teams, to develop mechanisms that will encourage more private finance to flow into woodland creation and management.

3. Collaboration with Natural England:

While in the oral session our evidence was mostly focused - in response to questions - on data and guidance supporting regulatory decisions, it is worth relaying the breadth of areas where we collaborate, which also include: developing joint training plans for our staff; collaboration on the design of grants (EWCO) and guidance (e.g. natural colonisation, peat and afforestation, wading birds); and ongoing dialogue through a range of forums and regular bilaterals at all levels between our respective organisations.

4. The Forestry Commission is leading the way in delivering the Government's ambitions in this sector from the three angles of

- Policy, through Forest Services working with the forestry sector, landowners, and a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the right trees are planted in the right places for the right reasons;
- Evidence, through Forest Research's body of work and evidence to inform woodland creation policy and tools;
- Practice, through Forestry England managing and growing the Nation's forests for people, nature and the economy.