



A future for community forests

A contribution to the debate on the future of England's woodlands, prepared by Julian Dobson for The Mersey Forest



In a nutshell

Uncertainty over the future of Britain's forests has highlighted the vital importance of well managed, accessible woodlands for the wellbeing of our citizens and our planet. This pamphlet from The Mersey Forest maps out some key principles for future ownership and management of our woodlands that link the aspirations of the Big Society with environmental responsibility and opportunities for local people.

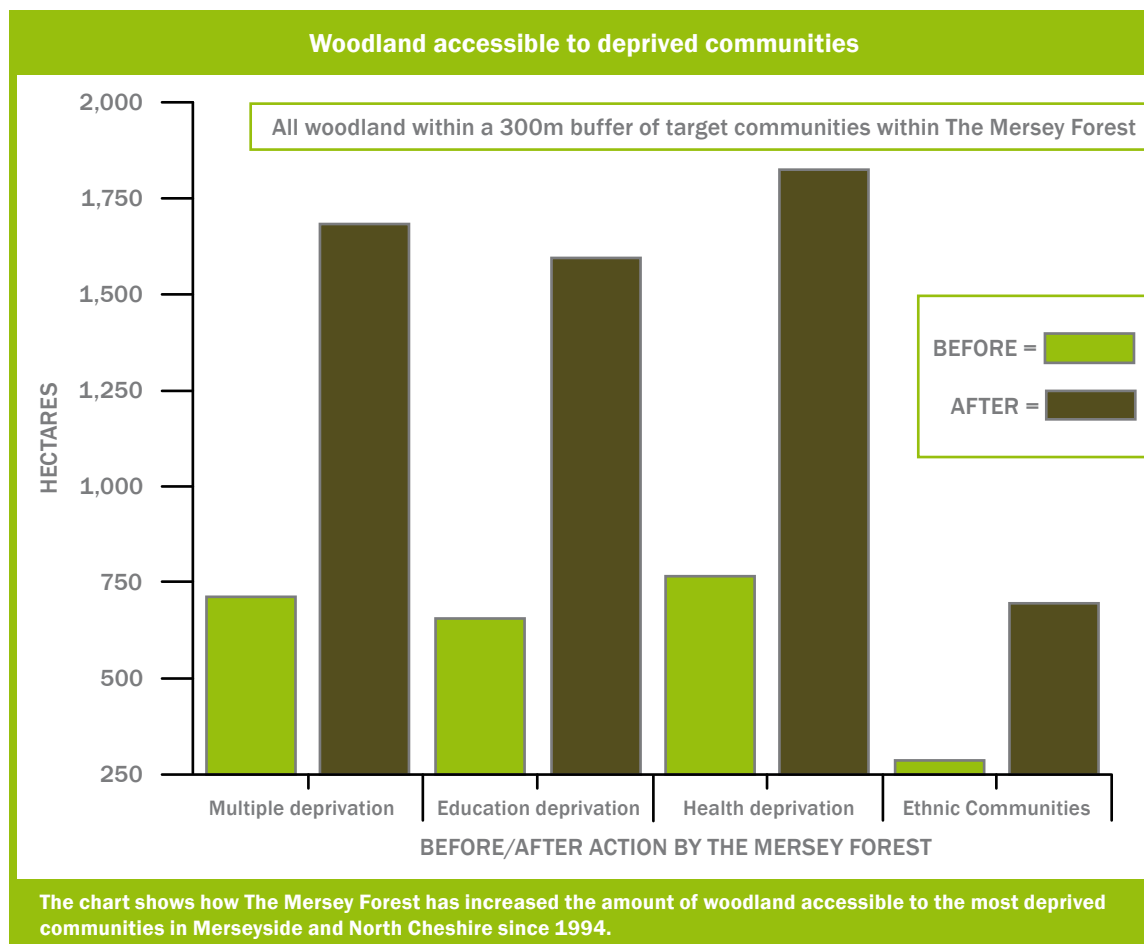
It argues that government should encourage community involvement and ownership, building on the huge potential of woodlands to provide job opportunities, help tackle climate change and improve public health. But it warns that in areas where community woodlands are likely to be of greatest value, there may be relatively few people with the connections, capital and experience needed to manage them effectively for public benefit. Community forests have been highly effective in supporting local people in such places.¹

¹ The Mersey Forest, 2006. The Mersey Forest Comparator Study. [online] Last accessed 15 December 2010 at <http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/files/1213.018%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

Key points

- Woodlands provide work. Trees and forests need care and maintenance, and can provide a wide range of jobs and training opportunities, from planning and planting to ongoing management. These can offer employment not only for graduates but also for people who find it hard to hold down a job, such as those with learning difficulties or mental health problems.

- Woodlands are wanted. Research by The Mersey Forest shows new woodlands are not only highly valued but are well used by local residents.
- Woodlands promote wellbeing. They provide a natural health service, offering vital opportunities for physical exercise and recreation, as well as a place to relax and reduce the stresses of daily life.
- Woodlands help meet environmental challenges. They are an important source of carbon storage, help reduce the 'urban heat island' effect and reduce the likelihood of flooding.
- Woodlands can build social capital. A carefully managed transfer of woodlands in or near urban areas to community organisations could help to ensure access, increase use by local people and provide social benefits.



- We need more woodlands. The UK compares unfavourably with other European nations for tree cover and the public considers tree planting a top priority. This extends to planting trees in urban streets as well as creating more extensive woodlands. The debate over the future of the Forestry Commission estate and the forthcoming natural environment white paper provide a unique opportunity to ensure lasting benefits for the public.

The context: woodlands at risk?

British people feel strongly about their forests and woodlands. They are woven into our national history, from the royal forests created for the Norman kings to the legends of Robin Hood. Our woodlands supplied the oak that made us a maritime nation; today they play a vital role in mitigating the impact of climate change.

So it is no surprise that proposals to sell or dispose of land owned by the Forestry Commission raise strong feelings. To include this proposal in the Public Bodies Bill, a piece of legislation popularly depicted as a ‘bonfire of the quangos’, may be doubly unfortunate. These concerns have been raised against the backdrop of a very clear response to consultation on the future of the public forest estate in England only one year ago.

As the Forestry Commission reported in December 2009: ‘The estate is seen to represent good value for money in providing multiple social and environmental benefits and there is a strong desire for the estate to increase in size. In particular, expansion is sought to provide social benefits to urban

populations and to protect areas with special characteristics. Woodland creation and free public access remain top priorities. There is strong resistance to the disposal policy and concern over relinquishing management to third parties, notably the private sector.’²

Coalition government ministers are aware of this resistance but argue that a diversity of ownership may bring better management. Environment secretary Caroline Spelman summarised the Government’s position in a recent Guardian article: ‘This is no fire sale by a cash-strapped state. We think it’s much better to give individuals, businesses, charities and local authorities the chance of a much bigger role in protecting their natural environment – and, frankly, those who live closest are most likely to protect it.’³

If new forms of ownership are to realise ministers’ hopes rather than the public’s fears, we need to learn from previous experience in creating and managing community woodlands and put safeguards in place to ensure public benefits are at the heart of all transfers of ownership and management.

² Forestry Commission England, 2009. The long term role of the Public Forest Estate in England: consultation. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf)

³ Spelman, C. Setting the record straight on the sale of England’s woodlands. The Guardian, 12 November 2010. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/cif-green/2010/nov/12/england-woodland-sale-caroline-selman>

Woodlands are wanted

We know from the responses to the previous government’s disposal proposals that the public feel that Forestry Commission

woods are a national asset that should be safeguarded. Recent research for The Mersey Forest by Vision Twentyone⁴ demonstrates the value to the public of creating and maintaining well managed, accessible woodlands within easy reach of urban areas.

The research found that 86% of people in the Merseyside and North Cheshire area had visited woodlands created through the Mersey Forest programme. Since 2006, when previous research was conducted, the number of visitors has increased in nearly all cases. These woodlands – many created on derelict former industrial sites – have become popular and well used. Nearly all visitors use the Mersey Forest woodlands to take some form of exercise, and 39% arrive on foot– underlining the importance of creating woodlands that are within walking distance of centres of population.

There is an exceptionally strong sense of local pride in community forests – 93% of respondents were in favour, and more than 85% said planting more woodland trees should be a very high priority. Two thirds of respondents felt that in the last ten years their environment had improved as a result of The Mersey Forest’s work.

One interviewee’s comment on the Sutton Manor woods in St Helens sums up the importance of community woodlands for those who are often unable to afford other forms of leisure activity: ‘I really appreciate having greenery and somewhere to take a nice walk on a sunny day to relax, listen to the birds and look at the wildflowers away from the concrete and the housing estates.’

This sense of pride and belonging should not be taken lightly. It is the kind of approach to the local environment that underpins many of the Big Society ideas. Woodlands can make otherwise bland or difficult environments feel like home, a place to cherish.

⁴ The Mersey Forest, 2010. Awareness Survey 2010. [online] Last accessed 15 December 2010 at http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/partnerreports/awareness_survey2010.pdf

Woodlands promote wellbeing

The Mersey Forest's finding that the vast majority of people use its woodlands for exercise is particularly important in the light of the increase in obesity and related conditions such as diabetes.

Recent figures from GP practices show that the number of people with type 2 diabetes has risen by 150,000 in a year.⁵ One in 20 adults in the UK now have the condition. More than 5.5m people over 16 are now officially registered as obese.

In 2008, the number of prescription items dispensed for the treatment of obesity was 1.28 million - ten times the number in 1999. It is recommended that adults should spend at least half an hour involved in moderate exercise, on at least five days a week. Children need at least an hour's activity each day.⁶

Community forests provide ideal opportunities for such exercise, often within easy reach of some of the neighbourhoods most affected by obesity. Walking, cycling, and running are typical activities that can be done easily and cheaply in woodland settings.

As local authorities take over responsibility for public health, there is an opportunity to bring together councils' responsibilities for placemaking, community leadership and wellbeing. Research by Natural England estimated that if every household in England had good access to quality green spaces such as woodland, it could save around £2.1bn annually from the NHS budget.⁷ The Mersey

Forest has helped to improve access, planting over 2,600ha of new woodland, but this is just a beginning.

Local authority directors of public health will have a ring-fenced budget, and will be responsible for allocating health improvement funds according to the needs of the local population. The allocation formula will include

Case study: woodlands for wellbeing

The importance of woodlands in helping people keep healthy has been highlighted by two recent Mersey Forest projects.

The first, Running Rings, aims to create a series of circular routes in community woodlands. The project will also bring local people and schools together to plant more trees.

Running Rings was recently awarded the London 2012 Inspire mark for projects run by non-commercial organisations that are deemed to be genuinely inspired or energised by the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

It builds on other work by The Mersey Forest to encourage local people to get fit and enjoy the outdoors. The [Discover The Mersey Forest website](#), for example, provides free 'route packs' of directions and maps for more than 40 walking, cycling and horse riding routes in the region, as well as ideas for dozens of woodlands to visit. More than 13,000 packs have already been downloaded.



Photo by Nathan Cox

a 'health premium' designed to promote action to improve population-wide health and reduce health inequalities.⁸

The recent public health white paper acknowledges the importance of green spaces in fostering better physical and mental health. Importantly, it makes the link between the responsibilities of the Department for Communities and Local Government and Defra in designating green spaces of local value. Defra is to lead a campaign of tree planting, 'particularly in areas where increased tree cover would help to improve residents' quality of life and reduce the negative effects of deprivation, including health inequalities'.⁹ The Mersey Forest and other community-led woodland projects are well placed to ensure this scheme is effective.

The recognition of the importance of woodlands and green spaces to physical and mental health chimes with the Government's moves towards creating a national measure of wellbeing. Building on the work of Nobel economists Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, such a measure will, according to David Cameron, judge progress 'not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving, not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life.'¹⁰

This in turn links to the idea of a 'Big Society' in which decision-making is devolved to a local level, public services are focused around users' needs and citizens are encouraged to engage in voluntary action. Speaking at a recent Woodland Trust parliamentary reception, Defra minister Richard Benyon described conservationists as being at the 'absolute heart' of the government's plans.¹¹

Defra recently announced the 'Big Tree Plant',¹² a partnership designed to plant one million extra trees over the next four years. It is important that as this programme develops, it draws on the learning of previous community forestry and tree-planting schemes and builds on the expertise of those who have successfully created and cared for community woodlands.

⁸ Carter, C. Diabetes and obesity soar to shocking levels. The Guardian, 25 October 2010. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/oct/25/uk-shocking-diabetes-obesity>

⁹ NHS Information Centre, 2010. Statistics on obesity, physical activity and diet: England, 2010. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/obesity/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet-england-2010>

⁷ Natural England, 2009. An estimate of the economic and health value and cost effectiveness of the expanded WHI scheme 2009, [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/TIN055_tcm6-12519.pdf

⁸ Department of Health, 2010. Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_117353

⁹ HM Government, 2010. Healthy Lives, Healthy People: our strategy for public health in England. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/PublicHealth/Healthyliveshealthypeople/index.htm>

¹⁰ Prime Minister's Office, 25 November 2010. Britain's wellbeing to be measured. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/latest-news/2010/11/britain's-wellbeing-to-be-measured-57578>

¹¹ ePolitics.com, 10 November 2010. Conservation at 'heart' of government policy. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.epolitix.com/latestnews/article-detail/newsarticle/conservation-at-heart-of-government-policy/>

¹² Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2 December 2010. The Big Tree Plant: new partnership to plant one million trees. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://ww2.defra.gov.uk/news/2010/12/02/tree-plant/>

the objectives of the government's Work Programme for long term unemployed people, while providing worthwhile work on schemes that have positive benefits to the wider public.

The Biodiversity and Access Project, run by Sefton Council's Coast and Countryside Service and supported by The Mersey Forest, is an example of the multiple benefits that can be achieved. Adults with learning difficulties are developing woodworking skills while making signs, gates, picnic benches, nest boxes and interpretation boards. Sefton became the first local authority in the northwest to gain the right to use the FSC 'woodmark' logo on products from its own woodlands as a sign of their sustainability, and at the same time is saving money – it previously spent between £10,000 and £20,000 a year sourcing timber products from commercial suppliers.

Research by Natural Economy Northwest found that environmental volunteering programmes and supported work placements for people with learning difficulties or the long term unemployed improved work skills, increased confidence and helped jobseekers back into the labour market. At Dutton Park in Cheshire, where Groundwork Merseyside ran an environmental volunteering and employment project in partnership with the Woodland Trust, researchers found 'solid economic benefits':¹³ several people went into paid employment, while social services calculated savings ranging from £100 to £1,000 a day compared with costs of daycare. The project involved planting around 6,000 trees, and participants were also able to gain accredited qualifications.

Woodlands provide work

Woodlands managed for community benefit can provide important work opportunities for people who often struggle to access the labour market. Planting and maintaining more community woodlands could help to achieve

Community owned or managed woodlands could also provide business opportunities by producing biomass products. At a small scale, where biomass does not take land out of food production or harm biodiversity, it can make an important contribution to renewable energy generation and biomass fuels can be a natural byproduct of well managed woodlands. An increasing number of community facilities in Scotland are powered by woodfuel.

We should also recognise the wider economic benefits woodlands can bring. Research by Regeneris Consulting on activity undertaken by The Mersey Forest, funded through the EU Objective One programme, found that every pound invested by the programme will generate, over the lifetime of the investment, an estimated £10.20 in social cost savings, wellbeing benefits and gross value added. These benefits included carbon sequestration, rising property values connected with improved quality of place, leisure, tourism and better health.¹⁴

¹³ Natural Economy Northwest, 2008. The Benefits of Environmental Employment: Research summary 8 [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php>

¹⁴ Regeneris Consulting, 2009. The Economic Contribution of The Mersey Forest's Objective One-Funded Investments. Last accessed 9 December 2010 at <http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/files/Economic%20Contribution%20report%20and%20appendices.pdf>

Woodlands help meet environmental challenges

The role of woodlands in helping us adapt to climate change and in mitigating its effects is well established. Tree cover helps absorb CO₂, provides important ecosystem services, can slow down storm water run-off and provides

drainage. Urban woodlands can improve air quality and reduce the 'urban heat island' effect, where warming occurs at a faster rate in built-up areas. A Woodland Carbon Task Force is examining further opportunities for woodlands to play a part in addressing climate change, including the potential for new markets to be developed in renewable woodfuels.¹⁵

Providing networks of interconnected woodlands can also help to protect biodiversity and create migration routes for species that may be affected by climate change. Replacing conifers with a diversity of native species can reduce forests' vulnerability to altered weather patterns and improve the resilience of the local environment. Forestry Commission research found 98% of respondents agreed public money should be used to plant new woodlands and manage existing woodland for public benefit, with the main reason being to provide habitats for wildlife.¹⁶

The Climate Change Act 2008 set legally binding targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 34% by 2020 and at least 80% by 2050 compared with 1990 levels.¹⁷ While tree planting alone cannot achieve this reduction, it is important to see woodlands as part of an ecosystem approach to climate change, providing carbon storage, protecting and creating new habitats, and acting as an essential part of the nation's green infrastructure.¹⁸ The Forestry Commission has estimated that an increase in woodlands of 23,200ha every year for the next 40 years would offset one tenth of the greenhouse gas emissions expected by the 2050s. This would raise forest cover in the UK to 16%, still well below the European average.¹⁹

Green infrastructure – including woodlands and urban trees – is increasingly recognised as offering economic as well as environmental value, improving quality of life and making places more attractive in addition to providing ecosystem services. The Mersey Forest recently produced a green infrastructure strategy for the city of Liverpool, providing further evidence of the importance of trees and a high quality outdoor environment in urban as well as rural areas.²⁰

¹⁵ Forestry Commission, 31 March 2010. Forestry Commission launches 'Woodland Carbon Task Force'. [online] Last accessed 9 December 2010 at <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/newsrele.nsf/byunique/8231212A60888BFD802576F6002CAE0F>

¹⁶ Forestry Commission, 2009. Public Opinion of Forestry 2009, UK. [online] Last accessed 15 December 2010 at [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/POFUK2009final.pdf/\\$FILE/POFUK2009final.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/POFUK2009final.pdf/$FILE/POFUK2009final.pdf)

¹⁷ Department of Energy and Climate Change, n.d. A low-carbon UK. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/what_we_do/lc_uk/crc.aspx

¹⁸ Woodland Trust, 2006. Adapt or die? Climate change and woodland. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/pdf/adaptordie.pdf>

¹⁹ Forestry Commission, 2009. Combating Climate Change: a role for UK forests. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at http://www.tsoshop.co.uk/gempdf/Climate_Change_Main_Report.pdf

²⁰ Liverpool City Green Infrastructure Strategy, n.d. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.greeninfrastructurenw.co.uk/liverpool/>

Woodlands can build social capital

The Mersey Forest's experience and research shows how creating woodlands for community use can instil a sense of ownership and belonging. The Vision Twentyone research demonstrates that local people appreciate the chance to share the experience of woodlands with families and friends as well as enjoying them as individuals. Tree planting schemes bring communities together and generate a culture of shared awareness and purpose.

There are opportunities to build on this goodwill and the social networks that emerge from local environmental action. A carefully managed programme to transfer forestry land to local communities, with a modest amount of dedicated funding and support, could bring lasting local benefits.

However, policymakers need to recognise that in areas where community woodlands are likely to be of greatest value there may be fewer people with the kind of connections, capital and experience required. Community

groups wanting to own and look after their own woodlands are likely to be at a disadvantage in bidding for Forestry Commission sites in comparison with commercial companies and private landowners.

There needs to be a realistic assessment of which Forestry Commission sites are suitable for community ownership. These are most likely to be the ones within easy reach of towns or cities, and where there are existing community organisations or voluntary bodies that could provide advice and expertise. The

experience of the community right-to-buy legislation in Scotland shows the importance of dedicated funds and support for community groups, as well as the value of a right of first refusal when land comes up for sale.²¹ Community ownership and management schemes will be stillborn if central government or the Forestry Commission seek to maximise capital receipts or fail to factor long term public benefits into valuations when land is earmarked for disposal.

Organisations such as The Mersey Forest, which has built up extensive knowledge of community engagement as well as woodland management, can play a key role in ensuring the best outcomes are achieved from any disposal plans. This should include helping to identify sites where keeping land under Forestry Commission ownership would be the best way to gain community benefits.

²¹ Macleod, C. and Braunholtz-Speight, T. 2010. Community Right to Buy in Practice. Joseph Rowntree Foundation [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/CA-briefing-paper-macleod-speight.pdf>

Case study: community tree planting



Photo by McCoy Wynne

Tree planting is bringing communities together in The Mersey Forest area. In just four months, local people joined forces to plant more than 10 hectares of trees – and even took a stab at setting a new world record.

The planting schemes, held between November 2009 and March 2010, included school grounds improvements, planting on village greens and allotments, and projects with faith groups and a fire station.

During National Tree Week, groups across The Mersey Forest took part in the BBC's national world record planting attempt. At one event alone, parents and nursery children planted 170 trees in just 28 minutes.

We need more woodlands

One of the main concerns about the plans to dispose of Forestry Commission land is that its use will not be protected. While ministers have argued that they want to achieve greater public benefit through new ownership arrangements, the public are unlikely to be reassured unless such benefits are enshrined in legislation.

Furthermore, there is a strong public demand – evidenced by The Mersey Forest's research and the responses to the 2009 consultation on the Forestry Commission estate – for more

woodland and greater public access to the assets we already have. That demand includes a desire to increase the number of street trees in towns and cities as well as planting traditional woodlands: The Mersey Forest's research found that 56% of respondents thought planting more street trees should be a very high priority.

Trees in urban parks improve physical and mental health, by offering an environment for exercise and reducing stress. Forestry Commission research has found that incorporating tree planting into urban development plans can help to improve the aesthetics and environmental quality of urban areas, encouraging inward investment and new jobs.²²

The UK is one of the least wooded countries in Europe, with less than 12% cover compared with a European average of 44%. In England

the figure is only 8.6%.²³ But central government has signalled its desire to take action.

Defra is due to publish a white paper on the natural environment in spring 2011. A discussion paper set a positive tone: 'Our natural environment underpins our economic prosperity, our health and our wellbeing. Whether we live in towns and cities, small villages or open countryside, we rely on natural systems for our food, our water, the very air we breathe. Our land, seas, rivers, woods and fields, parks and open spaces provide us with benefits so fundamental that they are often overlooked.'²⁴

This presents a unique opportunity to link government policies and action on the environment, climate change and public health with the clear passion among the public for accessible, cared-for woodlands where people can enjoy the natural environment. The Big Society ideas, coupled with the government's stated desire to move decision-making to a local level and enable communities to own and manage their own assets, offer a way to preserve and increase local woodlands.

But building such assets for the community cannot be done on the cheap. Community organisations need loans or capital funding, technical and professional support and advice, and – crucially – enough time to develop and prepare proposals for new forms of ownership and management. Treasury pressure for asset sales and capital receipts risks undermining such aspirations.

The future of the Forestry Commission estate and the development of a wider vision for our natural environment provides a chance

to set a new benchmark for the quality of government decision-making in transferring ownership of public assets. Community benefit and assessments of long term value must be woven into these decisions at every stage.

²² Forestry Commission, n.d. Street Trees [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/fr/urgc-7EKECS>

²³ Woodland Trust, 2006. Adapt or die? Climate change and woodland. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/pdf/adaptordie.pdf>

²⁴ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Natural environment white paper. [online] Last accessed 5 December 2010 at <http://ww2.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/>

Julian Dobson is a writer and commentator on regeneration, sustainable communities and social issues.

The Mersey Forest is the largest of England's 12 community forests. Find out more at: www.merseyforest.org.uk

