



# Seeing the wood for the trees: The forestry review and why it matters

A briefing by The Mersey Forest



## Summary

The Mersey Forest Partnership welcomes the Government's decision to review forestry policy in England. England's forests play a vital role in our national wellbeing and prosperity but are threatened by a combination of intense economic and environmental pressures.

If we want to continue to reap the benefits from this crucial resource, we need a wide ranging debate about the options for forests' management and funding. This debate needs to focus on how we can increase the amount of woodland, protect what we have and maximise its public benefits.

This contribution to the debate considers the future of forests<sup>1</sup> under three headings:

- Forestry for community
- Forestry for commerce
- Forestry for climate

On page 8 we set out nine key questions for the future.

<sup>1</sup> We define 'forests' to include urban trees, community woodland, recreational forest parks and commercial forestry.

## Introduction

### Who we are

The Mersey Forest is a network of trees and woodlands being created across Merseyside and Cheshire. It was set up in 1991 and launched in 1994 as the largest member of the national network of 12 Community Forests. It covers 465 square miles of Merseyside and North Cheshire, and 1.7m

Figure 1: The extent of The Mersey Forest



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people live within its boundary [figure 1].

The Mersey Forest's 30-year plan sets a target of planting 8,000 hectares of new woodlands, scattered across what is developing as a well-wooded landscape, linked to other habitats, providing an attractive setting for business and a high quality of life and place.

### **Our work**

The work of The Mersey Forest highlights the many social, economic and environmental benefits that can accrue from well-managed woodland. These benefits are highly valued by the people of Merseyside and North Cheshire and The Mersey Forest has a strong reputation for community engagement<sup>2</sup>. In a recent survey, two thirds of respondents said their environment had improved as a result of The Mersey Forest's work.

### **Five key facts**

1. Through community and partnership working, The Mersey Forest has planted more than 8m trees.
2. Since 1994, more than 70% of the woodlands in The Mersey Forest have been brought into management to secure their long-term future.
3. For every £1 invested in The Mersey Forest, £8 of value is generated, thanks to the way we maximise our funding.
4. £40 million of external funds have been won by the partnership to help create new woodlands with local communities.
5. 60% of people living in The Mersey Forest

use their local woodlands – with nearly 20% visiting at least once a week.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, [www.merseyforest.org.uk/foam/](http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/foam/)

### **A unique opportunity: the reason for this briefing**

The importance of forests to the British public was thrown into sharp focus this year when thousands of people rose in opposition to Government plans to transfer large swathes of Forestry Commission land to alternative ownership and management.

As a result, the Government has launched a wide-ranging review of forestry policy, which we welcome. This arrives at a time when public finances are under strain, environmental policy is under review and climate change is having an increasing impact.

Our concern is that in many forums, the debate has been reduced to a 'public good/private bad' binary that reduces the chance of maximising the potential benefits of effectively managed woodland. The different ways of managing forests should be explored actively and with an open mind.

In addition, public discussion of the benefits of woodland has tended to focus around biodiversity and access. These issues are vital, but are not the full story. This briefing is intended as a contribution to a wider debate and as a starting point for a Mersey Forest Partnership response to the national review.

### **Key message one: forestry for community**

Recent events have made clear that the public strongly believes woodland should be managed in the public interest. Meeting this expectation will require investment, but our research suggests that this will bring high returns in terms of economic and social benefit.

For example, 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.<sup>3</sup>

Some of our latest research, carried out by Vision Twentyone<sup>4</sup>, demonstrates how highly the public value well-managed, accessible woodlands within easy reach of urban areas. This 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.

Our work has demonstrated that as well as being popular with local people, high quality, accessible woodland can have a positive impact on several areas of major Government concern.

For example, they promote wellbeing, both mental and physical, by providing an escape from (and within) the urban environment and a space for physical exercise. At a time when obesity is rising dramatically, along with its side effects such as type 2 diabetes, it makes sense to provide places where people can run, walk or cycle at little or no cost.

The review needs to take into account the importance of woodland management for effective access and providing linkage between areas. In urban and urban fringe areas, creating networks that link people's homes with workplaces, schools, shops and other amenities can help increase walking and cycling with knock-on benefits for health and the climate.

Woodlands also build social capital. Our research shows that local people appreciate

the chance to share the experience of woodlands with families and friends, and that tree planting schemes bring communities together and generate a culture of shared awareness and purpose.<sup>5</sup>

There are opportunities to build on this goodwill and the social networks that emerge from local environmental action. Forest policy should support managed programmes to involve local communities in looking after forestry land, backed by a modest amount of dedicated funding and support to bring lasting local benefits.

The Mersey Forest and similar community forests can act as essential support organisations, mobilising the enthusiasm of local residents and groups and ensuring they are supported with relevant expertise and knowledge of woodland management, finance

and understanding of commercial markets.

Forest Enterprise, the agency that manages forests on behalf of the Forestry Commission, has been a valuable partner, creating large areas of new woodland (more than 600ha) as well as managing the important area of Delamere Forest. It is a significant owner of woodland and has a good reputation for community engagement.

It is important, especially in the light of reduced funding, that these assets and the knowledge and reputation of the organisation are safeguarded in any future arrangements for woodland ownership and management in and around our towns and cities. This can be achieved through effective partnership between the Forestry Commission and community forests to develop innovative approaches.

<sup>3</sup> Regeneris Consulting, 2009. *The Economic Contribution of The Mersey Forest's Objective One-Funded Investments*. <http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/files/Economic%20Contribution%20report%20and%20appendices.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The Mersey Forest, 2010. Awareness Survey 2010. [online] Last accessed 8 April 2011 at [http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/partnerreports/awareness\\_survey2010.pdf](http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/partnerreports/awareness_survey2010.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> More information in our recent report, *A Future for Community Forests*, at <http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/pages/displayDocuments.asp?iDocumentID=265>

## Key message two: forestry for commerce

Research shows that a well-managed natural environment plays a crucial role in sustainable prosperity, providing a wide range of economic, social and environmental benefits.<sup>6</sup> For example, attractive environments draw in investment and increase property values,

while workers who have regular access to open spaces have been shown to have less sickness absence.

Nationally we import 85% of our timber, but have a large and modern timber processing sector. Over 150,000 jobs depend on woodland management and timber processing. However, there is a danger that we are now approaching 'peak wood' in terms of

commercial timber production [figure 2].

The forest sector provides a wide variety of jobs; high tech processing, engineering, land management, community engagement, environmental education, leisure and tourism, management and finance, surveying and use of GIS and many more. These require a variety of educational attainment.

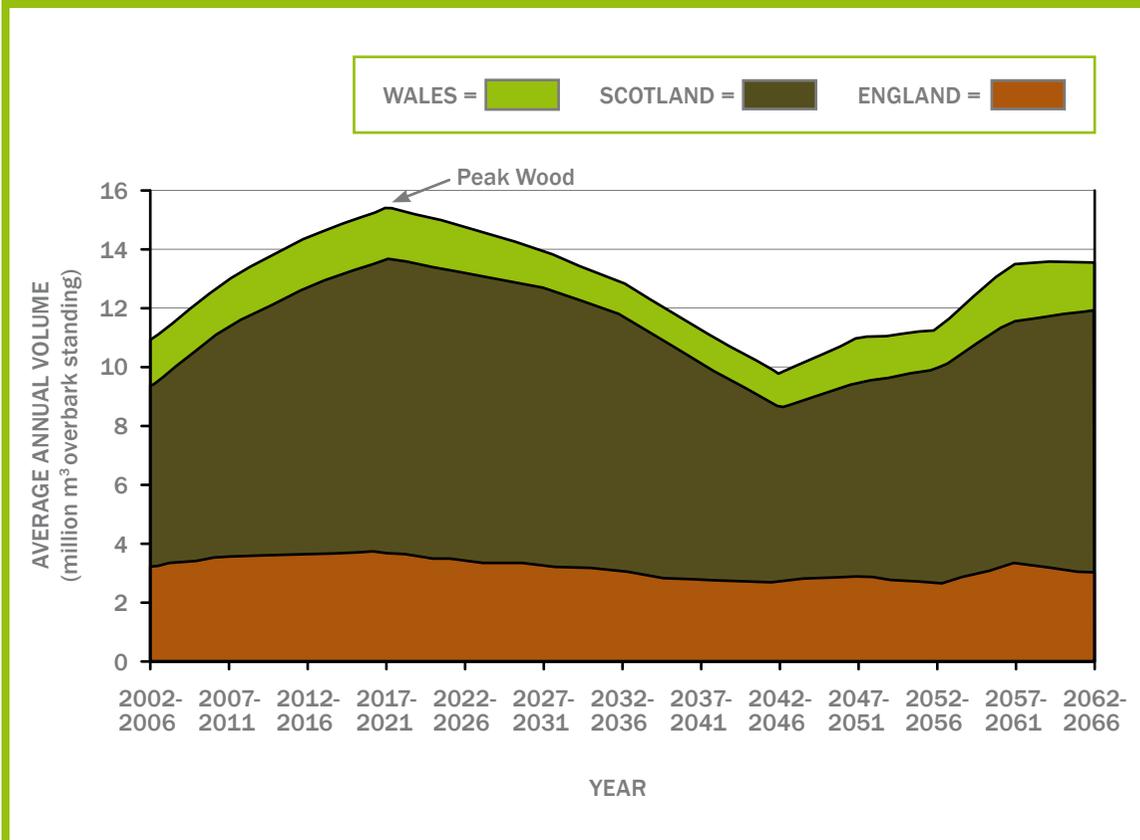
Woodlands can provide important work opportunities for people who often struggle to access the labour market. Managed planting and maintenance of community woodlands could help to achieve the objectives of the Government's Work Programme for long term unemployed people, while providing positive benefits to the wider public.

At Dutton Park in Cheshire, for example, where Groundwork Merseyside ran an environmental volunteering and employment project in partnership with the Woodland Trust, researchers found 'solid economic benefits': several people went into paid employment, while social services calculated savings ranging from £100 to £1,000 a day compared with costs of daycare.<sup>7</sup>

Community owned or managed woodlands could also provide business opportunities by producing biomass products. In The Mersey Forest area, woodlands produce a sustainable yield of 8,000 tonnes of wood and timber each year, much of which is not harvested at present.

A recent workshop on civil society, communities and woodlands<sup>8</sup> highlighted the importance of social enterprise in woodland management, an element of the debate lacking earlier this year.

Figure 2: 'Peak wood' Long term trends in softwood availability for GB



Source: Indicators of Sustainability - 2002, DEFRA

<sup>6</sup> The Economic Value of Green Infrastructure: <http://www.nwda.co.uk/PDF/EconomicValueofGreenInfrastructure.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Research Summary 8. Dutton Park: Supporting people for their contribution to the economy, environment and community. [www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php](http://www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk/resources+reports.php)

<sup>8</sup> Civil Society, Communities and Woodlands: Key messages from a meeting to share experience and discuss emerging opportunities.

### Key message 3: Forestry for climate

The Read report<sup>9</sup>, the first national assessment of the potential of the UK's tree cover to mitigate the effects of climate change, called for a massive increase in woodland planting rates. It suggested that appropriate planting of 23,000 hectares a year over 40

years – equivalent to about 30,000 football pitches – would involve changing the use of only 4% of the UK's land. This would mean increasing tree planting by 200% on current levels. It would bring woodland cover in the UK from its current 12% of the land area to 16%, still well below the European average of 37%.<sup>10</sup>

However, far from increasing, tree planting

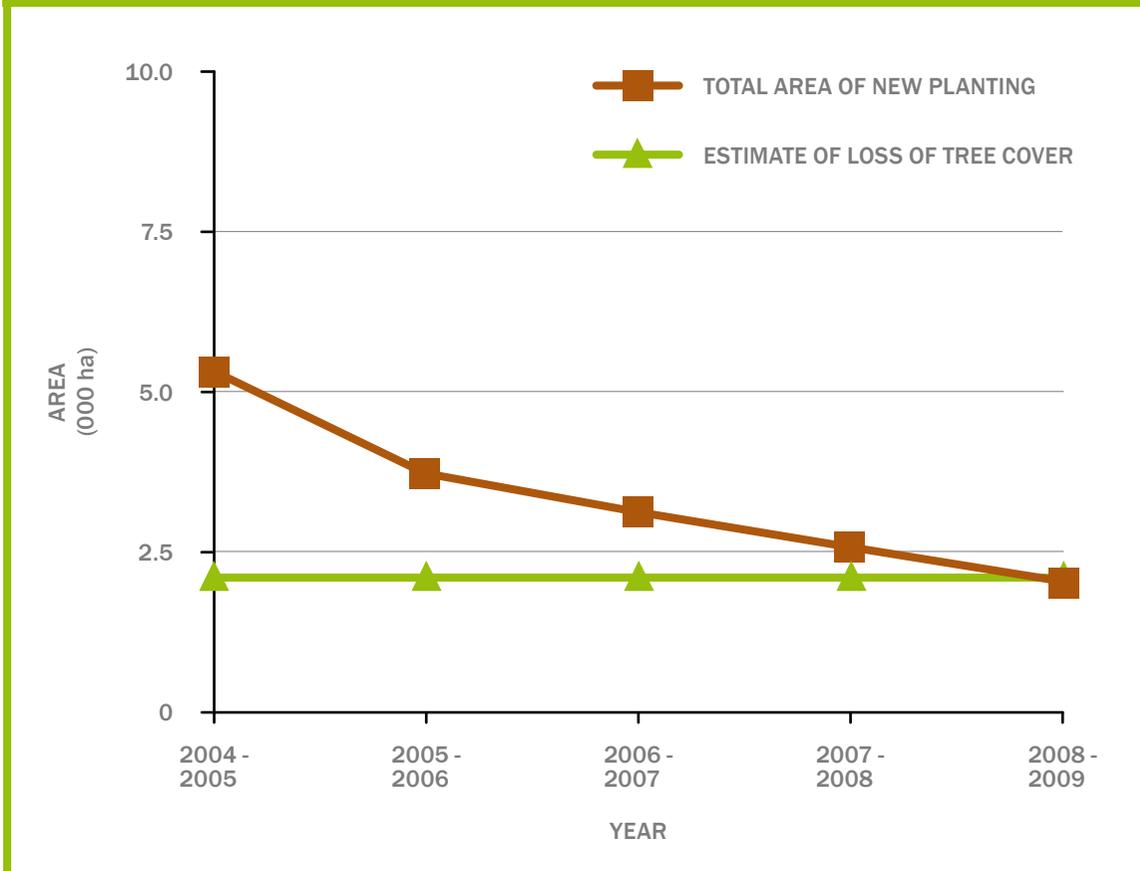
has actually slowed in recent years. There is concern that we may already have slipped, unnoticed, into a phase of deforestation in England [see figure 3]. Levels of new planting have decreased nationally and locally, and we are also losing woodland due to development and are not replanting areas where trees have been felled or lost to disease, or where woodlands have been restored to other habitats. The Mersey Forest and the Woodland Trust are currently working on a project to assess this important issue. The decline in new planting puts future investment in timber processing in jeopardy, increases reliance on timber imports and reduces our ability to cut down on energy-intensive materials.

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. 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.

Green infrastructure can reduce storm water run-off and provides drainage, reducing the likelihood of flooding. It can also provide places to store water for re-use, allow water to be absorbed into the ground, sustaining aquifers and river flows, and can catch sediment and remove pollutants, thereby ensuring that water quantity and quality is maintained.

In urban areas especially, green infrastructure is important in managing high temperatures. Tree cover provides shade and helps reduce

Figure 3: Estimated balance between Planting and Tree Losses



the 'urban heat island' effect. Providing local recreation areas and green spaces benefits the climate since it reduces the need for people to travel.<sup>11</sup>

We also need a source of raw material for the timber industry to substitute for more energy intensive building materials, such as concrete and steel, which require large amounts of fossil fuels to produce.

It is now widely recognised that climate change and biodiversity are interconnected. The Lawton Review<sup>12</sup> of Britain's wildlife sites called for a transformation in nature conservation, warning that recent dramatic increases in species decline would continue if

the Government failed to take urgent action to tackle the country's threatened habitats.

The report also drew attention to the fact that wildlife sites are poorly connected to urban areas. Our work has demonstrated the value of providing networks of interconnected woodlands that can help to protect biodiversity and create migration routes for species that may be affected by climate change.

As well as helping to tackle climate change, forests are also themselves at risk. The ForeStClim project is a transnational programme that is sharing information between foresters to help improve and develop management to protect our forests.<sup>13</sup>

Forestry Commission research<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> [www.forestry.gov.uk/newsrele.nsf/web-allbysubject/7E8175C795DEB48A802576780042FEE0](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/newsrele.nsf/web-allbysubject/7E8175C795DEB48A802576780042FEE0)

<sup>10</sup> *Combating Climate Change: a role for UK Forests*. Synthesis available for download from <http://bit.ly/inEe0K>

<sup>11</sup> See *Green Infrastructure to Combat Climate Change: A Framework for Action in Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside*. Available from: [www.ginw.co.uk/climatechange/framework](http://www.ginw.co.uk/climatechange/framework)

<sup>12</sup> <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.forestclim.eu>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/POFUK2009final.pdf/\\$FILE/POFUK2009final.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/POFUK2009final.pdf/$FILE/POFUK2009final.pdf)



## The questions we must ask

Despite the overwhelming public antipathy towards the proposals for ownership and management advanced in the 2010 consultation and the emphatic rejection of the previous government's suggestions in 2009, it is significant that the review leaves open the possibility of different approaches to ownership and management.

From a community forest perspective we hope that the panel will consider the following issues.

**Expansion:** do the proposals recognise the risk of deforestation and offer appropriate solutions in terms of scale and impact and acknowledge the scope of forestry in the UK, from urban trees to our large commercial forests, public and private?

**Forests for the community:** the evidence for the public benefits from our forests is overwhelming. How can we best secure these benefits for the long term as a contribution to a low carbon and more equitable country?

**A sustainable economy:** do the proposals enhance local markets in wood products, reduce reliance on imports and sustain a range of skilled jobs and work opportunities?

**Regeneration:** do the proposals recognise that woodlands are an important way of restoring blighted sites and creating community benefits?

**Access:** woodlands are a significant and well-used public amenity. Do the proposals offer sufficiently robust protection for all kinds of public access?

**Resources for management and maintenance:** what are the best ways of protecting and enhancing our forests, including finding new sources of funding and value?

**Capacity:** the Government has recognised the need for new woodlands. These need to be created with care and looked after. What are the best ways to achieve this?

**Expertise:** do the proposals take into account how far the public forest estate needs to be managed by highly skilled people in order to balance the demands of leisure use, public access, protection of wildlife and biodiversity, and commercial uses?

**Bringing it all together:** Do the proposals encourage the scale of creativity, connectivity and common sense that can truly deliver all that we expect from our forests?

## What next?

The review of forestry in England is part of a much bigger picture. The natural environment white paper will set out a strategic direction for land and resource management that needs to inform, and be informed by, the debate over the future of our forests.

Similarly, the European collaboration through the ForeStClim project<sup>15</sup> needs to be factored into any decisions about the future of publicly owned forests and community forestry. We need to recognise that forests are a global as well as a local issue, and the best solutions will bring together global and local stewardship.

The Mersey Forest Partnership will continue to be a strong advocate of community forests, working closely with other partners and stakeholders.

The Mersey Forest hopes to bring together the views of communities and civic leaders in the Mersey sub-region and contribute to the wider debate by responding directly to the Government review.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.forestclim.eu/>

To get involved in these discussions, please contact...  
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