



By email: wpcresponse@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

WPC Response
Forestry Commission
620, Bristol Business Park
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol
BS16 1EJ

21st December 2012.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Woodland Creation Potential

Following the call by the Forestry Commission and Natural England for views on the potential for woodland creation, the Cotswolds Conservation Board made an initial response by email to comply with the first deadline of 31st October 2012. Subsequently, the Board's Land Management Committee has discussed the potential for woodland creation in the Cotswolds AONB and Cotswolds National Character Area (NCA 107). Board staff also attended the South West workshop held in Taunton on 27th November. The Board now writes to elaborate on the initial emailed response and add some further points.

General issues

Woodlands provide among the highest identified number of ecosystem services – regulating, provisioning and cultural (UK NEA 2011 p. 715). The principle of creating more woodlands and therefore increasing the woodland cover of England is one we support, though it is important to establish the right trees in the right place for the right reason.

Tree planting and woodland creation can enhance landscape character, but in some landscapes they can be out of place. In many parts of the country, forests and woods are an essential part of local landscape character, giving identity and a sense of place; they are, for example, a key feature of the upper slopes of the Cotswold Escarpment. But absence of woodland may also define an area's identity; an example of this is much of the open landscape of the Cotswolds High Wold.

Similarly, woodland creation can provide excellent opportunities for biodiversity, creating resilience and climate space for species. However, in some places it can be destructive, for example on important unimproved grasslands, heathland or fen; and

Conserving, enhancing, understanding and enjoying the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Cotswolds Conservation Board Fosse Way Northleach Gloucestershire GL54 3JH

Tel: 01451 862000 Fax: 01451 862001 Email: info@cotswoldsaoib.org.uk Website: www.cotswoldsaoib.org.uk

inappropriate tree planting may also be damaging to the historic environment, including the setting of monuments.

Competing land uses will constrain opportunities for woodland expansion. For example, nearly half the farmed area of the Cotswolds AONB is arable, most of it grade 3, and, with rising commodity prices, this seems unlikely to change for the foreseeable future.

Woodland expansion should not be at the expense of managing existing woodland, which is also in need of priority attention. To maximise the benefits of woodlands they need to be managed sustainably. Unfortunately, most woodland is under-managed or not managed at all and there is a concern that a lot of limited funding and time will go into planting new areas of woodland without a clear purpose whilst existing mature woodland becomes increasingly moribund. The threat of Chalara adds to the imperative of re-establishing woodland management. This issue must be addressed as new woodlands are created, though there is a likelihood that as demand for wood fuel grows commercial incentives to better management will increase.

Finally, it is also essential to deal with the impacts of deer and grey squirrel. Woodland creation will provide more food and cover for both animals, which already do a lot of damage to woodland, timber and - in the case of deer – also crops.

Quantifying the potential

Aspirations for woodland uplift need to take account of landscape character along with other factors, such as better management of existing woodland, safeguarding priority habitats, conserving the historic environment and current land use. Consequently, rather than simply applying a global figure for expansion of woodland cover extrapolated from work in the North West, it would be better to derive a meaningful figure for desirable woodland cover for each NCA, based on an opportunity mapping exercise.

Those attending the workshop in the South West were unwilling to identify figures for woodland expansion for each NCA, but were happy to approach the task based on four bands of woodland creation potential :

1. None (0%)
2. Low (1 – 3%)
3. Medium (4 – 6%)
4. High (7 – 10%)

This approach appeared to work well and on this basis agreement was reached quickly on all the NCAs within the South West. The Board supports this approach and recommends it is used for all NCAs. Part of the reluctance to identify uplift figures was that, although the consultation document claimed that the figures do not represent

targets and are not binding, past experience suggests that in reality any such figure will be seen as a target.

Woodland Creation Potential of the Cotswolds

The Cotswolds AONB is currently 10% woodland, whilst the larger Cotswolds NCA is 11% woodland. The amount of woodland varies across the Cotswolds and is identified within the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment (LCA). The principal areas are the broadleaf woodlands on the steep ground of the Cotswold scarp, particularly the beech woods between Cheltenham to Wotton-Under-Edge and the oak/ash woods to the north and east of Bath. It is important to note that woodland in both areas occurs in a mosaic with unimproved limestone grasslands. The rest of the AONB is generally characterised by an open landscape with expansive views, although conspicuous woodland blocks on ridges are often visible from long distances. Woodlands tend to be small to moderate in size. There are, however, a few exceptions in the form of larger estates with substantial blocks of woodland such as Cornbury Park (a remnant of the Wychwood Forest) and Cirencester Park.

Using the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment, the Board has published a guide to Woodland Planting and Management based on the 19 Landscape Types identified by the LCA. To retain the landscape character of the Cotswolds, the guidance identifies the need to limit woodland creation in some areas and to extend woodlands and link them in others (but not by planting on permanent pasture). For some Landscape Types woodland creation is not appropriate.

The Board's Climate Change Strategy sets out the basis of our understanding of the way forward on woodlands for the longer term. One of the key ecosystem services from forestry is the regulation of flooding and drought and this could be particularly important in a western upland with relatively high rainfall such as the Cotswolds. This suggests that carefully situated new planting could have an increasing role as the century progresses in flood and drought management. On the other hand the Strategy points out that in the years ahead some characteristic tree species such as beech could come under stress from more frequent summer droughts, while there may also be increasing damage from wind, pests, disease and fire. Such changes may require us to prioritise action to sustain existing woodlands over the expansion of woodland cover.

However, the feared impact of ash dieback (*Chalara*), in a landscape where ash is often the most conspicuous tree species, may be so extensive as to prompt a search for a more creative approach to landscape in the AONB, which might also give opportunities for a welcome increase in other woodland ecosystem services. Partly for this reason, the Board intends to review its landscape guidelines over the next few years, and this

exercise may identify where more trees can be accommodated, based on a more creative approach to landscape conservation.

Conclusion

In general, the Cotswolds is not an appropriate area for a significant increase in woodland cover due to the generally open nature of much of the landscape character. There is, however, some potential to accommodate new woodland, especially where this would link existing woodlands and in connection with new development; this approach is positively encouraged by the Board, where proposals are consistent with the Board's guidance. Once the impact of ash dieback becomes understood, a more active approach to new planting may be indicated. Meanwhile, the priority for woodland in the Cotswolds is to bring into management and utilize the existing woodland first.

Taking into account landscape character, other priority habitats and current land use, the woodland creation potential for the Cotswolds, using the approach taken by the South West workshop, is Medium (specifically, the low end of medium)

If you wish to clarify or discuss further any of the above comments, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,



Mark Connelly
Land Management Officer