

# ***The Future of the Public Forest Estate in England***

## **Consultation**

This briefing note is targeted to help those opposed to the Government plans to break up the ownership and management of the Public Forest Estate (PFE) in England. It is aimed to help you make your views be known and to contribute to the public consultation.

Our position is that our public forests should be publicly owned and managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission and we reject all the models for disposing of public forest and the cuts, restructuring and further sales proposed by the government.

We believe the consultation is flawed because it doesn't ask whether the forests should be sold, leased or transferred, it doesn't ask about sale of the 15% already earmarked, it doesn't refer to the Public Bodies Bill (the legislation already going through Parliament to give the government the powers to make these disposals despite the consultation), and it doesn't give people the opportunity to say they want to keep the Forestry Commission protecting and increasing public benefits. However we suggest that everyone should complete the consultation process while making these points forcefully.

## **Some key points**

The Forestry Commission manage only 18% of England's public forests and woodlands, the majority of the remainder is already in private ownership.

For state ownership read 'taxpayer ownership', they are your woods & forests.

The PFE costs less than 30p each per year, far more money goes to the private sector in the forms of grants or tax concessions to manage private woodland.

The passing of the Public Bodies Bill will enable the Secretary of State to dispose of our woodland without further consultation. The minister Jim Paice has made it very clear that he intends to dispose of most of the PFE.

The Forestry Commission managing our forests across the country is able to balance, better than most, environmental, timber and recreation interests. It consults and engages with local communities and interest groups. 'Big Society' is not new it's been happening for years.

## **What you can do**

Support the campaigns both local on on-line such as "<http://www.38degrees.org.uk/page/s/save-our-forests#petition>"

Write or your MP or better still arrange a meeting at their local surgery.

Complete the PFE consultation to make your views known.

Keep up to date with the latest news and developments at <http://saveourforests.co.uk>

## **Observations**

The proposals look to fragment the forest estate, breaking it up into differing ownership models that will make it easier to sell off either now or in the future. There are real benefits and efficiencies in managing the PFE as a whole.

It suggests there is a conflict of interest in the Forestry Commission being a regulator of the industry yet the largest operator. This is simply not the case, the Forestry Commission manages just 18% of our forests and woodlands and is independently audited. The Forestry Commission only produces more timber than any other owner as two thirds of private woodlands are un/under-managed.

The four categories suggest they are suited to different ownership models yet we know most of our forests and woodlands are multi purpose. For example most of the 'heritage forests' still generate the majority of their income, to help offset other management costs, from timber yet a small 'commercial woodland' located near to a community can have visitor numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

The ink is only just dry on the last public consultation 'The Long Term Role of the Public Forest Estate in England' 2009, yet there is little mention of the public's views taken then. A key message was captured in the summary:-

***"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."***

Government should not try to abdicate to others the responsibility for delivering biodiversity obligations, tree planting targets and the health, wellbeing and engagement of local communities. The Government should act as an exemplar, working in partnership with others, to demonstrate in practice that it is the 'greenest government' ever and in so doing appreciate the issues and challenges faced by woodland owners in support of the private sector.

## Ownership Models Suggested

The consultation proposes a number of new ownership models, and there are many disadvantages and concerns that results in an unacceptable risk to public benefits in pursuing any of the options.

### Heritage forests to new or existing trusts, forests such as the Forest of Dean and the New Forest, 50 - 80,000 ha

- This will take some of our most important public forests out of public ownership and management, losing all the benefits that multipurpose forestry across the whole public forest estate brings.
- The revenue from commercial sales of timber will not be available to fund woodland management.
- There are serious questions about how this will be funded. It will require a large amount of money in grants and funds from the government, that raises questions about the benefit to the Exchequer.
- If charitable trusts are expected to do it without much funding, or if the funding is phased out, they will have to rely on appeals, membership and sponsorship, and might end up having to scramble about for sufficient funds, rather than concentrating on good woodland management.

### Small woods sold on a commercial basis to local communities

- Can local communities afford to buy woods? If the prices are set artificially then how much will be raised for the Exchequer?
- Big society and running things yourself is a lovely idea in theory, but in practice relying on volunteers who don't necessarily have the experience and skills in forest management, nor the consistency – enthusiasm might be high at first but how will it be sustained?

- The danger is that when or if local communities or charities fail, the forests will then be sold on commercially to the private sector.
- The advantages of scale of the public forests run by the public Forestry Commission will be lost, as will the advantages to the economy, society and the environment of a multi-forest approach.

### Large commercial forests given out on 150 year leases

- Equivalent to privatisation.
- Those who buy forests to run them for profit will not have as a priority biodiversity, public access and facilities for a wide variety of users.
- It is very difficult to put in place protection for access and facilities for the wide range of forest users, for diversity, and for other environmental issues, even if the government attempts to set these up as promised. This will have an impact on the price.
- Loss of timber revenues that currently fund woodland management.
- Consequences for strategic forest management, particularly for such an excessive length of time.
- Experience in Canada, New Zealand and South Africa of forest leasing is negative for sustainable forest management.
- Danny Alexander, LibDem MP and current senior government minister, fought similar proposals in Scotland 2009, and this was called off in the face of public opposition

### Responding to the Consultation

You have until 5pm 21 April 2011 to respond, so there is time to think it through, consider all of the facts and read the consultation document fully. You can respond by printing out a paper version of the survey, doing it online, or you can just send a letter or e-mail.

Send your letter or consultation reply form by post to:

*Public Forest Estate Consultation Co-ordinator,  
Forestry Commission England, 620 Bristol Business Park,  
Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1EJ*

or by e-mail to [publicconsultation@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publicconsultation@forestry.gsi.gov.uk)

or complete online reply form [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-pfeconsultation](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-pfeconsultation)

Hopefully you will have time to consider the questions carefully and express your own views, **using your own words** in the consultation - MPs will sometimes dismiss responses if they feel they have been sent en-mass in the form of a template and we are unsure if template responses will be dismissed as valid returns.

We have attached the approach that we will be taking below, please use as a guide if you wish but **do not copy and paste** large amounts of text:

## Response to the PFE Consultation

Question	Response
1a	<b>Disagree</b> to all
1b	Disagree with the purpose of the question. The principles listed in Q1a and more important principles apply to running the forests well, and this can be best done under direct public ownership and management. A properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.
2a	<b>Disagree</b> to all
2b	<p>Disagree with the government's aim to reduce state ownership. A properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best model for delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.</p> <p>State your concerns about each of the models:</p> <p><b>Heritage forests:</b> funding will be both insufficient and inefficient with large grants and funds to charities that do not have enough of their own or would have to devote a lot of time and energy to fundraising at the expense of woodland management. There are other implications about whether volunteers will have the skills and experience and commitment to run forests.</p> <p><b>Selling forests to communities:</b> Can they afford it and how would they fund management, the expense of grants to help them do so, volunteers' long-term commitment, skills and experience, and that if they fail the forests will be sold to private owners.</p> <p><b>Commercial long-term leasing:</b> concerns over privatisation for profit and the loss of revenue to fund other forest management objectives.</p> <p><b>On all three:</b> concerns about the impact on jobs in the forests, in local communities and tourism, about the consistent supply of timber products, and about the protection of access and facilities, biodiversity and other environmental purposes.</p>
3a	<b>Highly Unlikely</b>
3b	<p>There is no evidence that the proposed new models of ownership will result in efficiency gains.</p> <p>Fragmentation, managing smaller areas, will add cost.</p> <p>A risk that single interest management will increase costs and miss opportunities for income generation.</p> <p>Charities and communities have no record of timber production.</p> <p>Loss of tax revenue.</p> <p>2/3rds of woodlands in other ownership are under-managed, the proposals are likely to increase this area.</p>
4a	<b>Disagree</b>
4b	<p>There is significant overlap between the characterisations and yet the options presented in this consultation are restricted to the crude boundaries of the characterisations e.g. Heritage = Charity Option only; Multi-purpose / Commercial = lease option only (but for a limited area to be offered for Community / Civil Society management).</p> <p>Characterising different types of forests can be useful for purposes of appropriate management, but not for their disposal. Limited options will lead to the fragmentation of the public forest estate with negative impacts on biodiversity and the timber market.</p> <p>The best outcomes come from running the whole of the Public Forest Estate for multiple purposes.</p>

Question	Response
5a	<b>Disagree</b>
5b	Disagree with having criteria for transferring public forests to a charity, because of concerns outlined in answer to Q2b. A properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.
6a	<b>Disagree to all</b>
6b	Although the principles are good ones to run forests, disagree with the premise of having these principles in order to transfer the public forest to a charity. Concerns as in answer to Q2b  The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.
7a	<b>Disagree to all</b>
7b	Although the objectives are good ones to run forests, disagree with the premise of listing objectives for a charity to run the forests.  The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.
8a	<b>Disagree</b>
8b	Disagree with the premise that some land will be transferred to a charity and some sales made over the next 4 years, and therefore with the question about how the rest of the forest should be sold. Offering it first to community or civil society organisations doesn't answer concerns about that option as given in answer to Q2b, and will often be impractical because of size and cost. In any case the question is meaningless because they will then go to the private sector.  The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.
9a	<b>Disagree to all</b>
9b	Disagree with the premise for the questions about the right principles and procedures to use in selling public forests to community or civil society groups. The procedures described here might make it easier to sell the public forest to community or groups, if they can afford the market rate, and to allow them to run them for their own objectives with minimal protection of public benefits.  The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.
10a	<b>Disagree</b>
10b	Disagree with the premise of making these sales, and disagree that simply listing some conditions or requirements for community groups running forests will answer the concerns already detailed in answer to Q2b. The problem still remains that doing this splits up the Public Forest Estate and loses the multipurpose approach that provides benefits from having a range of forests as now.  The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.
11a	<b>Disagree to both</b>
11b	Disagree with the premise of leasing any part of the Public Forest Estate to the private sector as it is better run under public ownership. Leasing brings all the concerns listed in answer to Q2b, and disagree that lease conditions to safeguard public benefits will allay those concerns.  The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.

Question	Response
12a	<b>Disagree to all</b>
12b	<p>Disagree with the proposal to lease forests, therefore with the procedure outlined, the length of the leases, and the emphasis on splitting up forests into smaller parcels of land. One major disadvantage of the leasing (or selling) of timber producing forests is that the consistent level of supply and pricing of timber that currently ensures the wood processing industry a stable environment in which to run its business will be lost by forest-buying companies wishing to act to maximise short-term profit.</p> <p>The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.</p>
13	<p>The consultation document suggests possible conditions on certification of forestry management standards, high-quality access, restoring woodland and granting sporting rights, but not timber marketing. Possible comments would be to disagree that leasing the land is better than owning and running it publicly, or that it provides better possibilities for protecting access or environmental management. The best way to manage this is to run the forests publicly for the whole wide range of public benefits as done in the multipurpose forestry currently carried out by the Forestry Commission and to resource this properly.</p>
14a	<b>Disagree</b>
14b	<p>The best approach the government could adopt is not to sell, let, transfer or outsource the ownership or management of the public forests.</p> <p>The current model of public ownership managed by a properly resourced Forestry Commission offers the best means of delivering and protecting public access for recreation, biodiversity, heritage and sustainable timber production.</p>
15a	<b>Agree to all</b>
15b	<p>While agreeing that these are good aims of forestry policy, emphasise that they are best carried out by the Forestry Commission in the whole range of public forests that it owns and runs, prioritising the multipurpose forestry approach. People are currently able to play a role in determining how forests are run for public benefit, and giving a few people the opportunity to run a few forests themselves doesn't seem likely to deliver much public benefit, and I have already expressed concerns about this approach in answer to Q2b. The Forestry Commission already involves local people in its forests in partnerships and many other arrangements that work extremely well and would collapse if these proposals go ahead. Involvement of people in forests and woodlands would be reduced, not increased, by these proposals.</p> <p>A properly resourced Forestry Commission should continue to manage the public forest estate balancing the social, environmental and economic values on behalf of the public.</p>
16	<p>Asks for any other comments. As well as including points already raised above, detailed below are some responses you may wish to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disagree with the questions being asked because they assume that the sale, lease and transfer of all of the public forests is already decided and comments are only sought about the detail of how this is done. The opportunity to give views about the future resourcing, management and ownership of our public forests is not being given. Object to the government deciding that new owners are required for the public forest estate and not allowing consultation on this decision.</li> <li>• State concerns about the powers proposed in the Public Bodies Bill to allow ministers to make a wide range of changes to forestry ownership and management without proper Parliamentary debate and scrutiny, but it is not being asked about in this consultation. It is fundamentally wrong that the Secretary of State should have the powers to dispose of the Public Forest Estate as proposed in the Public Bodies Bill. Clauses 17 &amp; 18 should be removed.</li> </ul>

Question	Response
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State disappointment that the government intend to sell 15% of the existing public forest over the next 4 years, and although they have published criteria for the sales they haven't given the opportunity to say whether the forests should be sold or how.</li> <li>• Express concern about whether the Forestry Commission is going to be sufficiently resourced to carry out all the important work it does. Indicate that you understand that there are going to be cuts of 25%, but the government are not consulting about this.</li> <li>• State that the Forestry Commission represents good value for money and is best placed to protect and enhance public benefit and biodiversity whilst ensuring sustainable timber production from the public's forest estate.</li> <li>• State that the new ownership options proposed risk fragmenting the forestry estate and putting at risk the multipurpose benefits currently provided. It is also meaningless, because most woods and forests are run for many different purposes, and I don't think this is the best way to make sure that they will be run efficiently to meet international standards of good forestry. If the revenues from timber can no longer be used to fund management of the forests for recreation, biodiversity and in the best interests of the environment, the public will not get the full range of benefits from our forests delivered in the most efficient way. If the government needs to pay out more grants to community groups and businesses, and to fund charities to run forests, that is likely to cost more and the forests will be run less efficiently they are now run by the Forestry Commission.</li> <li>• There is no evidence that the proposed new ownership models will maintain or enhance current levels of public access or biodiversity and deliver sustainable timber production as effectively as the current model does nor that the move to new ownership will save taxpayers money. What is proposed is a high risk strategy, that could end up costing more and delivering less.</li> <li>• It is likely that new commercial owners of forests that buy or lease them will want to make a profit, and access and biodiversity and other important public benefits of forests will stand in the way. Charities and communities that buy forests or have forests transferred to them will need to raise funds to run them (even if they are given funds initially it has been made clear that they will have to become self-sufficient in time). They will need to make charges, spend time on fundraising, and might not have the experience and skills available to them to do such a good job as the Forestry Commission does at the moment, let alone to improve or expand the forests.</li> <li>• The Forestry Commission are already working with charities, third sector partners, volunteers, community groups and private businesses in delivering public access, education, biodiversity and sustainable timber production. Rather than dismantle the Forestry Commission the government should be looking to build on this successful model (public ownership managed by the Forestry Commission). This consultation does not allow the existing model to be considered.</li> <li>• Government should not try to abdicate to others the responsibility for delivering biodiversity obligations, tree planting targets and the health, wellbeing and engagement of local communities. The Government should act as an exemplar, working in partnership with others, to demonstrate in practice that it is the 'greenest government' ever and in so doing appreciate the issues and challenges faced by woodland owners in support of the private sector.</li> <li>• <i>[I'm particularly worried about my local Forest where I live or work or visit or have a connection--- put in more detail about your own particular concerns or experiences of woods and forests, or how you like to use them, or to express your wider concerns such as about wildlife or the environment or timber supplies.]</i></li> </ul>

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