

Secretary to the Forum

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Defra – Forestry Policy Unit (via email)
Area 5D, Ergon House
Horseferry Road
London SW1P 2AL

Re - England's Trees, Woods and Forests; a consultation document.

Please find below the response from The Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex (CAFWS) to the above consultation. Due to the timing of the consultation this response has not been approved by the Forum however it is a combination of individual members' comments that have been approved by the Forum Chairman.

New woodlands

The planting of new woods is supported - especially if there will be public access in future. However, the government must be clear as to whether **all** woodland will be coming under the CROW Act in future. Landowners may think twice about planting new woods if the consequence will then be public access as of right. Having said that, the development of community woodlands in the county has been welcomed by many communities.

Strategic planning locally

The proposals for the development of a mosaic of semi natural habitats is supported, especially if they can also be linked with new rights of way in the countryside around areas of new development. As part of this pro-active planning process, it would be beneficial if proposals to improve access in an area were related to the local Rights of Way Improvement Plan. Local Development Frameworks, the successor to Local Plans could also be more prescriptive in encouraging better delivery of access in woodlands.

Social inclusion

Well designed woodland paths are ideally suited for use by wheelchair trails, Riding for the Disabled, etc. Trees can provide welcome shelter and shade.

Access for all

Not all woodlands are suitable for public access, which can be positively dangerous when felling and harvesting trees. The extension of CROW Act type access on a blanket form of provision is not the way forward.

Healthy living

Improved access to woods and forests for all users will help deliver on the Government's health agenda.

Facilities

Apart from car parking and dog bins and information, there are wider and ongoing issues with regard to public access. It does not come without cost and so the owners must have staff available to manage the access. Most of us love the peace and quiet of the woodlands but against urban areas many are very concerned at the lack of person safety. A regular and visible warden service may be essential there.

Access to Forestry Commission managed woodlands

The Policy is equating the numbers of people accessing Forestry Areas in financial terms. These areas are owned by the Government and the Crown and should provide adequate

access for the public to walk and in many cases ride within, without always referring to the cost. We can agree that adequate safety procedures and items have to be on hand, which has a cost, but these areas belong to the people and therefore should be made accessible for public recreation purposes.

Riding in woodlands, in particular Forestry Commission managed woodlands

The Strategy for the Horse Industry in England and Wales was produced in partnership with Defra and one of its aims is to increase access to off-road riding and carriage driving. It is important that our forests and woods contribute to this aim.

Closures/restrictions (Q2)

Decisions on closures and restrictions to protect habitats, for harvesting or for other land management reasons, should be made on a site by site basis and should not be blanket restrictions. They need to be managed in a way to enable maximum access to parts of the site (defined linear or open areas) that are not affected.

Government's role in supporting trees, woods and forests (Q4)

- Forests can make a significant contribution to the local economy through increased visitor spend.
- The Forestry Commission is one of the country's largest providers of recreational opportunities. However, the woods and forests it manages in many areas are not used to their maximum potential for access. There is a particular need to improve equestrian (both horse riding and carriage driving) access.
- Equestrians are a particularly vulnerable group when using roads. There are many opportunities to increase safety by providing routes through woodlands to avoid/minimise having to use the road network and to enable routes to join with the wider bridleway network. This should be identified in the strategy.
- In some areas providing suitable horse box parking would enable equestrian users access to existing bridleways/permissive routes through woodlands.
- There does not seem to be a consistent approach to charging for equestrian access to Forestry Commission managed woods across the country. Many areas in the north of the country provide 'free' access while there is a charge for horse riding in many woodlands in the south. This should be addressed with access being free for all users wherever possible.

Designing for access

Good design of recreation routes and facilities, such as improving sight lines, providing appropriate surfacing, encourages usage. This in turn makes an area feel safer, thereby attracting more use which adds to the sense of community. Design can also go a long way to minimising both perceived and actual instances of conflict.

Promoting responsible use

Promoting responsible use, for example through codes of conduct and information available on site, is desirable.

Thank you for taking time to consider this response. We look forward to seeing the final strategy when it is published.

Yours sincerely

Fiona MacLeod
Secretary to the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex