

The Future of the Public Forest Estate in England

Dear Local Access Forum

You may be aware of speculation on the future role of the Forestry Commission and more particularly, the Public Forest Estate in England. We are now in a position to give some more detail on the next steps of the Government's proposals.

On Thursday 27 January 2011, the Government launched a twelve-week public consultation on proposals for a new approach to ownership and management of the Public Forest Estate in England.

The Government remains committed to shifting the balance of power from 'Big Government' to 'Big Society' and for forestry this means securing greater public involvement in the ownership and/or stewardship of England's public forests. The proposals set out in the consultation would do this and create a far greater role for civil society, businesses and individuals.

The Government recognises that there is not a 'one size fits all solution' and therefore the proposals are for a "mixed model" approach to the future ownership and management of the Public Forest Estate to secure their public benefits for the long-term which could include:

- Inviting new or existing charitable organisations, to take on ownership or management of the heritage forests (like the New Forest and the Forest of Dean);
- Creating opportunities for community and civil society groups to buy or lease forests that they wish to own or manage;
- Finding commercial operators to take on long-term leases for the large-scale commercially valuable forests. By leasing rather than selling, it will be possible to ensure that these forests continue to deliver public benefits through lease conditions.

The Government wants England's woodlands, forests and trees to expand and be sustainably managed by:

- focusing the Government's role on policy, research, regulation and advice and developing new approaches to the ownership and management of the public forest estate in England;

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- ensuring England's woodlands, forests and trees (and the open habitats within them) are managed and expanded to enhance the environment and biodiversity, combat climate change and support economic growth, both during and after the transfer to the 'Big Society';
- encouraging more tree planting, increased woodland area and more sustainable woodland management driven by the private sector and civil society;
- supporting and developing a competitive, thriving and resilient forestry sector, integrated with other land based businesses and the wider rural economy in England;
- seeking to enable more public benefits to flow from England's woodlands at reduced cost to the taxpayer;
- securing the best return for the taxpayer from any capital receipts or lease arrangements generated over this Spending Review period and beyond.

The consultation paper recognises that the process of transferring ownership and management of the estate in the ways outlined in the consultation is likely to take a number of years. It also seeks views on the future role of Forestry Commission England in delivering forestry policy through its statutory regulatory functions, managing grant schemes and providing expert advice (both nationally and locally).

We would like to encourage as many people as possible to take part in this consultation process. The consultation is easily accessible and people can respond [online or download the consultation document and questions](#) and post completed responses they have printed. In addition, there will be a series of workshops taking place across England. To register your interest and make your voice heard by attending one of these events, please [contact your local office](#).

The Government expects to publish its response to this consultation later in the summer of 2011.

Meanwhile, the Forestry Commission is increasing its estate rationalisation programme in England through open market sales (and lease reversion). In December 2010, Ministers announced that a further 40,000 hectares would be sold over the four years from 2011/12 to 2014/15. The selection criteria for these sales have now been announced and are on our [website](#).