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new forests and woodlands in the UK - sustainability and planning

Peter Jones and **Daphne Comfort** examine the characteristics of some of the recent new forest and woodland forest schemes within the UK, and look at the relationship between new forest and woodland creation and planning



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New forest schemes can contribute to sustainable development in a variety of ways

In January 2018 the Woodland Trust and the Community Forest Trust officially announced plans to create a new 'Northern Forest' in the North of England, and the UK Government agreed to kick-start the project with a pledge of £5.7 million. This announcement was publicly, although not

universally, welcomed as part of the 'Government's strategy to build an environment fit for the future'.¹

The Northern Forest will stretch from Liverpool to Hull and see the planting of some 50 million trees, and it has been described as 'the first project of its kind for more than a quarter of a century'.¹ That

said, the proposed Northern Forest scheme is just one of a number of new forest and woodland initiatives in the UK. These schemes have received grant aid from a variety of public sector bodies across the jurisdictions within the UK and from conservation charities, principally the Woodland Trust.

Writing in this journal, Nolan² argued the case for the investment in the new Northern Forest prior to the formal announcement of its creation. This article complements his contribution by taking a wider perspective, in that it describes the characteristics of some of the new forest and woodland schemes within the UK, outlines how creating new forests and increasing woodland cover can contribute to sustainable development, and provides a short discussion of the relationship between new forest and woodland creation and planning.

New forest and woodland schemes in the UK

All the new forest schemes in the UK have their own, often distinctive features, as illustrated below, but there are a number of common underlying sustainability themes.

First formally proposed by the Countryside Commission in 1987, the National Forest embraces some 520 square kilometres of the English Midlands across parts of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire. The initial tree planting took place, albeit on a small scale, in 1990, and planting began in earnest the following year. In the years since then, more than 8.5 million trees have been planted, over 7,000 hectares of new forest have been created, and the area of forest cover has increased from 6% to over 20% through both the transformation of large areas of derelict coalfield and former mineral working land and the conversion of farmland to woodland. The majority of the trees are broadleaved species, with just over 10% conifers. Almost 50% of the woodland is in active management, and over 120 woodland management plans are in place.

‘The new Northern Forest will embrace a continuous large swathe across northern England from Cheshire and South Yorkshire to North Yorkshire. This project will effectively connect five existing community forests’

England’s Community Forest programme, initially established as a pilot project in 1990, includes 13 community forests in northern, midland and southern England. These forests range in size from 9,000 hectares to 90,000 hectares. Each community

forest is a partnership between local authorities and local, regional and national partners, including the Forestry Commission and Natural England, and each sets out a 30-year vision of landscape-scale improvement.

The Mersey Forest, for example, whose origins go back to the early 1990s, is a growing network of woodland and green spaces across some 1,300 square kilometres of Merseyside and North Cheshire. During the period 1990/91 to 2012/13 some 9 million trees were planted and woodland cover across the project increased from 4% to 8%, and during the period 2014-2019 the plan is to create 300 hectares of new woodland and plant 2,000 street trees.

The Forest of Marston Vale covers an area of some 150 square kilometres between Bedford and Milton Keynes. Initially tree cover in the designated area was just 3% and the area included a large former brickworks and a number of landfill sites. By 2017 the tree cover had been increased to 15%, and the goal is to eventually increase tree cover to 30%, which will involve planting a further 5 million trees. The Great Western Community Forest, established in 1994, embraces Swindon and its surrounding area, and here the aim is to increase tree cover in the forest until it reaches 30%. Achievements at the Greenwood Community Forest in Nottinghamshire include the planting of 3.5 million trees across some 1,300 hectares of new woodland, the bringing into active management of 900 hectares of existing woodland, and the creation or restoration of 350 kilometres of hedgerows.

However, not all the initial community forests were successful, and the charitable organisation that ran the North East Community Forest – which covered 250 square kilometres, including Sunderland, Gateshead, South Tyneside and parts of County Durham, and saw the creation of some 900 hectares of woodland – went into administration in 2008.

The new Northern Forest will embrace a continuous large swathe across northern England from Cheshire and South Yorkshire to North Yorkshire. This project will effectively connect five existing community forests – namely, the Mersey Forest, Manchester’s City of Trees, the South Yorkshire Forest, Leeds’ White Rose Forest, and the HEYwoods project in East Yorkshire – to existing and new woodland, and will include the cities of Chester, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, and Hull. The first work on the new forest will begin in 2018 on a 700 hectare site, the largest site ever acquired by the Woodland Trust, at Smithills in Bolton. The Northern Forest project will be developed over 25 years, and the proposed 25,000 hectares of woodland will be a mixture of native trees, including oaks, spruce and pine.

In November 2017, prior to the announcement of the creation of the Northern Forest, the government

announced that the Forestry Commission had approved what was then described as 'England's largest woodland planting scheme',³ Doddington Moor in Northumberland. Some 600,000 trees are to be planted in this private sector venture in just over two years on a 350 hectare site to the north of Wooler. A total of 268 hectares will be planted, with the majority of trees being conifers, the vast majority of which will be Sitka spruce, along with native broadleaves and Scots pine.

A scheme to plant some 210,000 trees on a 170 hectare site on the Lowther Estate on the fringes of the Lake District National Park was also announced in November 2017. Here, 120 hectares will be planted with productive softwood species,

creation target from the current level of 10,000 hectares per annum to 25,000 hectares per annum.

The Great Trossachs Forest project – which stretches from just outside Callander to the shores of Loch Lomond and which includes landholdings of Forestry Commission Scotland, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Scotland and Woodland Trust Scotland and covers an area of 160 square kilometres (roughly the size of Glasgow) – was launched in 2009. This 'forest in the making'⁵ has been described as 'one of the most significant woodland regeneration projects in the UK in a generation',⁵ which will ultimately 'be one of the largest native broadleaf woodlands in the UK'.⁶ Over the 200-year lifetime of the project the aim is to



Woodland Trust

Newly planted trees at Heartwood Forest in Hertfordshire

while the remainder of the site will be productive broadleaved species. By way of a geographical contrast, Heartwood Forest at Sandridge, three miles north of St Albans in Hertfordshire, is in the Green Belt. The 350 hectare site was acquired by the Woodland Trust in 2008, and work began the following year to convert the formerly agricultural land to deciduous woodland. Since then, over 500,000 trees have been planted.

The current Scottish Forestry Strategy aims to increase woodland cover within Scotland from 17% in 2006 to around 25% during the second half of the century, but in 2017 the Scottish Government⁴ signalled that it was looking to increase its woodland

see the creation of a landscape-scale forest which will include a range of woodland types at a variety of densities.

In Northern Ireland, where woodland covers 8% of the land area, compared with 13% in the UK, the Forest Service has a target to increase the percentage of woodland to 12% by 2050. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' Forest Expansion Scheme, for example, has seen the creation of 400 hectares of new woodland since 2015. In the past, government financial support was generally for small broadleaved woodland, but under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme, approved in 2015, the focus has switched to larger-

scale commercial planting, particularly on land that offers limited agricultural productivity.

The Woodlands for Wales Action Plan⁷ has identified 'supporting woodland creation and management' as a 'priority action area' and includes suggestions of a target of 35,000 hectares of woodland creation by 2040.

Sustainable development and planning

While new forest and woodland schemes in the UK vary in their character, size and type of location, the concept of sustainability can be clearly identified as an underlying theme, although it was not always explicitly recognised as such when some of the forests described above were initially established. More specifically, new forest schemes can contribute to the environmental, economic and social elements of sustainable development in a variety of ways.

In the long term, arguably the most important role that new forests and woodlands can play is to help mitigate the effects of climate change and associated extreme weather events and as such to maintain and enhance the resilience and adaptive capacity of the environment. Here, new forests can play a role in increasing existing carbon sequestration levels, in contributing to sustainable flood management, in endorsing sustainable soil management, and in encouraging the substitution of wood for other building materials that have a high embodied energy content.

New woodlands also have an important role to play in helping society to adapt to climate change, particularly in and around settlements, by providing shelter, cooling, and shade, and by helping to control surface water run-off. New woodland cover can also help to safeguard clean water supplies, and to protect and enhance biodiversity by restoring and enhancing priority habitats, helping to reduce the fragmentation of habitats, and also helping to protect ancient and heritage trees. The development of the Great Trossachs Forest, for example, will increase the range of habitats and allow a variety of wildlife to thrive.

On the socio-economic side, new forests and woodlands can contribute to the sustainability of local communities in a number of ways. The creation of large new forests and the establishment of new forest-based business enterprises could play an important role in employment creation and more generally in rural diversification and development. This in turn could help to increase the market share and value of locally grown timber, develop markets for wood fuel and biomass for energy production, and encourage the increasing use of timber in sustainable construction. Rural Northumberland, for example, is an area where forestry and timber processing is already a major employer, and it is expected that the new forest at Doddington Moor will provide a boost for local businesses and generate a number of new employment opportunities.



Doddington North Afforestation Project

Doddington Moor in Northumberland, where more than 600,000 trees are due to be planted

At the same time trees, forests and woodlands make a significant contribution to the quality of life in both urban and rural areas, and they offer a range of recreational and leisure opportunities that can also enhance human wellbeing.

Given the increasing importance accorded to the contribution that forests and woodlands can make to sustainable development, and given that the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that 'the purpose of planning is to help achieve sustainable development',⁸ forestry might be seen as an increasingly important element within the planning systems in the UK. However, the use of land for forestry does not constitute development under current planning legislation, and planning permission is not required for the creation of new forests and woodlands. Nichol⁹ has argued that 'planning controls over forestry are fairly simple on the face of it', and more pointedly Fairlie¹⁰ has suggested that 'forestry is the poor cousin of agriculture, in planning policy – it seems to have been included as an afterthought'.

Forests and woodlands certainly receive limited attention in the NPPF.⁸ In addition, there is no dedicated Planning Practice Guidance for forestry or woodlands, as there is, for example, for conserving and enhancing the historic environment and for water supply, wastewater, and water quality. Within the NPPF reference to woodland is confined to the possible role of native woodland (among a number of other land uses) in land reclamation projects, the refusal of planning applications which could result in the loss of ancient woodland, and general support for the creation of community forests.

In Scotland national planning policy is more explicit and more positive towards new woodlands, in that 'where appropriate, planning authorities should seek opportunities to create new woodland and plant native trees in association with development'.¹¹ Further Scottish national planning policy advises that 'planning authorities should consider preparing forestry and woodland strategies as supplementary guidance to inform the development of forestry and woodland in their area, including the expansion of woodland of a range of types to provide multiple benefits'.¹¹

At the local level in England, the government has suggested that 'through local and neighbourhood plans' local communities could use the Local Green Space designation introduced in the NPPF to identify for special protection green areas of particular importance to them, which could include woodlands.¹² The Woodland Trust has sought to encourage local authorities and local communities to incorporate tree planting and woodland creation into local and neighbourhood plans.

However, in some areas the Woodland Trust believes that local authorities could do more to promote tree planting. In commenting on the

proposed Bournemouth Local Plan, for example, the Woodland Trust¹³ suggested that it 'would welcome a specific reference to maintaining and enhancing the tree canopy in the area', that it 'would like to see a strong commitment here to the expectations on developers to provide trees as part of a new development', and that it 'would welcome strong statements on design which recommend protection... and new planting'.¹³ In some ways such comments strike a chord with research carried out by Davies *et al.*,¹⁴ undertaken among staff responsible for tree management decisions in 15 local authorities within the UK, which suggested that 'local authorities have a reactive approach to urban forest management'.

'Forests and woodlands receive limited attention in the NPPF. In addition, there is no dedicated Planning Practice Guidance for forestry or woodlands, as there is, for example, for conserving and enhancing the historic environment and for water supply, wastewater, and water quality'

In Scotland planning guidance at the local level on the creation of new forests and woodlands has been more extensive than in England. In *The Right Tree in the Right Place* Forestry Commission Scotland and Natural Scotland¹⁵ outlined 'the considerations that should inform how planning authorities approach woodland issues' and encouraged local authorities to prepare 'new forestry and woodland strategies... to guide future woodland expansion'. More recently, in providing guidance to planners on 'how the benefits from an expansion of woodland cover and forestry can be optimised through the new development planning system' Forestry Commission Scotland¹⁶ argued that 'planning authorities exert a strong influence over where future woodland expansion should occur'.

A number of Scottish local authorities have published forest and woodland strategies designed to guide tree planting. The Ayrshire and Arran Forest and Woodland Strategy, prepared by the LUC consultancy,¹⁷ for example, aims to 'provide supplementary planning guidance for the three Ayrshire Local Development Plans', sets out the priorities for woodland expansion and management, and provides a spatial strategy for woodland creation and management. Aberdeenshire's Local Development Plan, published in 2017, includes a

forestry and woodland strategy, *inter alia*, as supplementary guidance. As part of the Local Development Plan the local authority argued that it would use this strategy in 'determining planning applications' and that 'developers should consider [the forestry and woodland strategy] when bringing forward development proposals'.¹⁸

However, despite the positive approach to forestry and woodland strategy and guidance, doubts remain about the extent to which local planning authorities can exert significant influence over the scale or the location of forestry and woodland expansion within Scotland.

Conclusion

A number of new forestry and woodland creation schemes have been established within the UK in recent years, and they are increasingly seen to be making a variety of contributions to sustainable development. As the concerns about the transition to a more sustainable future grow, so the case for a substantial increase in the creation of new forests and woodlands and for increased government financial support for such schemes may become increasingly compelling.

The creation of new forest and woodland schemes falls outside the planning system, and while a revised draft revision of the NPPF was published in March 2018,¹⁹ the focus of the revisions is on new housing development rather than on the role of the natural environment in contributing to sustainable development. Nevertheless, local planning authorities will surely want to keep a watching brief on new forestry and woodland creation schemes.

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Notes

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