



# Small Woods Association response to the Defra Command Paper “Health and Harmony” – May 2018

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The Small Woods Association welcomes this opportunity to contribute our ideas to the development of new land management schemes post-Brexit.

## 1. Our Small Woodlands

Woodlands are valued for a wide range of functions and services. The same woodland can be managed for a wide range of different objectives and quite different decisions would be taken, which are often strongly informed by the motivation of the woodland owners. Looking ahead the UK will need to prioritise efficient and productive use of its resources; and arguably its woodlands represent one of its most under-utilised resources. Sixty per cent of the annual increment of 7.1m tons of wood produced by woodland in England is currently not harvested. Most of this is in its broadleaved woodlands, with the majority in **smaller unmanaged woods**.

### 1.1 *The nature of our smaller woodlands*

Small woods, generally regarded as those below 20ha in size, make up half the UK's woodland cover and more than half of them are unmanaged or under-managed. They are easily overlooked and the wide range of contributions that could be made by such woodlands is generally underappreciated by English land use policy. Whilst these woods are under threat from a range of sources such as development and encroachment, they are mostly threatened by neglect and lack of understanding. It is also clear that this absence of management can be just as bad for wildlife as it is for the economy, with ancient woodland flora species having declined by 34 per cent in the last 20 years, as canopy closes in unmanaged woodlands.

Small woodlands provide rich habitat, livelihoods for small rural businesses, and add value to rural and urban landscapes. They also provide places for employment and industry especially for those who seek a second chance in life. Wood products help to reduce fossil fuel use and combat climate change. The current increase in demand for woodfuel (if it is not to be met by imports) should provide a driver to bring more of these woods into management with economic, environmental and social benefits. Woodland owners and managers, including farmers are beginning to see the potential of woodland management for multiple objectives rather than simply for commercial timber production, or low/non-intervention conservation management, however, they need the knowledge, structures and support to deliver. Recent work from George Peterken, further supports the case for management, his work on Lady Park Wood in the Wye Valley over the past 70 years. This work shows that woodland species decline the longer a woodland is unmanaged.

### 1.2 *The reasons behind under-management and its effects*

Un-managed and under managed woodlands are those where no management regime is in place, and no management applications have been made, such as felling licences. In the vast majority of our un-managed woodlands, it can be confidently asserted that the woodland condition is in decline, as a direct result of their under-management.

Small woodlands are undermanaged for a range of reasons, in addition to constraints relating to their size, small woodlands are often on difficult sites for traditional forestry operations, they are therefore often regarded as uneconomic, or are simply valued for a more limited use, such as cover for a rough shoot, a shelter belt, or recreation site. Woodland owners also tell us that they lack the knowledge to take informed management decisions and consequently the "do nothing" option is simply an easy default.



Unfortunately, the combination of the fact that many of our small woodlands are even aged and the combined effects of squirrels, deer, disease and climate change mean that many woodlands are under stress and will not reach any sort of mature steady state without intervention and care.

However, all woodlands are assets that are capable of producing valuable “services” economic, environmental and social benefits, given the right support and imagination. Without support, these potentials will not be achieved and the services provided by our small woodlands will be in danger of going into further and continued decline. In addition, continued undermanagement will call into question the validity of any planting targets, without the commitment to do what is needed to turn plantations into woodlands. (See Section 3 for exploration of some of these services)

## 2. The opportunity for change

### 2.1 *The CAP we have*

The one size fits all approach of a CAP that needs to work for 28 countries has meant that appropriate approaches to woodland management have been hard to achieve. Added to which, the CAP is the only tool available to land managers, whilst woodland management and forestry have been largely outside the competence of the EU. This has meant policy has been designed primarily for agriculture and other forms of land use largely left outside. As a consequence, farmers have been rewarded for land management that maximised agricultural production to the detriment of other land uses, with for example, payments for agricultural management, but not for woodland management and the unintended incentive to register woodland as grazing land and consequently to undergraze woodlands, which suppresses natural regeneration; another unintended consequence.

The CAP has thus had a disproportionate impact on small woodlands, particularly where they are on farms, through neglect, or use as grazing and outside farms through the absence of a level playing field with other sorts of land use. Whilst agricultural land can yield a crop every year, albeit a tough way of life for many, income from woodland management is far more sporadic and thus arguably more in need of support.

Management support mechanisms developed under the existing CAP-driven mechanisms are constrained in various ways, with desirable elements excluded for various reasons. Examples include constraints on training, equipment support, size of area to be supported, amongst other issues.

It is often said that the UK gold-plates the conditions imposed by Brussels. The opportunity to design something completely new means the UK institutions now have a once in a generation opportunity to develop approaches that break the mould and go in new directions, which are focused on what will promote woodland management through an understanding of what works in the English context(s).

Small woodlands require approaches that fit their particular circumstances. Farm woodlands require an approach that is integrated with the farm management system, other woods need different approaches and small woodlands within estates require yet another approach. However, in common between them all is the need for some sort of catalyst. Impulse is needed from the market, from knowledge exchange and from policy to ignite the woodland management cycle.

Were any new approach to be proposed that aimed to address the chronic under-management of small woods, then it would need to include a significant catalytic role alongside incentives for



improvement of the planting and management grant regime, accelerating and focusing their effects in order to overcome the barriers faced by owners and managers, providing new motivation to management. The catalytic role would need to include facilitation, community engagement, business networking and growth through cooperation and social and economic investment.

The intention of our policy proposals is to look at what is needed to incentivise woodland management, at the same time as minimising the danger of wasted resources or perverse incentives that characterise the CAP.

Our focus is on the stimulation of local markets, mobilising more products from semi-natural woodlands and thereby improving their management and their condition. A result of the “one size fits all” approach driven by the CAP is that “perverse incentives” result, i.e., they lead to the opposite of their intended effects as owners and managers act to maximise grant take, rather than responding to market signals

### 3. Our policy proposals for the way ahead

#### 3.1 *The SWA policy proposal*

Firstly, the woodland management policy should be objective-led, i.e., it should be designed to achieve a clear outcome that delivers benefits to woodland health and harmony, and the economic, social and environmental goods that flow from them. **It is critical that these three elements of sustainable development, economy, environment and society are on an equal footing** within any support arrangements, as to favour one over the other would be to unbalance the policy.

That doesn't mean that SWA is suggesting that every wood should be managed in this way, far from it, it should be for the woodland managers to choose the approach that best fits their woodland, based on a **well-informed woodland management plan**, determining the mix of objectives that fits best on each site.

However, the woodlands of England in particular are historically under-managed and given the fact that so many English woodlands are even aged and secondary in their nature, this means that there is a legacy of under-management that needs to be addressed. Hence SWA would be keen to promote a specific **“Into Management” component of the support regime**. This would recognise the specific challenges of bringing an un-managed woodland into management. Cost/cycle/thinning

The Small Woods Association wishes to support proposals for an **integrated common countryside policy**, which brings together support for agriculture, forestry and other land management on a level playing field, in common with proposals put forward by Confor, Woodland Trust and others.

In pursuing such a comprehensive approach, SWA are in support of land management contracts for farmers that are as comprehensive as possible; it will also be important to ensure that woodlands are on a level playing field with other forms of land management. For this reason, we are keen that such a new system should be focused on the production of public goods from woodland management that do not incentivise farmers to under-record woodland on their land or register it as grazing land, as is the case currently.

An integrated approach based on the *Common Countryside Policy* principle would necessarily lead to more woodland work being done by farmers, both for woods on farms and potentially beyond. However, we are very aware that most woodland management is undertaken by non-farmers; i.e., by woodland owners, managers and contractors, and this is likely to remain the case, for reason of skills, equipment and qualifications (including the need to ensure any work carried out is safe and



covered by the appropriate forestry “tickets”). They are also more likely to have the skills required to devise a **woodland management plan** and to be able to undertake their implementation.

### *3.2 Small Woods requirements for the new system*

Whilst it will be important to ensure that the system that is intended to be established is comprehensive and straightforward, it will be more important to ensure that it is capable of providing the sort of support that our woodlands need, given their range of needs. Hence, we are proposing menu of support that should be recognised:

- the **particular stage of development**, the secondary un-managed nature of many small native woodlands in England;
- the specific nature and needs of the **labour force, equipment and skills needs**;
- the capacity for **farmers** to do more woodland management;
- the need for support contracts to **integrate different elements**, e.g., a land management contract that supported farming and/or woodland management should also be capable of supporting and balancing support for other uses, such as flood defence and biodiversity.
- the particular role played by **collaboration** and the challenges in delivering economies of scale for small sites, e.g., through skills (such as contractors) and equipment sharing;
- the need to be guided by well-informed **woodland management plans**.

### *3.3 Woodland management specific elements of the menu*

SWA supports the policy direction to have a single land management menu available for all land managers, regardless of who they might be. All land managers, including farmers, woodland managers and those managing for other objectives (such as biodiversity, soil conservation or flood defence), should have access to a range of options that cover the full range of land use public goods in England.

Specifically, in relation to the nature of small woodlands the national menu of options should include:

- **Management for sustainable production** – conversion of existing unmanaged woodland into productive multi-use woodland is an ongoing process, which is very challenging to start when woodlands are unmanaged. A one off grant to bring woodlands into management, that enabled a planned approach, which introduced thinning cycles according to a sustainable and locally appropriate management system, such as Continuous Cover Forestry, along with the introduction of infrastructure, such as hard standing. We would also support a declining schedule of payments that recognise the ongoing costs of this stage of management.
- **Size limits** set the threshold for support at a level that can benefit small woodlands, for example 1ha.
- **Promotion of collaboration** – the scheme should be designed with collaboration in mind, with specific measures to facilitate equipment and skills sharing, as well as support for owners to collaborate on management.
- **Equipment for sharing** – small woodlands are by their nature not of a size to justify investment in the full range of machinery needed for their management. Hence, we would



propose support for equipment purchase where it was to be in shared use across a number of sites.

- **Shared forester approaches** – we propose support for woodland management undertaken by a shared or ward forester across a number of sites in a number of different ownerships.

We appreciate that there are likely to be a wide range of demands on the national menu, we therefore recommend that the single menu approach is thoroughly tested through a pilot stage and that the possibility of a woodland management variant of the new approach to land management is maintained for England as an alternative to the single menu, if it proves to be impractical to deliver a sufficiently robust approach through the single all-purpose menu.

## 4. Other considerations

### 4.1 *Managing for multiple objectives*

The greatest public benefits are gained from woodland management where multiple objectives are aimed for and achieved from both market and non-market sources. However, the argument for public support for woodland management is weakened if the opportunities for market development have not been fully exploited. In economic terms woodland management is not happening currently due to market failure. Some of those market failures could be seen as temporary, or capable of being addressed, e.g., finding markets for woodland management products for which markets do not currently exist. At the same time characteristics such as declining biodiversity as a consequence of non-intervention, would be addressed through improving management.

The current CAP-driven incentives are based on a common approach to all owners, the approach to be trialled through this pilot work would be a new direction, as it would seek to maximise flexibility and develop an area based approach that packaged all the elements of woodland management support that can maximise public benefit. It would also seek to locally sensitive, adapting its approach as the circumstances change, a facility completely impossible in a mechanism that seeks to apply a common approach across 28 member states. Our expectation is that the needs will vary between areas and will change with time because the roots of the under-management problem are as much in the knowledge and motivations of owners, as they are about economics.

Future woodland management support should be designed to support the achievement of multiple objectives, i.e., where woodlands are productive in terms of products and employment opportunities, whilst delivering biodiversity/ecosystem services and social benefits within its capacity to so do. Achieving multiple objectives from woodland does not lend itself to simple one size fits all incentives, of the sort most recently promoted by the RDPE under the auspices of the CAP. A mix of facilitation, cooperation, market and product development and coordination is needed alongside the simple grants to incentivise management.

### 4.2 *Integrating social opportunities*

Current and recent experience is that social forestry offers a good opportunity for some woods, to both increase public engagement with woodlands as well as opportunities for another income stream, quite apart from their beneficial effects on health and wellbeing. Forest Schools, Social Prescribing as well as Small Woods own experience in Health and Wellbeing programmes, has revealed that this is now a growth area and offers job and business opportunities in all parts of England, rural and urban. Future small woodlands development should fully embrace the opportunities offered by social forestry if they are to recognise the full value of such woodlands, as it



offers a way to reconnect people with nature, improve health and wellbeing, particularly amongst those who most need the support, as well as offering new income streams for woodland owners and managers.

#### *4.3 Sector skills development*

The experience of woodland owners is that should they wish to gain the support of a local contractor who was trained in and sensitive to the needs of multi-objective woodland management, it is often difficult to find appropriate personnel. Although it is not possible to pre-empt the findings of the current FC Business Skills work, it is clear that there is no ready supply of such people, although there is no shortage of potential. Skills development is a best led from the local level, where local colleges and skills development providers can work with other “links in the chain” to identify the most appropriate routes to sector skills development.

#### *4.4 Market development*

The “sector” broadly represented by the products of woodland management as well as its social goods have a high degree of “Locational quotient” (LQ). This is a term used by economists to denote how connected a sector is to its locality. By way of comparison web designers have very low LQ, as they are “footloose” and able to move the location of their business at very little notice. A woodland management business is conversely very attached to its locality and a job once created is likely to stick. Hence market development for the sector has the potential to be long lasting and locally beneficial. In this context therefore, the development of local markets has a particularly important part to play. However, this is a process that is neither easy, nor simple. For this reason we are suggesting that local groups are given the tools to investigate local market opportunities, with a view to promoting wider ranges of products from local woodlands. One aspect that has changed with regard to market development is the price of timber, which has risen of late, which ensures that the general market conditions have improved for all products made from or with timber.

#### *4.5 Knowledge transfer*

Woodland owners and managers tell us that one of the biggest barriers for them is access to knowledge, both knowledgeable people (see skills development above), but also knowledge to inform management decisions made by owners, i.e., when to call for assistance and what they should be looking for. It is clear that woodland ownership is a very dynamic area of land ownership, with the work of companies such as woodlands.co.uk opening up woodland ownership to a whole new group of people. This brings challenges of its own and a locally driven approach to cooperation is needed to overcome the effects of such fragmentation.

Events, such as that run with support from the FC’s “Making Woodlands Work” initiative are a good model for the sort of event that will work for many owners and managers. However, people with familiarity of how things work in their own area will know what is most likely to work and who to involve in order to have the greatest impact, including the traditional knowledge transfer community, based around universities and colleges.

#### *4.6 Hubs*

Early discussions in the proposed project areas has revealed a number of groups that perceive the lack of focus for the sector to be an issue. The woodland management sector is by its very nature dispersed and opportunities for networking limited. The provision of hubs, such as Small Woods own centre in Coalbrookdale, Shropshire and others such as Flimwell and Hill Holt Wood are seen as one way of addressing this. It can be difficult to make a success of such centres, and careful scoping



is important on which a sound business case could be made, and then implemented using a realistic business plan led approach.

#### *4.7 Cooperation*

Research for the SIMWOOD project has indicated that cooperative approaches offer a way ahead for small woodland management. Approaches similar to the shared forester or ward forester approach that has been previously trialled in the South West with a degree of success. The general improvement of market conditions should make such approaches more likely to succeed in 2017-20 than previously. Cooperation is difficult and requires high degrees of trust. This is why the locally grounded approaches are thought more likely to succeed, as such groups are more likely to be able to develop mutual trust. Given the importance of cooperation to LEADER, the development of local woodland action groups should offer a very real way of demonstrating LEADER principles in action.

#### *4.8 Action planning*

Finally, it is intended that in each case the pilot project will establish an Action Plan for the promotion of Woodland Management for each area. In addition, it will lead to the production of an overall Action Plan that brings the conclusions of the pilot project together.

The importance of this cannot be overstated. It is important with a pilot project that the process of bringing the lessons together is envisaged from the beginning and that it does so on a basis that is well understood by all stakeholders. The Action Plans will be coordinated, produced to an agreed joint timetable, enabling the conclusions from all 5 areas to be fed into the overall Action Plan.

## **5 Evidence from Research**

The proposal is based on evidence collected from three principle sources – SIMWOOD, Running our own projects and the word forester work in SW England.

**SIMWOOD** – SWA ran one of the two UK pilot projects within the major EU-funded research project looking at the mobilisation of timber from small woods. The project found, counter to mainstream forestry thinking, that timber could be mobilised from small woodlands, but it needed different, more creative approaches, which involved cooperation and pooling of needs and resources, together with techniques that were more appropriate to small scale exploitation.

**HEARTWOODS** – SWA has run a number of projects, including the formerly RDPE-funded Heartwoods project in the Marches area of England. This found that hands on support to woodland owners could stimulate local market development.

**Ward Forester** – the Ward Forester approach trialled in SW England, had some success, but has been limited by the prevailing market conditions. The fact that those conditions have changed means that the approach is now significantly more viable and more likely to bring forward the benefits that were predicted during the original trials.

## **6. Small Woods Association**

Small Woods Association is the foremost independent membership organisation that exists to support woodland owners across the UK. We were established in 1988 in response to a perception



that small woodlands were under threat and that woodland owners could do more when working together and better informed. Our objectives are:

- To increase the sustainable management of small woodlands
- To promote the wider utilisation of local timber and wood products

We have 2250 members, who between them own +/- 30,000ha of woodland, a similar woodland area to the Woodland Trust.

Small Woods Association are keen to use our experience in running small woodlands support programmes; having been the delivery body for the successful and well-regarded Heartwoods programme, as well as working with Forest Research on mobilisation of small woodland resources in the SIMWOOD project.