

Position Statement

Planning

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Introduction

What is planning?

“Good planning improves the welfare of people and their communities by creating more convenient, equitable, healthful, efficient, and attractive places for present and future generations. It helps to create communities that offer better choices for where and how people live. Planning helps communities to envision their future. It helps them to find the right balance of new development and essential services, environmental protection, and innovative change.”¹

Why is the Trust interested in planning?

The planning system is a positive force for transformational change in both rural and urban areas, helping us to deliver our vision for a UK rich in native woods and trees. Our aspirations to double native woodland cover rely on working with a wide range of key partners, including local authorities and their planning departments. Planners have the power to set a clear vision about the importance of including green spaces and green infrastructure into new developments from a very early stage. They also have the power to require developers to undertake schemes to compensate for the impact of their developments.

Planning can also be a potentially damaging force in sanctioning the destruction and damage of irreplaceable natural resources in the name of economic gain. This would thwart our aim of protecting ancient woods and trees. The Trust regrets that decisions taken under the Town and Country Planning System trump requirements of the Forestry Acts to obtain felling licences and replant trees. So at times the Trust may need to challenge the planning system to oppose damaging developments, whilst at other times we will support and encourage it to ensure trees and woods are seen as an essential part of a high quality local environment.

The Woodland Trust view

What do we want planning to deliver for woods and trees?

In broad terms we wish to seize the opportunities within the planning systems in all four countries of the UK and to see them deliver the following:

- Continuing protection of irreplaceable ancient and semi-natural woodland and ancient trees through national and local policy and guidance. The Trust has fought hard to achieve this over the past decade and should never take such protection for granted given that the planning systems can and do change. We oppose the loss of all ancient and semi-natural woodland and wish to see no further erosion of it in the future.
- Increasing recognition of woodland as an especially valuable kind of green space in green infrastructure strategies. Green Infrastructure means the network of natural environmental components and green spaces that lie within and between cities, towns and villages. It includes trees, hedges, copses, shelter belts, open spaces, parks, playing fields, gardens, avenues, allotments,

¹ American Planning Association <http://www.planning.org/aboutapa/> Sept 15 2010. The definition applies equally well to the UK.

urban and rural woods, nature reserves and so on. Such green networks serve many purposes, economic, social and environmental.

- Promoting the general importance of creating new woodland as part of adaptation to climate change, in urban regeneration and as healthier places to live, assisting the four countries in the UK in furthering their biodiversity strategies, and thereby contributing to the UK's, EU's and UN's aims of reducing and halting biodiversity loss.

What the Woodland Trust will do

We will focus our energies on the following areas:

- Working to influence the front end of planning: national planning statements which occur in various forms in all four countries are short top line statements setting out the guiding principles about various sectors such as energy, natural environment, transport and so on. The guidance may also be relevant to decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.
- Engaging with local authorities to raise the profile of green infrastructure as a key route to generating more woodland creation.
- Building capacity and empowering local communities to be able to take action themselves on cases where ancient woods come under threat. We also want to encourage local communities to be a voice for more new woodland as well. To do this we have developed a scheme called WoodWatch. We believe this is a more effective way of working than attempting to fight ourselves all cases we hear about even though many would understandably like us to do so. With 450 known live cases of ancient woods under threat at present [August 2010] we have to prioritise our work so we will consider direct involvement in cases which meet at least one of the following four specific criteria:
 - A clear example of a breach of national planning policy
 - Cases setting a clear and adverse precedent
 - Cases affecting large areas of ancient woodland (e.g. more than 50 hectares (approximately 125 acres))
 - High profile cases affecting iconic areas of woodland, such as those woods demonstrating strong historic or cultural associations, outstanding landscape quality, nationally important biodiversity or deep public affection
- Working more closely with planners and developers to achieve positive outcomes for woodland protection and creation even where development may result in some woodland loss. This is a new activity for us and it is explained further below.

Mitigation and compensation for woodland loss

The pre-planning application stage

By the time planning applications are reviewed by local authorities, much time and energy will already have been invested by developers in their plans. We will spend more time engaging with developers at an earlier pre-application stage of their plans to persuade them to adapt their proposals so as to eliminate ancient woodland loss. If the avoidance of loss is not negotiable, then we should aim to mitigate their plans so as to deliver as much native woodland creation as possible. This process is known as planning mitigation.

Planning application stage

Once plans enter the planning system and are reviewed by local planning authorities, we will pursue further efforts to achieve positive outcomes for woodland. We will continue to take an implacable line in opposing the loss of any ancient woodland. We have achieved considerable success in preventing developments in ancient woodland where we have objected to and fought right through the planning system. But we also recognise that not every decision will go our way and in those cases we should negotiate hard to achieve some positive benefit out of an adverse situation. We support local authorities in seeking to achieve

compensation measures for the loss of woodland and other habitats, and on a case by case basis would judge the merits of working with a developer on compensation measures within a local area, even while continuing to oppose the loss of ancient woodland.

The post application stage

Once the planning system has made a decision, there may in future be some further possibilities of creating compensatory new habitats through a new idea called 'habitat banking'. Interest has grown in 'conservation banking' or 'habitat banking' as a way of ensuring proper recompense for habitat lost to development. Conservation banking first emerged in the US in the mid 1990s. Through purchasing 'credits' developers offset or compensate for the impact of their project on habitats or species. Credits are pooled from several projects and used for the creation, restoration or enhancement of the same type of habitat elsewhere. By placing a value on the species or habitat which might be lost, credits are intended both to encourage avoidance or minimise loss where development is unavoidable and to provide for compensation. The governance and the mechanisms of such a banking system need to be set up in a fair and open way without undue influence from government or the developers themselves.

We are fully supportive of conservation banking because it represents a tool for creating habitat creation funding from sources other than government, a particularly important issue at a time of government spending cuts. It can be seen to offer advantages in establishing a compensation system which results in no-net-loss of habitat, encourage minimisation of habitat lost to development and provide funding for a more strategic approach to compensation measures. Of course, there need to be particularly steep tariffs in terms of habitat creation requirements where non-re-creatable habitats such as ancient woodland are lost.

In supporting habitat banking we believe it should be viewed primarily as a policy instrument which minimises unavoidable damage (through introducing an economic value for habitat) and only in the final resort provides compensation. Existing planning legislation and regulations should be rigorously applied, including obligations under planning guidance; the Birds Directive; the Habitats Directive; their associated network of *Natura 2000* sites; the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive; the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive and the Water Framework Directive.

Conclusion

While planning systems only affect land use decisions on a minority of the UK's land area, such decisions affect the places where people live and work so environmentally positive planning systems can play a key role in helping to deliver our aspirations for a doubling of native woodland cover in the future.