

England's community forests

SELECT COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL POLICY FOR THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Call for Written Evidence

Evidence from England's Community Forests

Background to England's Community Forests

England's Community Forests are Government approved programmes with a track record of environmental regeneration in and around our towns and cities.

Over half of England's population lives within easy reach of a Community Forest. Our maturing woodlands are improving health and wellbeing, tackling a changing climate and setting the scene for future growth and prosperity and an essential part of the sustainable development of our towns and cities.

Each Community Forest is strategically located to support the jobs and growth agenda across key city regions and urban clusters. Our footprint includes the Northern Powerhouse, M4 Growth Corridor and D2N2.

As our woodlands have grown up we've developed a range of answers to the complex problems of our towns and cities. Our Forests: enable sustainable development, creating an attractive green framework for town and cityscape - places to live work and play; boost health and wellbeing; help adapt to climate change; connect people to their landscape each other and their communities; support economic growth through timber and biomass production and tourism through the outdoor visitor economy; help to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

We have achieved sustainable improvements to the quality of life and place in some of the most deprived parts of England, as recognised by national planning and environment policy.

The quality and functionality of our built environment relies to a large degree on the quality, quantity and distribution of trees and other green infrastructure elements.

Trees in and around our towns and cities provide a broad range of benefits that can no longer be taken for granted including the recognised positive impacts a green environment has on property values.

Where trees are lacking we can identify "pinch points" to sustainable development.

We are pleased to provide comments on the role we think Community Forests play and can continue to play in the built environment.

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Evidence

Below the are set out the questions in the Call for Written Evidence followed by the response of the Urban FWAC Network

Policymaking, integration and coordination

Are the decisions that shape England's built environment taken at the right administrative level? What role should national policymakers play in shaping our built environment, and how does this relate to the work and role of local authorities and their partners?

- Trees and other green infrastructure types are an essential part of any discussion about built environment. GI needs to be planned in the same way as other infrastructures a fundamental consideration of how places function.
- Need for decision making at several levels, but clearer links between high level strategic planning and Local Authority level. Need for greater flexibility and ambition for local and neighbourhood plans and policy. We support the TCPA calls for a national strategic land use plan – to include forests and trees (Lie of the Land, 2014, TCPA).
- The need for a national GI plan that crosses planning authority boundaries. Community Forest Plans are good starting points in the areas where they exist. These plans should be used more frequently in local decision making, using the links top NPPF and the strong links to community aspiration for their local areas.
- There needs to be some stability in plans and policy. The past 20 years has seen too many restarts/resets for plans and policy making. This has resulted in some places having started the planning process multiple times, confusing communities, wasting resources and leaving a policy vacuum.
- The natural element of the built environment requires longer term planning (stability) that can be adaptive in nature to respond to the changing demands in towns and cities.
- The Natural Capital Committee 2015 report makes a string case for community forestry, identifying major cost:benefit returns and supporting key agendas such as housing growth, health, education and creation of attractive places for investment.

How well is policy coordinated across those Government departments that have a role to play in matters such as housing, design, transport, infrastructure, sustainability and heritage? How could integration and coordination be improved?

Government policy and implementation is not well integrated. There is a clear need to identify a lead department and establish a co-ordination team that brings in all relevant government departments to oversee delivery of GI so it is integrated into infrastructure planning for urban areas. Policy needs to be integrated once it is issued. Policy needs to have been consulted on internally before leaving government with all relevant Government Departments.

National Land use policy can help to inform the work of the coordination team, and provide a framework for monitoring alongside Natural Capital accounts.

National policy for planning and the built environment

Does the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provide sufficient policy guidance for those involved in planning, developing and protecting the built and natural environment? Are some factors within the NPPF more important than others? If so, what should be prioritised and why?

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There is need for better, integrated policy guidance on natural environment – at present it has many strands and no unifying language, nor plan.

What is required is high level Natural Capital policy and GI policy, delivered locally through GI Plans, community forest plans and ecological frameworks - all of which have shared objectives.

Is national planning policy in England lacking a spatial perspective? What would be the effects of introducing a spatial element to national policy?

As a minimum, consideration should be given to our urban areas as different to our rural areas. They are the most densely populated areas with the most social, economic and environmental problems. There are also critical interrelationships which should be recognised, for example, maintaining flood plains and wooded areas up stream of rivers leading into urban areas to reduce the risk of flooding.

There should be national Green Infrastructure planning policy and guidance to making our cities towns and villages more liveable.

Is there an optimum timescale for planning our future built environment needs and requirements? How far ahead should those involved in the development of planning and built environment policy be looking?

Need for long term, stable plan and policy for natural environment in the built environment. These plans can be adaptive. The Community Forest plans are 40 year plans. This has worked well; it is a good model to use as the basis for planning for the built environment.

Green Infrastructure Plans will include many elements (including community forests) reflecting the multiple benefit and the partnership implementation. Delivery will be over many decades and will include projects relating to urban trees, green roofs, sustainable urban drainage, new green cycle ways, river and floodplain restorations etc. The long term integrated maintenance of these schemes also needs to be considered as the project “grow” and multiply their benefits.

Buildings and places: New and old

What role should the Government play in seeking to address current issues of housing supply? Are further interventions, properly coordinated at central Government level, required? What will be the likely effect upon housing supply of recent reforms proposed for the planning system?

How do we develop built environments which are sustainable and resilient, and what role should the Government play in any such undertaking? Will existing buildings and places be able to adapt to changing needs and circumstances in the years to come? How can the best use of existing housing stock and built environment assets be made?

The built environment should be adapting to Climate change and the development of Green Infrastructure Plans and SUDs proposals are integral to these. GI will promote resilience, sustainability and economic benefits to urban communities that can come from GI not only amenity. GI Plans can be retro fitted to existing built areas and planned as part of new urban areas.

Ensure CF Plans are supported, where they exist, in local plans. Strengthen existing policy in NPPF to encompass all features of CFs in planning, not just in greenbelt issues.

Historic and Heritage environment create a sense of place pride. Understanding the history of where we live often leads to community involvement and community coherence. Trees and woodlands are part of the historic environment and can massively increase the value of an urban area. Historic trees

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and avenues in the urban areas are highly valued and add to the economic as well as aesthetic values of an area.

Skills and design

Do the professions involved in this area (e.g. planners, surveyors, architects, engineers etc.) have the skills adequately to consider the built environment in a holistic manner? How could we begin to address any skills issues? Do local authorities have access to the skills and resources required to plan, shape and manage the built environment in their areas?

There has been a skills drain in the public sector, with the removal of the experienced planners, surveyors, architects, engineers, resulting in poor design being implemented by unskilled or poorly qualified. Local Enterprise Partnerships and other skills agencies may have a role to play to reskill our public players. Critically we require multi-disciplinary practitioners to plan urban areas who understand architecture, landscape, climate change, engineering, drainage, pollution etc.

Are we using the right tools and techniques to promote high quality design and 'place-making' at the national level? How could national leadership on these matters be enhanced?

England's Community Forests, The Landscape institute, the RTPI and other national bodies have a leading role to play in advising Government. These organisations have been an ardent supporter of GI and multi-disciplinary planning and their energy and passion should be channelled into Government policy making.

Community involvement and community impact

Do those involved in delivering and managing our built environment, including decision-makers and developers, take sufficient account of the way in which the built environment affects those who live and work within it? How could we improve consideration of the impacts of the built environment upon the mental and physical health of users, and upon behaviours within communities?

There is a good evidence base to support high quality green infrastructure improving the quality of life and place. These interventions, if well planned and coordinated, can be lower cost solutions to some of the problems that our towns and cities face now and in the future with pressures from projected climate change and demographic shifts.

Setting clear framework nationally and maintaining up to date plan and policy database of good practice would be helpful (planning and forestry portal was part of Env White paper – but now going out of date due to lack of resources (<http://www.forestryandplanning.org.uk/>))

How effectively are communities able to engage with the process of decision making that shapes the built environment in which they live and work? Are there any barriers to effective public engagement and, if so, how might they be addressed?

The reduction of the public sector work force through declining budgets has placed more pressure on the planning system. Consulting communities on shaping their built environment requires a resource that currently is not there or is present at a reduced capacity. To facilitate effective public consultation resources will need to be provided to the public sector to engage in long term sustainable solutions. These need not be large amounts but could be used to draw in third sector partners to facilitate this process.

Financial measures

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Are there fiscal or financial measures potentially available which would help to address current issues of housing and land supply? Are there financial or other mechanisms that would encourage better design and place-making by private sector developers?

- There should be a re-examination of the use of tax credit to support sustainable environmental improvements to unlock housing and other land use pinch points. There is emerging evidence to show how good quality GI can accelerate development on approved sites and lead to accelerated returns on investment. This can , income retention - BE Group - accelerate investment
- Consideration of European mainland financial models and approaches to housing and urban development e.g. where infrastructure goes in prior to development.
- Government should investigate Green Bank investments into City or town Centres, which elevate the value of land and produce a return on that investment through increased land values.
- Government should be looking at sustainable incomes rather than one-off capital payment. Incomes should be related to other incomes such as the Community Infrastructure Levy or the Landfill Communities Fund where a percentage of the payments help maintain the public realm into the future.