



WOODLAND
TRUST

A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland





Why a vision?

In 2006, the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development launched its forestry strategy: *Northern Ireland Forestry, A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth*.¹ This made some welcome revisions to Northern Ireland's previous forestry policy, including a commitment to expanding woodland cover and increased regulation on tree felling.

The Woodland Trust, however, believes that *A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth* fails to address several vital issues such as: the protection and restoration of ancient and long-established woodland, climate change and its impact on woodland, and how government can deliver native woodland creation.

It is now imperative that the Northern Ireland Executive and relevant departments go much further and articulate a vision that responds to the growing challenges confronting woodland conservation that arise from climate change,

agriculture, energy, forestry practice, and infrastructure development.

Northern Ireland has very little woodland cover, only 6 per cent compared to an average of 12 per cent for the rest of the UK.² This is significantly lower than the European figure of 44 per cent, and almost 80 per cent is comprised of recently-planted non-native conifer plantations.³ The remaining native and broadleaved woodland is scattered and fragmented, although it forms a precious natural heritage from which to rebuild woodland cover.

To remedy the historic legacy of habitat removal, the Woodland Trust has prepared *A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland* which outlines how to achieve a sustainable future for Northern Ireland's woodland heritage and the wildlife it supports.

A summary of the Woodland Trust vision

The Trust's vision for Northern Ireland is one where all woodland, old and new, native and non-native, will be valued for the wildlife it supports, easily accessible to people, and capable of assisting in mitigating against, and adapting to, climate change.

All woodland identified on the Ancient Woodland Inventory and all ancient trees will be given absolute protection.⁴ Furthermore, all sites identified on the Ancient Woodland

Inventory that have been planted with non-native conifers will be restored to their former glory.

Northern Ireland will be known for its greatly expanded woodland resource which will allow everyone to enjoy ready access to high quality woods. These will be ecologically connected across enhanced landscapes and provide a robust habitat for wildlife.

Ancient and long-established woodland

Ancient woods (areas wooded since at least 1600) are very rare, making up a small fraction of Northern Ireland's sparse woodland cover. Despite a legacy of destruction, ancient and long-established woodland is one of the most diverse habitats in the province – our equivalent of the rainforest. Once lost, ancient and long-established woodland is irreplaceable, yet this crucial habitat remains under significant threat from development.

The Woodland Trust has produced the Ancient Woodland Inventory, the first ever record of Northern Ireland's ancient and long-established woodland. Long-established woodland (woodland dating back as far as 1830) is also significant in a country where ancient woodland is so rare. Indeed, all sites on

the Ancient Woodland Inventory have now assumed an important role in woodland biodiversity owing to their continuity.

Given the scarcity of ancient and long-established woodland, the Northern Ireland Executive should:

- **Afford absolute legislative protection for all woodland sites on the Ancient Woodland Inventory.⁵**
- **Encourage the restoration of all sites on the Ancient Woodland Inventory planted with non-native conifers.**
- **Make Forest Service an exemplar in restoring all Ancient Woodland Inventory sites in its ownership that have been planted with non-native conifers.**





Woodland inventory

In addition to the Ancient Woodland Inventory there is a need to expand on our knowledge base by creating an inventory of all woodland in Northern Ireland. The creation of such an inventory will assist government to target those areas of the province poorly served by woodland and, in addition, help to monitor loss. The Northern Ireland Executive should therefore:

- **Create a national inventory of all woodland.**
- **Use this national inventory of all woodland to inform planning decisions.**
- **Commit to maintaining the Ancient Woodland Inventory and the new national inventory of all woodland.**

Ancient trees

Ancient, veteran and significant trees are of prime importance to biodiversity in Northern Ireland. Individual old trees often have local or national cultural significance, are a living connection to the past and are inextricably linked with certain landscape character types. The term 'ancient tree' encompasses: trees of interest biologically, aesthetically or culturally because of their great age; trees in the ancient or third and final stage of their life; and trees that are old relative to others of the same species. The Northern Ireland Executive should:

- **Afford legislative protection to all ancient, veteran and significant trees.**
- **Restrict development of land when it is likely to negatively impact on ancient trees.**

Climate change

Climate change is already here. It is impacting on woodland habitats and the species they support by disrupting life cycles, altering interactions between species, and requiring them either to adapt or move to more suitable climatic and habitat conditions.

Helping species adapt and respond to some of the consequences of climate change is essential, and here trees and woodland provide scope for ameliorating some of the worst effects. Woodland creation can give many 'wins' by abating intensive land use, storing carbon and creating new habitat.

Northern Ireland has a highly fragmented landscape and likely rates of climate change threaten the survival of its natural world. Accordingly, the Woodland Trust expects the Northern Ireland Executive and its departments to recognise the importance of native woodland, in particular ancient and long-established woodland and ancient trees, as the foundation for the restoration of this fragmented landscape.

Through a landscape-scale approach to the conservation of the province's natural heritage the Woodland Trust wants to see the creation of new wildlife habitats within a more sympathetically managed landscape that will allow as many species as possible to adapt and move in response to changes in climate.

To safeguard the many benefits people derive from a healthy natural environment the Northern Ireland Executive must:

- **Adopt a landscape-scale approach to create robust, diverse and ecologically**

functional habitats, as supported by the commitments and recommendations outlined in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy.⁶

- **Target habitat creation to buffer habitats from the negative edge effects of intensive land use, and extend the area of habitat rather than simply physically linking them.**
- **Reduce the release of carbon into the atmosphere by protecting woodland and other carbon sinks.**
- **Continue the process of CAP reform to make the wider countryside receptive to wildlife.**
- **Ensure that national and area planning protects the environment and takes account of climate change, while maximising the opportunities for whole landscapes to benefit both wildlife and people.**
- **Introduce a credible assurance scheme to guarantee that bioenergy is sourced and produced sustainably.**



Woodland expansion

Woodland creation should be targeted to help buffer and protect ancient and long-established woodland from negative edge effects. These effects – diffuse pollution, intensive agriculture and infrastructure development – can seriously degrade woodland and make them unsuitable habitats for certain wildlife.

Not only should woodland creation buffer existing woodland, it must also make the natural environment more accessible by creating new woodland where there is currently a lack of public access.

A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland calls for a strategic expansion of woodland cover, including targets for woodland creation and policy instruments for delivery. These should include:

- **A new strategy to enable the doubling of woodland cover over 50 years. It is estimated that Northern Ireland has 87,000 hectares of woodland; there will therefore be a need to plant on average 1,740 hectares of new woodland per annum.⁷**



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- **Targeting the creation of new woodland to extend, buffer and protect the remaining fragments of ancient and long-established woodland.**
 - **Priority given in the grants mechanism to planting native broadleaved woodland.**



Recreation, access and communities

Woodland can make a significant contribution to our quality of life by offering us respite and inspiring our imagination, creativity and culture. In particular, ready access to green spaces has demonstrable benefits for both physical and mental health and can facilitate social inclusion.⁸

Woodland is an especially valuable type of green space because of its ability to accommodate large numbers of people, reduce noise pollution, provide shading and complement the height of artificial structures in urban areas.

Woodland creation should be targeted near locations where people live, work and relax.

By creating new woodland, the Northern Ireland Executive can truly deliver cleaner, safer and greener communities. To help ensure that woods are created to benefit the people of Northern Ireland, woodland creation should enable:

- **Everyone in Northern Ireland to live no more than 500 metres from at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 2 hectares in size.**
- **Everyone to have at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 20 hectares within 4 kilometres of their homes.⁹**

Legislation

To facilitate successful implementation of this vision there is a need to comprehensively revise the *Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953* and guarantee that Forest Service:

- **Delivers forest management to reflect the needs of both people and wildlife.**
- **Promotes sustainable management, woodland creation, and the restoration of ancient woods planted with conifers through targeted grants.**
- **Reintroduces the requirement for felling licences to protect all woodland.**

Certification

Independent certification encourages the responsible management of woodland by promoting best practice and providing rewards for owners and reassurance to buyers of wood products.

A certification regime is an important tool in integrating the economic, social and environmental strands of development. The Northern Ireland Executive should:

- **Ask that all government departments, or their agents owning and managing woodland, achieve UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS), and Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) certification to validate that they are pursuing sustainable woodland management.**
- **Set clear targets and support certification in the private sector.**





A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland requires bold and dynamic leadership, legislative change at Stormont, and better targeting of resources by government bodies.

The Woodland Trust hopes the Northern Ireland Executive and its agencies rise to the challenges facing woodland in the province by pursuing this vision.



Annex – references and sources

Our vision is based on a mixture of research and analysis commissioned by the Woodland Trust and government departments, including the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of Regional Development, and the Department of the Environment.

*Northern Ireland Forestry, A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth*¹⁰

In 2006, the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development published its forestry strategy. It failed to give due consideration to significant issues including: climate change impacts on woodland, public access to multi-functional green spaces and native woodland creation. In so doing, the strategy gave the impression that the primary role of Forest Service remains timber production.

*Shaping our Future The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025*¹¹

Our vision would supplement and give clarity to the section entitled ‘Caring for the Environment’, and in particular sections 1.1 through to 1.4. These ideas on protecting and managing Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), trees, and woodland areas must be shared across all departments.

*Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy*¹²

The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy recognises that ancient woodland provides a sanctuary for many species and therefore further emphasis in government policy must be apportioned to recommendations 13 through to 20. *A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland* demands tangible action to protect, enhance and extend ancient and long-established woodland.

*A Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, First steps towards sustainability*¹³

This Strategy was the province’s adjunct to the UK Sustainable Development Framework and sought to outline how a diverse, healthy and resilient natural environment could be achieved. *A vision for woodland in Northern Ireland* asks for greater action on many of the policy commitments, such as increasing woodland cover.

*The UK Biodiversity Action Plan*¹⁴

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) was written to help assist the implementation of the UK BAP targets, on behalf of the UK Biodiversity Partnership and the UK Government.

*Making Woodland Count*¹⁵

In *Making Woodland Count* the Woodland Trust demonstrated how woodland has the capacity to contribute to the improvement of 11 out of the 15 headline quality of life indicators. In our vision for Northern Ireland the Woodland Trust wants to see woodland being managed to provide the full range of social, health and environmental benefits of which it is capable.

*Back on the Map*¹⁶

Under the aegis of the ‘Back on the Map’ project the Woodland Trust undertook a field survey and desk study to identify all areas of ancient and long-established woodland. Such sites now identified must be enhanced, restored and protected from land-use pressures, including major infrastructure projects, intensive agriculture and climate change.

*Space for People*¹⁷

The Woodland Trust developed a Woodland Access Standard in the context of other accessible natural green space standards, based on wide-ranging research and surveys of public use. This standard aspires that no person should live more than 500 metres from at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 2 hectares in size and there should be at least one area of accessible woodland of no less than 20 hectares within 4 kilometres of people’s homes. These ambitious targets can be achieved in Northern Ireland by giving grants to support woodland creation, enacting legislation to open existing woodland, and by making the creation of green spaces a requirement of planning permission.

¹ Department for Agriculture and Rural Development, *Northern Ireland Forestry, A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth* (2006),

www.forestserviceni.gov.uk/index/publications/policy-and-standards/a-strategy-for-sustainability-and-growth.htm

² Forestry Commission, *Forestry Facts and Figures*, www.forestry.gov.uk

³ *Ibid*, The European average is estimated at 44 per cent.

⁴ The Woodland Trust, *Back on the Map The Search for Northern Ireland's oldest woods* (2006), www.backonthemap.org.uk

⁵ Environment and Heritage Service, 'Our Environment, Our Heritage, Our Future' *State of the Environment Report in Northern Ireland* (2008), p.100, www.ehsni.gov.uk

The report draws upon the Ancient Woodland Inventory and uses the area of woodland cover in Northern Ireland as an indicator to measure changes in land and landscape management.

⁶ Environment and Heritage Service, *Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy* (2002), www.ehsni.gov.uk

⁷ Forestry Commission, *Forestry Facts and Figures*.

⁸ The Sustainable Development Commission, *Health, place and nature: How outdoor environments influence health and well being: a knowledge base* (2008), www.sd-commission.org.uk

The report reviewed many pieces of research and concluded that 'Exposure to natural spaces is good for health in and of itself and also in terms of facilitating activity and social contact.'

⁹ The Woodland Trust, *Space for People: Targeting action for woodland creation* (2004), www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications

¹⁰ Department for Agriculture and Rural Development, *Northern Ireland, A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth* (2006).

¹¹ Department for Regional Development, *Shaping our Future, Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025* (2001), www.drdni.gov.uk

¹² Environment and Heritage Service, *Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy* (2002).

¹³ Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *A Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland, First steps towards sustainability* (2006), www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk

See Objective 5 'To protect and enhance our biodiversity.'

¹⁴ *UK Biodiversity Action Plan* (1994), www.ukbap.org.uk

¹⁵ The Woodland Trust, *Making Woodland Count, Its contribution to our quality of life, Summary*, A report prepared by ERM in collaboration with Professor Kenneth Willis for the Woodland Trust (2004), www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications

¹⁶ The Woodland Trust, *Back on the Map* (2006).

¹⁷ The Woodland Trust, *Space for People* (2004).

Where to find out more

The Woodland Trust is the UK's leading woodland conservation charity. We are committed to:

- No further loss of ancient woodland
- Restoring and improving the biodiversity of woods
- Increasing new native woodland
- Increasing people's understanding and enjoyment of woodland

Established in 1972, the Woodland Trust now has more than 1,000 sites in its care covering over 20,000 hectares (50,000 acres) of woodland. It offers free access to nearly all of its sites.

The Woodland Trust aims to conserve, restore and re-establish the UK's woodland. To carry out our work, we rely on the generosity of the public, industry, commerce, and agencies. If you would like to support us or would like more information about our work and membership details, please contact your nearest Woodland Trust office.

Woodland Trust

1 Dufferin Court
Dufferin Avenue
Bangor
County Down BT20 3BX
Tel: 028 9127 5787

For more information, visit the Woodland Trust website:
www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

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