

# What people told us

November 2020

Scoping a new forestry plan for forests and woodland in the  
North West

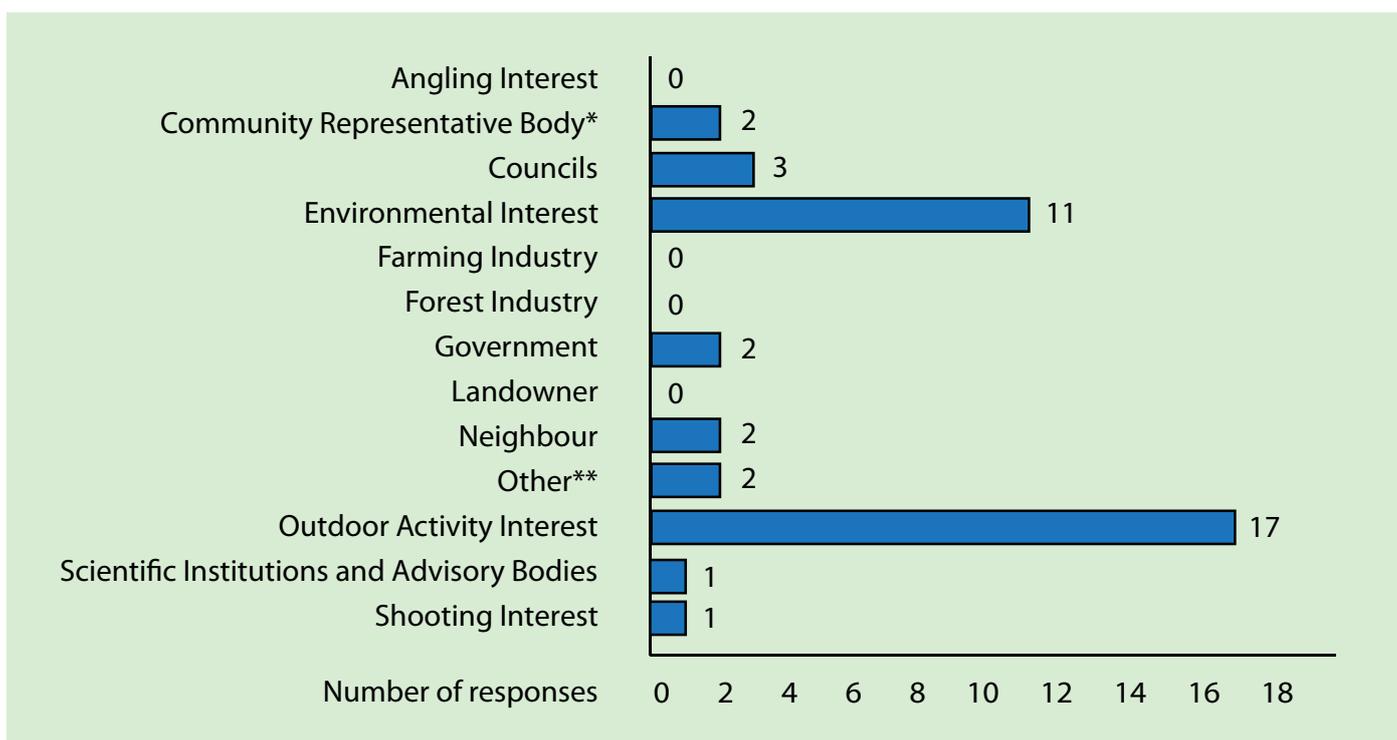
# Summary of Responses to the North West Forestry Planning Area Scoping Consultation

A scoping consultation was initiated via the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) website on 25 January 2019 and ended on 1 March 2019. The purpose of the consultation was to ask people and organisations to help inform the development of a new forestry plan for the North West Forestry Planning Area. The consultation was designed to reflect the wide ranging social, environmental and economic aspects of forestry in a way that would be both of interest to stakeholders, and, relevant to forestry planning. The consultation is part of a review of the eight Forestry Planning Areas that cover all of Northern Ireland. The North West scoping consultation document and other forestry planning documents can be viewed at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/forest-planning>

This summary report provides feedback on the results of the consultation to those who contributed, and others who may be interested in participating in future consultations. In total, 41 responses were received from representatives of organisations, groups and private individuals, as shown in the chart below. Organisations and groups who responded are listed in the Appendix.

## Stakeholder Interest Categories

Stakeholders identified themselves according to the following categories:



\* 'Community Representative Body' includes local development associations.

\*\* The category of 'other' includes a mountain bike group and a stakeholder who identified their interest as "Landscape management organisation covering the natural environment, outdoor recreation, built/cultural heritage and local communities".

## How Forest Service will make use of Consultation Responses

Stakeholders' responses to the scoping document will help the forestry planning team develop a draft forestry plan. Feedback from stakeholders has also helped the forestry planning team identify areas of competing priorities, and has indicated where a balance will have to be found in order to draft a forest plan that reflects stakeholders' interests while meeting the requirements of the UK Forestry Standard.



# Summary of Responses by Scoping Topic

## **Topic 1 - Enhancing Landscapes**

A number of stakeholders expressed their appreciation of forested landscapes in the North West. One individual stakeholder, noting the iconic outline of Binevenagh, said that “forests afford us the opportunity to feel that we belong somewhere”. Some stakeholders, however, said they did not like the appearance of coniferous plantations in the landscape.

Northern Ireland Environmental Agency (NIEA) Regional Operations welcomed the opportunity to reshape felling coupes close to the Binevenagh Special Area of Conservation. They noted that softening the boundary between forest and grassland would create a more natural looking landscape. Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme suggested that the design plan for Binevenagh Forest should ensure that trees are not visible above the skyline beyond the cliffs overlooking the coast to the north-west.

The National Trust noted that Downhill Forest is an integral part of the historic landscape of Downhill Demesne and asked that changes to the forest design be considered in this wider context.

## **Topic 2 - Protecting Rivers and Lakes**

Stakeholders agreed that sustainable management of riparian woodland is important for biodiversity, flood risk management and water quality. A number of stakeholders, including, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, suggested that a collaborative approach involving different organisations was appropriate for riparian management. In particular, collaboration was recommended where there is an objective to restore high status sites, such as open wetland habitats.

An individual stakeholder was concerned that water quality in a number of rivers in the North West was decreased as a result of forestry activities. NIEA Water Management Unit agreed that increasing the area of riparian woodland has the potential to improve water quality; however, they did not raise any specific concerns about current forest activities.

## **Topic 3 - Enabling Enjoyment of Forests by Local People and Visitors**

Stakeholders enthusiastically endorsed the role of forest-based recreation in sustaining users’ health and well-being and widely supported maintaining and improving access to forests with existing and potential partners, as outlined in the scoping document. Both the National Trust and NIEA Regional Operations expressed an interest in co-ordinated outdoor recreation development.

Garvagh People’s Forest Project said it is important that people understand the value of forests and have opportunities to connect with the natural environment. North West Red Squirrel Group referred to their leaflets and information boards, and the introduction of wildlife safari tours of Muff Glen Forest. They noted these as examples of how people could be encouraged to get active and visit their local woods. NI Bat Group also noted that forests are a natural resource that could be used to promote tourism and outdoor education. However, there is a recognition that inappropriate public access is a risk to flora and fauna due to trampling and habitat disturbance. NIEA Regional



Operations noted that the forest planning process was an opportunity to manage this risk.

Although some stakeholders said that they were content with how forests are managed for recreation, others said there was scope for new or improved facilities. Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme and other stakeholders asked for improved signage, car parking and trails, and, better access to archaeological sites. The Partnership also suggested that the lake in Downhill Forest could be restored by dredging.

The development of the Garvagh Forest mountain bike trail centre by Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, was widely welcomed; Cavehill Mountain Bikers and others called for the development of more cycle trails in the North West. One individual stakeholder suggested that forests would also be suitable locations for purpose-built motorcycle tracks.

The Scottish Association of Country Sports, SACS, said that local access for sustainable hunting is important. SACS drew attention to associated benefits from recreational hunting, including sporting income and added value through game meat processing.

Local residents' groups and users of Muff Glen Forest, including Edenreagh Residents and Enagh Youth Forum, expressed their disappointment that a footbridge damaged during heavy rain has not been repaired or replaced.

A number of stakeholders expressed their concerns about litter and dog fouling, while others said that forest roads were sometimes made inaccessible to walkers due to damage incurred during timber harvesting.

#### **Topic 4 - Promoting Afforestation and Sustainable Forestry**

There was widespread support for increasing woodland cover and sustainable forest management. However, where non-native species were used, a number of stakeholders cautioned that inappropriate afforestation could potentially threaten natural habitats, including wetlands, meadows and peatlands.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) said that woodland expansion should be integrated with other land uses. The RSPB encouraged riparian and catchment-scale planting schemes that would provide a range of ecosystem services including filtering pollutants and flood risk mitigation.

Northern Ireland Environment Link, The Woodland Trust, Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme and NIEA Regional Operations recommended afforestation to buffer and connect small woodlands in the North West. These include a number of isolated semi-natural woodlands in the Faughan valley, many of which are ancient and long established woodland sites. A number of stakeholders also advised that the threat of damage to young broadleaved woodland by wild deer should be managed. The Derry City and Strabane District Council's Climate Team recommended planting trees where there is the greatest potential to mitigate against the impacts of climate change.

A number of stakeholders called for enhanced rates of grant aid for the establishment of new riparian woodland. Attention was drawn to the broad range of ecosystem services provided by riparian woodland relative to the area of land required.

Stakeholders widely endorsed the promotion of sustainable forestry. Derry City and Strabane District Council welcomed the diversification of woodlands noting that this will help improve woodland resilience in relation to threats from pests, diseases, and climate change.



## **Topic 5 - Supplying Sustainable Wood Products**

There was widespread support for the continued supply of sustainable wood products from forests. Stakeholders voiced support for the increased use of low impact silvicultural systems (also referred to as 'continuous cover forestry', and 'alternatives to clearfell') to deliver multiple benefits.

For example, the Woodland Trust suggested that continuous cover forestry is a more appropriate silvicultural system than clearfelling for woodland in designated areas and at key locations for spawning salmon. Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme also endorsed the use of continuous cover forestry to minimise timber harvesting impacts in sensitive landscapes. Derry City and Strabane District Council's Climate Team suggested the use of low impact felling was more beneficial in relation to climate change adaptation. Additionally, Grand Day Out (NI) observed that increased use of thinning as an alternative to clearfelling would enhance the quality of forest walk experiences, and improve the woodland habitat, and, could increase recreational opportunities.

Wood Plc, representing the interest of a wind farm operator on land neighbouring a forest, said forests could negatively affect the efficiency of wind turbines in neighbouring wind farms. They asked if there was scope to adjust plans for clearfelling in relation to the location of individual turbines, depending on topography and tree height.

## **Topic 6 - Regenerating Forest Land**

There was widespread agreement that forest regeneration plans were an opportunity to improve the delivery of ecosystem services that serve the needs and interests of local communities. These ecosystem services might include enhancing biodiversity, protecting water, and improving the contribution of forests to the landscape.

Garvagh People's Forest Project agreed that community engagement is important in developing forest design and regeneration plans.

A number of responses, including from the Northern Ireland Environment Link, agreed that the future management of rides, glades and edges is critical for maximising biodiversity benefits. NIEA Regional Operations asked that consideration is given to the size and orientation of rides in conifer blocks to benefit plants and insects.

Responses from those with specialist knowledge provided valuable advice about regenerating forests. The NI Bat Group noted that native woodland adjacent to watercourses enhances foraging and roosting potential for all bat species. A member of the North West Red Squirrel Group noted that red squirrels were less likely to be displaced by grey squirrels in coniferous forests.

Stakeholders encouraged more planting and natural regeneration of native species and noted that planting at lower densities results in more vibrant habitats. An individual stakeholder said they would support semi-natural pinewoods being created using seeds collected in Ireland or the west of Scotland.



## **Topic 7 - Growing Trees Sustainably**

Stakeholders expressed their support for the opportunity outlined in the scoping consultation document to liaise with neighbours and statutory bodies in relation to controlling damage to woodlands, and preventing deer poaching and other wildlife crime.

A number of stakeholders reported that deer were causing localised damage to woodlands in the North West, although, in overall terms the impact across the North West was not high. The Woodland Trust asked if the forest plan might reflect the need for a deer forum; another stakeholder suggested that Forest Service may need to provide grants for deer management in the future if populations increase. Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme stated that the feral goat population in the Binevenagh area needed to be monitored and controlled.

Garvagh People's Forest Project advised that engaging with local people of all ages is one aspect of controlling damage to woodlands, and that the role of the Forest Guides is critical to this engagement. They also recommended that how people understand, value and relate to their forests has to be seen as a priority by both the Forest Service and local authorities.

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council stated that it was good management practice to engage with neighbouring land owners and managers in relation to protecting forest and woodlands. The Council noted that the creation of healthy, safe forests is reassuring to the public.

A number of responses referred to anti-social activities in forests, including quads and motorcycles in Binevenagh and Loughermore forests, and fly tipping at Loughermore Forest.

Derry City and Strabane District Council called for a focus on making forests more resilient to help mitigate effects of climate change. Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme suggested that opportunities to mitigate flood risk should be considered, for example by taking action to reduce the peak flow from watercourses flowing through forests.

## **Topic 8 - Minimising the use of Pesticides and Fertilisers**

Stakeholders broadly welcomed the Forest Service's approach to minimising the use of pesticides and fertilisers. However, one stakeholder opposed any return to the use of aerial fertiliser application due to the potential to cause damage to habitats through airborne fertiliser drift. Another stakeholder expressed their alarm at the use of a neonicotinoid pesticide.

A number of stakeholders wanted the use of pesticides and fertilisers to be stopped, as this would benefit bees and wildlife, reduce pollution of waterways, and avoid over-enrichment of land. One stakeholder suggested that forests should be managed organically and forest products certified as 'organic'.

An individual stakeholder suggested that the overall requirement for pesticides and fertilisers could be further reduced by avoiding monocultures and diversifying the species of trees within forests. The stakeholder noted that monoculture plantation forests can be less effective at capturing nutrients than mixed forests, and are also more vulnerable to pest and disease outbreaks.



## **Topic 9 - Targeting Invasive Species**

There was widespread support for controlling and monitoring invasive species. NIEA Regional Operations noted that invasive non-native plants, including Himalayan balsam, are present in some, but not all, forests in the North West. Derry City and Strabane District Council's Climate Team identified the potential for an increase in invasive species as a result of climate change.

Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme highlighted the potential of invasive species in upland forests to colonise river catchments downstream. A number of other contributions referred to the need to remove self-seeded conifers in peatland, heath and grassland habitats adjacent to forests.

An individual stakeholder suggested that forestry planning could reduce the risk of unwanted woodland colonisation by identifying vulnerable habitats and planning accordingly. They also expressed their concern regarding the spread of rhododendron in Garvagh Forest, particularly within riparian woodland along the Agivey River and an adjacent tributary.

## **Topic 10 - Protecting Habitats and Species**

Stakeholders agreed that forests make an important contribution to protecting habitats and species.

Stakeholders referred to the very limited extent of ancient woodland sites in Northern Ireland, many of which have been converted to forest plantations (referred to as Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites, or PAWS). Stakeholders called for restoration of PAWS to native woodland in Cah Wood, which is part of Aghadowey Forest, and Ballycarton, which is part of Binevenagh Forest. It was suggested that increasing the extent of native woodland in Binevenagh Forest could potentially contribute to a significant native woodland habitat network, which would include Aghanloo Wood ASSI.

A number of responses advocated action to benefit protected species. One response noted there is a breeding population of marsh fritillary butterflies (*Euphydryas aurinia*) on land next to Gortnamoyagh Forest. It was suggested that, with suitable management, this endangered species could recolonise open areas within the forest.

The North West Red Squirrel Group highlighted the risk to red squirrel populations caused by grey squirrels and suggested that it would be beneficial if grey squirrel populations in the Binevenagh area were monitored and controlled.

The NI Bat Group recommended that bats would benefit by installing more bat boxes in suitable locations in forests. The group highlighted the importance of riparian woodland for bats and the need to take account of roosting bats before tree felling. Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme highlighted the importance of ponds and remnant fire dams for dragonflies and amphibians, and suggested that increasing the amount of open water in seasonal pools in forestry areas would be beneficial.

The Northern Ireland Environment Link suggested that woodlands should be surveyed to identify biodiversity 'hot-spots', including invertebrate hot-spots. It was suggested that this baseline biodiversity data could be used to inform future forestry planning decisions and help prioritise actions.



## **Topic 11 - Restoring Peatland Habitats**

Stakeholders recognised that peatlands are a valuable habitat that support a specialised range of plants and animals as well as providing ecosystem services including flood risk mitigation and carbon storage. It was noted that peatlands contain important evidence of past climatic conditions and weather events.

Stakeholders observed that the types of peatland habitats found in Northern Ireland have significantly declined in extent and condition both nationally and across Europe. However, RSPB said that there is good evidence that peatlands are amenable to restoration. RSPB also said that it is important that the scale of restoration is increased so that the benefits and services are realised on a landscape-scale.

NIEA Regional Operations welcomed the scoping opportunity to identify and prioritise areas of afforested peat for restoration, especially where the adjoining peatland has a protected designation. Northern Ireland Environment Link said that restoration of deep peat was preferable to forest regeneration. Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Partnership Scheme called for restoration to reconnect hydrologically linked peatland habitats.

# Appendix

## **List of organisations who responded to the North West Forestry Planning Area scoping consultation**

Binevenagh and Coastal Lowlands Landscape Partnership Scheme

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Cavehill Mountain Bikers

Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM)

DAERA Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) Natural Environment Division - Regional Operations

DAERA Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) Resource Efficiency Division - Water Management Unit

Derry City and Strabane District Council

Derry City and Strabane District Council Climate Team

Edenreagh Residents

Garvagh People's Forest Project

Grand Day Out (NI) Walks and Ways in Northern Ireland

National Trust

North West Red Squirrel Group

Northern Ireland Bat Group

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL)

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Northern Ireland

Scottish Association for Country Sports (SACS)

Templemore Archaeology Society

The Woodland Trust

Wood Plc

