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English Tree Strategy Consultation Response Plan

Birmingham Friends of the Earth (BFOE) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the English Tree Strategy. We are an environmental campaign and educational organisation based in Birmingham, engaged with advancing the principles of environmental sustainability and positive environmental change.

Introduction

Our consultation response has been based on comments and suggestions from meeting and email feedback gathered and collated from other members.

We are supportive of the suggestions put forward, and if all proposals were implemented that would be fantastic. However the document feels extremely aspirational, and whilst we welcome the sense of ambition, it lacks enough detail on delivery plans and financing. This leaves us doubtful that much of this strategy will become a reality particularly as we are now in a recession.

We think the consultation is too complicated and inaccessible, and can't envisage many members of the public feeling able to answer the questions confidently. We feel that this significantly undermines the public consultation process, although we note that a separate letter is also an option.

Expanding and Connecting

We would like to see much more ambitious targets that see tree cover in England doubled to 20% by 2041, with around 50% of this being native trees. We feel this is very achievable. With a shift to vegetarian/vegan diet, more people are eating less meat, so former grazing land could be used for tree planting. We suggest encouraging councils to identify tree planting sites.

It is unclear how much money is being put towards the expansion of trees and woodland, particularly in light of the recession we now face and need guarantees that the money will be ring fenced. In light of Covid-19, how will the Tree Strategy be kept on the Government's agenda?

Research by Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FOE EWNI) into the ten biggest land owners in the UK highlights how important it is to incentivise private land owners

(<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/trees/englands-10-biggest-landowners-must-grow>)

w-more-trees). The Church Commissioners and The Duchy of Cornwall are two private land owners that could increase their tree cover significantly and this would play a big part in increasing England's tree cover.

We think the public would be supportive of this and land owners could host re-wilding and tree planting events to raise awareness and create positive publicity for themselves.

Great Northumberland Forest is a fantastic example of good practise that could be emulated in other parts of the country. There are proposals to re-build the Forest of Arden in our West Midlands area, for instance. Restoration of so much degraded land for tree planting would be very desirable, creating significant job opportunities and cleaning up unpleasant areas. It has been shown replacing lost woodland with native trees will result in native flowers and wildlife returning. Dormice are one example where woodland loss has almost driven them to extinction, and the over 100 ancient woodlands being lost for the HS2 development is only 10% of ancient woodlands threatened with damage or destruction in the UK, many of them in England.

Protecting and Improving

In light of the new planning law proposals that are currently under public consultation, how will green belt land be protected against development? If planning zones are established based on what local people want, how will the balance between housing need and green belt protection be established and respected?.

We strongly agree that the law needs changing to allow an option to revoke tree felling licences if necessary. In fact we consider this vital.

The National Policy Framework says that any development resulting in loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats should be refused, but we are concerned that the new planning laws may undermine this.

Engaging

We believe that areas with tree inequality should be talked about in the same breath as we talk about health inequalities, as we know trees have a huge benefit on mental and physical health. We do not think that the document did enough to show how economically deprived communities with low levels of tree cover will be prioritised.

Northumberland County Council is offering one free sapling to any household that wants one – a fantastic way to engage the public with trees. We suggest that this should be a nationwide strategy.

Encouraging the public to sponsor a tree through a responsible tree planting body such as The Woodland Trust, The Wildlife Trust or local Tree Council Warden Schemes would also be beneficial.

We totally agree that community projects such as orchards and forest schools are a great way of engaging the public and raising awareness of the importance of trees and local green spaces. Again, it is unclear where the funding will come from for these new projects and how much the government is planning to put towards them.

It is also really important to think about the future when planning new community projects. It is all well and good to fund new orchards and similar projects, but it is unclear how the ongoing maintenance of these trees and woodland areas will be funded to ensure the sustainability of tree planting projects. From our own local outreach and engagement work we hear time and again that trees on public land are not being maintained and cared for.

We would encourage community engagement at every level – schools and faith organisations have a crucial role to play.

Engaging the public is crucial but we are concerned that when pressing their local councils, those councils (and therefore the public) will be over ridden by the planning Process.

Supporting the Economy

We think it is good that supporting the economy is such a large part of the plan but we'd like to know whether the money is going to be ring fenced and protected against future budget adjustments.

Many local authorities across the UK have declared a Climate Emergency and are working on their climate action plans. How will the government link the English Tree Strategy with the UK's journey towards becoming net zero carbon?. Tree cover should be an essential element of local climate emergency plans but co-ordination and support from central government is needed to make this feasible.

Seeds sourced from the UK will encourage employment and avoid pests and diseases that maybe be present on trees and wood that is imported (20 new pests and diseases since 1990).

(<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/tree-pests-and-diseases/>).

Summary

We strongly agree with most of the points made and are supportive of all the proposals in this document. However, we feel that a clear target to double tree cover to 20% by 2041 in England is essential, with at least 50% of this being native trees.

This without impacting on peatlands, valuable farmland and other precious habitats. We feel this is very achievable.

England's tree cover is very poor in comparison to the rest of the UK, and worse still compared to the rest of Europe.

We would like to see funding of £500,000,000 per year is essential to ensure this 20% target is met (representing an increase in spending from £1 per person to £10 per person in England), leading to job creation in forestry, tourism and ecosystem restoration.

It really is time to act on this and the government needs to ensure that this remains on the agenda as we move through this recession and recover from Covid-19.