



What people
told us

6 June 2018

Scoping a new forestry plan for Sperrin forests and woodland



Summary of Responses to the Sperrin Forestry Planning Area Scoping Consultation

A scoping consultation was initiated via the DAERA website from 18/12/2017 to 23/02/2018. The main reason for the consultation was to involve people and organisations in the development of a new forestry plan for the Sperrin Forestry Planning Area. The consultation was designed to reflect the wide ranging social, environmental and economic aspects of forestry in Northern Ireland in a way that is likely to be both of interest to stakeholders, and, relevant to forestry planning. The scoping consultation document can be viewed at:

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/scoping-new-forestry-plan-sperrin-forests-and-woodland>

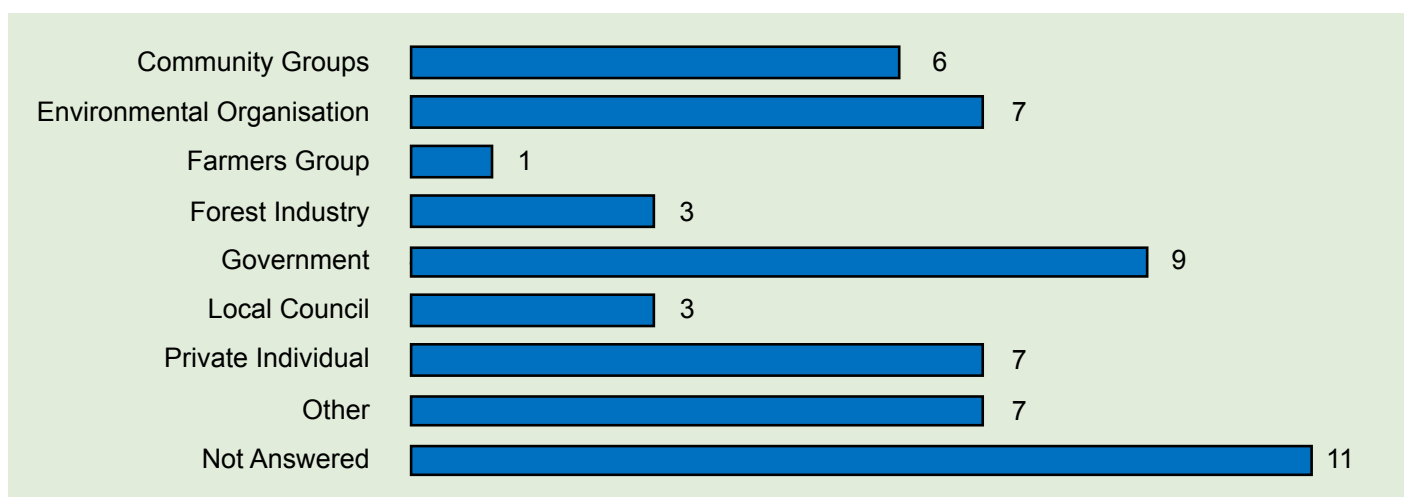
In total, 54 responses were received from representatives of organisations, groups and private individuals, as shown in the chart below. Organisations and groups who responded are listed in the Appendix. This summary report provides feedback on the results of the consultation to those who contributed, and others who may be interested in participating in future consultations.

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 developed in drafting a forest plan that also meets the requirements of the UK Forestry Standard.

Stakeholder Interest Categories

Stakeholders identified themselves according to the following categories:



The category of 'other' includes stakeholders who identified their interest as one of the following: - umbrella organisation, independent research charity, membership organisation, rural affairs and country sports body, independent rural development organisation, and Chartered professional body.



Summary of Responses by Scoping Topic

Topic 1 - Enhancing Landscapes

Several stakeholders agreed that forests contributed positively to the Sperrins Area of Natural Beauty (AONB), and contributed to tourism and rural initiatives in the area. Some were concerned that additional large scale forestry would be detrimental to the area, while others favoured the creation of new native woodland in the area. One stakeholder advised that the forestry plan should take account of management plans associated with the AONB. Broughderg Area Development Association referred to the visual impact of treelines visible from roads, and to householders' perceptions of feeling enclosed as views to which they had become accustomed as a result of felling of nearby plantations became once more obscured as replanted areas developed.

Improvements to the external and internal design of forests by using broadleaved tree species to soften edges, and incorporating open space were welcomed. Stakeholders recommended that the appearance and diversity of felling coupes could be improved by including natural features in their design and planting native trees along aquatic boundaries, while taking account of the contribution of views towards rivers, streams and open water bodies to the landscape and visual character of the AONB.

Stakeholders also expressed concerns that modifying external forest boundaries may be detrimental to adjacent land if used for field sports, and could result in the loss of valuable open habitat, for instance, where coniferous trees were colonising adjacent bog and heathland.

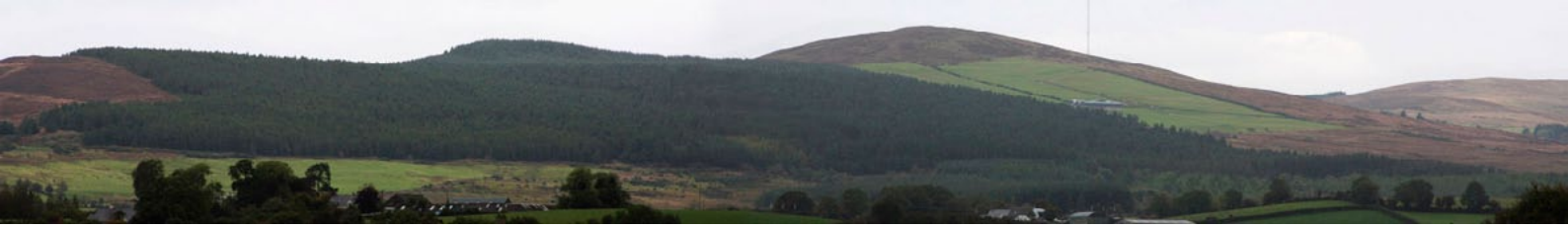
DAERA Countryside, Coast and Landscape acknowledged the comprehensive framework for forest landscape design planning provided by the UK Forestry Standard, and supported the Forest Service's intention to apply the requirements of the standard and implement forest landscape design guidelines. It was recommended that Forest plans made use of the NI Regional Landscape Character Assessment (NIRLCA), which acknowledges that the integration of forests into the landscape has improved in recent years as they have been regenerated in line with forest design plans.

Topic 2 - Protecting Rivers and Lakes

Stakeholders' interests in protecting rivers and lakes encompassed water quality, biodiversity, and angling. A number of respondents highlighted the importance of maintaining good water quality for the conservation of Atlantic salmon, and local fresh water pearl mussel populations, particularly in rivers designated as ASSI/SAC, and, for angling.

There was widespread support for increased provision of water buffer areas and riparian woodland, to protect and improve water quality. NIEA Natural Environment Division (NED) referred to the need to review the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) for the forestry plan, and advised that the HRA should inform the appropriateness of riparian woodland along SAC rivers to ensure there are no adverse effects to Atlantic salmon and other features, for instance to mitigate against the potential for river tunnelling or shading and ensure sufficient light reaches the river bed.

The NI Raptor Study Group cautioned that, while new native woodland along river corridors would be of benefit to some of the more common raptor species, such as buzzard and sparrowhawk,



open water buffer areas with good cover of rushes, grasses and heather may be highly suitable for hen harrier roosting and nesting.

NIEA Water Management Unit advised that buffer areas need to be of a scale to ensure that forestry activities do not impact on waterways. NED also recommended that the HRA process should be used as a tool to inform the operations to be undertaken within the Sperrins Forestry Planning Area. The Loughs Agency referred to the need for careful water management on clearfelled sites and the importance of measures to reduce the potential for sediment, nitrates and phosphates to directly enter watercourses.

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

Stakeholders valued access to forests and its contribution to health and well-being. A number of stakeholders referred to the untapped tourism potential of the Sperrins, and of the potential to improve existing facilities in forests and develop rural economies by providing more forest recreation attractions, including facilities for children and young people, mountain biking and horse riding. The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) advised of the importance of monitoring the recreational and social use of forests.

Stakeholders recognised that partnerships between Forest Service, Councils and local groups could provide a means to develop forests as local community assets; Northern Ireland Environment Link referred to the potential for community asset transfer as a means to involve communities to the greatest possible extent. A number of stakeholders specifically referred to the potential to develop Gortin Glen forest as a visitor attraction, while Broughderg Area Development Association suggested that the wealth of archaeological sites in Davagh forest and the surrounding area offered further potential to increase its attractiveness to visitors.

Stakeholders also indicated that there was a need to consider the ongoing maintenance of walking trails, signage and information resources, and referred to the importance of forests as places for quiet enjoyment of the landscape and nature, and activities that did not depend on development, such as schools and educational visits, photography, access to rivers and lakes for angling, and archaeological trails. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) suggested that participation of volunteers in bird monitoring projects in the Sperrins could also increase public use of the forest area.

Stakeholders representing shooting interests stated that forest plans should enable the co-existence of recreational hunting and the exercise of sporting rights with other activities.

Topic 4 - Promoting Afforestation and Sustainable Forestry

A number of stakeholders were concerned about the potential links between afforestation and displacement of rural farming communities, and the perceived effects of coniferous plantations on landscape, water and biodiversity. Some, including the NI Environment Link, wished to see more native woodland. Others, such as Confederation of Forest Industries (CONFOR), wished to encourage the expansion of predominantly coniferous woodlands to generate forest based employment and create rural prosperity.

NIEA Natural Heritage advised that afforestation should not take place close to areas used by breeding waders, and recommended that afforestation proposals include buffer zones between planting sites and designated areas to reduce encroachment of forestry into protected habitats.



With regard to forestry in areas used by hen harriers, NI Raptor Study Group recommended that forest plans should take account of the need to maintain the extent and distribution of suitably aged pre-thicket stands, and maintain or increase the extent, quality and connectivity of new native woodland and open habitats such as rough grassland, and heath.

DAERA Environmental Policy Division called for more focussed attention on the risks posed by climate change to Northern Ireland's soils, farming, freshwater resources, natural carbon stores, marine ecosystems, wildlife and habitats, the need to build resilience to these risks, and the need for evidence to understand these risks, including in relation to potential changes in forestry productivity.

A number of stakeholders referred to the potential for new afforestation and increasing riparian woodland to help reduce or mitigate the risk of flooding. NIEA Water Management Unit also suggested that the use of natural flood management techniques should be considered.

Topic 5 - Supplying Sustainable Wood Products

Stakeholders recognised the economic importance of timber production and of the employment it generates. CONFOR referred to the dependence of the UK on imported timber and of the need to address the potential shortage of timber in the future, while a private individual commented that the planning opportunities presented in the consultation appeared to reduce, rather than enhance, the tree cover in the area.

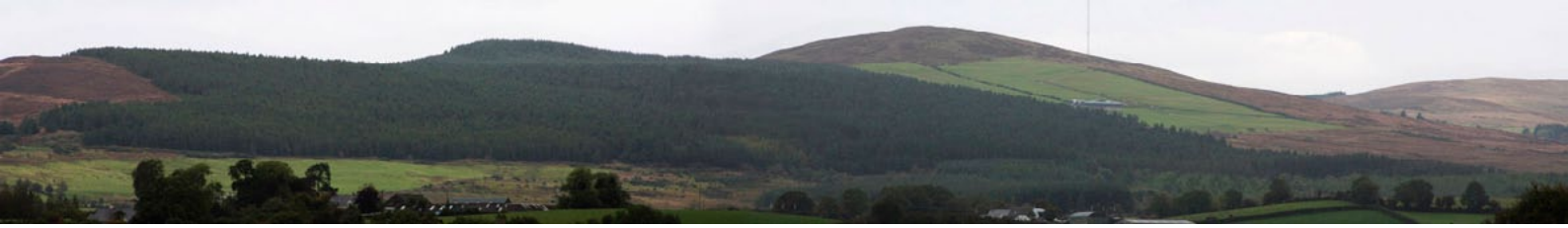
Stakeholders were in favour of increased timber production from thinning, and more continuous cover forestry under 'Low Impact Silvicultural Systems', or LISS, to contribute better to landscape character, to reduce risk to the environment caused by clearfelling, and, possibly, reduce the potential for wind damage to forests.

The NI Raptor Study Group highlighted the issue of disturbance of protected bird species, particularly the hen harrier, during the breeding season, and suggested that forest interventions which occur at regular intervals, such as thinning, and LISS management, could result in a greater disturbance risk than a management system that only involved clearfelling. They also pointed out that clearfelling could generate a better mosaic of open habitats and young plantations for breeding and hunting that would not be available if a forest was to be transformed to LISS management.

Some stakeholders, including NI Environment Link, wished to see greater emphasis on a range of forest products in addition to coniferous timber, such as timber from broadleaved tree species, and renewable energy from biomass.

Topic 6 - Regenerating Forest Land

Stakeholders welcomed the introduction of native species and open ground in forest design and regeneration plans, particularly in relation to linking existing areas of native woodland, and in proximity to aquatic habitats. The NI Raptor Study Group emphasised the need to appropriately manage forest rides to allow suitable opportunity for nesting and foraging of forest edge dwelling bird species, and increase connectivity with open lands. DAERA Countryside, Coast and Landscape advised that it would also be beneficial to identify where open areas may be of most benefit for butterflies, moths and other invertebrates.



While a number of stakeholders indicated their opposition to extensive conifer monocultures of Sitka spruce and other conifers, one stakeholder acknowledged that it would be useful to investigate the use of alternative conifer species, and, the need to ensure forests are more resilient to disease, climate change and other pressures.

Topic 7 - Growing Trees Sustainably

There was wide recognition of the need to increase forest resilience from the threats posed by pests and diseases, storm damage and the loss of soil fertility. A number of stakeholders recognised the need to control deer and grey squirrels to protect trees.

Stakeholders raised concerns about crime and anti-social activity. Countryside Alliance Ireland wished to see a greater emphasis on supporting the activities of the Partnership Against Wildlife Crime (PAW NI), particularly with regard to deer poaching. A number of stakeholders including the NI Rural Development Council pointed to the positive role local community groups can play in reducing anti-social behaviour.

CNCC advised that the parameters used to define sustainability need to be clear when communicating with the public.

Topic 8 - Minimising the use of Pesticides and Fertilisers

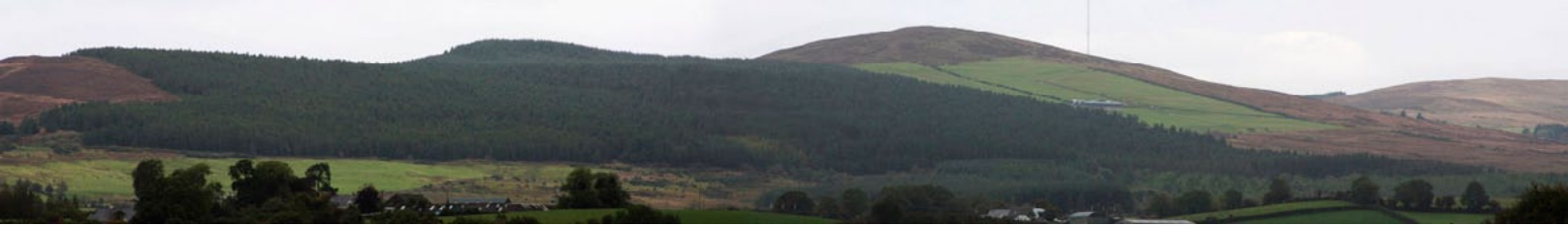
NIEA Water Management Unit advised that the statement in the scoping document in relation to the detection of significant environmental effects of pesticides used in forestry was misleading. Catchments have been identified where there are both detections of pesticides and biological effects. Although forestry may not be the only source of pesticides in these catchments, forestry cannot be ruled out conclusively, given the widespread use by forestry of some of the pesticides detected.

Most stakeholders expressed support for minimising the use of pesticides and fertilisers, while recognising the need to use them where there is no satisfactory alternative. A few stakeholders, including Angling NI, were opposed to any use of chemicals. NI Rural Development Council recognised the importance of ongoing monitoring by NIEA in enabling economic returns to be considered in relation to potential environmental effects. The Loughs Agency referred to the potential for buffer zones and run off areas to mitigate potential effects of pesticides and fertilisers on the aquatic environment.

CNCC recommended that, given concerns about the effects of pesticides on pollinators, Forest Service should engage with appropriate environmental organisations and local beekeeper associations. The NI Raptor Study Group advised that timing of fertiliser applications should be planned to take account of the need to avoid disturbance of breeding birds.

Topic 9 - Targeting Invasive Species

There was widespread recognition of the damaging effects of a number of introduced invasive species including rhododendron, laurel, Japanese knotweed, piri-piri burr, Himalayan balsam, and grey squirrels and the negative effects these can have on public access, habitats and species, and timber production. Various stakeholders indicated that a multi-agency approach was needed,



involving public bodies, neighbouring landowners, stakeholders, and, potentially, volunteer groups. Some stakeholders, including the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Woodland Trust, regarded self-seeding Sitka spruce on land adjacent to forests as an invasive species.

One stakeholder recommended that, where possible, operations to clear areas of rhododendron and laurel should be planned to take place between September and February, to minimise disturbance to breeding birds.

Topic 10 - Protecting Habitats and Species

NI Environment Link and the Woodland Trust recommended that priority should be given to protecting small fragmented areas of ancient and long established woodland by creating natural corridors of hedgerows and enrichment planting using native species. Some stakeholders, including Butterfly Conservation NI and Bug Life, also highlighted the importance of deadwood habitats and forest margins, glades, rides and riparian areas for invertebrates, and advised that deadwood habitats were also important for hole-nesting birds and their prey.

Stakeholders referred to the significance of rivers in the Sperrins for salmon and populations of the freshwater pearl mussel, which are also dependent on healthy populations of trout. Stakeholders also expressed their interest in the conservation of threatened mammals including bats, otters and red squirrels, and highlighted the significance of forest areas and adjacent land for raptors, particularly the hen harrier and merlin.

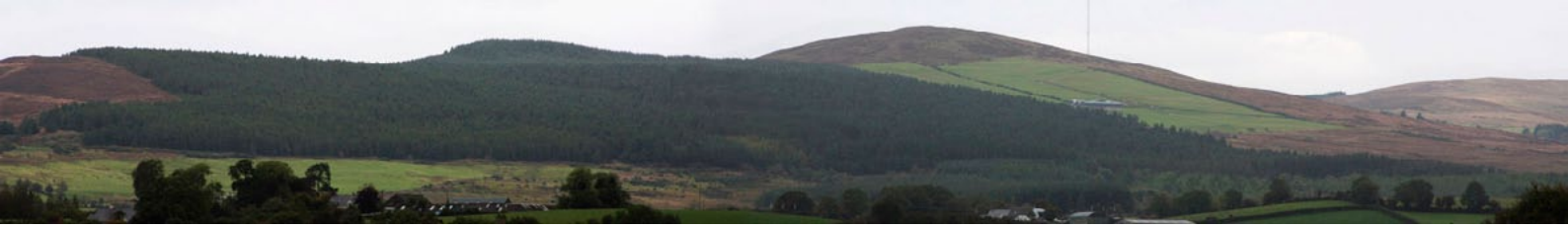
A number of stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the spread of Sitka spruce and other conifers from forests into adjacent bog and heath, and the potential for forestry operations to negatively impact breeding raptors and aquatic habitats. However, stakeholders also recognised the potential to avoid or minimise impacts of operations by taking appropriate measures, such as planning the timing of timber harvesting, and introducing additional measures to prevent movement of sediment into drains and watercourses. Concerns were also expressed regarding the risk of disturbance arising from more extensive public access, and certain recreational activities, particularly motorsports and dog training.

One stakeholder drew attention to a rare wild flower, the wintergreen (*Pyrola media*), that is threatened by predicted climate change, and suggested that Scots pine should be established on suitable sites in upland areas to help safeguard its continued existence in Northern Ireland.

Topic 11 - Restoring Peatland Habitats

Stakeholders indicated they were in favour of the restoration of afforested peatlands. Responses from forest industry stakeholders suggested that peatland forestry was, in some cases, an unsustainable land use, while others indicated that restoration could generate environmental benefits, including carbon sequestration and flood risk mitigation. One stakeholder from the forest industry advocated compensatory planting to reduce the loss of timber producing capacity in Northern Ireland that could otherwise occur if restoration projects were initiated.

A number of stakeholders, including the RSPB, advocated the restoration of areas within Creggan and Davagh forests, including for example, forestry land adjacent to the Black Bog ASSI. One stakeholder suggested that there were also restoration opportunities in Glenshane forest, and that forest plans might also consider areas that had been subject to drainage and mechanical peat cutting.



The Ulster Farmers' Union advised that any impacts of proposed actions on neighbouring land should be considered and that Forest Service should ensure that landowners are made aware of any proposals. One stakeholder suggested that a reduction in recreational use associated with peatland restoration would be beneficial in terms of improving breeding and foraging habitat for hen harrier and merlin, while another suggested that peatland restoration might encourage recreational use, with the provision of boardwalks to maintain access.

Appendix

List of organisations who responded

54 Stakeholders responded to the consultation.

The following is a list of organisations who responded:

An Creagán

Angling Northern Ireland

British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)

British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)

Broughderg Area Development Association

Bug Life

Butterfly Conservation Northern Ireland (BCNI)

Carntogher Community Association

Causeway, Coast and Glens Borough Council

Confederation of Forest Industries (CONFOR)

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC)

Countryside Alliance Ireland

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) – NIEA – Natural Environment Division – Biodiversity and Conservation Science

DAERA – NIEA – Natural Environment Division – Conservation, Designation and Protection

DAERA – NIEA – Natural Environment Division – Countryside, Coast and Landscape

DAERA – NIEA – Resource Efficiency Division – Water Management Unit

DAERA – Regulatory and Natural Resources Policy Division - Environmental Policy Division – Climate Change

DAERA – EU Area Based Schemes Division – Countryside Management Delivery Branch

DAERA – CAP Policy, Economics and Statistics Division – Rural Development Programme Management Branch

Department for Infrastructure, Rivers

Derry City & Strabane District Council

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

Friends of the Glens

Landscape Institute Northern Ireland (LINI)

Learmount Community Development Group Ltd

Loughs Agency

Moneyneena & District Development Initiative

MTB Gortin Glens

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL)

Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group (NIRSG)

Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC)

Royal Forestry Society

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

Scottish Woodlands Ltd

Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU)

The Woodland Trust