



The Government is committed to shifting the balance of power from 'Big Government' to 'Big Society'. For forestry, there are compelling reasons for changing the status quo by reducing the level of Government ownership or management of woodland. It is, for example, an anomaly that the Forestry Commission is currently the largest operator in the sector that it also regulates. This consultation considers ways to shift this balance. Throughout this process, the Government is determined to secure the future provision of public benefits from the public forest estate.

The public forest estate, managed by the Forestry Commission on behalf of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, is the largest Government owned land-holding in England. It covers 258,000 hectares, 2% of England's total land area, although only 18% of England's total woodland – with the majority of the remaining 931,000 hectares privately owned. It is diverse and multifunctional, acting as both a significant commercial timber operation and the largest provider of countryside leisure activity. The public forest estate also contains some of England's most sensitive and protected wildlife habitats, and helps to shape some of our most treasured landscapes.

The estate can be characterised into four broad but overlapping types of woodland. These categories take into account the woodlands' economic value, and the social and environmental public benefits they provide. These four broad categories are:

● Large commercially valuable forests and woodlands which have commercial timber operations and can have other profitable non-timber activities, or the potential to develop them. These forests generally provide low to moderate levels of public benefits whose management is integrated with timber production.

● Small commercially valuable woodlands which can produce timber and provide other commercial opportunities, such as sporting use. Levels of public benefits are generally low or moderate, but may include conservation features, such as ancient woodland sites, and informal use by local walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

● Multi-purpose forests and woodlands which combine timber production with significant recreational facilities, high visitor numbers and high levels of biodiversity.

● The heritage and community forests and woodlands which provide high public benefits often associated with their particular landscape and biodiversity character, high levels of recreational access and active community involvement.



**Executive
summary**
The Forestry
Commission in
England

The Government's proposed approach to the future management and ownership of the estate recognises that the estate is so diverse that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not appropriate. Instead, the Government is proposing a mixed-model approach with the following elements:

- Inviting new or existing charitable organisations, to take on ownership or management of the heritage forests to secure their public benefits for the long-term future;

- Creating opportunities for community and civil society groups to buy or lease forests that they wish to own or manage;

- Finding commercial operators to take on long-term leases for the large-scale commercially valuable forests. By leasing rather than selling, it will be possible to make sure that these forests continue to deliver public benefits through lease conditions.

Tree felling proposals must still be submitted to the Forestry Commission for approval unless they are exempt (for example because they are very small scale, the trees are dangerous or consent is given through the development planning process). Development would require planning consent from the Local Planning Authority. The ongoing protection of forests and woodlands will be considered as part of the Government's future consultations on the National Planning Policy Framework.

To achieve this programme of reform, there will need to be substantial changes to existing forestry legislation, and the Government is seeking to take powers to make these changes through the Public Bodies Bill currently being considered by Parliament. Subject to this, the change programme will be implemented

over the next ten years with the Forestry Commission's role in England substantially changing as a result. It will be a much smaller organisation, and it will no longer be charged with managing a large forest resource. Instead, it will focus on its regulatory role, on providing advice and grants, on research, and on working with woodland managers and other public authorities to combat the threat of pests and diseases.

In this document we invite views on the key elements of the Government's proposals, including:

- What do you think of our overall approach – is a mixed-model approach better than a one-size-fits all approach, and are there any other models we should be considering?

- What do you think about charities managing heritage forests?

- What do you think about communities having the right to buy or manage forests?

- What do you think about leasing commercial forests?

- What do you think about the future role of the Forestry Commission in England?

The Government expects to publish its response to this consultation in the summer of 2011.