

Tide begins to turn on productive planting



Confor's campaign for more support to encourage planting is beginning to bear fruit, as **David Lee** reports

In terms of government spending, it was a proverbial drop in the ocean. But the £1m funding for the Woodland Creation Planning Grant could be the catalyst which stimulates a new generation of large-scale productive planting in England.

Rory Stewart MP was the minister responsible for forestry who announced the money at Confor's Westminster conference back in November 2015.

The initial promise of funding came from the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government in early 2015, but it had not been confirmed before David Cameron won his outright majority in May 2015. Confor recognised the danger of the money slipping away and lobbied hard for the pledge to be honoured – and this was confirmed in a letter from the then-Chancellor George Osborne to Confor's Chief Executive Stuart Goodall. Mr Goodall went to the November 2015 conference with this important piece of paper in his hand – and it was to prove a pivotal moment.

The Woodland Creation Planning Grant (WCPG) was highlighted last month by the largest productive planting scheme to be approved in England for more than 25 years.

More than 213,000 trees will be planted over 170ha at the Lowther Estate, south of Penrith, Cumbria, this winter 120ha of productive softwood species, while the remainder will be predominantly productive broadleaves.

David Bliss, Estate Manager for Lowther Estate, a long-standing Confor member, said: "The Woodland Creation Planning Grant funding helped Ian Jack, our recently-retired forester, to plan and gain approval for this magnificent commercial woodland, which will in the fullness of time support many local jobs and associated forestry businesses. We are extremely excited to have gained consent for the largest conifer planting scheme in recent times. We now look forward to the challenge of planting."

'Brilliant news'

Confor's England Manager Caroline Harrison said the granting of Countryside Stewardship approval for Lowther – known locally as Jack's Wood to reflect Ian Jack's dedication to the project – was brilliant news for the sector, especially with other largely productive planting schemes in the pipeline awaiting approval.

Andy Howard, the project manager behind the large-scale Doddington North planting application in Northumberland, has also highlighted the WCPG as an important factor in the decision to prepare an application for an even larger proposed new productive scheme.

Caroline Harrison said: "The WCPG really has

been the key to unlocking new productive planting at scale. We are now seeing the combined fruits of Confor's hard work and the determination of applicants like Ian Jack – proving that it is sometimes a small investment early in the process that can make all the difference.

Plummet

"We have seen productive planting plummet to its lower level in a generation, but Confor has continued the fight to turn the tide. Hopefully, other schemes will follow Lowther and give real confidence to the sector that England is open for high-quality, large-scale productive planting schemes. This winter, the Lowther scheme means we will see more large-scale planting activity in England than we have for decades and hopefully it will usher in a series of busy planting seasons. This will help protect and create jobs along the forestry and timber supply chain and investment in our rural communities, have a positive impact on climate change targets and the wider environment and provide a great raw material for future generations to build with."

2016 was the worst year for new planting on modern record and Confor calculated that the UK Government's target to plant 11m trees by 2020 was more than seven years behind schedule – unless new large-scale planting schemes started to be approved.

Stuart Goodall said: "We are delighted to see the Lowther scheme approved and hope it signals a real upsurge in planting. Speaking to potential investors a few years ago I was told they needed political support and a scheme that wasn't 'anti-productive planting' if they were to look once more at England as a place for modern, new productive forestry. After a huge amount of lobbying and raising awareness in the media, we now have that political support and the WCPG, which we pushed for, has helped to 'de-risk' the process of making an application. We also requested additional funding in recognition of the carbon benefits of tree planting and subsequently welcomed the introduction of the £19.2m Woodland Carbon Fund."

Mr Goodall said the larger schemes now coming through in England meant forestry was in a healthier state across the UK – with renewed optimism in the sector in Wales and planting rates pushing up to and beyond Government targets in Scotland.

"The *Branching Out* report in Wales laid down the need for more productive planting very clearly – thanks in no small part to the commitment of our Wales Manager Martin Bishop to telling the forestry story. Martin continues to work hard with politicians to ensure the 13 recommendations in the *Branching* >>

>> *Out* report are implemented, especially the call to significantly increase planting rates.”

Confor’s work in Wales is starting to pay off, with historically low planting rates starting to nudge upwards – and in Scotland, the picture is even brighter.

As with the WCPG in England, it was practical action stimulated by Confor that has pushed up new planting in Scotland. After years of making improvements to successive grant schemes, Confor asked members what could make a final, decisive difference to planting rates. The answer was to learn from the planning process. Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity, Fergus Ewing, seized on this and appointed former Chief Planner for Scotland, Jim Mackinnon, whose fast-track report recommended a number of changes to reduce bureaucracy and stimulate new planting. These were accepted by Fergus Ewing and projected planting for 2017/18 is 7250ha, with 2018/18 potentially seeing 12,000ha.

Confor has secured valuable cross-party support for forestry in the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Government subsequently raised its new planting targets earlier this year from 10,000ha per year to 15,000ha per year by 2025, linking the numbers closely with their impact on climate change targets and construction with home-grown timber.

Mr Goodall said: “We are very encouraged by developments across the UK. It is very pleasing when you start to see hard work paying off – but it is important that we keep up the pressure because we still have a long way to go.

“The UK is the second largest net importer of forest products, after China, and we simply have to grow more of our own timber for future generations. We are starting to see more joined-up policy thinking about forestry and timber, with the Clean Growth Strategy showing that the UK Government recognises the need to plant more trees linked to key policy areas like climate change mitigation, flood prevention and housebuilding.

“We need to do more work in England to identify, and remove, the barriers which are preventing more planting applications coming forward. It was great to see Dr Therese Coffey highlighting improvements to the Countryside Stewardship scheme last month – improved application forms, guidance being release earlier and funding for a wider variety of options. It is practical steps like these – following on from the Woodland Creation Planning Grant – which will encourage more large-scale planting and help us increase woodland cover in England from its low base.

“At the same time, we continue to press for better restocking and improved woodland management – planting has been a high-profile issue and success, but we cannot lose sight of our existing resource.”

• *Lowther Estate: how to plant a large productive woodland, see p12*

SITUATION

ACTION

OUTCOME

OUTLOOK

ENGLAND

The UK Government was missing its very modest target of 11 million trees in the 2015-2020 Parliamentary term by a country mile. Confor calculated that at current planting rates, the target wouldn’t be hit until summer 2027.

New applications for large schemes were unknown since the 1980s in England, and initially the agencies, including Forestry Commission, appeared unprepared and negative



CONFOR LOBBIES AT WESTMINSTER

In 2016, Confor lobbies at Westminster for funding to increase productive planting in England

- Secured commitment from Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne to a £1m fund for forestry
- Confor proposed in 2016 that it be used to de-risk new applications for large, productive planting schemes
- Oct 2016 Request to Ministers for additional funding for woodland creation
- Facilitated and organised high-profile media coverage of the planting challenge faced by the forestry sector



NEW FUNDING FOR WOODLAND CREATION APPROVED!

- Woodland Creation Planning Grant (when – check)
- Creation of £19m Woodland Carbon Fund.

MEDIA PUTS FORESTRY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Countryfile and the *Guardian* among other media outlets, take the lack of tree planting seriously for the first time.



NEW PLANTING AT LAST!

A 170ha productive planting scheme has been approved on Confor member Lowther Estate and we are hopeful that an even bigger scheme will soon be approved at Doddington in Northumberland.



SECTOR’S PROFILE RAISED

Ministers are talking about the importance of delivering productive planting for the industry, and using more wood in timber building. There is a real appetite to deliver much more productive planting across England.

FTN WEB RESOURCES



Download the *Branching Out* report and infographic (right)

www.confor.org.uk

SCOTLAND

Although Confor lobbying ensured that the usual complete collapse in planting that accompanies a new scheme was avoided, and the right balance of productive and native planting was being achieved, the levels were still well below the 10,000 hectare annual target. Get this text checked



SECTOR IDENTIFIES KEY SOLUTION TO REMOVE BARRIERS TO PLANTING

When Fergus Ewing was appointed as Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs & Connectivity in May 2016, Confor challenged members to identify one thing that would provide for a step-change in planting. The answer was to take the experience of local planners into the Forestry Commission.



CHANGES IN FC SCOTLAND

Mr Ewing accepts suggestions and appoints ex-chief planner for Scotland Jim Mackinnon.

Confor channelled the expertise of its membership into a review and its recommendations have seen real changes in Forestry Commission Scotland with the planting forecast now to rise to over 7000ha this season.



FUTURE PLANTING SURPASSES TARGET

Projected figures for 2018/19 – perhaps as much as 12,000ha, exceed the Scottish Government’s 10,000ha annual target –with the prospect of rising further to meet the Scottish Government’s raised planting target of 15,000ha per annum by 2025.

WALES

A long-term drop-off in planting has seen Wales lose 40 million trees in 15 years, threatening the future of an industry supporting 10,000 jobs.



CONFOR LOBBY ON NEED FOR INCREASED PLANTING

Confor lobbied a wide range of politicians, NRW and other stakeholders on the need to increase new planting and speed up restocking on the WGWE – and marshalled large rural employers to warn of the damaging job implications of a lack of future timber supply.



BRANCHING OUT REPORT

Confor input into the WG consultation on forestry policy resulted in the *Branching Out* report summarising the issues and calling on WG to act now. Published in July 2017 by the Senedd’s Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, it highlights all the issues Confor had raised – including the benefits of tree planting to the economy, environment and communities.



FORECASTS FOR 2018 REMAIN TOO LOW

New planting forecasts for 2018 remain too low and much more needs to be done – and Confor continues to press for the *Branching Out* report to be implemented in full.

NRW forecasts and increase in restocking on the WGFWWE from 2018 onwards to reduced the backlog.