

Forestry Skills Forum

Response to the England Tree Strategy

With increased understanding of climate change, and the impact it is having on our environment, there is a need for collective and proactive planning for both our immediate and longer-term response. A policy that results in expanded and improved woodlands, supporting the economy and helping us to meet our carbon targets, is of course something to be welcomed. But whilst a tree strategy for England presents an exciting opportunity, it is important to acknowledge the timescales involved and the range of people and roles that will be required to implement these plans.

We welcome the acknowledgment of the multiple benefits that trees and woodlands provide to the environment, the economy and to our communities. However, it follows that the roles and structures required to grow and support such a 'multi-user' sector, will also be many faceted. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that much of the expertise such a strategy requires is already 'out there', some of the solutions are already known, and some of the mechanisms we require are already in place. They just need to be brought together, supported and implemented in the right way.

About the Forestry Skills Forum

The Forestry Skills Forum includes representatives from Confor, Forestry Commission, BiFor, the Forest Education Network England, Heart of England Forest, Herefordshire, Ludlow and Shropshire College, Institute of Chartered Foresters, Lantra, National School of Forestry, University of Cumbria, The Royal Forestry Society, the Woodland Trust and many more.

The purpose of the Forum is to:

- provide a unified voice for advocating and promoting education, learning and development in forestry
- agree collective, collaborative, and individual actions across industry and other organisations on priority skills issues
- share information on developments within own and related organisations that may be relevant to the group's activities.

Our activity focusses on the attraction and retention of new entrants, encouraging skills development of skills and supporting the training providers and educators operating within the forestry sector.

A collective response

The group's objective is to be a collective voice across the sector on skills and to this end has come together to respond to National Tree Strategy's online survey. However, we supplement our responses with this addendum, as the overall feeling of the forum was that the questions somewhat 'missed the mark' in places.

The National Tree Strategy seems to almost skip over those already working in forestry and the good practice already in place (which could be extended), and instead seems to focus more on making others aware of the importance of tree planting. As if it will only be successful if tree planting is adopted by other sectors and if we invent new ways of planning.

A National Tree Strategy is as effective as the people who can deliver its aims, and even now such individuals are in dire shortage. There are skills gaps across the sector, from technical to management roles. There are particular shortages in the contractor sector, which struggles to finance training and take on new entrants due to uncertain income streams, high costs of machinery and high output requirements. Elsewhere this has been supported and subsidised, and it is certainly something that will need to be considered as part of any integrated strategy.

To better establish the scale of the problem, and the additional resource required to meet targets, modelling is required to work 'backwards' from harvesting and planting targets, to calculate the human and technical input that is required at each stage (as has already been conducted in Scotland). This needs to be carried out in conjunction with a study into the current workforce – no labour market intelligence has been undertaken since the 2017 Skills Survey and with looming EU Exit, Covid-19 and 2050 Clean Growth targets, the evidence it provided is no longer current or comprehensive enough to form a baseline on which to build.

Forestry has existing strategies, and associated experts with the appropriate training. We just need more of them. We have the UKFS standards and UKWAS certification, which could be extended to apply in urban settings, if councils became required to consult with forestry professionals. And of course, if we are able to increase the number of such professionals.

Throughout the strategy reference is made to the importance of forestry skills, outreach and knowledge transfer. It is clear to all that we need to increase awareness of forestry careers with forestry and environmental / sustainability studies becoming mainstream throughout school education. However, there is no clear strategy or lead identified for this work, and without this, we run the risk of multiple groups 'scatter gunning' education providers with pockets of resource that have minimum effect.

The Forestry Skills Forum is agreed that investment and support in talent attraction and training across the wood supply chain has never been more important. At the same time, there is no need to reinvent training, rather it is important to ensure existing training is better resourced, by both private and public means, so it can extend delivery. At the same time, a diverse range of operational leads within the organisations that need to increase scope and reach, should be supported in their work through subsidised forestry leadership and business support programmes.

It should be made equally clear that forests are for everyone (no matter their background or experience), at the same time we must increase understanding of both how to get the most out of a visit as well as how to 'leave no trace'.

Apprenticeships, workplace training and clear career pathways are equally important and to this end planning must be for the longer term. The enthusiasm, expertise, experience, and wide representation on the Forestry Skills Forum, could be better utilised and resourced to this end and we are certainly ready and willing to help.