

# RFS

ROYAL FORESTRY SOCIETY



INSPIRING PASSION AND EXCELLENCE IN WOODLAND MANAGEMENT



THE ROYAL  
FORESTRY SOCIETY

**WOODLAND  
CREATION  
OPPORTUNITIES  
AND BARRIERS**

- survey results 2020

INSPIRING PASSION AND EXCELLENCE IN WOODLAND MANAGEMENT



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## Executive Summary

In spring 2020, the RFS invited 4,624 members to respond to a survey on woodland creation. 695 (15%) responded to the survey, 54% were woodland owners, 30% forest managers, agents or consultants and the balance mainly other countryside professionals. Of the balance, the majority are forestry workers, arborists, tree officers or forestry contractors, but respondents also included members with a wide range of interests including students and researchers.

23% of respondents have created woodland in the last two years, but 42% intend to do so in the next five years, indicating a significant increase in interest. Plans range from less than 1 ha to more than 2,000 ha.

61% of the survey responses were fully completed with some questions getting more attention than others. Much of the value of the survey lies in the very substantial volume of respondents' comments. A small illustrative selection are included in this report.

## Responses and Recommendations

1. The biggest deterrents to woodland creation are:

- The physical availability of suitable land
- The reduction in land value when converting agricultural land to woodland
- Access to grants which incentivise a change in land use.

Motivations for creating new woods are mixed, including biodiversity, landscape and carbon capture, but for most survey respondents there must also be a viable business case.

71% of respondents have or intend to apply for a grant and 51% regard a suitable grant to as a pre-requisite to undertaking the process.

**Recommendation:**

**The uptake of woodland creation applications will increase if grants address these concerns.**

2. The complexity, cost and timing of the current grant process are also a significant obstacle to encouraging more woodland creation grant applications.

**Recommendation:**

**Administrative processes will need to be greatly simplified to speed up the rate of**

**applications and willingness to engage with the process. Timeframes for applying for and claiming grants must also be lengthened or otherwise adjusted to fit forestry timeframes.**

3. Access to professional advice is not considered a serious issue, but there is more concern expressed about the availability of skilled contractors to deliver woodland creation plans.

**Recommendation:**

**Building capacity and capability of skilled forest operatives and contractors must be a policy priority to ensure that the expected increase in woodland creation can be delivered.**

4. Lack of flexibility on species choice is seen as a significant barrier to woodland creation by those wanting to grow a diversified mix of site-suitable productive timber species which are resilient to projected environmental conditions.

**Recommendation:**

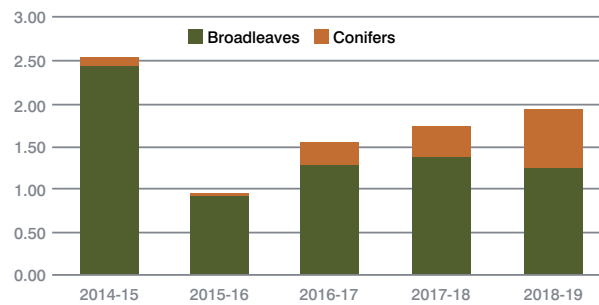
**Greater flexibility will encourage more experimentation and more resilient woods.**



## 1. Background

In response to the climate emergency the UK government has set a target to create 30k ha per year of new woodland for 30 years. The average rate of woodland creation over the last five years (2015-19) has been less than 9k ha/year, so the newly calibrated target is a substantial challenge. This is particularly the case in England and Wales where, although on a rising trend, rates of new woodland creation, averaging 1.7k ha/year over five years, have been lamentably low, even against the modest targets set by the government in 2013 (see chart right).

### New woodland creation England and Wales 2015-2019 (K ha)



Source: Forestry Commission statistics 2019

### Risks

Respondents frequently mention the risks and uncertainty of woodland creation, which is a long term and permanent land use change. Key risks are:

- 1 Grey squirrel damage to broadleaved trees. Without rigorous control, grey squirrel damage to broadleaved trees will undermine the economic and environmental value of new woodlands.
- 2 Deer browsing of young conifers and broadleaf regeneration which requires rigorous deer control.
- 3 An ever-increasing number and severity of pests and pathogens both established in the UK and a latent threat for which land managers have limited options to manage.
- 4 Climate change and weather events such as increased frequency of spring/summer droughts making establishment of new woods more difficult and unpredictable.
- 5 Changes to government forestry policy and support mechanisms and uncertainty of availability of any support beyond the first 10 years maintenance payments.
- 6 The market for wood products and different timber species in 30+ years is at best an educated guess.

To succeed in planting more woodland requires a better understanding of land managers' motivations and the barriers, perceived or real, that stand in their way. Removing these barriers where possible, and shaping incentives which address financial concerns, risks and uncertainty is critical to success.

With this in mind, the RFS launched an online survey to all RFS members to gauge their views, with the expectation that it might provide helpful insight for policy makers.

The principle woodland creation grant in England is the *Countryside Stewardship (CS) Woodland Creation Grant* for schemes above 3 ha. This grant qualifies for a 10 year *CS Woodland Maintenance grant* to support establishment. It has been supplemented by the *Woodland Carbon Fund* for productive woodland creation of more than 10 ha and the *Woodland Carbon Guarantee*. In Wales, the grant is *Glastir Woodland Creation* for schemes above 0.25 ha and includes agroforestry. *The Woodland Carbon Code* applies in both countries. The majority of survey respondents are in England and their comments mainly refer to the CS Woodland Creation Grant.



## 2. Woodland creation activity and motivations, past and future

### 2.1 Have you created woodland in the last two years?

23% of respondents have created new woodland in the last two years, of which 37% were created on pasture, 26% on arable and the balance on a mix of arable and pasture. The proportion of arable land is higher than expected. Areas planted range from 1 ha to 2,000 ha, the higher ranges being across a

number of clients, and include a number of agroforestry schemes. In total 160 new woods are reported. 46% of new woods are broadleaf, 52% mixed broadleaf and conifer and 2% conifer. This varies from Forestry Commission data which shows an average of 16% new woodland creation was conifer in England and Wales over the last five years, influenced by a small number of large commercial schemes.

### 2.2 Do you plan to create new woodland in the next five years?

42% of respondents plan to create new woodland by 2025. Plans range from firm to speculative, but indicate an intention to deliver a significant uplift in the number and area of new woodland creation. Areas to be created range from less than 1 ha to 700 ha/ year and “as much as possible”. The expectation is that the majority (81%) will be created on either pasture (54%) or mixed arable pasture (27%) land, and only 18% on arable land. This is a shift from actual experience of using arable land. Other land use changes include golf course, quarry, amenity grassland and game cover. 72% of respondents plan to apply for, or have already applied for, a woodland creation grant. 18% will not use grant aid and the balance are undecided. This contrasts with actual experience over the last two years where there is an even split between those who have funded woodland creation with grants and those who have not.

### Rank the following woodland creation management objectives

256 responses	Very important	Important	Not important
Commercial	24.4%	37.4%	38.2%
Biodiversity	57.3%	39.2%	3.5%
Carbon capture	45.7%	45.0%	9.3%
Flood attenuation	19.3%	43.0%	37.7%
Landscape	41.0%	48.7%	10.3%
Timber	32.6%	43.4%	24.0%

The top three motivations for creating woodlands are to increase biodiversity, capture carbon and enhance landscape. More than 90% of respondents rank these criteria as important or very important motivators. The lowest ranked management objective is commercial (61% important or very important) but it is clear that when probed, the majority of survey respondents are unlikely to invest in woodland creation without a sound business case.

*I already have 25% of my land under woodland, and think that this is a good balance, particularly as the future is so uncertain.*



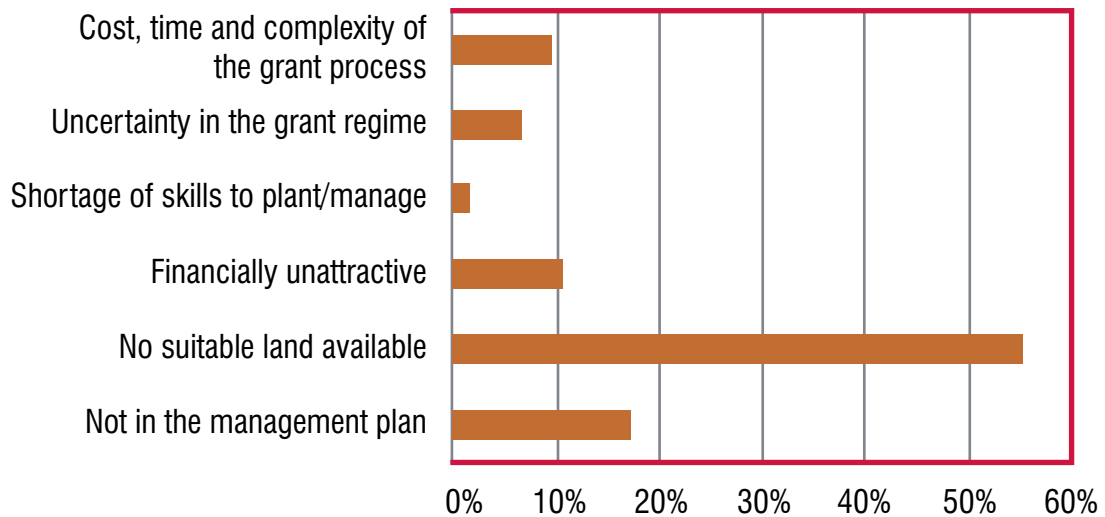
**2.3. If you are not planning to create new woodland, why not?**

For the 58% of respondents who are not planning woodland creation, by far the most significant barrier is lack of available land (55%). This is ranked much higher than “financially unattractive” at 10.3%. Comments reflect physical constraints (no land available), views

that current land use allocation is well balanced, and agricultural vs. woodland land price differentials which are distorted by the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) in favour of the status quo.

Concerns about the grant system are also cited as a barrier. This topic is covered in more detail in section 3.1.

**Reasons for not planning to create woodland in the next five years**



*As an Estate we are able to look at the long term returns from timber, and looking forward to the reduction in BPS payments, we are re-assessing the value of the land currently in pasture.*

*Land that might be turned over to woodland is under farm tenancies and the single farm payments for the tenant farmer is a financial incentive to retain control of the land rather than return control to the landowner in order to establish woodland.*



## 2.4 How important are commercial issues in planning woodland creation?

A majority of respondents rank financial return (61%) and land devaluation (56%) as important or very important issues. They expect capital grants for woodland creation to cover more than 80% of the actual cost. 51% consider access to a grant vital. They are unlikely to convert land to woodland without a financial incentive. However, a surprising large minority of respondents consider these criteria are not important.

This may be either because woodland creation is seen as a socially responsible option in its own right or because the intention is to grow a commercial crop that will create a financial return. Least important is maintaining short term cash flow, a reflection of the long-term nature of woodland management. Some respondents believe that carbon trading will play a more prominent role in funding woodland creation and management in future.

*I cannot absorb the loss of value of converting pasture to woodland without assistance or changes to the current distortions to land values from subsidy payments..*

*Chasing grant money results in poor woodlands with little owner interest.*

### When planning woodland creation, how important are commercial issues?

388 responses	Very important	Important	Not important
Obtaining a financial return	29.4%	37.7%	32.9%
Avoiding devaluation of land	16.4%	40.4%	43.2%
Retaining short term cash flow	8.3%	39.3%	52.4%
Maintaining grant value in relation to actual cost >80%	20.2%	41.5%	38.3%

*If the government is serious about reaching its planting targets it must stop penalising farmers by removing their basic payments when they plant trees on their land. Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) must put farmland and woodland on an equal footing and allow equal access to Tier 1 payments.*

*Planting is easy, relatively cheap and can be fairly successful. Management is the main issue and caring for young trees. This is too often forgotten/neglected resulting in a waste of time, effort and resources.*

*There appears to be no reasonable commercial case for a small woodland owner to re-plant, establish new plantings or maintain forestry and woodland (without income) unless money is no issue and/or general environmental considerations have an overwhelmingly high priority.*



### 3. Barriers to woodland creation

#### 3.1 What grant related factors deter you from woodland creation?

A majority of respondents report the grant process is a significant barrier to engaging with the woodland creation process.

Respondents were invited to rank five issues commonly cited as a deterrent to engaging with the current woodland creation grants in England and Wales.

*The single most important issue effect tree planting is the shambolic grant system; but also once the trees are grown, the issue of grey squirrels.*

*The major obstacle is the time it takes to get the money back from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) once the work has been done. For smaller enterprises the time lag for payment would make many schemes impossible to take on for fear of going bankrupt with such large capital outlay.*

#### What grant related factors deter you from woodland creation?

345 responses	Very important	Important	Not important
Uncertainty about grant regime post Brexit	21.0%	41.4%	37.6%
Dealing with multiple agencies	35.3%	41.0%	23.7%
Increasing cost of tree planting and capital items	15.6%	56.5%	27.9%
Time scales for applications	27.9%	43.3%	28.8%
Species choice	24.6%	44.0%	31.4%

*The Countryside Stewardship (CS) process has proved to be a major deterrent. It is unnecessarily bureaucratic and lacks the 'common touch'. ELMS needs to realign with Forestry Commission (FC) as sole contact and reinstate personal one to one service.*





All five issues are ranked as important or very important by more than 60% of respondents. Dealing with multiple government agencies to secure grant approvals and claims is ranked the greatest deterrence (77% important or very important), followed by the overly restrictive windows for grant applications and claims which are considered impractical by most respondents (73%).

With the exception of uncertainty about the grant regime post Brexit, the other four issues are entirely within the control and influence of the government to fix, largely administrative constraints, or in the case of species choice, reflect policies which do not properly account for the need for climate change adaptation.

*Multiple agencies is a nightmare. I have just done a third set of forms for a single farmer (Woodland management plan and planning grant), one each for Natural England (NE), RPA online and now FC, who said they could not accept either of the first two.*

*Grant agreement timescales are too short, sometimes only including one full winter. If the weather is too wet for ground preparation and if trees are in short supply then the pressure is immense to get it done within the deadlines. CS maintenance grants often lag 2 years behind the start of tree maintenance. It should be possible to apply immediately after planting with no cut-off date.*

*The administration was very frustrating and dragged on for no reason. These are simple schemes and do not warrant a complex process. I had to apply extreme pressure to get it approved in time to plant in the spring after starting the previous summer.*

*The current requirement to plant a minimum of 3 ha in order to be eligible for a grant is extremely limiting, particularly for people such as myself who will be also purchasing the land.*

*Government agencies are often slow to respond and the general application process and complexities are often enough to put one off considering woodland creation. I understand the process in Scotland is more streamlined and easier to navigate.*



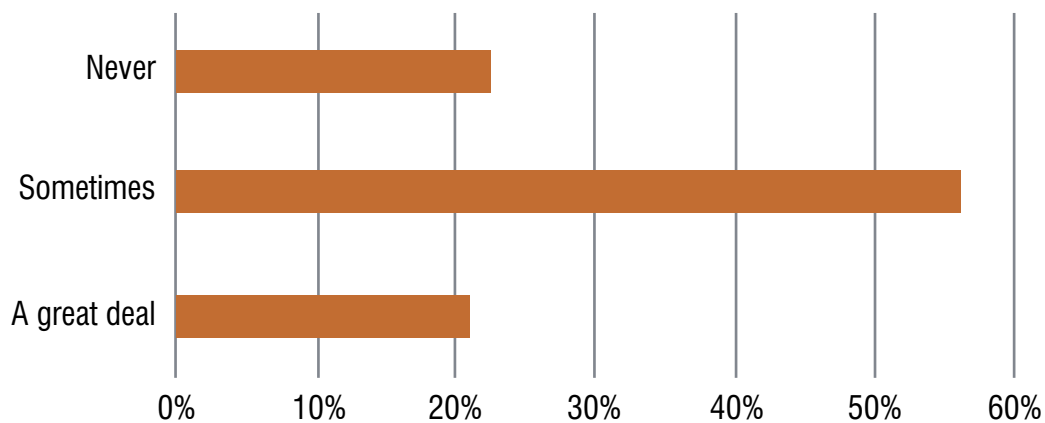
**3.2 Do local authority, non governmental organisations (NGOs) or other government agencies' administration and management requirements impact on your woodland creation planning and implementation?**

It is generally acknowledged by survey respondents that stakeholder consultation is a necessary but time-consuming process, but highlight the problem created by the absence of a presumption in favour of woodland creation, or a bias in favour of amenity planting.

56% of respondents report that local authority, NGO or other government agency requirements sometimes impact on their woodland creation planning and delivery, adding to the cost, time and risk of undertaking the process. 21% report that this is a factor a great deal of the time. 34% have experienced opposition or an objection to their plans from NGOs or government agencies.

However some respondents point out that these objections can be well founded.

**Do local authority, NGO or other agencies' administration and planning requirements impact on your planning and implementation?**



*Areas of Natural Beauty (AONBs) (various) consider (new woodlands) to have negative landscape impact; object to any change of land use in principle; objected to both conifer and eucalyptus.*

*If agents don't undertake proper landscape and habitat surveys, they can expect to have their woodland planting proposals to be challenged.*

*Natural England are mainly in opposition to woodland creation, if there is even the hint of any designation within 500m of the planting site in question.*

*Protected landscapes have non-woodland areas for a reason. Many forestry agents are driven to pursue woodland creation grants and fail to notice that the 'rough grassland' or apparently neglected field has huge carbon capture and habitat value in its own right.*



### 3.3 Access to knowledge, skills and expertise

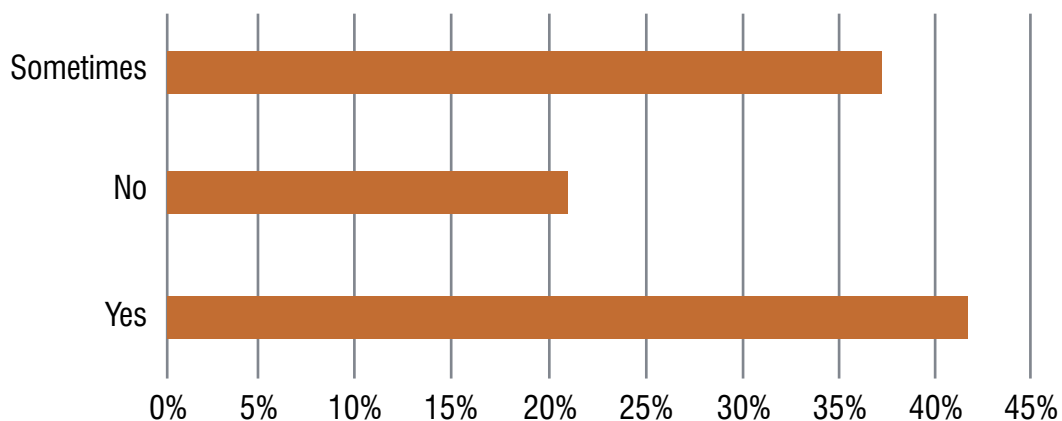
Only 15% of respondents struggle to access the level of professional expertise they require for undertaking a woodland creation project, with an overwhelming 68% saying they find it easy.

In contrast, well over half - 58% - of respondents said it's not easy or they sometimes have trouble accessing contractors with the right skill sets to deliver their woodland creation plans. However, within the 42% who said it was easy, there was a suggestion that planning well ahead could help with availability of good contractors.

*Contractors are not valued enough and also generally not given sufficient guidance and support to carry out their tasks to a suitable standard.*

*We are the contractor, but sourcing adequate skilled labour is hard.*

In your experience is it easy to find contractors with the right skills sets within in the timescales you require?



*Of course it is not easy, but contractors are available particularly if planned with sufficient time and assurances.*

*All contractors say they can do it. Very few can actually do it right.*



### 3.4 Flexibility in species choice

The Countryside Stewardship (CS) Woodland Creation manual guidelines for biodiversity state that the majority of new woodland should be made up of native species but can include a proportion of non-native or advancing/honorary species as follows: up to 20% of the species mix can be non-native and up to 20% of the native species can be 'advancing' or 'honorary' natives (e.g. sycamore, sweet chestnut). The guidance on species choice does not mention climate change, but emphasises the need to mimic the local National Vegetation Classification (NVC). Guidelines on planting for water quality should be expanded to specify more inclusive detail on species choice, areas and percentages, and also how the UK Forest Standard will be utilised within the application and appraisal process.

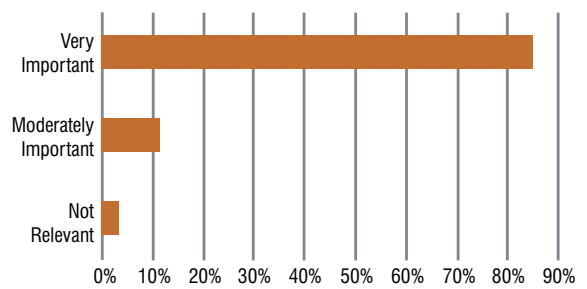
The Glastir Enhanced Mixed Woodland Creation

grant is less restrictive on species choice with a minimum 25% broadleaves, and appears better aligned to climate change adaptation good practice.

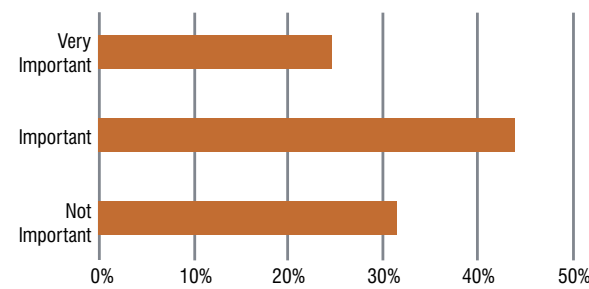
86% of survey respondents consider species choice a very important consideration in their woodland creation planning, but only 38% are always able to incorporate all the species they want. 69% view constraints on species choice as an important or very important factor in deterring them from new woodland creation.

Respondents acknowledge the importance of selecting species which are suitable for the site both now and in climate conditions projected for the future, and the need to observe guidelines on designated or sensitive sites (ancient woodland, SSSI etc.). However, they still perceive that flexibility in species choice is unnecessarily constrained.

How does species choice rank in your woodland creation planning?



How important are grant restrictions on species choice in deterring you from woodland creation?



*Seed sourcing/provenance/gene pool is of high importance. Delay (woodland creation) until the correct sourcing is available.*

*CS grant funding limits species choice in many instances and remains quite anti-conifer.*

*Wanted to try a few alternatives like sequoia and nothofagus but grant conditions didn't permit.*



For more than 135 years, the RFS has dedicated itself to sharing knowledge on the art and science of woodland management so that the accumulated wisdom and experience of landowners, foresters, arborists and others is transferred from one generation to another.

Our research reports and publications are a respected contribution to the development of forestry policy.

*Find other RFS publications here.*

**Photography:**

Our thanks to Members for the use of their photographs.

**Footnote:**

The RFS is grateful for the support of Bryan Elliott, Devon Forestry Consultants, in the creation of this survey.

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