

Northern Ireland Forestry



A STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND GROWTH



An Agency within the Department of
**Agriculture and
Rural Development**
www.dardni.gov.uk

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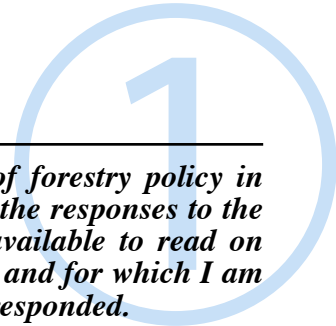


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FOREWORD



I am pleased to publish this strategy for the delivery of forestry policy in Northern Ireland. This follows a period of reflection on the responses to the consultation paper 'Options for Forestry', which are available to read on the Forest Service website at www.forestserviceni.gov.uk and for which I am grateful to the many organisations and individuals who responded.

The strategy focuses on how more forests can be created and on the sustainable management of existing forests. It commits the Forest Service to continuing in its role as the major source of advice on forestry and promoting the use of forests and forest products. It will also continue to be the main provider of access to forest based recreation and of timber and forest products. The Strategy commits the government to ensuring that all forests are managed to national standards.

I would like to see the area of forests double so that the people of NI will have access to the same level of forestry benefits as are available in other parts of the UK. While it is desirable that this should take place quickly, in practice progress depends on the willingness of landowners to plant their land and may well only be achieved over the next 50 years or so.

Changes in agriculture, notably reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the introduction of the Single Farm Payment (SFP) will provide additional confidence that forestry is a credible option for land use. Subject to government's overall spending priorities the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) will support this by optimising funding available under the NI Rural Development Regulation Plan. We will also ensure that policies developed by different Departments are joined up, so that, for example, Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment policies on developing renewable energy capability will create a demand for wood based energy and forest design and management will support Department of the Environment policies on conserving biodiversity.

The strategy will secure a balance of public benefits through a programme of sustainable management of our existing woods and forests. Sustainable management means meeting our current needs for wood production and economic activity, public access and environmental protection while at the same time safeguarding the resource for future generations. My officials will take forward the proposals as far as possible within the existing legislation and, where the existing legislation is in need of modernisation, the government will amend the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 (the 1953 Act) to ensure that the Act reflects the work actually done by the Forest Service today and provides a sound basis for forestry policy in the 21st Century.

The strategy also outlines the arrangements for delivery of the forestry programme. I considered transferring the responsibility for managing and developing access to the Department's forests to local government in support of their tourist and recreational responsibilities. However, most councils and almost all other respondents to 'Options for Forestry' disagreed with this proposal. A small number of councils said they were interested in developing local partnerships and we will pursue this where it is sensible to do so. Therefore, I am satisfied that forestry services should continue to be provided on a regional basis by the Forest Service as an agency of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) subject to the outcome of the review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland.

In the meantime the Service will continue to focus on improving efficiency and effectiveness, and I have approved a series of measures in the strategy that can help achieve this.

The conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment carried out at the same time as the review of forestry policy had suggested that Forest Service policies largely had a positive impact on disadvantaged groups and I am happy that this has been endorsed by the responses received.

In conclusion, it is clear to government that the continued existence and development of forests and woods are important to the people of Northern Ireland. I believe this strategy will create a vision for forest expansion and sustainable forest management that will ensure we can hand on a lasting legacy to our grandchildren.

Jeff Rooker
March 2006



THE CHALLENGE

NI forestry policy is a devolved matter within the UK, but operates in a global economy and needs to take account of the international context. The challenge is to develop a modern policy that fully meets the needs of the people of Northern Ireland and demonstrates how we meet our responsibilities in relation to global issues.

2.1 The Government's approach

Forestry is a matter of international importance because of concerns about the global impact of deforestation on climate and the loss of biodiversity. Prior to devolution the UK government committed itself to action at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and the second Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (1993), and consequently formally adopted a forestry policy to promote sustainability. This was expressed in the following terms:

- **The sustainable management of existing woods and forests, and**
- **A steady expansion of tree cover to increase the many diverse benefits that forests provide.**

Since then the government has engaged at an international level in the development of sustainable forest management practices and the means to verify these in terms of the standards applied at forest level, and in relation to the trade in timber and other forest products. The UK Forestry Standard, agreed by the UK government and the devolved administrations, establishes credible standards of sustainable forest management and a process of verification.

2.2 Forestry in Northern Ireland

From a base of only 1.4% of land area at the end of the First World War, forests and woodland have expanded to cover 6% of the land area of NI. This is however much less than the 10% cover in the Republic of Ireland, 12% cover in Great Britain and 33% cover in Europe. The restoration of forestry was driven first by a need to develop a strategic reserve of timber for use in a time of national emergency, and then by a need to promote economic development through the supply of raw material to sawmills and other industrial applications. Today there are 86,000 ha of forests, of which DARD owns three quarters. Most of this forest is concentrated in the uplands in the north and west of Northern Ireland and is managed by the Forest Service, an Agency of the Department. The Department has published a target for new afforestation of an additional 1,500ha by 2008 at an annual rate of 500ha.



Most forests, including all Forest Service plantations, are managed on a sustainable basis and subject to independent audit and certification against the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). This Standard encompasses the UK Forestry Standard as a minimum, but also requires forest managers to deliver a programme of habitat restoration, conservation and environmental enhancement and social engagement whilst ensuring economic viability.

2.3 The Department's role

Legal responsibility for forestry lies with DARD. The Department's vision is for a thriving and sustainable rural community and environment in NI. It has set itself goals of improving performance in the marketplace,

strengthening the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas, enhancing animal, fish and plant health and welfare, developing a more sustainable environment, and delivering services to customers effectively. Forestry has an important role in achieving these goals, and the links between the forestry strategy and the wider DARD strategy are set out at paragraph 4.1.

2.4 Forestry Policy Review

Forestry policy has been the subject of a thorough review of progress since the 1970 White Paper, “Forestry in NI”. The review concluded that forestry had provided value for money but the rate of afforestation was very slow. In 2002 a consultation document was published, also called “Forestry in NI” and over 90 responses were received. The views expressed were used to construct different options for policy development that were subject to an economic appraisal.

In November 2003 the then Minister, Ian Pearson MP, agreed that the key issues facing the forestry sector were:

- **How to obtain best value from the Forest Service estate;**
- **The need to secure a balance of public benefits from forests through environmental improvement, public access and timber production; and**
- **The continuing scarcity of forest in NI compared with other countries.**

The annual benefits of the forestry programme are £18 million from value added in timber processing, £1 million in visitor benefits and additional non-monetary benefits to the environment achieved for a cost of £15.3 million net of timber sales and visitor receipts. On the basis of this Mr Pearson agreed that Forest Service forests should continue to be accessible for informal public recreation, and that forests should be managed with regard for the environment. He also recognised the strength of the view that we should have more trees in NI. These conclusions were subsequently published in the consultation paper ‘Options for Forestry’ in December 2004.

The ‘Options for Forestry’ paper mainly considered how to deliver the policy and asked a number of focused questions. To support the consultation process Forest Service held four public meetings, at which senior officials answered questions on the proposals and on their stewardship of the Forest Service estate. The views of the public attending those meetings were recorded and used to inform the process. In addition there were 110 written responses from a wide range of interests. Concurrently a public opinion survey of forestry in NI, which had 1,000 participants, was held as part of a wider UK survey.

Copies of the consultation paper, the 2003 economic appraisal and the public opinion survey can be accessed on the Forest Service website at www.forestserviceni.gov.uk



2.5 What you told us...

- **There is substantial support for increased forest cover in NI. 75% of respondents to the public opinion survey would like to see more woodland in their part of the country.**
- **There is a need to update the statutory basis for forestry in NI to provide the Department with powers to develop more diverse opportunities. The public opinion survey recorded that the 3 most popular reasons to support forestry with public money are “to provide places to walk in”, “to provide places for wildlife”, and “to improve the countryside landscape”.**

- The Department, in acquiring powers to develop land for wider purposes, should ensure that opportunities for development do not conflict detrimentally with access, amenity and biodiversity.
- There is support from a broad range of interests to create a statutory right of access to forests. Some stakeholders would like to see this right extended to other non-motorised access (cycling and horse riding for example) and others want it developed through local partnerships.
- A proposal to introduce powers for the Department to recoup costs for damage to roads by forest traffic, to control and monitor deer, and to regulate tree felling is welcomed, however a number of caveats are expressed. These include concerns that any additional costs to private woodland owners would be detrimental to the profitability of the industry, access to private land to control deer and other mammals should be by negotiation, and that powers of entry should avoid providing preferential treatment to the public sector.
- There is mixed support for the Department to assume powers to compulsorily acquire land and sporting rights. There is concern about determining where the public interest lies in individual cases and that the powers sought should be subject to stringent rules on compulsory acquisition and used very sparingly.
- The option to transfer responsibility for management of public access to forests from Forest Service to local government is not favoured. Fourteen of the sixteen district councils that responded to 'Options for Forestry' support this view. The public opinion survey found that 66% of respondents want Forest Service to retain responsibility.



THE POLICY

Forestry policy in Northern Ireland will continue to be stated as:

- **The sustainable management of existing woods and forests, and**
- **A steady expansion of tree cover to increase the many diverse benefits that forests provide.**

4.1. Introduction

This document provides a strategy for the delivery of forestry policy that encompasses the findings of the review and is consistent with the wider aims of the Department. The consultation paper 'Options for Forestry' confirmed that the Forest Service would continue to carry out certain functions.

The key tasks are:

- **To verify the sustainable management of forests.**
- **To maintain the supply of timber from forests.**
- **To restore the area of forest exploited for timber subject to addressing wider environmental objectives and exploiting development opportunities where this is in the public interest.**
- **To promote the use of forests for informal public recreation.**
- **To promote forest expansion.**

The strategy will be delivered through successive Departmental and Forest Service annual business plans.

4.2. Additional Measures

The strategy also outlines new measures, which are listed under two main themes. These are:

- **A programme of afforestation**
- **The sustainable management of our existing woods and forests**

Although the strategy is directed at developing forestry through and across the public and private sectors, a common thread throughout is that of how we will obtain better value from the public forest estate.

4.3. A programme of Afforestation

There are ambitious afforestation programmes under way in many other countries, responding to the same kinds of pressures that exist in NI, but at current rates it would take us well over 100 years to attain even the current GB forestry intensity. This is much slower than is desirable and will restrict the potential for people to gain from the benefits of forests.

The Department will encourage a wide range of types of forest. It will favour those that complement other objectives of government policy by improving the environment, by promoting sustainable lifestyles and rural development, and which support renewable energy policy. While economic development through timber production will still be a major objective, in the long term it need not initially be the dominant objective. Thus, there is a continuing need for traditional coniferous and broadleaved plantations as well as new energy plantations, and a preference for new plantations to consolidate existing ones.

The rate of afforestation is likely to parallel the rate of change in the agricultural sector because of changes to the Common Agriculture Policy, notably the introduction of the Single Farm Payment (SFP). The role of government will be to provide guidance on the types of forest that are needed and, where new planting is particularly desirable, to encourage progress by providing technical advice and contributing to costs where there is a commensurate public benefit, and by encouraging the orderly development of markets for forest products.

To address this we will:

4.3.1: “Use the new Rural Development Regulation to encourage the development of new afforestation and target areas for action”

Within NI we should aim over the next 50 years to double the area of forest largely through transfer from agricultural use to forestry. The current rate of afforestation of 500ha per annum is not sufficient to meet the demand for new afforestation, which emerged strongly from the consultation. We will therefore optimise funds available under the NI Rural Development Regulation Plan within the constraints of the National funding allocated to the afforestation programme. The Rural Development Regulation will be reviewed again in 2013 and measures to provide for afforestation can be reviewed again at that time. The commitment of landowners to continuing agricultural activity means that forests are likely to expand slowly. However, as confidence about the impact of the SFP grows and the advantages of growing trees become apparent, the Department expects demand to increase and it will then give increased priority to afforestation projects within the Plan.

To encourage afforestation the Department will revise the Woodland Grant Scheme. The Scheme will continue to provide support for all afforestation projects but will also encourage an increased rate of new planting in locations where certain types of forestry seem particularly desirable. This targeted approach will assist the Department to meet objectives that may not be achieved through the application of a standard grant scheme.

4.3.2: “Avail of opportunities for public sector afforestation”

The Department will assist the afforestation programme and complement these developments through a programme of consolidation and expansion of existing forests, particularly those used for public access as and when opportunities arise.

4.3.3: “Publish maps showing where afforestation is to be encouraged”

The programme of afforestation should complement the individual needs of landowners and be sympathetic to the natural environment. The Department is well placed to provide strategic information and advice that will enable landowners to find forestry solutions that are consistent with sustainable land use. This in turn will help the Department to process grant applications more efficiently. We will, in co-operation with other agencies, publish maps showing where afforestation is to be encouraged and from time to time revise these to take into account changes to habitat condition and statutory designations affecting land use.

4.4 Sustainable Forests



The sustainable management of forests is about ensuring the delivery of benefits for the present generation, while at the same time protecting the environment and resources for the benefit of future generations. The affordable delivery of environmental and social benefits depends in large measure on the successful economic development of the timber sector that, by purchasing timber, provides the wealth to invest in forests.

The timber sector operates in a competitive environment. The challenge is to improve the economic performance of forest management so that in producing timber it can also afford to provide wider benefits through changes to forest structure and condition that improve diversity and sustainability.

To address this we will:

4.4.1: “Secure a balance of public benefits from forests”

The 1953 Act provides that DARD is responsible for promoting the interests of forestry in NI, the development of afforestation, the production and supply of timber, and the maintenance of adequate reserves of growing trees. This provides adequate power to conduct core activities such as timber production but does not provide sufficient flexibility to meet more contemporary and evolving commercial, environmental and social objectives. The Department intends to change the legislation to recognise the reality of the broad range of activities currently undertaken by the Forest Service and provide a sound base for the future, by creating a duty to supply timber, provide recreational access, protect the environment and avail of development opportunities in a balanced manner.

4.4.2: “Obtain better value from the public forest estate”

The Department, through the Forest Service, has a well-developed commercial approach to the sale of timber. It also however manages significant property assets that are mainly used in support of forestry objectives, but from time to time these may have a higher value in an alternative use. It is important that there are mechanisms in place that allow the Department to make forests available for development and to share in realising that value. To achieve this the Department intends to take statutory powers to permit the development of its land. The powers will be widely drawn to allow, for example, the creation of wind farms, the development of tourist facilities and the participation in partnership arrangements with the private sector and other bodies.

Consideration will also be given to the disposal of plantations where this will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the forestry strategy.

The Department will also seek reserve powers for compulsory purchase of land and rights over land where this will improve management efficiency, effectiveness and safety. Examples include the need to secure adequate access to property ready for timber harvest, and the purchase of sporting rights over forests where there is evidence that other users of that forest are at risk and where agreement on the acquisition or exercise of sporting rights is not possible. In the past the absence of these powers prevented the Department acquiring land from other public bodies obtained under their compulsory purchase powers, even though afforestation would have been in the public interest.

The powers will be subject to NI rules on compulsory acquisition, executed under Ministerial supervision, and will be used very sparingly.

4.4.3: “Support policy through the introduction of Regulations”

Tree Felling

Policy is that areas felled will be replanted or naturally regenerated, except where felling is allowed for environmental improvement or to enable development authorised under planning regulations (The UK Forestry Standard, 2004). At present, however, there is no requirement to notify the Department when felling is taking place. In order to safeguard the area under forestry use and to achieve diversity and improved forest structure, we propose introducing regulations that will compel forest owners to manage with greater consideration to sustainability, including the timing and extent of felling, and the composition of regenerating woodlands. Equivalent regulation in GB has not resulted in less forest, and we envisage that this will contribute positively to forestry in NI.



Damage to roads caused by timber traffic

Generally, timber traffic is likely to constitute ‘exceptional traffic’ under the terms of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 and attract a liability to the owner of the timber for damage caused to minor public roads. At present there is no statutory mechanism for alerting the Roads Service to proposed forestry works, except where planning permission is required and the introduction of felling licences will provide a mechanism for notification. The Department also intends to obtain powers to enable it to designate “forestry zones” within which it can undertake improvement and repairs to roads damaged by lorries accessing forests, and where appropriate recover costs from private woodland owners within these zones. In areas outside these zones Roads Service, using powers within the Roads Order, will recover the costs associated with the repair of unclassified roads.

Deer, large mammals and grey squirrels

A reduction in agricultural activity resulting from CAP reform and the introduction of the SFP could mean that land adjacent to forests, until now used for agricultural use, may support significantly increased deer numbers and lead to unacceptable levels of damage to forests and other habitats. Our view is that fencing will not provide effective affordable protection for forests, and that additional risk is posed by the spread of the grey squirrel and the release or escape of illegally imported forest dwelling animals not normally found in NI.

The Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 currently provides that power to control deer is exercisable only by the owner of the land on which the deer are or with the permission of that owner. The Department is seeking statutory powers to control and monitor deer, grey squirrels and other animals in forests and on adjacent land. This will be achieved either through amendment to the Wildlife Order or through forestry legislation.



4.4.4: “Focus on recreational issues”

The demand for recreational use of forests is increasing and diversifying, and, due to the relative scarcity of forests in Northern Ireland, this is placing growing pressure on commercial and environmental objectives. In the main, most forests will continue to be used for timber production and the quiet enjoyment of the population in general, however the Department will examine opportunities to enter into partnership agreements whereby facilities can be developed within some forests and used exclusively for specific activities. The aim is to accommodate more active or high value pursuits in support of wider government objectives for sport and tourism, and enhancement of the environment.



To complement local government policies on recreation, tourism and access to the countryside the Department proposes creating a statutory right of pedestrian access to many of its forests, while limiting its liability towards people exercising that right. The Department will also consider the creation of operational guidelines to give greater freedom to cyclists and horse riders to use forests in a way not foreseen when the current bye-laws prohibiting those activities were drawn up.

5.1 Links to the DARD strategy

The Department recognises the valuable contribution that forestry makes in achieving its vision for a thriving, sustainable rural community. Through Forest Service, it aims to ensure the sustainability of forests between generations, increase tree cover where it is affordable to do so, and manage forestry in a way that increases biodiversity, enhances the landscape and assists in improving water quality. Forest Service primarily expresses these aspirations through ensuring that forests are compliant with the UK Forestry Standard, through an afforestation programme, and by reviewing the regulatory framework for forestry. Additional measures within the new forestry strategy that address sustainable forest management and afforestation will further complement the DARD goal.

5.2 Structures for delivery

The outcome of the Review of Public Administration in NI announced on 21st March 2006 was that the Forest Service will continue to be an Executive Agency within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, subject to a review of the arrangements for Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland. The Agency will remain the lead body for delivery of the forestry strategy and will deliver services on a unified, regional basis, to compete in timber markets and contribute effectively to supply chain efficiency. Nevertheless, the Agency is a small organisation in comparison with other European state forestry bodies. It needs to continue its search for further efficiency and improve its commercial focus, and it needs to ensure that in the exercise of its functions it can demonstrate that it is achieving a proper balance between competing objectives for the use of forests.

The Agency status conveys certain advantages in terms of implementing the forestry strategy. For example, the Agency publishes its own business plan and annual report, and these will remain the principal means for setting more detailed performance targets and reporting progress. For example, the 2005/06-business plan shows how forestry contributes to the aims of the *NI Biodiversity Strategy*, provides opportunities to improve public health, and complements policy on renewable energy.

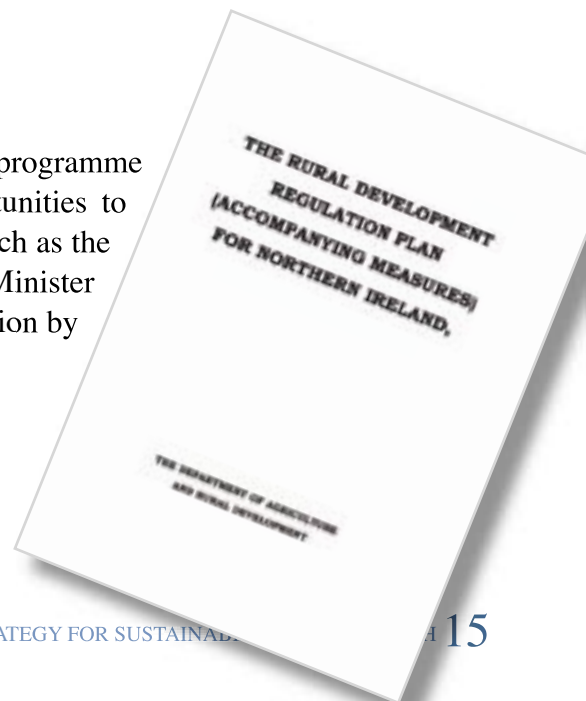
The emphasis on an increased commercial approach, with the majority of decisions being reached on commercial criteria, suggests that the Forest Service may need to undergo a further change in organisational structure and remit in order for it to be effective in the long term. Changes of internal organisation designed to improve efficiency will continue, and Ministers will consider whether further change is necessary when the review of Environmental Governance reports.

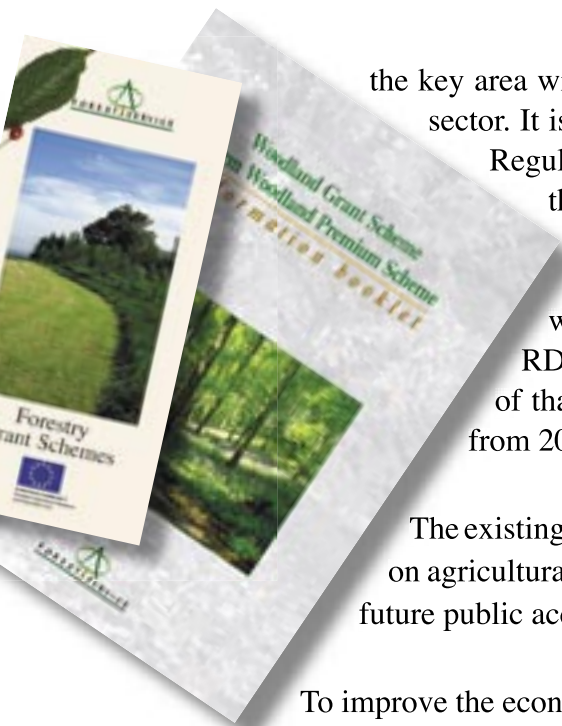
5.3 Legislation

A proposal to amend the 1953 Act has been included in the legislative programme for the 2006/07 Parliamentary Session. There may also be opportunities to progress some of the measures through other legislative proposals such as the Partnership legislation being taken forward by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). It is planned to enact legislation by 2008.

5.4 Resources

An important part of ensuring that this strategy will be carried forward is the availability and efficient use of resources. As already noted,





the key area will be growth of new afforestation across NI, largely led by the private sector. It is proposed to optimise funding available under the Rural Development Regulation Plan within the constraints of national funding. Clearly therefore the amount of funds available through both European and national funding will be limited. However, in order to provide the necessary impetus to kick-start a programme of private sector planting, appropriate priority will be given to afforestation projects within Departmental budgets. The RDR plan will run for 7 years from 2007 and a review towards the end of that period should be undertaken to consider future afforestation support from 2014 onwards.

The existing Woodland Grant Scheme will also be revised, focusing new afforestation on agricultural land close to urban settlements and planned in a way that will facilitate future public access.

To improve the economic sustainability of forest industries, and in doing so demonstrate the commercial viability of forestry to landowners, we will strive to reduce the costs of production, improve markets for forest products and services, and sponsor forestry related research. In doing this we will work with industry in reviewing the effectiveness of the timber supply chain, review arrangements for training, and communicate findings of research to appropriate contacts.

Progress on minor projects such as restoration of listed buildings, trail construction and maintenance will require increased expenditure on recreation, and the Departmental Board will consider how resources can be made available in the context of tight financial constraints.

Environmental improvements are closely related to the pattern and timing of harvesting operations, and in the main can be accommodated within existing provision. Where a major project arises, such as restoration of extensive areas of bog, this will be the subject of a specific bid on resources in the normal way through the business planning process.

A recurring theme across responses received during the consultation phase was a view that public forests must be accessible and that a wide range of activities must be catered for. The Department accepts that forests must be made accessible and the provision of a statutory right of access will encourage the quiet enjoyment of these assets. It is desirable that other more proactive activities such as horse riding, biking, and motor rallying should also be accommodated. However, the existing small forest estate means that these additional activities will have to be regulated and issues of cost will need careful consideration.



5.5 Partnership

The Review of Public Administration in NI aims to increase the responsibilities of local government. In support of this we put forward a specific proposal in the consultation paper to transfer responsibility for access management of the Department's forests to district councils. A substantial body of opinion was

opposed, including a large proportion of district councils. There was support for the development of local partnership agreements from councils and other organisations that want to use public forests as part of recreational and tourist strategies within their areas. We will take this forward as part of normal business and propose strengthening this by:

- **Utilising new powers to enter into commercial partnerships**
- **Working with other agencies to ensure afforestation is a core component of planning, landscape, and biodiversity developments**

5.6 Detailed strategies

The Forest Service will consider drawing up more focussed strategies, in consultation with stakeholders and as part of its normal business planning cycle, setting out how it proposes to tailor specific areas of operations. This may include, for example, a strategy outlining how we will facilitate the recreational use of our forests, or address the aspirations of the NI Biodiversity Strategy in relation to forests.



CONCLUSION

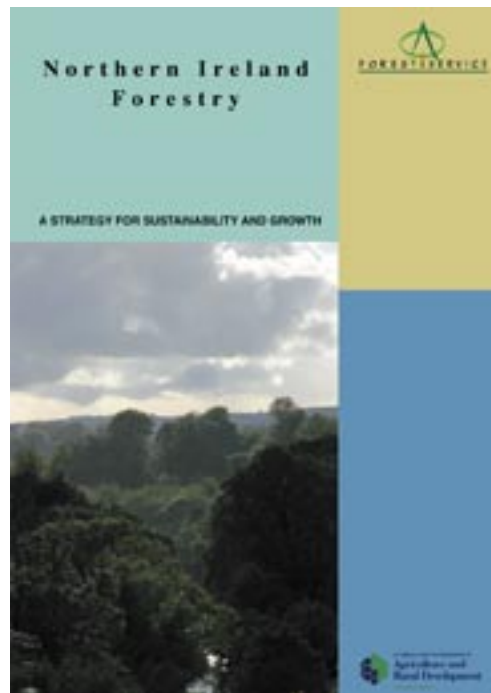


Our vision for forestry in NI is

“To meet the forest needs of present and future generations through improved sustainability of forests and an increased rate of afforestation”.

We aim to:

- **Provide those owning land with the information and the means to consider afforestation as a realistic alternative land use.**
- **Continue a steady supply of timber to ensure the economic sustainability of forestry industries and to encourage the rural economy.**
- **Continue to provide access to forests and to realise the potential of forests to be used for recreation.**
- **Provide a statutory basis for realising the vision.**
- **Encourage forest growth to provide timber, biodiversity and access opportunities and further develop the quality of the NI landscape.**
- **Improve the sustainable management of the forestry resource in NI.**



Should accessible formats such as large type, audio cassette or a language other than English be required, please contact the Customer Services Manager at Forest Service Headquarters and appropriate arrangements will be made as soon as possible.

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