



Small Woods : Press release : 2 February 2011

Community groups need support to take on woodlands

The Coalition Government has launched its consultation document on the future of the public forest estate, in line with its commitment *“to fundamentally reform the public forestry estate, with diminishing public ownership and a greater role for private and civil society partners.”*

Small Woods Association (**Small Woods**) promotes the sustainable management of the UK’s small woodlands, many of which are in private ownership. While strongly supporting private ownership of small woodlands, **Small Woods** believes that the wide range of woodland types within the existing public forest estate would deliver most public benefit through largely remaining in public, NGO or community ownership. A broad range of ownership should be enabled by providing time, funding and support mechanisms to enable community groups and NGOs to take on the leases and ensure the woods continue to be managed sustainably.

Leasing woodlands to social enterprises would help protect the resource, and also maximise the public benefit by engaging, educating and training local communities as well as disadvantaged groups and those with health challenges. The large heritage forests in the public estate (which in our opinion includes most of the larger forests such as Cannock Chase, Wareham Forest, Delamere Forest, Mortimer Forest, Wyre Forest, New Forest) could be transferred to a Forestry Trust to secure their future multipurpose management. Some of the other large forests could be leased to commercial forestry companies, subject to guarantees around access, maintenance of access infrastructure, biodiversity.

Judy Walker, Executive Director of **Small Woods** said: “We believe that it is crucial to retain the access, biodiversity and social benefits arising from English woodlands currently part of the public forest estate, and that this can be achieved in combination with sustainable management in the right ownership – we think this is the right opportunity for community groups and social enterprises to step forward, and the Coalition Government should take action to help make this happen”

Small Woods is proposing that a mix of ownerships is the right way to go forward, with any disposals happening over several years, to give time for communities and social enterprises to gear up and get organised to take on such a commitment. Any community group will require assistance and support to be in a position to manage woodlands.

Small Woods’ role in any disposal is fourfold:

- Supporting community groups to develop capacity and find funds to be able to purchase or take on leases of local woods
- Offering support, advice and training to new or inexperienced woodland owners to encourage the sustainable management of their woodlands
- Promoting the continued sustainable management of all our woodlands for the production of timber, wood products and woodfuel that helps to reduce society’s reliance on oil and gas; and helping to train and support wood based businesses
- Promoting the role of woodlands for social interventions: for offering structured programmes of training and activity to help rebuild health and confidence in those with physical or mental illness and to help alienated groups to re-engage with society, learn skills and find employment opportunities, creating a positive future for themselves.



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Notes for editors

1. Small Woods Association is a UK wide charity that promotes and teaches sustainable woodland management. The Association has over 1900 members, many of whom own woodland or run small woodland businesses. Small Woods also supports the 100 or so active woodland initiatives across the UK, including community groups, through the Woodland Initiatives Network.
2. **Small Woods** has recently undertaken research for Forest Research on the development and support required by community woodland groups in England, and has helped to develop Llais y Goedwig (Voice of the Woods) in Wales, as a group to represent community woodland groups across Wales. Small Woods has also helped to write the Good Practice Guide to Social Forestry, available from www.smallwoods.org.uk
3. For more information please contact Judy Walker, Executive Director of Small Woods Association on 01952 432769, judywalker@smallwoods.org.uk