

PE1812/S

Woodland Trust submission of 9 March 2021

The Committee's ongoing and thorough consideration of this petition is welcomed. At the next meeting on the 10th March 2021 the Committee will consider the Scottish Government's response to the petition. The petition raises issues which the Woodland Trust has been advocating for many years now: ancient woodland does not have enough protection from development in the current planning system, or protection from other threats such as overgrazing, and this irreplaceable habitat continues to get fragmented and chipped away at.

The Scottish Government response is inadequate given the importance of ancient woodland to biodiversity and to carbon sequestration. The Forestry Strategy for Scotland recognises that:

*All Scotland's forests, woodlands and associated open ground habitats provide some biodiversity value. However, **suitably managed native, and in particular ancient and semi-natural woodlands**, including appropriately restored plantations on ancient woodland sites (PAWS), will contribute the most.*

Yet in a biodiversity emergency more than half of these woods continue to be in unsatisfactory condition, and some get chopped away to make space for built development that should be located in a more appropriate place.

Ancient woodlands store more carbon than the average for other woodland types. It is clear that these woods are vital in meeting our climate change targets. Their longevity means that they must be around to sequester carbon for generations to come.

We know that more than half of our native woodlands are in poor condition. The Scottish Government's response states that '*The proportion of Scotland's protected woodland sites in favourable or recovering condition at 31st March 2020 was 64.3%.*' This is for woodlands that are in protected areas, not for all ancient and native woodlands, many of which are not under any protection or inside protected areas.

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy progress report to the Scottish Parliament¹ laid in June 2020 presents disappointing information on the state of our native and ancient woodlands. It finds that sustained effort is required in the following areas, which are the areas that the Scottish Government discuss in their response:

- Increase the amount of native woodland in good condition (upwards of 46% as identified in the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland).
- Restore approximately 10,000 ha of native woodland into satisfactory condition in partnership with private woodland owners through deer management plans.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/progress-report/2020/06/scottish-biodiversity-strategy-report-parliament-2017-2019/documents/scottish-biodiversity-strategy-report-parliament-2017-2019/scottish-biodiversity-strategy-report-parliament-2017-2019/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-biodiversity-strategy-report-parliament-2017-2019.pdf>

It is clear that not enough action is being taken to address the main threats to our woodland condition which are invasive non-native species and overgrazing mainly by deer. Inappropriate development, which is the main focus of the petition, is also part of the threats to ancient woodland. NatureScot as the statutory agency for nature, is the custodian of the Ancient Woodland Inventory, and should be responding to planning threats on ancient woodland but it doesn't have capacity to engage in a meaningful way. The Woodland Trust would like to see NatureScot play a more active role in the protection of ancient and native woodlands from threats, including inappropriate development. NatureScot needs to be better resourced in this respect.

The Woodland Trust does welcome the commitment in the Government's *Statement of Intent* on the National Planning Framework 4 to strengthen protection for woodlands however, we would have liked to see ancient woodland specifically mentioned as this type of woodland is irreplaceable and protection for this in the planning system must clarify that development on this type of woodland is off limits. Scotland's next National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) is a chance to give ancient woodland the protection it deserves from inappropriate development and to ensure trees are around long-term to absorb carbon to meet Scotland's climate targets, while the Climate Change Plan update is a chance to address other threats to ancient woodland such as overgrazing.

Most recently the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee in its report² scrutinising the Climate Change Plan update states that:

The Committee also calls on the Scottish Government to outline in further detail its plans and associated targets for the regeneration of Scotland's ancient woodlands given the significantly greater impact this will have in storing carbon compared to other types of woodland, and, more generally, for the good management of Scotland's existing woodlands, with appropriate support and incentives as part of rural and forestry policies.

The Woodland Trust welcomes the recommendation above and wants to see this taken on board by the Scottish Government in the Climate Change Plan update.

Ancient woodland is an irreplaceable resource. Once it's lost it's gone forever. Overall the Scottish Government's response falls short of acknowledging that better policy support and resource allocation is required to protect and restore ancient woodland.

² https://www.parliament.scot/S5_Rural/20210304_EM_to_Cab_Secs_TIC_RET_and_ECCLR_-_CCPu_scrutiny.pdf