

Introduction

This consultation is to enable all stakeholders to participate in the review of the Down Forestry Planning Area (FPA) at the earliest possible stage. This scoping consultation is being carried out to find out which of the topics identified in this document are relevant to you as a stakeholder. The consultation gives you the opportunity to say if you would like to engage with the Forestry Planning Team in relation to any opportunities identified in the document.

Forestry Planning

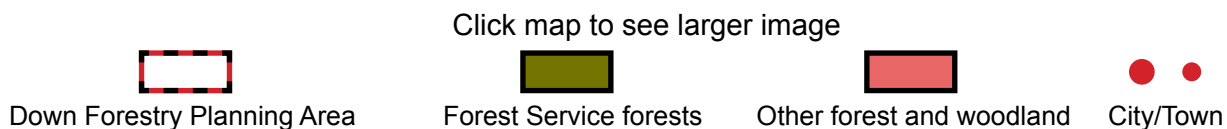
[Forestry planning](#) facilitates the delivery of the many different services our forests and woodlands provide such as sustainable wood production, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and recreational opportunities. Reviewing forest plans ensures that they are up to date and that forests continue to meet the diverse and sometimes competing needs of people, wildlife and wood processing industries.

Down Forestry Planning Area

The Down FPA comprises all of County Down and part of County Antrim. The FPA includes all of Ards and North Down Borough Council, Belfast City Council, and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. The FPA also includes parts of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council.

The majority of Forest Service forests within the FPA are situated within Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. The distribution of forests and woodlands in Down FPA is recorded in the [Northern Ireland Woodland Register and Basemap](#), and is shown in Map 1. Forests and woodland are estimated to cover around 8,800 hectares (ha), which is approximately 11.0% of the FPA. Forest Service manages 58% (5,086 ha) of the forest area in the FPA.

Map 1: Forests and woodland in Down Forestry Planning Area (FPA)



Forests and woodland managed by Forest Service within the Down FPA are mainly within the Mourne AONB and are predominantly [coniferous](#). Forest Service also manages significant areas of [broadleaved](#) and [mixed woodlands](#) within the FPA, for example Hollymount and Castleward forests. The areas and composition of forests managed by Forest Service are shown in [Appendix I](#).

Forest Service forests are managed to meet a range of sustainable development objectives in line with the requirements of the [UK Forestry Standard](#), which is the UK Governments' statement on [sustainable forestry](#). Through its promotion of sustainable forestry, Forest Service contributes to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' (DAERA's) purpose of 'Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone'. Sustainable forest management supports the work of the Department for the Economy on energy policy, and the Strategic Investment Board in delivering a public sector energy strategy.



For forest design purposes and to reflect the range of landscape characters in the FPA Forest Service forests are grouped into three forest landscape units: Lagan Valley, North Down, and Strangford and Mourne.

Forests and woodlands in Down that are not managed by Forest Service are typically fragmented and broadleaved in character. The NI Woodland Register and Basemap indicates that these are comprised of more than 34,100 small broadleaved or mixed woodlands less than 1 ha in size. There are also a large number of mainly small coniferous plantations, up to 20 ha in area, located throughout the FPA.

There are a few larger areas of [broadleaved](#) and [mixed woodland](#), up to 96 ha in area, occurring mainly in the traditional estates such as Tobar Mhuire, Seaford, Finnebrogue, Ballywalter and Clandeboyne in the north and east of the FPA.

Regional Landscape Character Assessments (RLCAs) are geographical descriptions of the landscape that reflect the distinctiveness of different parts of Northern Ireland including the extent of forests and woodland. Down FPA includes parts of numerous RLCAs: South Antrim Hills and Six Mile Water RLCA, Belfast and Lagan Valley RLCA, Belfast Lough and Islandmagee RLCA, Down Drumlins and Holywood Hills RLCA, Strangford, Ards and Lecale RLCA, Newry Valley and Upper Bann RLCA and Mourne and Slieve Croob RLCA (which encompasses almost 80% (4,028ha) of Forest Service forests in the FPA).

Down FPA includes three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs): Lagan Valley (encompassing Belvoir Park Forest), Strangford and Lecale (encompassing Mount Stewart, Castleward and Hollymount forests), and Mourne (encompassing all the forests within Slieve Croob RLCA and Narrow Water Forest).

Down FPA includes significant [native woodland](#) areas including [ancient](#) and long established woodland such as Rostrevor Oakwood and Mourne Park. The latter is one of the prime examples of estate woodland in Northern Ireland. Belvoir Park Forest contains many fine examples of veteran oak trees including the Belvoir Oak which is estimated to be 500 years old. It is one of a network of 70 ancient trees identified across the UK dedicated to The Queen in celebration of the Platinum Jubilee under the Queen's Green Canopy initiative.

A number of forests within the FPA have protected area designations, representing features of national and international importance. A number of important areas of [native](#) and [semi-natural woodland](#) are designated as [Special Areas of Conservation \(SAC\)](#), including Hollymount and Rostrevor Wood.

Hollymount SAC is recognised for both the alder woodland on floodplains and sessile oak woods. Rostrevor Wood SAC is a mature oak woodland known to be at least 250 years old and may be a remnant of the original forest which once covered the region.

Belvoir ASSI is of special scientific interest for its parkland and wood pasture habitat and associated species. The walled grounds were known as the Belvoir Demesne and remained wooded during the 18th and 19th centuries when most of the trees throughout Ireland were felled.

Bohill Nature Reserve consists of an area of deciduous woodland, comprising holly, oak, birch, rowan and hazel which have naturally regenerated since the site was clear felled in the past. This small reserve was established to protect the Holly Blue butterfly, once considered rare in County Down but now more widespread.

Designated areas adjacent to and on land managed by Forest Service are listed in Table 1 of [Appendix II](#).

Participation and Engagement

Forestry planning involves engaging with people whether as individuals or as representatives of stakeholder organisations. The purpose of the engagement is to ensure that a wide range of interests are considered including those of local communities and specialist interest groups.

Woodland Development

Forestry has had a significant impact on the social, environmental and economic development of Down for over 100 years. State forestry began in Down with the purchase of Hillsborough Forest in 1925. Forest expansion continued with the acquisition of Donard, Rostrevor, and Tollymore forests within a decade. Further acquisitions continued in traditional demesnes such as Belvoir and Castlewellan. Castlewellan Forest was acquired in 1968 and included the castle, lake and arboretum. The 1950s and 1960s saw a significant expansion of forestry particularly in the upland areas across Northern Ireland. Although the area



of new state owned planting has decreased every decade since then small annual increases in forest area occurred until the late 1990s.

The rate of increase in woodland area outside of state forestry since the beginning of the 20th Century is not well documented. Information available from an inventory of private woodland undertaken in 1975-79, and other Forest Service records, indicates that approximately 14% of the current non-Forest Service woodland area in the Down FPA is comprised of grant-aided planting since 2012. The remainder is divided between woodland referred to in the private woodland inventory, and woodland derived from scrub and woodland succession (as noted in reports of the [Northern Ireland Countryside Survey 1998 and 2007](#)).

Within recent years there has been renewed interest in woodland creation that has resulted in the creation of new woodland in areas such as Divis Mountain, Black Mountain and within the Mourne. This [afforestation](#) has been facilitated by DAERA funding through the 'Small Woodland Grant Scheme' and the 'Forest Expansion Scheme'. The work has been carried out by organisation such as Northern Ireland Water, the Woodland Trust and the National Trust.

Approximately 44% of forest and woodland in the Down FPA is described in the [Ancient Woodland Inventory](#) as woodland on sites which have been continuously wooded since at least 1830. Much of this woodland is easily accessible, including parts of Belvoir Park, Rostrevor, Hollymount and Bohill forests.

In 2021 the Woodland Trust bought 156 hectares of Mourne Park estate which includes 73 hectares of ancient woodland. The acquisition was partly funded by DAERA (£972,000) through the 'Environment Fund'. The Woodland Trust intend to protect and restore the ancient woodland and open the woodland for the public to visit. There will be opportunities for partnership work between Forest Service and the Woodland Trust to facilitate public access to the adjacent existing Mourne Forest which is managed by Forest Service.

Forestry remains a significant source of employment in the rural economy. The number of people directly employed by Forest Service has decreased significantly since the 1960s and 1970s after forests were established and due to mechanisation however, the wood processing sector in Northern Ireland continues to generate around £80 million per annum and sustains approximately 1,000 rural jobs. Increasingly forest based recreation is becoming an important source of employment.

Tollymore Forest was the first Forest Park in Northern Ireland when it opened in June 1955. This was followed in 1969 with the opening of Castlewellan Forest Park. Forests within the Down FPA have provided facilities for forest based recreation for many decades and are important to the tourism offering of the region.

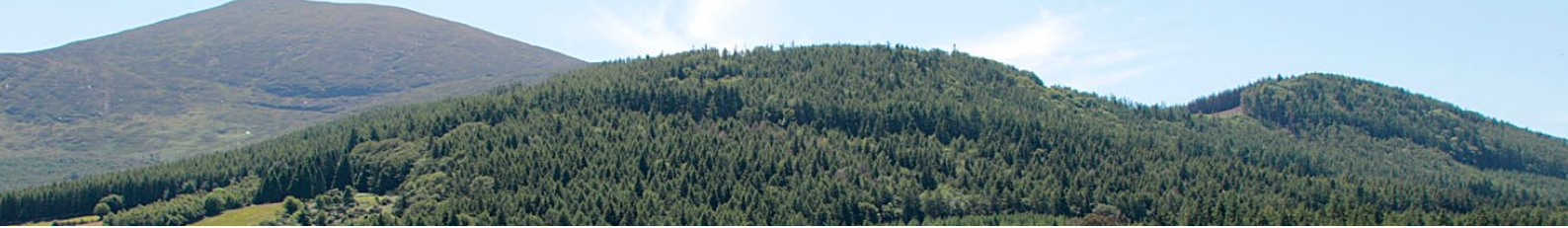
The last decade has seen significant investments in forest based recreation in partnership with councils. Investments have resulted in the creation of new cycle and walking trails, toilets, play areas, sculpture trails and other refurbished facilities. More details are listed under the 'Achievements' section of this document.

Forest Plans

Forest plans provide the direction for interventions that will affect the future appearance, composition, or design of forests. Forest plans show areas of felling (which are individually referred to as coupes), the regeneration of felled areas, management to retain areas under continuous woodland cover, and changes to the type of trees that grow in the forest.

Forest design aims to ensure that there is continuity of woodland for timber and wood products and the delivery of a range of non-timber benefits. These benefits include landscape improvement, water protection, places for people, and protection of habitats, including [ancient](#) and [native woodland](#).

Forest Service seeks greater involvement of people in the revision of its forest plans, which has taken place on a five yearly cycle for many decades. The forest management plan for Down forests was last reviewed in 2015 ([Down Management Plan 2015](#)). The Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 placed a duty on Forest Service to promote [afforestation](#) and [sustainable forestry](#), and therefore, Forest Service plans will in future include references to non-Forest Service forest and woodland.



Achievements

Achievements of the previous forest plan, 2015 – 2021, are highlighted in the box below.

1. Continued implementation of the forest design plan for 5,086 hectares of forest.
2. Produced an average of 18,000 cubic metres (equivalent to 600 lorry loads of timber) each year to supply the timber processing industry.
3. Regenerated 266 hectares of Forest Service forest land after clearfelling, and planted nearly 650,000 trees.
4. Grant aided the creation of 320 hectares of new woodland.
5. A programme of work to control invasive plant species was carried out in Belvoir, Castlewellan, Donard and Tollymore forests.
6. The Northern Ireland Forests Visitor Survey 2019 calculated that there were:
 - 245,000 annual visits to Belvoir Park Forest;
 - 276,000 annual visits to Castlewellan Forest;
 - 285,000 annual visits to Hillsborough Forest; and
 - 177,000 annual visits to Tollymore Forest.
7. In partnership with North Down and Ards Borough Council new or refurbished recreational facilities have been provided in the following forest:
 - Cairn Wood (Ballysallagh Forest) – development of improved walking trails, new toilet facilities and improved car parking.
8. In partnership with Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council new or refurbished recreational facilities have been provided in the following forest:
 - Hillsborough Forest – development of improved walking trails, play park, sculpture trail, toilet facilities and improved car parking.
9. In partnership with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council new or refurbished recreational facilities have been provided in the following forests:
 - Castlewellan Forest – refurbished glass houses. Improved accessible parking bays reserved for use by Blue Badge holders.
 - Corry Wood (Castlewellan Forest) – walking trails.
 - Drumkeeragh Forest – Improved walking trails, horse riding access and car parking.
 - Donard Forest - path improvements to access Slieve Donard.
 - Tievenadarragh (Bohill Forest) – walking trails and car park.
 - Rostrevor Forest – new cycle trails and new walking trails.
 - Tollymore Forest – new parking facilities for horse boxes. Refurbished ablution facilities for caravan and camping customers. Refurbished paths in the arboretum to facilitate those with less mobility. Improved accessible parking bays reserved for use by Blue Badge holders.
10. Agreed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Trust in relation to a collaborative partnership.

Scoping Topics

Forestry planning opportunities are presented under 11 scoping topics which are intended to reflect the various areas of interest to stakeholders, these are as follows:

- Enhancing Landscapes
- Protecting Rivers and Lakes
- Enabling the Enjoyment of Forests by Local People and Visitors
- Promoting Afforestation and Sustainable Forestry
- Supplying Sustainable Wood Products
- Regenerating Forest Land
- Growing Trees Sustainably
- Minimising the Use of Pesticides and Fertilisers
- Targeting Invasive Species
- Protecting Habitats and Species
- Restoring Peatland Habitats

Appendices

A summary of the composition of Forest Service forests is provided in [Appendix I](#). Details of environmental regulation requirements, designated areas and historic monuments are provided in [Appendix II](#). The Forest Service's strategy for restoring peatland habitats is provided in [Appendix III](#).

Map 1: Forests and woodland in Down Forestry Planning Area

