West Country
Labour & Cooperative
Farming - Fisheries - Food

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Trees in the farmed landscape

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This briefing note has been prepared by the West Country Labour and Cooperative **Farming, Fisheries and Food** (3F) group, to inform the work of Local Government Committees (LGCs), the Regional Executive Committee (REC) and Shadow Ministerial team. Our work complements that of other party policy structures and affiliated organisations. Each of our 'work packages' is led by a subject matter expert and includes qualified and experienced practitioners.

Background

- As part of its commitment to achieve net zero by 2050, the UK government has a target of increasing tree planting rates across the UK to 30,000 ha per year, covering 1.5 million ha by 2050. This would boost UK woodland cover from 13% to 17%[1]. Current planting rates are around 14k ha per year, with most occurring in Scotland.
- Of all land cover types, woodlands offer the highest rates of carbon sequestration, depending on species, age and location[2,3].
- Much of the new planting is likely to take place on farmland, including on-farm woodland, hedgerows and agroforestry (silvo pasture and silvo arable). It may also include rewilding and natural colonisation.
- Not all agricultural land should be targeted for tree planting – higher quality agricultural land (Grade 3a or similar), designated sites, priority habitats, peatlands and archaeological features should be avoided.
- Farming and forestry in the UK is very separate in terms of policy/management and land managers. In many European countries, farming and forestry co-exist and the identity of landowners is often as farmer-foresters or producers, rather than either a farmer or a forester.

What you need to know

- To date, uptake of grants and incentives to increase tree planting rates on farmland has been poor. Barriers to planting on farmland include structural factors (tax implications, land tenure) and attitudinal factors (e.g. farmer identity as food growers not tree growers, and what it means to be 'a good farmer'; perceptions that forestry is unprofitable).
- About a third of farms in the UK are operated by tenant farmers. Tenancy agreements are often short-term (e.g. less than 5 years), with a requirement that the land be maintained in agricultural production.
- Woodland on farmland is not eligible for exemptions in inheritance tax, unlike agricultural land. Thus farmers are reluctant to undertake permanent land use change which will potentially place a financial burden on their successors.
- Agroforestry has the potential to deliver both food production and increased tree cover and is not considered 'permanent' by farmers, with legislation currently catching up to ensure it is legally recognised as impermanent change.
- Trees on farmland provide multiple benefits, including carbon storage, biodiversity, social benefits, and on-farm benefits such as shelter for stock, wind protection for crops, reducing run off, flood alleviation and improving soil structure[4].

Policy implications

- National. An improved understanding of the perceptions, motivations and behaviours of farmers is required, along with a better understanding of the barriers to on-farm tree planting. Farming and forestry need to be better integrated (both in terms of policy and the identity of landowners as farmer-foresters) to allow for a more integrated approach to multifunctional land use. Structural barriers relating to tenant farmers and inheritance tax need to be addressed. Flexible & tailored bundles of regulation, economic incentives/markets (for carbon, biodiversity, social benefits as well as timber, wood products & fibre) in both woodland, trees outside of woodland and agroforestry settings & advice packages that have capacity to adapt to changing needs & circumstances of farms over time & in response to shifting norms are needed.
- Regional and county. Facilitate more local and adaptable supply chains (e.g. saw mills & demand for wood products) that exploit a wider range of tree species, timber sizes and potential products (timber, wood, fibre etc.) to improve profitability for farmers. Access to forestry/woodland expertise, training and advice. Increase rewilding & natural colonisation opportunities through locally-led integrated Land Use Plans.
- District, town and parish. Ensure local communities are consulted and engaged with new planting to ensure social benefits are delivered.

Useful resources, references and point of contact

- References: [1]CCC (2019) Net Zero: The UK's contribution to stopping global warming, London; [2]Gregg et al. (2021) Carbon storage and sequestration by habitat: a review of the evidence (second edition) Natural England Research Report NERR094; [3]Staddon et al. (2021) Encouraging woodland creation, regeneration and tree planting on agricultural land: a literature review. Natural England Research Report NEER020; [4]Royal Society (2023) Multifunctional landscapes: Informing a long-term vision for managing the UK's land.

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