

Understanding land managers' decision making to support tree health policy Research summary 2020-2021

Introduction

Research was undertaken between October 2020 and March 2021 to support the development of tree health policy options. The aim of this phase of the project was to discover the optimal blend of regulation, financial support and guidance to elicit behavioural responses required to achieve desired outcomes. A national survey and six stakeholder workshops were co-designed between policy (Defra and the Forestry Commission), researchers (Forest Research, Sylva, CCRI, Fera) and co-design stakeholders, including land managers and woodland owners. These methods provided opportunities to both consult widely and explore specific issues in detail.

National Survey

During February 2021 an online survey was run to collect the opinions of woodland and tree owners, forestry and land agents, and professional arboriculturists across England. The survey was built and hosted by Sylva Foundation.

There were 359 responses to the survey. The majority (33%) of respondents were woodland owners; most were from South East England (86) and South West England (81), the least from London (21) and North East England (30). The total area owned or managed by woodland owners was 227,593ha, representing 20.75% of privately-owned woodland area in England. 74% of the woodland area was broadleaved compared to coniferous. Only half of respondents had a management plan in place, and of these 68% were UKFS-compliant plans. Among the 118 respondents owning and managing Trees Outside Woodlands (TOWs), the number of trees totalled 224,963, covering 18,186ha, and extending 258km in length.

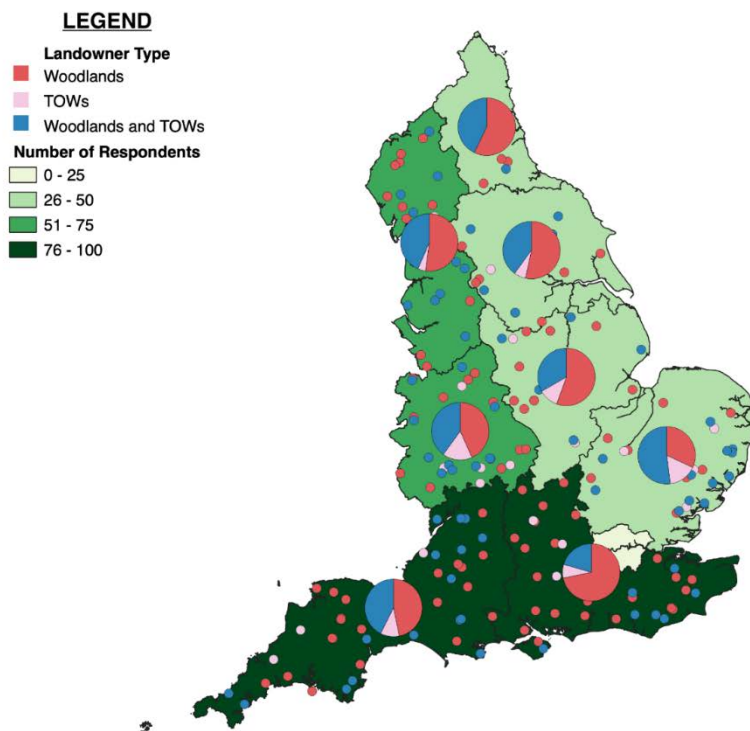


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by frequency and landowner type across English regions.

We asked a high-level question about a respondent's ideal balance between incentives (grants), regulation, and advice and guidance which might be provided by the government in future. A high proportion of respondents (48%) favoured grants alone, followed by 28% preferring advice and guidance alone.

Among the various combinations, a blend of grants plus advice & guidance was favoured over regulation only. There were significant differences between respondent types to this question, for example Arboriculturists were least in favour of grants. Woodland owners with a management plan were less in favour of advice and guidance than those without a management plan. The majority of respondents had not received a grant in the last 10 years, and those respondents were more likely to choose advice & guidance over grants. Respondents who had received grants in the past were more likely to favour grants in future and least likely to favour advice. Conversely, respondents who had not received grant(s) in the past were more likely to favour advice, with no significant difference between preference for advice and grants.

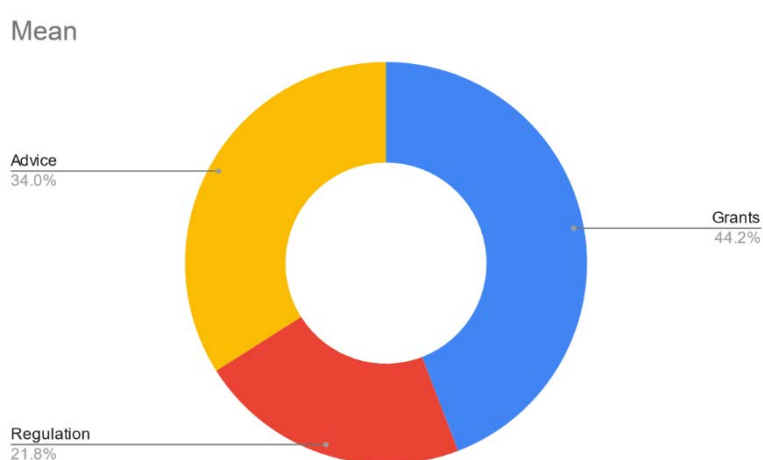


Figure 2. Distribution of support for grant, regulation, and advice & guidance among the five respondent types.

We explored perceived barriers to receiving a grant for felling among a range of possible scenarios. Preparing a Biosecurity Management Plan was perceived to be the greatest barrier, but otherwise the various choices were not seen as a barrier, among them following Basic Biosecurity Guidance, completing Online training, adding Biosecurity signage, or the Training of contractors. We also explored barriers to receiving a grant for restocking, including capital items. Again, the concept of a Forestry Commission-approved Biosecurity Management Plan was perceived as the greatest barrier, but otherwise the seven options were generally perceived unlikely to be barriers.

Respondents answered a series of questions on tree health problems related to four specific species. Answering about the species they had experience of, most respondents (c. 58%) answered questions on ash, followed by sweet chestnut (c.35%), larch (c. 29%), and spruce (c. 23%). For each of the four species, the majority of owners/managers reported presence of the main tree health issue (in this case ash dieback), otherwise presence of the pest/pathogen of interest was a minority among other species. In dealing with diseased ash, sweet chestnut, and larch, respondents would prefer a grant (c.30%) over regulation (c.10%), but the most favoured option was consistently a preference for a blend of both (c.60% of respondents).

A number of options for Advice & Guidance were offered to respondents who were asked to prioritise them. Help with initial identification of a pest/pathogen was the most popular need among respondents, while the preferred option for support was help with Initial identification, followed by Developing an application for support.

Workshops

Between January and February 2021, four workshops were held with stakeholders to consult on details about potential policy options. Each workshop had a different focus and involved a different set of stakeholders. Two workshops were organised around two of the host species (spruce [IPS] and sweet chestnut [SC]), while the other two focused on two landowner groups, farmers [FMR] and owners of small woodland [OSW], who might need specific incentives to support action for tree health. Overall, 65 participants took part, including farmers, estate managers and woodland owners/managers.

The workshops focused on discussing what elements might need to be included in a grant scheme for treatment/felling or restocking, to encourage participants to apply, and what advice and guidance they might need, and when. The potential for group schemes, where a group of woodland owners/managers could apply collectively for a grant, was also discussed, and was a particular focus in the workshop with owners of small woodlands.

There were a range of suggestions as to what should be included as part of the incentive package for felling and treatment. For example, it was suggested that some elements of advice and guidance should be eligible under the scheme, specifically surveying and diagnosis costs to establish presence and extent of tree P&D. Costs for working up a management plan (c.£500-£1,000 was mentioned) was also suggested, to include work to establish the costs of proposed operations, e.g. getting quotes from contractors, that could be included as part of the grant application [FMR/OSW]. Contractor costs were considered as needing to be covered in full [FMR], and if costs for establishing access to, and extraction from woodland were included, this would overcome an important barrier to action [FMR/IPS/SC]. Alternative options for felling should be considered eligible, e.g. use of specialised equipment for small spaces, or horse logging [IPS/OSW].

Farmers felt that a grant for restocking alone was considered unlikely to be sufficient to encourage landowners to carry out felling, as the costs of felling are perceived to be variable and high compared with the costs of restocking. However, other participants felt restocking was particularly expensive so a restocking grant could help some owners to fell in some circumstances [SC]. Restocking decisions are influenced by understanding the benefits of replanting, so information about resilient species for restocking (and economic or public benefits) is linked to felling decisions and behaviours [FMR/SC]. A grant for full costs was preferred by some workshop participants [FMR] who viewed stocking rates as too low in previous woodland schemes. If full costs are not possible, then payments for maintenance of restocking may be important to incentivise action [FMR/IPS]. There was a very high demand from participants for the cost of deer fencing to be included in the restocking grant [FMR/OSW]. A high proportion of the incentive should be paid upfront, but e.g. 30% withheld for c. 5 years, since the required outcome is restocking [SC].

While there was general support for group applications in theory, participants recognised a number of challenges. Firstly, consideration needs to be given to the criteria for a group to come together – i.e. neighbouring woodland owners, a small landscape unit, or a much larger collection of woodlands not necessarily bordering each other [OSW]. Secondly, participants felt that a group application should be facilitated by an independent individual or organisation, with the Farmer Facilitation Fund (FFF) recognised as a successful model [FMR/OSW]. The FFF, Small Woods Association (SWA), Royal Forestry Society (RFS), Community Forests, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Wildlife Trusts and others were identified as possible facilitators, as well as the Forestry Commission due to its 'regulator' status. Thirdly, it was strongly felt that individuals in any group scheme should be responsible individually for meeting the scheme's requirements, so that the group is not penalised for the actions of one non-compliant member.

Advice and guidance were identified as crucial to elicit action to deal with tree pests and diseases. In particular, there is a need for awareness-raising about tree health as an issue, and diagnostic training/confirming for particular pest and disease (P&D), information about P&D management options, costs and their implications [FMR/IPS/OSW/SC]. Among some groups the level of awareness and

knowledge was noted as very low, specifically new owners of woodland and some farmers, who were not aware of the resources already available, or where to find relevant information and guidance. A mix of approaches was identified as needed at the pre-application stage including a combination of face-to-face advice and online resources. For instance, awareness-raising can be done via remote means including webinars and other on-line resources produced by Defra/FR/FC and others, but dissemination should be through organisations working with target audiences (e.g. Country Land and Business Association, National Farmers Union, Tenant Farmers Association for farmers, or the FC, SWA, RFS for owners of small woodland). On-site advice around P&D diagnosis and assessing what action might take place is preferred through face-to-face interactions. This could be with professional forestry/arboricultural businesses as well as Defra/FC staff [FMR/IPS/SC], and representatives from membership organisations, e.g. SWA, RFS, [SC]. Having longer term knowledge of the locality was cited by all groups as an essential quality for those providing advice [FMR/IPS/OSW/SC]. In addition, information about restocking alternatives is needed, particularly in identifying resilient species with functional attributes to allow development of restocking plans [FMR/OSW/SC].

If the application process is simplified, then there may be no need for additional advice from professional advisors. If the application is complicated and requires a plan or other pre-application entry requirements to be satisfied, this may need professional input and some kind of incentive to cover some of the costs [FMR/OSW/SC]. There was some agreement [OSW] that help at the pre-application and application stages may be required to understand the rules and regulations associated with felling, and because it is at this planning stage that decisions are made not only for an application but also for future management. Support for form filling from FC staff was appreciated and considered important [OSW].

Next Steps

The survey and workshops provided useful information which is being used by Defra and the Forestry Commission to design tree health policy options which will be announced in Summer 2021 and piloted from Autumn 2021 onwards. Piloting will enable policymakers to test policy in context and adapt it accordingly. Co-design principles will continue to guide this process, and we hope to involve as many stakeholders as possible during the remaining phases of this project.

Thanks and acknowledgements

We are indebted to the many organisations that helped to promote the survey and recruit participants to the workshops among their memberships and contacts, including: Arboricultural Association, Country Land and Business Association, Confor, Forestry Commission, Institute of Chartered Foresters, Royal Forestry Society, Small Woods Association, Tilhill Forestry, Woodland Heritage, Small Woodland Owners' Group, and the National Coppice Federation Facebook Group.

Finally, we are extremely grateful to the hundreds of individuals who took the time to share their valuable knowledge and opinions, and for those co-design stakeholders and partners who took an active role in framing the issues, and shaping the questions included in the survey and workshops, and who also tested the national survey for us before it went live.



Photo credit: Sylva Foundation.