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Guidance

Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: protecting them from development

What planning authorities should consider for developments affecting ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees.

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From:

Forestry Commission (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/forestry-commission>) and Natural England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england>)

Applies to:

England

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You should use this Natural England and Forestry Commission guidance (known as 'standing advice') to help you decide on development proposals affecting ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees.

Standing advice is a 'material planning consideration'. This means you should take it into account when making decisions on planning applications. It replaces the need for each agency to give an individual response to planning consultations. It has the same authority as an individual response.

This guidance is also useful for decision-makers who are responsible for major infrastructure projects, such as road and rail schemes.

Natural England and the Forestry Commission will only provide bespoke advice as set out in the when to contact sections, or in exceptional circumstances.

Ancient woodland

Ancient woodland takes hundreds of years to establish and is defined as an irreplaceable habitat. It's important for its:

- wildlife (which include rare and threatened species)
- soils
- recreational value
- cultural, historical and landscape value

It's any area that's been wooded continuously since at least 1600 AD. It includes:

- ancient semi-natural woodland mainly made up of trees and shrubs native to the site, usually arising from natural regeneration
- plantations on ancient woodland sites - replanted with conifer or broadleaved trees that retain ancient woodland features, such as undisturbed soil, ground flora and fungi

They have equal protection in the National Planning Policy Framework (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/11-conserving-and-enhancing-the-natural-environment#paragraph_118) (NPPF).

Other distinct forms of ancient woodland are:

- wood pastures identified as ancient
- historic parkland, which is protected as a heritage asset in the NPPF

Many of these do not appear on the Ancient Woodland Inventory because their low tree density did not register as woodland on historic maps.

You should give consideration to wood pasture identified as ancient in planning decisions in the same way as other ancient woodland.

'Wooded continuously' does not mean there's been a continuous tree cover across the whole site. Not all trees in the woodland have to be old. Open space, both temporary and permanent, is an important component of ancient woodlands.

Ancient and veteran trees

Ancient and veteran trees can be individual trees or groups of trees within wood pastures, historic parkland, hedgerows, orchards, parks or other areas. They are often found outside ancient woodlands. They are irreplaceable habitats with some or all of the following characteristics.

Ancient trees

An ancient tree is exceptionally valuable. Attributes can include its:

- great age
- size
- condition
- biodiversity value as a result of significant wood decay and the habitat created from the ageing process
- cultural and heritage value

Very few trees of any species become ancient.

Veteran trees

All ancient trees are veteran trees, but not all veteran trees are ancient. A veteran tree may not be very old, but it has decay features, such as branch death and hollowing. These features contribute to its biodiversity, cultural and heritage value.

Making decisions

When making planning decisions, you should consider:

- conserving and enhancing biodiversity
- reducing the level of impact of the proposed development on ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees (see 'Avoid impacts, reduce impacts and compensate as a last resort')

You should make decisions on planning applications in line with paragraph 175C of the NPPF (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>).

You should refuse planning permission if development will result in the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees unless:

- there are wholly exceptional reasons
- there's a suitable compensation strategy in place

Assess the impacts

You should use the following process to assess impacts on ancient woodland when making decisions on planning applications. The process also applies to:

- wood pastures identified as ancient
- ancient trees and veteran trees

Consult inventories

You can use the following inventories to help you decide whether a development will affect ancient woodland (including wood pastures identified as ancient) or ancient and veteran trees:

- Natural England's ancient woodland inventory - download the data (http://www.gis.naturalengland.org.uk/pubs/gis/tech_aw.htm) (enter 'ancient woodlands' into the search box) or view it on the Magic map system (<http://magic.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx?chosenLayers=ancwoodIndex,bapdecIndex,orchardIndex,bapwoodIndex,backdropDIndex,backdropIndex,europaIndex,vmlBWIndex,25kBWIndex,50kBWIndex,250kBWIndex,miniscaleBWIndex,baseIndex&box=207763:417>) (zoom in to see local detail)
- ancient tree inventory (<http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/>) (click on 'Tree search' and enter a postcode)
- wood pasture and parkland inventory (includes some ancient sites) (<http://magic.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx?chosenLayers=bapwoodIndex,backdropDIndex,backdropIndex,europaIndex,vmlBWIndex,25kBWIndex,50kBWIndex,250kBWIndex,miniscaleBWIndex,baseIndex&box=207763:417>) (zoom in to see local detail)

Ancient woodlands smaller than 2 hectares are unlikely to appear on these inventories. You should use this guidance for all ancient woodlands and ancient and veteran trees whether they're on the inventories or not. They are updated and reviewed from time to time.

You should contact Natural England if a site has evidence of ancient woodland on it and is not on the inventory.

Potential impacts

Development can affect ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees, and the wildlife they support on the site or nearby. You can assess the potential impacts using this assessment guide (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/740503/FCNE_AWSA_AssessmentGuideFinalSept2018.pdf) to help you with planning decisions.

Direct impacts of development on ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees include:

- damaging or destroying all or part of them (including their soils, ground flora or fungi)
- damaging roots and understorey (all the vegetation under the taller trees)
- damaging or compacting soil around the tree roots
- polluting the ground around them
- changing the water table or drainage of woodland or individual trees
- damaging archaeological features or heritage assets

Nearby development can also have an indirect impact on ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees and the species they support. These can include:

- breaking up or destroying connections between woodlands and ancient or veteran trees
- reducing the amount of semi-natural habitats next to ancient woodland
- increasing the amount of pollution, including dust
- increasing disturbance to wildlife from additional traffic and visitors
- increasing light or air pollution
- increasing damaging activities like fly-tipping and the impact of domestic pets

- changing the landscape character of the area

Providing evidence

You and the developer should work together to make sure there's enough suitable evidence to make a decision. This may include fieldwork and historic maps.

You should include proposed mitigation and compensation measures.

You should ask developers for a tree survey and an ecological survey, where appropriate. The tree survey should be in accordance with guidance in British Standard BS 5837 'Trees in relation to demolition, design and development' (<https://shop.bsigroup.com/ProductDetail/?pid=000000000030213642>). Ecological surveys should follow guidance approved by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) (<http://www.cieem.net/habitats-terrestrial>).

Avoid impacts, reduce ('mitigate') impacts, and compensate as a last resort

You and the developer should identify ways to avoid negative effects on ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees. This could include selecting an alternative site for development or redesigning the scheme.

You should decide on the weight given to ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees in planning decisions on a case-by-case basis. You should do this by taking account of the NPPF and relevant development plan policies.

If you decide to grant planning permission that results in unavoidable loss or deterioration, you should use planning conditions or obligations to make sure the developer:

- avoids damage
- mitigates against damage
- compensates for loss or damage (use as a last resort)

Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees are irreplaceable. Consequently you should not consider proposed compensation measures as part of your assessment of the merits of the development proposal.

Existing condition of ancient woodland

A woodland in poor condition can be improved with good management and development proposals should enhance the condition of existing ancient woodland, where appropriate. Where a proposal involves the loss of ancient woodland, you should not take account of the existing condition of the ancient woodland when you assess the merits of the development proposal. Its existing condition is not a reason to give permission for development.

Mitigation measures

Mitigation measures will depend on the development but could include:

- improving the condition of the woodland
- putting up screening barriers to protect woodland or ancient and veteran trees from dust and pollution
- noise or light reduction measures
- protecting ancient and veteran trees by designing open space around them
- identifying and protecting trees that could become ancient and veteran trees in the future
- rerouting footpaths
- removing invasive species
- buffer zones

Use of buffer zones

A buffer zone's purpose is to protect ancient woodland and individual ancient or veteran trees. The size and type of buffer zone should vary depending on the scale, type and impact of the development.

For ancient woodlands, you should have a buffer zone of at least 15 metres to avoid root damage. Where assessment shows other impacts are likely to extend beyond this distance, you're likely to need a larger buffer zone. For example, the effect of air pollution from development that results in a significant increase in traffic.

A buffer zone around an ancient or veteran tree should be at least 15 times larger than the diameter of the tree. The buffer zone should be 5m from the edge of the tree's canopy if that area is larger than 15 times the tree's diameter.

Where possible, a buffer zone should:

- contribute to wider ecological networks
- be part of the green infrastructure of the area

It should consist of semi-natural habitats such as:

- woodland
- a mix of scrub, grassland, heathland and wetland planting

You should plant buffer zones with local and appropriate native species.

You should consider if access is appropriate and can allow access to buffer zones if the habitat is not harmed by trampling.

You should avoid including gardens in buffer zones.

You should avoid sustainable drainage schemes unless:

- they respect root protection areas
- any change to the water table does not adversely affect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees

Compensation measures

Compensation measures are always a last resort. These measures can only partially compensate for loss or damage.

Compensation measures should be appropriate for the site and for the scale and nature of the impacts on it. A compensation strategy could include the following package of measures:

- planting new native woodland or wood pasture
- restoring or managing other ancient woodland, including plantations on ancient woodland sites, and wood pasture
- connecting woodland and ancient and veteran trees separated by development with green bridges, tunnels or hedgerows
- long-term management plans for new woodland and ancient woodland
- managing ancient and veteran trees
- planting individual trees that could become veteran and ancient trees in future
- monitoring the ecology of the site over an agreed period

Plant new native woodland

Establishing new trees and woodland is not a direct replacement for lost or damaged trees or woodland. You can accept large-scale woodland planting as a compensation measure alongside other measures. This could be on soil that has been moved from the destroyed area of ancient woodland ('soil translocation'). You cannot move an ancient woodland ecosystem because:

- it's not possible to replicate the same conditions at another site
- it's no longer an ancient woodland

New woodland creation can be effective where it links to and extends existing woodland, as long as it does not affect:

- other semi-natural habitats
- heritage features

Restore or improve ancient woodland

You can partially compensate for loss or damage of ancient woodland by improving:

- and restoring plantations on ancient woodland sites
- the management of nearby ancient woodland sites and connecting them better to semi-natural habitat
- the condition of important features of ancient woodland
- access for management purposes

You can partially compensate for loss or damage to wood pasture by restoring soils and pasture.

Management plans should follow the UK Forestry Standard (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uk-forestry-standard>). You can monitor the ecology of the site, over an agreed period, to help you advise on management measures.

Compensate for the loss of ancient and veteran trees

You can partially compensate by planting:

- young trees of the same species with space around each one to develop an open crown
- new trees near to the trees they're replacing

As a last resort, you can manage nearby ancient and veteran trees (including dead and dying trees) to help prolong their life. You should get advice from a registered tree consultant ('arboriculturist') before carrying out work on veteran trees by contacting:

- the Arboricultural Association (<https://www.trees.org.uk/Other-Pages/Contact-Us>)
- the Institute of Chartered Foresters (<https://www.charteredforesters.org/contact-us/>)

Leave the intact hulk of the ancient or veteran tree where it is (preferably standing) to benefit invertebrates and fungi. If that's not possible, move it near other ancient and veteran trees or parkland in the area.

When to contact Natural England

Natural England is a statutory consultee (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/consultation-and-pre-decision-matters#Statutory-consultees>) for proposals that affect any site of special scientific interest (<http://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/>). For all other proposals that affect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees, you should use the guidance on this page.

Consultation service

Natural England
Electra Way
Crewe Business Park
Crewe
Cheshire
CW1 6GJ

Email consultations@naturalengland.org.uk Telephone 0300 060 3900

When to contact the Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission is a non-statutory consultee (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/consultation-and-pre-decision-matters#Non-statutory-consultees>). You should use the guidance on this page. Contact your Forestry Commission England area office (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/forestry-commission/about/access-and-opening#area-offices>) for individual advice that's not covered on this page.

Forestry Commission England Tree Health Team

620 Bristol Business Park
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol
BS16 1EJ

Telephone: 0300 067 4000

Further information

Policy and standards:

- 'Keepers of time' (<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/keepersoftime>) policy statement
- National Planning Policy Framework, paragraphs 11 (footnote 6), 175c, 190 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>)
- The UK Forestry Standard (<https://www.forestry.gov.uk/ukfs>)
- British Standard 5837:2012 (<http://shop.bsigroup.com/en/ProductDetail/?pid=00000000030213642>) 'Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction - Recommendations'
- British Standard 42020:2013 (https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rc=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwizwqKXkYnXAhWJVROkHbYRCuAQFggmMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fshop.bsigroup.com%2FProductDetail%3Fpid%3D00000000030258704&usg=AOvVaw3YGxru_nRV3lsPhkJrtjqT) Biodiversity. Code of practice for planning and development
- Managing ancient and native woodlands in England (<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/inf-d-8azkv9>)

Other useful information:

- Natural England (2000) Veteran Trees – a guide to good management (<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/75035>)
- Lonsdale, D (2013) 'Ancient and other veteran trees: further guidance on management' (http://ancienttreeforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ATF_book.pdf)
- Soil translocation - 'A Habitats Translocation Policy for Britain' (http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/habitats_policy.pdf). JNCC, 2003, pages 9 to 10
- Corney et al (2008) Impacts of nearby development on the ecology of ancient woodland (<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/mediafile/100168350/Impacts-of-nearby-development-on-the-ecology-of-ancient-woodland.pdf>)
- Ryan (2012) Impacts of nearby development on the ecology of ancient woodland - addendum (<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/mediafile/100168353/Impacts-of-nearby-development-on-the-ecology-of-ancient-woodland-addendum.pdf>)
- Woodland Trust: Ancient tree guides (<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications/search/?query=&sortby=date&count=10&type=100007505&subject=100007508>)

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1. 5 November 2018 This page has been updated to: align with the revised National Planning Policy Framework; give clearer guidance on taking account of the existing condition of ancient woodland; and give further guidance on mitigation measures, including the use of buffer zones.
2. 4 January 2018 The advice on the appropriate size of buffer zones (under 'Mitigation measures') has changed. The last version suggested a 50 metre (m) zone to mitigate the effects of pollution and trampling. Following queries about the 50m zone, this text has been removed. Natural England and the Forestry Commission are reviewing the feedback they've received.
3. 27 November 2017 Republished as part of the biennial update.
4. 29 October 2015 Added definitions of 'wooded continuously' and 'ancient wood-pastures', and clarified the rules about soil translocation in 'plant new native woodland'.
5. 3 August 2015 Clarified the purpose of this standing advice.
6. 29 March 2015 Guide fully updated for publication on GOV.UK after consulting with Natural England experts.
7. 30 January 2015 Guidance temporarily removed, pending revisions.
8. 30 January 2015 Guidance temporarily removed due to pending revisions.
9. 13 October 2014 First published.

Related content

Detailed guidance

- Protected sites and areas: how to review planning applications (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-sites-and-areas-how-to-review-planning-applications>)

Explore the topic

- Protected sites and species (<https://www.gov.uk/topic/planning-development/protected-sites-species>)