

Position Statement

Access to woodland

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WOODLAND
TRUST



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The Trust's view

- As well as helping improve people's health and wellbeing, woodland access is fundamental to achieving our aim of inspiring everyone to enjoy and value woodland and trees.
- Everyone should have access to a wood within easy reach of their home.
- Only 15 per cent of people can currently access a wood within walking distance (500m), so we need substantially more accessible woodland.
- The Trust supports the use of incentives and education to bring permissive access to more privately-owned woods, rather than a legal right of access to all woods.
- While access is important, it needs to be appropriate, and should not override the need to safeguard ecological value, particularly in sensitive ancient woods.

The Trust will

- Continue to provide public access to the 1000+ woods in our ownership .
- Lobby for more accessible woodland through opening up inaccessible woods, and creation of new woods near where people live.
- Continue to base its lobbying on the best available evidence on accessible woodland in the UK, and work with others to ensure that evidence is robust.
- Lobby for stronger controls over inappropriate and damaging leisure impacts on ancient woods.

Access to woodland

In England and Wales, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CroW Act) gives a “Right to Roam” in certain “open access” areas. Forests are not included as open access land though landowners can voluntarily dedicate land, creating a right of access in perpetuity, (or until a long lease expires) even if ownership changes. The Forestry Commission (FC) has dedicated its freehold estate, as have other public bodies such as Natural England. In Scotland, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gave a right of responsible non-motorised access, to land and inland water throughout Scotland with few exceptions.

The Woods for People project, run by the Woodland Trust with support from FC England, collects data on accessible woodland across the UK, and led to development of the Woodland Access Standard, now widely adopted in forestry policy, which aspires that everyone should have access to:

- a wood of at least 2 ha within 500m of their home; and
- a wood of at least 20 ha within 4km of their home

Analysis of the data from 2009 showed that only 15.6 per cent of people in the UK meet the first of these, and 55.8 per cent of people the second. This could be increased to 40.2 per cent and 75.9 per cent if currently inaccessible woods were opened up, but there would still be a need for at least 35,000 ha of new woodland to enable everyone to meet the first part of the standard.

Benefits of woodland access

There is a substantial and growing body of evidence that accessing greenspace benefits physical and mental health and well being. In terms of physical activity, contact with the natural environment enhances the positive health benefits of exercise; attractive natural spaces increase motivation to continue outdoor activity in the long term, and promoting physical activity close to where people live, with an emphasis on walking, is more likely to result in sustained activity. Studies also show that exposure to nature aids recovery from daily stresses with benefits for mental health. Early experience of nature is important in children’s development, especially before the age of 12, and contact with nature has been shown to aid concentration and self discipline, and may even be helpful in dealing with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) which affects at least one in 20 schoolchildren in England and Wales.

The Woodland Trust View

Access is essential to achieving the Trust’s aim of inspiring people to enjoy and value woodland. We believe direct contact with woodland and its wildlife is one of the best ways to ignite a spark within people, inspiring them to care for woods in future. Our aspiration is that everyone should have a wood in walking distance of their home.

We acknowledge that a legal right of access to all woods would create tension with those whose woods form the basis of private businesses. For the present we support use of grants to incentivise quality and quantity of woodland access, information and case studies to communicate the true rather than perceived impact of the public on woodland wildlife, and encouraging private owners to work with local schools to offer opportunity for forest-based learning.

On sensitive sites, walkers with dogs, horse riders and cyclists can have a detrimental effect on conservation value. Recreational benefits should not override ecological sensitivity. Newly created woods are robust habitats containing fewer sensitive species than ancient woodland; their potential to deliver woodland access with a minimum of conservation impact should not be under-valued.

Specialist recreational activities that exclude public access may in themselves be damaging especially to semi-natural ancient and other important native woodland e.g. 4 x 4 off road driving and paintball games. The Trust believes stronger controls are needed over inappropriate leisure activities in semi-natural ancient woodland.