

CPRE South East eBulletin

News for January 2011

5 February 2011

Welcome to the CPRE South East eBulletin. Our audience is CPRE and its friends. Please feel free to circulate it. If you are not on our circulation list and want to receive the eBulletin regularly, just let me know at cprenews@gmail.com.

The main news this month remains the Localism Bill. For a summary of the Bill's progress and its contents, especially neighbourhood plans, see our special eBulletin issued earlier today (<http://bit.ly/localupdate>). Caroline Spelman's proposal to sell off England's woods and forests is creating a huge storm and we cover the controversy in depth at the end of this issue.

Andy Boddington, Editor

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Planning News

1. Planning

Right to Reclaim. Grant Shapps announced a new Community Right—the Right to Reclaim Land, which will allow communities to “reclaim and develop hundreds of acres of unused public sector land and buildings” for development. A central database will be established (Planning Portal: <http://bit.ly/eW8cDS>; CLG: <http://bit.ly/hcAT9l>).

Community funding. CLG unveiled a £3 million fund to help community organisations to engage with the changing planning system. The *Supporting Communities and Neighbourhoods in Planning* fund will be available from 1 April 2011 and will provide ‘advice, guidance and assistance’ to local community groups.

Travellers. Groups fighting encroachment onto green belt land by unauthorised gypsy and traveller settlements held a conference last month. They want planning applications for gypsy and traveller sites to face a specific requirement for local consultation, and also want local authorities to receive new powers to throw out retrospective applications submitted by people who have “knowingly and wilfully commenced development without planning permission” (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/i6Epkd>). Caroline Spelman promised to close the loophole through the Localism Bill (Independent: <http://ind.pn/gZOITT>).

CABE and Design Council “merger”. Design watchdog CABE is to be dissolved with just 20 of its staff being transferred to the Design Council, according to a letter from culture secretary Jeremy Hunt to deputy prime minister Nick Clegg. The Cabinet Office is set to approve the merger plans (AJ: <http://bit.ly/fzpJqN>; Building: <http://bit.ly/eR4jWV>).

The Big Society. The head of the civil service has ordered an inquiry into the government’s localism reforms amid growing concerns that its “big society” plans risk eroding the basic democratic principles of transparency and ministerial accountability (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/fgvSme>). Liverpool City Council has withdrawn from the Big Society initiative in protest at public expenditure cuts (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/liveexit>). “The port of Dover is now on the market. How does ‘big society’ talk fit with flogging off our heritage?” asks Tristram Hunt (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/eoxQKx>).

Local Enterprise Partnerships. Enterprise M3 has submitted a revised LEP bid, now extending from the Hampshire Solent LEP across to Surrey (<http://bit.ly/fmuI81>).

Around the South East. The Core Strategy for Sevenoaks has been approved. It promises to protect the green belt and restrict development at Fort Halstead, an MoD research site on the crest of the Kentish North Downs (<http://bit.ly/eOuSek>; Kent News: <http://bit.ly/e9sjYS>). Oxford City Council’s Core Strategy was finally approved at the end of December. CPRE Oxfordshire has expressed its disappointment that the Northern Gateway in the green belt has been given the go-ahead (<http://bit.ly/eyiuRd>). A bid to block plans for a new hotel critics say would harm the setting of Hampton Court Palace was rejected by the High Court (Planning: <http://bit.ly/eLXeTI>).

2. Housing

Localism Bill. Richard Capie, deputy chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Housing, said he feared the administrative burden and the community impact of the change would have a devastating effect. “You get what we’ve termed a revolving door of poverty,” he said. Homelessness charity Shelter’s chief executive Campbell Rob said ministers would “create a disincentive for people to improve their communities”. “Why not give people security of tenure?” he pressed. “It gives them that sense of stability moving forward.” National Housing Federation Chief Executive David Orr said “the move from capital to revenue subsidy and rents of 80% of the market level would produce an increase of intermediate rented housing, but a reduction of social rented properties” (Politics.co.uk: <http://bit.ly/fl9Tzg>; NHF: <http://bit.ly/hfVuSk>).

National Housing Federation. The government has been strongly critical of the NHF, widely considered to be an uncontroversial body, accusing it of being ‘no friend to the government’ and ‘always getting it wrong’ (24dash: <http://bit.ly/nhfpickle>).

New Homes Bonus. Conservative MPs and council leaders in the south east spoke out against the government's flagship scheme to encourage home building saying they did not think the bonus scheme 'will be a convincing enough reward' to overcome local opposition to development (Inside Housing: <http://bit.ly/dVywwy>).

Empty homes. Eric Pickles extended the delay before an local authority can take over an empty home from six months to two years. Homes may also now only be seized if vandalised or occupied by squatters (CLG: <http://bit.ly/hSAmSV>).

Homelessness in rural areas of England increased by 25% in the last year (Inside Housing: <http://bit.ly/hG64Ml>).

Green Deal. Grant Shapps said the government may extend its green deal programme for energy efficiency improvements to new homes, allowing builders to take advantage of a £6,500 private sector loan when developing new zero carbon homes (Inside Housing: <http://bit.ly/dNQ1Os>).

Innovation. Traditional building methods must make room for cost-effective, innovative and sustainable designs if the UK's housing crisis is to be alleviated, a Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors report said. Among its proposed solutions are modular homes constructed off-site and homes of recycled plastic (<http://bit.ly/fysyvS>). The first low carbon prospectus for Milton Keynes has been published (Milton Keynes: a Sustainable Future: <http://bit.ly/e5Z0un>).

Around the South East. Campaigners complain they have been steamrolled by East Hampshire District Council over 275 new houses in Clanfield (Post: <http://bit.ly/foR679>). Ten houses are to be built in West Meon despite opposition from CPRE Hampshire and residents (Hants Chronicle: <http://bit.ly/ed8crB>). Horsham District Council has granted outline planning permission for 963 homes at Broadbridge Heath outside the West Sussex town (Planning: <http://bit.ly/eTLso1>). The inquiry into 520 homes at Polegate got underway. The proposal is opposed by the Environmental Protection Organisations (EPOs): CPRE Sussex, the South Downs Society, the Campaign for Better Transport, Sussex Wildlife Trust and the Folkington Estate (Eastbourne Herald: <http://bit.ly/dKxGLW>). A planning inspector has rejected plans for a residential development on the site of the Bath Road Reservoir in Reading (Reading Chronicle: <http://bit.ly/e17gyW>; Planning: <http://bit.ly/i1gGJX>). Reading West MP Alok Sharma told the House of Commons that the victorious campaign to defend the reservoir from developers should encourage politicians to shake up the planning system (Reading Chronicle: <http://bit.ly/i7NMWD>).

3. Landscape and Environment

Light pollution. CPRE and the Campaign for Dark Skies have commenced their annual star count (<http://bit.ly/starcourt>). Emma Marrington, CPRE's dark skies campaigner, said: "Light pollution damages the character of the countryside, blurs the distinction between town and country, and denies people the experience of a dark, starry sky... Light pollution can [also] disrupt wildlife and badly affect people's sleeping patterns" (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/hWbR9q>; Daily Mail: <http://bit.ly/eAwb5u>). Blur star Alex James said: "Please, make sure you turn off unwanted lights. It's not only green, it also helps us all observe the true majesty of the heavens" (Sun: <http://bit.ly/dRvFUU>). Lights are to be switched off for five hours at night on part of the M5 to reduce light pollution (BBC: <http://bbc.in/ewG7qI>; <http://bbc.in/fiPw5v>). The International Dark-Sky Association has named the English Channel island of Sark its first "dark-sky" island (NPR: <http://n.pr/fkfZKX>). Finally, its official. Light pollution makes your hamsters sick (<http://bit.ly/h1Zpyb>). What better reason to turn off the lights?

Why Invest in Landscape? The Landscape Institute has launched a campaign and report championing how UK towns and cities gain a economic positive benefit from investing in landscape (<http://bit.ly/eUzgb0>; <http://bit.ly/hAGUcA>).

National Parks. The South Downs National Park Authority has refused to indicate whether it will support the extraction of crude oil in the countryside, as companies eye up new sites for extraction (The News: <http://bit.ly/egwtQW>). A bid by the island of Harris in the Outer Hebrides to become Scotland's third national park has been rejected (Scotsman: <http://bit.ly/fFylqs>).

Biodiversity and ecology. “The government wants you to think the UK’s rivers, wildlife and biodiversity are in rude health. The opposite is true” says John Vidal (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/i1KsYx>).

British Waterways. Defra has set up an Advisory Panel to advise on British Waterways transition to charitable body (Waterscape: <http://is.gd/T6OuFt>).

Heritage. English Heritage and allied bodies have published guidance on transfer of heritage assets to local communities. The guidance notes that “local authorities can sell an asset at less than full market value where this would support a use that brings social, economic or environmental benefits for the area” (<http://bit.ly/buypast>). English Heritage has also published *Valuing Places: Good Practice in Conservation Areas*, which champions best practice in urban conservation areas (<http://bit.ly/eYUEb2>).

Rights of way. The rights of way casework previously carried out by the National Rights of Way Casework Team in the Government Office North East has been transferred to the Planning Inspectorate in Bristol (PIN: <http://bit.ly/eTOLhP>). Work on Kent section of the England coast path is set to begin. Landowners remain unhappy (BBC: <http://bbc.in/gj6Fud>; Kent News: <http://bit.ly/gcxW4F>).

4. Farming and Food

Polytunnels. Appeal court judges have ruled in favour of a farm which erected polytunnels without an environmental impact assessment on land in an area of outstanding natural beauty. Wye Valley Action Association battled to have the polytunnels on Homme Farm, near Ross-on-Wye, pulled down. The judges also refused the WVAA permission to take their fight to the Supreme Court (FWI: <http://bit.ly/dMAsHm>; PP: <http://bit.ly/fv40xt>).

Industrial farming. The Environment Agency lodged an objection to the proposal for the UK’s first ‘super dairy’ in Lincolnshire. “We decided to object because we don’t think the risk to groundwater can be mitigated by the developer” (BBC: <http://bbc.in/emuUEX>). North Kesteven District Council has received 13,500 comments on the 3,770-cow dairy plan. A decision is expected in March.

Food security. As world food prices surged to a fresh record high in January for the seventh consecutive month (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/exO5sm>), the final report of the Global Food and Farming Futures Foresight project has called for urgent action to avert global hunger. “Nothing less is required than a redesign of the whole food system to bring sustainability to the fore” (BBC: <http://bbc.in/hkAzkO>; BIS: <http://bit.ly/hH5Te0>; Defra: <http://bit.ly/g7KskA>; Report: <http://bit.ly/forefood>). Natural England said the scarce wild relatives of modern crops could hold some of the seeds of success in the fight for global food security (<http://bit.ly/e4xBEh>).

Retail. The Scottish Parliament overturned plans to implement a controversial ‘Tesco tax’ on large stores (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/gXgJvL>). A report by the Plunkett Foundation says community-owned shops have been one of the leading success stories of the social enterprise movement (<http://bit.ly/gzyAOB>).

Localism Bill. Chains such as Tesco wear down opposition by repeatedly submitting proposals until they gain planning permission to build a new store, Neil Sinden of CPRE said, as the charity called for a new “community right of appeal” to be introduced in the Bill to allow local groups to challenge unwanted developments (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/flMhYA>). The Association of Convenience Stores is calling for a statutory duty to promote sustainable high streets to be included in the Bill (<http://bit.ly/hWhskg>). MPs on the Save the Pub Group have urged the government to include new planning laws to make it harder to demolish pubs in the Bill (Morning Advertiser: <http://bit.ly/f5abDD>).

5. Energy and Climate Change

National Policy Statements slammed. The consultation on Energy NPSs closed on January 24. The Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee warn that the NPSs could lead to a second ‘dash for gas’, delaying critical investment in renewables and other low carbon technologies, and making the UK’s climate change targets impossible to achieve. The committee is also sceptical

about the ability of the Government to deliver its aims on nuclear power. It is critical of the proposal to dramatically weaken the Holford Rules, which help to protect England's most beautiful landscapes from new pylons and overhead lines. It calls for more power line undergrounding (<http://bit.ly/gaLe0s>; PP: <http://bit.ly/gc75rI>). Dustin Benton for CPRE said: "At a time when we are likely to see the largest increase in new electricity transmission lines for a generation, it seems wrong to reduce protection for England's beautiful landscapes" (GBP: <http://bit.ly/gMMvZ8>).

Public belief in climate change. The public's belief in global warming as a man-made danger has weathered the storm of climate controversies and cold weather intact, according to a poll. Asked if climate change was a current or imminent threat, 83% of Britons agreed, with just 14% saying global warming poses no threat. 68% of people think that humanity is causing climate change; 24% choose to blame non-man-made factors (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/eOL037>).

Rural fuel poverty. CPRE, with partners ACRE, CRC and NALC, have published a new guide to renewable energy sources that will help rural communities keep their bills under control while playing their part in cutting carbon emissions. Dustin Benton for CPRE said: "Communities should decide on the best technologies for their area and start generating their own green energy. They can then use the profit from these schemes to pay for energy efficiency improvements in their local area" (24dash: <http://bit.ly/g1yW9s>; Report: <http://bit.ly/ruralenergy>).

Nuclear. Chris Huhne, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change renewed his support for nuclear power. He said: "The government is determined to provide certainty to low carbon investors, but there will be no public subsidy for nuclear power which is a mature technology." He also announced there would be a seven-fold increase in liability for nuclear sites to €1.2 billion a site (Edie: <http://bit.ly/gTubVR>; <http://bit.ly/h31VH4>; DECC: <http://bit.ly/fsLrKT>).

Gas. Energy minister Charles Hendry has given the go-ahead for Scottish Power to construct a 1,000 megawatt "carbon capture ready" gas-fired power station in north Kent (BBC: <http://bbc.in/hMnSjI>).

Solar. Two more solar farms have been announced for West Oxfordshire. Gillian Salway, chairman of the West Oxfordshire CPRE said: "In principle, CPRE is obviously in favour of finding alternative forms of energy. If that's done in a way which is sensitive to the environment, then I can't see that it is a worse use of land than something like covering it with polythene to grow tomatoes underneath" (Whitney Gazette: <http://bit.ly/gTEJ1p>). Plans for a solar energy farm in Wiltshire the size of 18 football pitches are under consideration. George McDonic of Wiltshire CPRE said: "We consider the idea of covering lots of fields with these panels to be contrary to the idea of preserving our countryside" (BBC: <http://bbc.in/fKnazN>). A farmer near Maidstone in Kent could cover 35 acres of prime farm land if a plan to create one of the largest solar farms in the country gets the go-ahead (BBC: <http://bbc.in/ejnYXW>).

Wind. Swedish utility Vattenfall will start to construct an offshore wind farm of up to 7,200 megawatts in the UK North Sea after 2015 (Reuters: <http://reut.rs/g6M56I>). Two of the UK's largest offshore wind farms have begun generating energy for the grid (EST: <http://bit.ly/dMS6Jt>). Clusters of swaying resin stalks, windstalks, might replace wind farms, an unduly optimistic article from Green Futures says (<http://bit.ly/hoZ3B9>). UK wind farms generated electricity to just 23.6% of their full capacity between October 2009 and September 2010, lower than in any year since 2002-3, the first year when the figures were collected (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/eEJgfr>). During the latest cold snap wind turbines produced less than 2% of the nation's electricity. Jeremy Nicholson, director of the Energy Intensive Users Group said the failure of Britain's wind farms to produce electricity in the extreme cold will cost billions of pounds, create an economic crisis and lead to blackouts (Daily Mail: <http://bit.ly/gfip2j>). Turbines would be more efficient if placed twice as far apart as at present (NAW: <http://bit.ly/dE1kyR>). "As Britain flaunts its environmental credentials... with thousands of wind turbines, it is contributing to a vast man-made lake of poison in northern China" (Daily Mail: <http://bit.ly/hIei9F>).

Grid. Planning barriers to the creation of an offshore supergrid will be explored as part of a pan-European project to link up green energy sources, ministers announced (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/ijCETy>; DECC: <http://bit.ly/f6stZD>).

Waste and Recycling. Communities secretary Eric Pickles called on councils to protect their waste and recycling services during cuts (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/hJm2us>).

6. Transport

Aviation. Campaigners against plans for a significant increase in flights at London City Airport, originally approved by Newham Council, are considering an appeal following a High Court judge's decision that there were insufficient grounds to overrule the local authority's decision (BBC: <http://bbc.in/dGhMiX>). Gatwick Airport chairman Sir David Rowlands, former chairman of the High Speed Two project, has slammed government policy on aviation and dismissed as "nonsense" ministers' claim that high-speed rail can replace the cancelled third runway at Heathrow (<http://bit.ly/gJ8mXw>). Boris Johnson continues to press the case for a new airport for London, rejecting expansion of Heathrow as an option (<http://bit.ly/ihmEqY>; <http://bit.ly/gevNDJ>).

Roads. The government is considering giving councils the power to reclassify local roads, making clear that they were unsuitable for large vehicles. Sat nav companies will use the data to divert trucks from unsuitable roads. Ralph Smyth, transport spokesman for CPRE said: "While improvements to sat nav software for lorries are welcome, additional measures to manage lorries in sensitive areas of the countryside are still needed" (Telegraph: <http://tinyurl.com/4q4ab89>). Consultation deadline 1 May 2011 (DfT: <http://bit.ly/fRJz6c>; <http://bit.ly/gWUcv1>). Science Vale UK has submitted a £6 million bid to the Regional Growth Fund for new transport infrastructure in South Oxfordshire with the aim of creating 8,000 jobs (Oxford Mail: <http://bit.ly/hHwEdV>).

High Speed 2. Christopher Pincher, MP for Tamworth, has joined other MPs requesting the Chairman of the Transport Select Committee to conduct a thorough inquiry into the business case for High Speed 2 (Tamworth Blog: <http://bit.ly/gi0PWk>). "The farm will be ruined" says a farmer near Tamworth opposing the new line, which will also cut through ancient woodlands (TI Tamworth: <http://bit.ly/hlit6Z>). Britain's oldest and largest wild pear tree could be felled to make way for the high-speed rail link. John Wharam for CPRE Warwickshire said: "Is cutting the time of a journey to London by 15 minutes really worth it?" (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/eldEIB>; Daily Mail: <http://bit.ly/fkfGNf>). Hundreds of protesters are expected at a convention on 19 February at the National Agricultural Centre, Stoneleigh Park to coordinate protests against the proposals. The event is being organised by organised by Stop HS2 (BFP: <http://bit.ly/h2ha9L>; www.stophs2.org).

Trains. In a sign perhaps of things to come, the direct Shropshire to London train service was ended at just three days notice, unable to attract a government subsidy to cover its £2 million annual deficit (BBC: <http://bbc.in/eEIGfQ>).

7. Rural Communities

Broadband. The Commission for Rural Communities has produced a short note explaining the importance of broadband to rural communities and the benefits it brings to businesses, public service delivery and community cohesion (<http://j.mp/f2jwQN>).

Market towns. The CRC has published a State of the Countryside update on market towns (<http://bit.ly/gVcLDK>).

8. Campaigning

CPRE. Tony Juniper "widely acclaimed eco-warrior" presented CPRE Bedfordshire's Living Countryside Awards (About: <http://bit.ly/dYrkmZ>). CPRE Norfolk is looking for a new honorary secretary (EN24: <http://bit.ly/fPAyh0>). CPRE Oxfordshire has launched a new website as it begins to celebrate its 80th anniversary (<http://www.cpreoxon.org.uk/>). Happy birthday!

The Great Forest Sell Off

9. Summary

The sale of England's publicly owned forests is proving to be one of the most controversial environmental moves by the coalition government. Up to 15% of the woodland is to be sold immediately without public consultation or legislation. The rest will be disposed of after consultation and the Public Bodies Bill comes into force. The aim is to raise money and to take the state out of the business of business of timber and woodland management. The Forestry Commission will become a much smaller regulatory body.

The plans have been modified since they were announced last year to give greater protection to the "crown jewels", including the New Forest. Smaller and less visited woodlands, however, will still have limited protection. Green groups argue that forest grants and subsidies will lead to the government paying out more in the long term. A YouGov poll found that 84% of British public agree that woods and forests should be kept in public ownership for future generations (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/geQmjd>). Although the sell off is seen as part of "the transformation to the Big Society", the Guardian revealed that the Forestry Commission expects that just 1% of woodland will be acquired by communities and 2% by charities (<http://is.gd/GpTPsq>).

Some of the extensive press coverage: (Independent <http://ind.pn/e0g201>; <http://ind.pn/fJj9Lr>; Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/ee3Z2Y>; Guardian: <http://is.gd/Vx0uCA>).

10. The Estate for Sale

The Government unveiled plans for a £250 million sell-off all of England's 258,000 hectare public forest estate currently managed by the Forestry Commission, over the next 10 years. The public forest estate hosts over 40 million visits per year; 27 visitor centres; and 350 way-marked walking and cycle routes. The right of access on foot has been dedicated in perpetuity over 90% of the freehold area under the Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000). So-called 'higher rights', such as cycling and horse riding, have not been dedicated. Rights on about 20% of the estate leased from a wide range of public and private sector owners vary.

Caroline Spelman said that the government was no longer in the business of managing forests. "It's time for the Government to step back and allow those who are most involved with England's woodlands to play a much greater role in their future," she said. Spelman insisted public access, ancient woodland and designated sites would be protected, but would nevertheless be sold, especially if they have limited public usage.

The sale will have two phases:

- ◆ **Immediate.** The government will sell 15% of the state over four years without consultation on the sale criteria.
- ◆ **Long term.** The sale of the remaining 85% of the estate over ten years is subject to legislation and consultation (Closing date Thursday 21 April 2011: <http://bit.ly/woodsale>).

The consultation divides the estate into four groups:

Large commercially valuable forests and woodlands which have commercial timber operations. Can have other profitable non-timber activities, or could develop them, for example, wind farms. Low to moderate levels of public benefits. 25% of the estate. Includes Kielder Forest.

Small commercially valuable forests and woodlands with other commercial opportunities, such as sporting use. Levels of public benefits are low or moderate, but may include conservation features and informal use by local walkers, cyclists and horse riders. Many will be sold under the 2011/12 – 2014/15 sales programme. 20-25% of the estate.

Multi-purpose forests and woodlands combine timber production with significant recreational facilities, high visitor numbers and often high levels of biodiversity. In addition to income from timber production, the high visitor numbers offer opportunities for revenue-generating recreation facilities. 20-25% of the estate.

Heritage and community forests and woodlands provide high public benefits associated with their landscape and biodiversity character, high levels of recreational access and active

community involvement. Heritage forests include the New Forest and the Forest of Dean as well as areas that are seen as representing the ‘crown jewels’ of the public forest estate. There are also 6,000 hectares of community forests in relatively urban or near-urban settings. There is a net cost to managing these areas. 25-30% of the estate.

11. The Immediate Sales (2011/12 to 2014/15)

40,000 hectares of land (15% of the estate) will be sold over the four year period 2011/12 to 2014/15. This is not subject to consultation and no legislation is required. Most of the sales will be of “small commercially valuable forests” (see definition above). There will be no guarantee of higher rights access (cycling and equestrian) to this land after the sale (Telegraph:

<http://is.gd/2FCTvh>).

Forestry Commission England will operate a preferred purchaser scheme. This will provide a mechanism for voluntary sector or public bodies to identify areas of land in which they have a particular interest and to request a first option to purchase this land at market price prior to the properties being offered on the open market. Community groups would be given just 28 days to mount a bid for preferred bidder status for land and must pay the market price.

Commercial organisations will be required to sign up to sustainable forest management, and enter higher quality woods in the English Woodland Grant Scheme. Heritage woodlands, such as the Forest of Dean and the New Forest, will be transferred into the ownership of a new charity or existing charities to be managed in the interests of the nation.

Woods selected for the first sales will be those which provide “limited added value from public ownership in the delivery of public benefits”. Priority will be given to leasehold woods with constrained public access, and freehold woods dedicated under CROW but with limited public usage. Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS)¹ will only be included where they comprise less than 10% of a woodland unit. Ancient Semi Natural Woodlands² can be considered for sale, and will be individually assessed for their quality and potential.

Sales in a National Park, Community Forest, AONB, or including a SSSI will be considered “in relation to the particular contribution they make to that designation”. Those making a significant contribution will only be considered for sale under the arrangements for “higher quality” woodlands. Where woodlands are identified as being of “higher quality”, they will only be sold to preferred purchasers, or other purchasers who can demonstrate that they have access to sufficient expertise, knowledge and experience in woodland management and would be prepared to enter a relevant English Woodland Grant Scheme to sustain and improve public benefits. Such purchasers would be public bodies, NGOs or established private woodland owners.

There are a number of obvious weaknesses in the system, not least the limited time for community groups charities and local councils to bid at a time when their income is falling. The organisation must “confirm that funding for an open market value purchase will be available”. The criteria for defining “limited public usage” of CROW land are not defined. There will only be a “presumption” of replanting. Change of use will not be restricted by contract, just planning permission. The government will only “seek to secure equivalent rights” of current permissive access, not impose it. The forests are expected to be sold without any requirement to uphold the Forestry Commission’s current commitment to replace rows of conifers with native broadleaf trees such as oak, beech, ash and lime, as this would reduce the sale value. As an example of things to come, Rigg Wood, a once a popular picnic and walking site in the heart of the Lake District is all but closed after the government sold it to a businessman at £7,250 a hectare (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/h0nlUu>). Recent sales of small woods in the South East have averaged £6,200 per acre, £15,200 a hectare (<http://bit.ly/heaz69>).

1 PAWS are sites that have a long history of woodland cover: they are ancient semi-natural woodlands on which the original, “natural” woodland was cleared, and replaced by a plantation of either native or exotic species (<http://is.gd/qDtgil>).

2 Ancient semi-natural woodland (ASNW) is composed of native tree species that have not obviously been planted (<http://is.gd/VQDe2s>).

12. Consultation on Sales Beyond 2012

The government announced a consultation on later sales of woodland:

- ◆ Up to half the public estate is commercially-valuable forest, which would be sold on a 150-year leasehold rather than a freehold basis, allowing the Government to impose conditions on timber companies to protect public access and ensure environmental standards. It is expected leasehold sales could raise between £140 and £250 million.
- ◆ Another 26,000 hectares, or up to 10% of the estate, could be sold or leased to communities, charities or even local authorities.
- ◆ Organisations would be given the first option to buy or lease woodlands, in which they could then run community enterprises such as wood fuel businesses or recreation schemes. But if the option was not taken up by communities the forest would be put up for leasehold sale in the same way as commercial woods.
- ◆ Heritage woodlands, such as the Forest of Dean and the New Forest, would be transferred at no cost into the ownership of new or existing charities to be managed in the interests of the nation. Government grants would be available for the organisation to manage the woodlands - but the public purse would not pay for the setting up of a new charity, and it would be expected to become less reliant on Government funding over time.

The consultation ends on Thursday 21 April 2011 with the results published in mid-2012 (<http://tinyurl.com/woodsale>).

13. The Reaction

CPRE called for better guarantees but did not oppose the sale on principle. “We want long-term guarantees that any change in ownership will not undermine the quality of the landscape, the diversity of wildlife or people’s ability to enjoy our forests” said Shaun Spiers. “The undertakings do not go far enough. ‘Heritage forests’ will be protected, but the document says nothing about the many other important forests – what will the future hold for them?” Ben Stafford for CPRE said: “Many questions remain unanswered in the proposals published today. “We now want Ministers to give some clear long term guarantees that any change in woodland ownership will not undermine the quality of the landscape, the rich diversity of wildlife or people’s ability to get out there and enjoy our forests” (CPRE: <http://bit.ly/gnM8VH>). CPRE Ryedale (<http://bit.ly/gJOOnG>) and Shropshire (<http://bit.ly/hw4aLy>) spoke against the sell-off.

The National Trust is poised to offer to “take over or buy much of the state-owned English woodland”. The initiative, says the trust’s director, Fiona Reynolds, could protect in perpetuity not just large areas of “heritage” areas such as the Forest of Dean and the New Forest, but other woodland expected to be offered for sale to communities and commercial enterprises. “This is a watershed moment in the history of the nation. These much-cherished places have been in public hands for centuries, enjoyed by everyone for generation after generation. The future of these important national assets will be decided in a matter of weeks” (Guardian: <http://bit.ly/hCLbte>).

The Woodland Trust, which government officials suggested could take over some heritage forests, said that it did not have the funds to participate. Sue Holden, chief executive of the Trust, added: “While we fully support the concept of community ownership, we don’t believe that the charitable sector can be the solution to future care of all of the publicly owned heritage woodlands, as it will not have the resources to manage these for decades into the future without substantial and sustained government funding” (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/hZQYJI>). The Woodland Trust says that selling sites without a radical overhaul of current safeguards would spell disaster for England’s oldest and most iconic forests. They want to see ancient woods treated as special cases and public access and wildlife guaranteed for the future.

Celebrities. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishops of Gloucester and Guildford have joined a list of 87 celebrities including the actors Dame Judi Dench and Richard Briers, and the authors Bill Bryson and Joanna Trollope, to fight the sell off (Church Times: <http://bit.ly/eeO0F9>; Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/f0HMJU>; Grough: <http://bit.ly/g3zdGD>).

MPs. Shadow environment secretary, Mary Creagh has written to the 42 Coalition MPs with more than 1,000 acres of Forestry Commission woodland in their constituencies, urging them to rebel against the bill (Telegraph: <http://bit.ly/fx1g5O>). Local government minister Bob Neill has robustly defended the Localism Bill to Public Finance, denying that it is a smokescreen for cuts and will place unwanted burdens on councils (Public Finance: <http://bit.ly/fkmpF3>). A Labour motion urging a rethink of the proposals was defeated by 50 votes in the Commons on 2 February (Planning Portal: <http://bit.ly/hMsvsV>). “The sell-off makes no economic sense,” said Caroline Lucas, Green MP. “Who will want to buy this land unless they can develop it into a profit-making enterprise? The plans are unlikely to make any money, and may even cost the taxpayer extra, as those who take our forests apply for government grants that may match or even exceed the value of the sale” (<http://bit.ly/fUH20P>).

Other comment. “This new threat is the most serious attack on the New Forest for 160 years,” said the New Forest Association chairman, William Ziegler. “Any charity that takes on owning and managing the New Forest will be required to find its own funding after initial government help to offset the £2.9m annual deficit. This could mean charging the public for access to the New Forest” (TI Dorset: <http://bit.ly/en1F6D>). The Wainwright Society condemned the plans and warned the advances of the last 30 years could be lost (Grough: <http://bit.ly/hjTWyC>). “If the government believed its own rhetoric, the disposal of the forest estate would help to restore a genuine public ownership of the land, lost through centuries of dispossession and enclosure. Instead it looks like just another squalid little fire-sale, liquidating our common treasury to release some emergency cash” (George Monbiot: <http://bit.ly/eHbnCj>). A report by woodlands.co.uk said smaller private owners, as well as charities and trusts should be allowed to buy woodlands, and that they had a good record in providing access and protecting biodiversity (<http://bit.ly/ePQDKB>).

14. Links

Community and environmental groups:

- ◆ Save Our Forests: <http://saveourforests.co.uk/>
- ◆ Hands of Our Forest [of Dean]: <http://www.handsoffourforest.org/>
- ◆ Save Britain’s Forests (Facebook)
- ◆ Woodland Trust: <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>
- ◆ Save England’s Forests: <http://saveenglandsforests.org/>.

Petitions are springing up like, err, trees:

- ◆ Woodland Trust petition: <http://is.gd/KCGvF8>
- ◆ Save Our Forests petition (38 degrees): <http://is.gd/Toc4Gt>
- ◆ Save England’s Forests: <http://bit.ly/fyWcln>.