



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

The Rt Hon the Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park
Minister of State

Ms Laura Blake
Chair
Thames Crossing Action Group

Our ref: PO2022/09422/BG

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27 May 2022

Dear Laura,

Thank you for your letter of 3 May about forestry and the Lower Thames Crossing.

The Government is committed to maintaining and planting trees and woodlands. They are at the forefront of its plans to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The England Trees Action Plan (ETAP) sets out our long-term, generational vision for the forestry sector to 2050. It introduces a programme of new measures to boost tree planting and establishment, improve woodland management in England, support a thriving green economy through greater private investment in trees and woodlands, and bring trees closer to people.

The ETAP, as you have mentioned in your letter, is supported by an intended £500 million from the Nature for Climate Fund. I would like to highlight that in the recently launched Net Zero Strategy, the Government has also announced that it will boost the Nature for Climate fund with a further £124 million of new money, ensuring total spend of more than £750 million by 2025 on peat restoration, woodland creation, and management – above and beyond what was promised in the manifesto. This will enable more opportunities for farmers and landowners to support growing trees and woodland creation.

The Government agrees with your support for the protection of ancient woodlands. Making sure that our ancient woodlands are adequately protected and suitably managed to provide a wide range of social, environmental, and economic benefits to society remains a key commitment. In 2018, the protection of ancient woodlands, ancient trees and veteran trees was strengthened through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), recognising them as irreplaceable habitats. The NPPF also outlines that any development resulting in the loss or deterioration of such irreplaceable habitats should be refused unless there are wholly exceptional reasons and only if a suitable compensation strategy exists.

More recently, during the passage of the Environment Bill in 2021, Parliament agreed to the following concessions related to ancient woodland, providing further protection for these irreplaceable habitats:

1. Undertake a review of the NPPF to ensure that it is being implemented correctly in the case of ancient and veteran trees and ancient woodland. Should this review conclude that implementation can be improved, we have committed to strengthen the guidance to local planning authorities to ensure their understanding of the protections provided to ancient woodland.

2. Consult on strengthening the wording of the NPPF to better ensure the strongest protection of ancient woodlands, whilst recognising the complex delivery challenges for major infrastructure.
3. Amend the Town and Country Planning consultation direction to require local planning authorities to consult the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities before providing planning permission for developments affecting ancient woodland.

Within ETAP we also committed to updating the Keepers of Time policy on management of ancient woodland and other semi natural woodland. As you have mentioned, we also committed to updating the ancient woodland inventory to cover the whole of England. I'm pleased to confirm that this project is now underway and includes mapping smaller ancient woodland sites of 0.25 hectares. We will also build the evidence base necessary to protect ancient woodlands, undertaking research into the interaction between ancient woodland and new development to inform proposals by developers and decisions by planners.

We will also introduce a new category of 'Long Established Woodland', alongside ancient woodland and consult on the protections these woodlands are afforded in the planning system, recognising their high ecological and societal value. Long Established Woodlands are identified as those that were in situ on the Ordnance Survey Epoch 1 Map series since 1893 and have been wooded continuously until today.

I hope this reassures you of the action the Government is taking in order to ensure the protection of our trees and woodlands, especially our ancient woodlands. The commitments in the NPPF, along with the commitments made in the ETAP, underline the Government's commitment to ancient woodlands as valuable and irreplaceable habitats. Defra will continue to explore options to further protect and restore ancient woodlands. and to ensure that impact upon ancient woodland is only permitted where deemed to be wholly necessary and where appropriately mitigated.

Regarding your specific concerns about the benefits afforded by the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC), the LTC would improve journeys and ease congestion on the Dartford Crossing by almost doubling road capacity across the Thames east of London. The LTC would reduce the number of vehicles using the Dartford Crossing by 22%. This would lead to improved connectivity for local and regional reliability, and relieve the pressure between Kent and Essex, by creating a direct, free-flowing connection between some of the country's most vital roads.

You have raised concerns around the impact on nature and habitats from LTC and suggest that National Highways (NH) has not identified and acknowledged valuable woodlands. I assure you that NH, as a scheme promoter, has undertaken significant assessment of impacts and predicted land required for the project. They have worked extensively with stakeholders to identify appropriate mitigation for the loss of trees. As such, there will be enhancements to existing habitats along the route, including woodland planting, replacement planting and translocation of ancient woodland soils. Green bridges will also connect habitats across the road.

Furthermore, NH is committed to reducing the carbon impact of the LTC on communities and the environment. NH has designated the project a 'pathfinder scheme', and been able to cut the amount of predicted carbon from construction by over a third, by optimising the design, refining how it plans to build the road, and carefully selecting what zero carbon energy sources it will use. The project will be the first major infrastructure project to use its procurement to target low carbon construction with incentives that drive further continuous carbon reduction.

NH has designed the LTC to comply with the UK air quality regulations, following the guidance set out in DMRB 105 LA. The World Health Organisation guidelines are not legally binding in the UK. NH appreciates that air quality is of primary importance to people who live and work near the proposed route, and continue to prioritise the health and safety of local residents.

Thank you once again for your letter.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Paul', written in a cursive style.

THE RT HON THE LORD GOLDSMITH OF RICHMOND PARK