Forest Research

Social science perspectives from Britain

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May 2025

c. 13.5 % woodland cover
c. 3,279 hectares

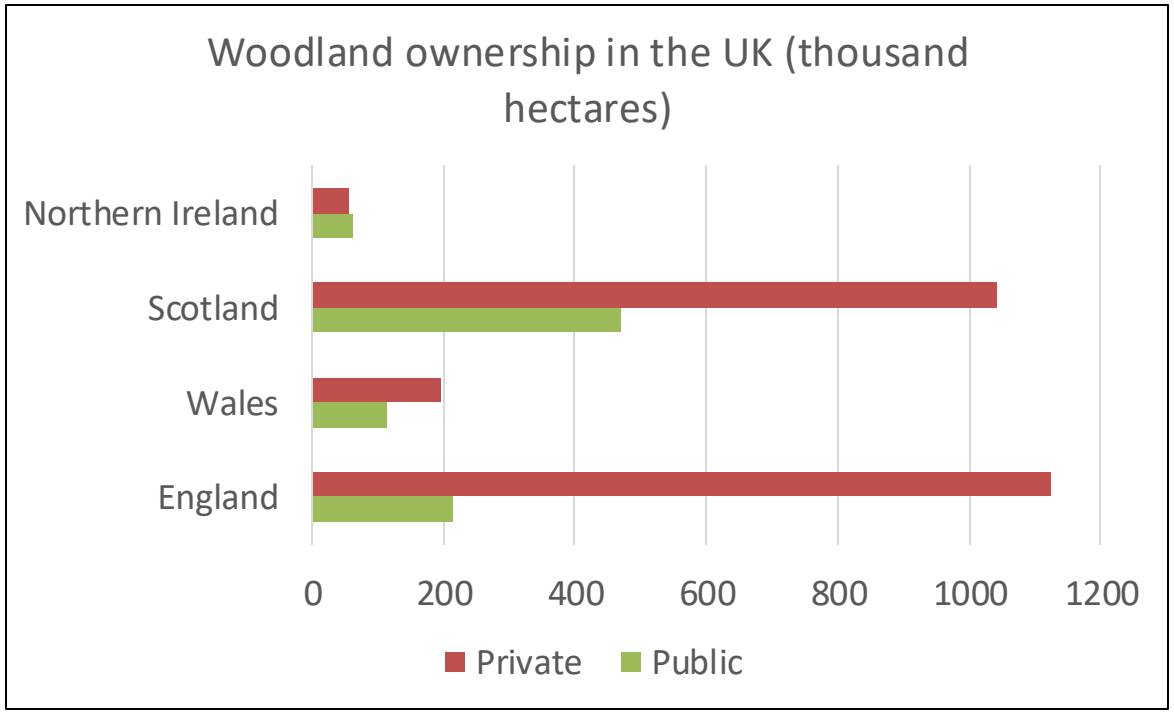
Table 1.2 Woodland cover, UK, 1086 to 2024

percent of land area[1]

Year	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	UK
1086[2]	~15.0	[x]	[x]	[x]	[x]
ca. 1350[2]	~10.0	[x]	~4.0	[x]	[x]
17th Century[2,3]	~8.0	[x]	~4.0	~1.5	[x]
1905[3]	5.2	4.2	4.5	1.1	4.7
1924	5.1	5.0	5.6	1.0	5.0
1947[3]	5.8	6.2	6.6	1.7	5.9
1965	6.8	9.7	8.4	3.1	7.4
1980	7.3	11.6	11.8	4.9	9.0
1995-99	8.4	13.8	16.4	6.0	11.3
1998[4]	9.5	14.4	16.7	6.0	12.0
2024[5,6]	10.3	15.0	19.4	8.6	13.5

Source: Forestry Commission, Forestry England, Scottish Forestry, Forestry and Land Scotland, Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, Forest Service, National Forest Inventory.

c. 70% private ownership
c. 40% certified
No. owners?
Size of forests?



Source: [Forestry Facts and Figures 2024]

Current forest policy in Britain

Scotland (2019-2029)
- Economic growth
- Resilience
- Wellbeing

Wales (updated 2021)
- Expand tree cover
- Improve management
- Resilience
- Multiple benefits
- Integrated land use

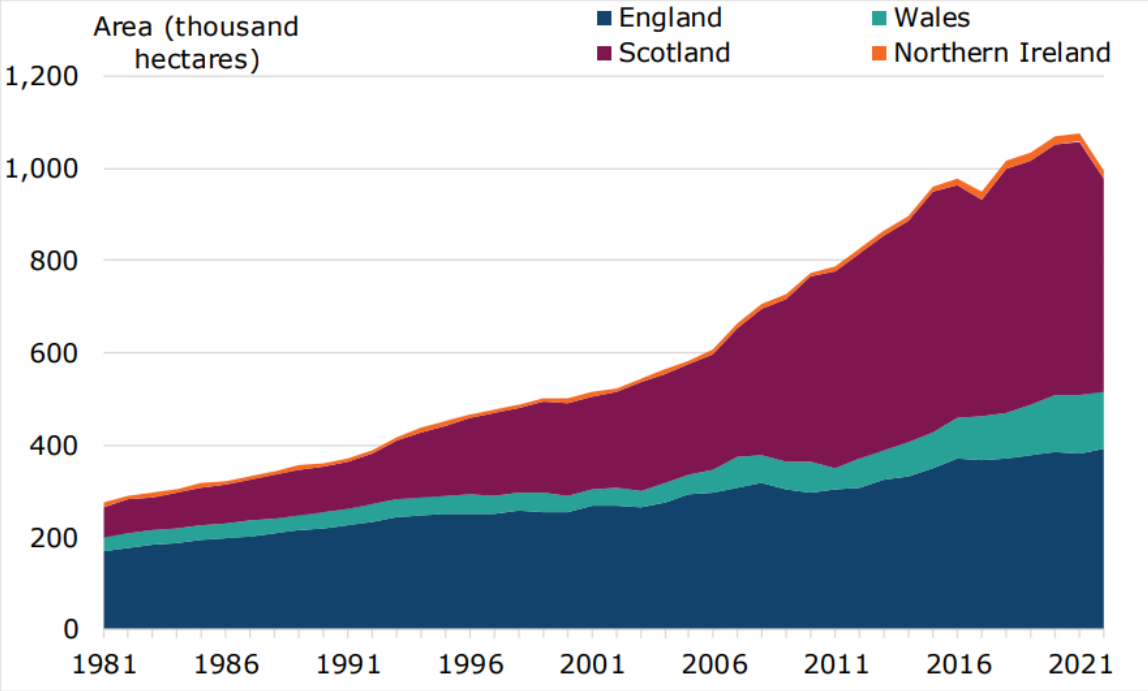
England (no sp. policy from 2024)
- Expand and connect tree cover
- Green economy
- Protection
- Improve management
- Connecting people

Woodland creation and expansion

Land manager decision making

Farm woodlands

Figure 1.4 Area of farm woodland, UK, 1981 to 2021



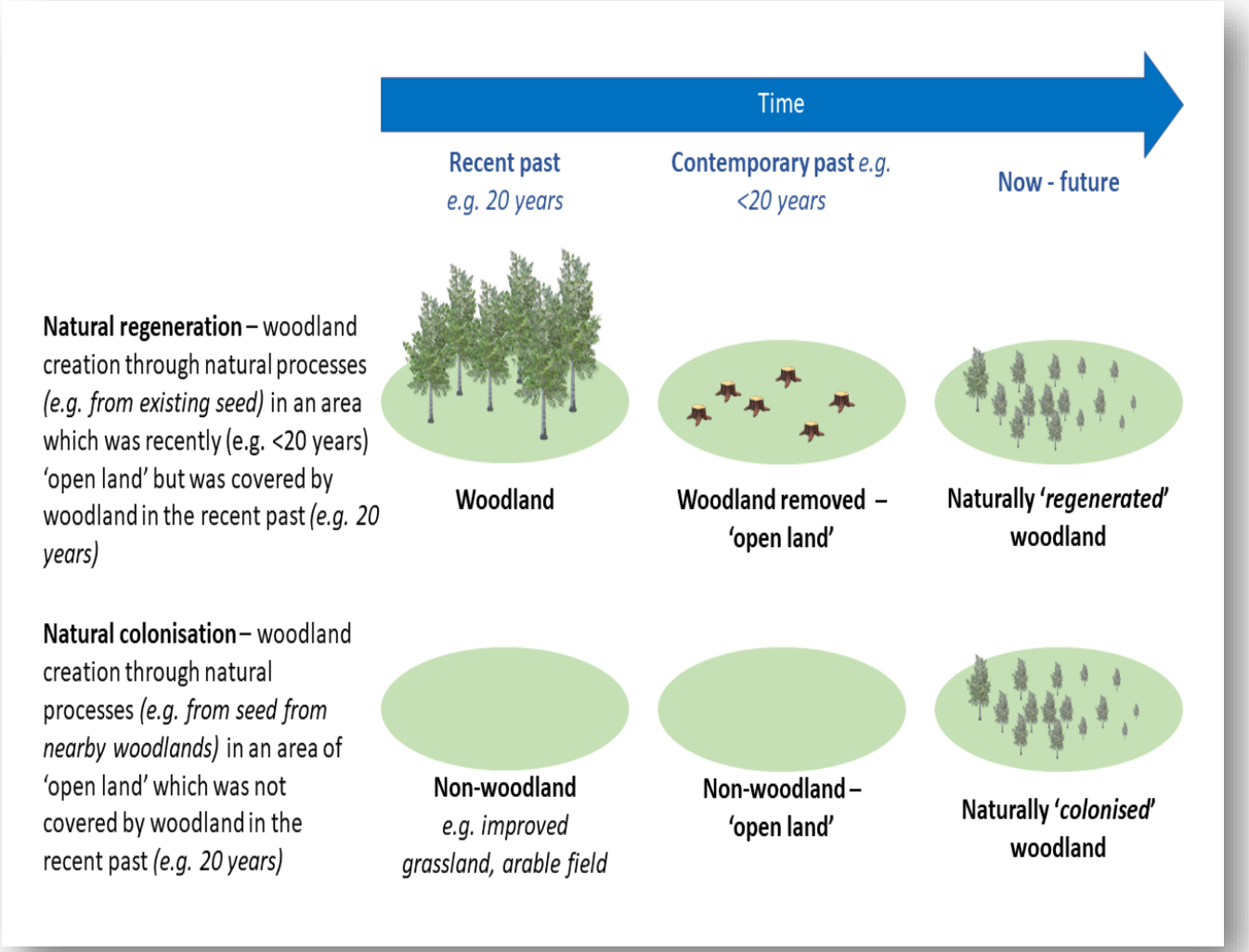
Source: Defra, Scottish Government, Welsh Government, Northern Ireland Executive.

Notes:

1. Changes in the area of farm woodland over time indicate a change in the area of farm land that is reported as woodland and do not necessarily indicate a change in woodland area.
2. Figures include estimates for farm woodland that is not in receipt of grant aid.
3. Area of woodland on farms shown to 2021, as results from the 2022 Scottish Agricultural Census onwards are not currently available.

- Expansion by subsidy
  - Reported “drop in income”
- Future management?
  - Skills
  - Value added?
- Other ‘hooks’ into farmer values?
  - Farm health?
- Trees outside woodlands (ToW) also a consideration in a “whole farm” approach

Natural colonisation for woodland expansion



- Promoted by policy because potentially:
  - low cost
  - low carbon
  - attracts wide range of land-owners, not just foresters
  - biodiversity restoration mechanism?

Source: Ambrose-Oji, B., Pearson, M., Spencer, K., Colley, E., Guy, M., & Watts, K. (in press) Tree planting, natural colonisation, hybrid approaches: Land manager decisions explored. *People and Nature.*

Trade-off between approaches

Table 2 Summary of land managers' perceptions of the benefits and disbenefits associated with different approaches to expanding tree cover

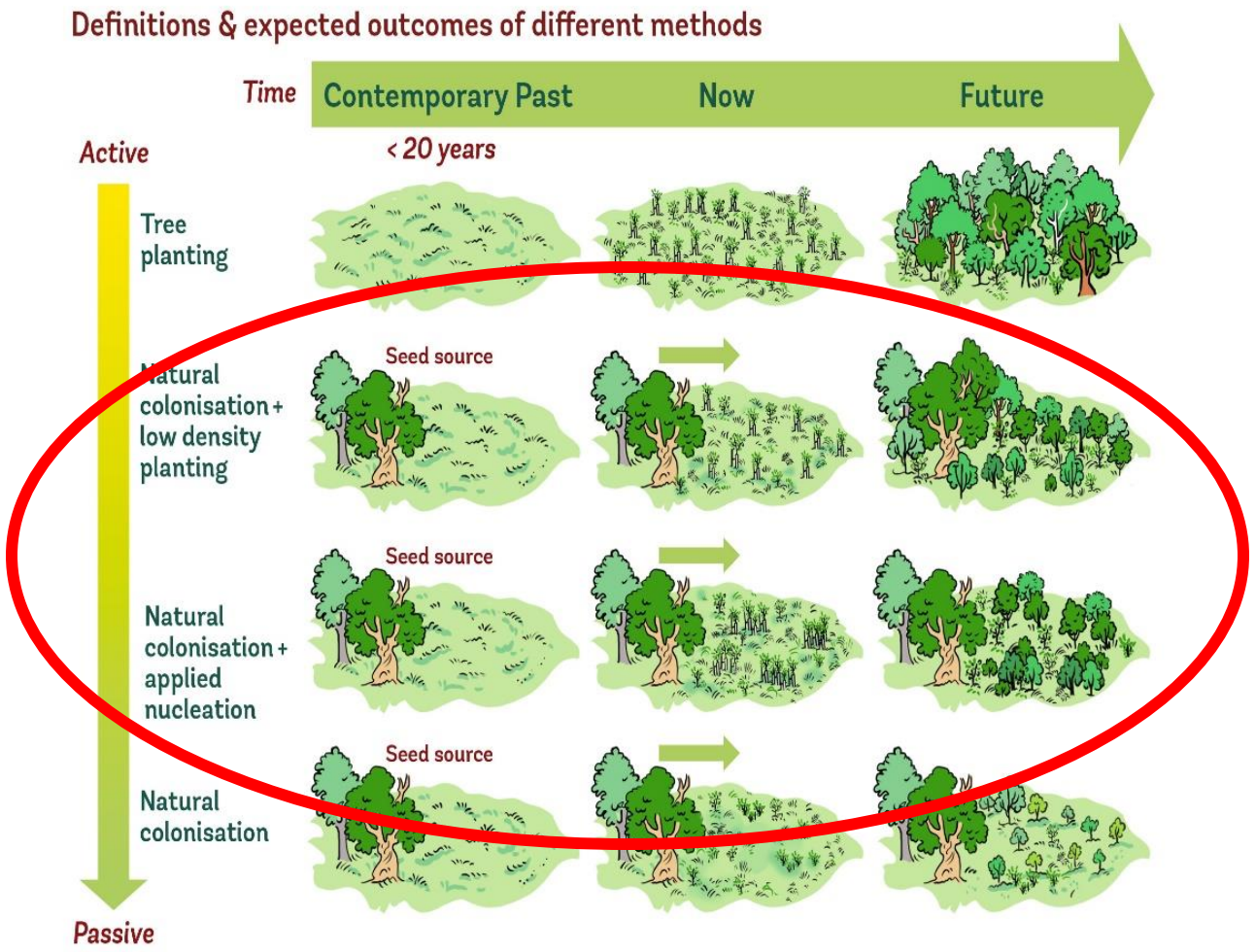
Perceived outcomes	Natural colonisation	Tree planting	Hybrid approaches
Biodiversity	Benefit ✓	May provide benefits or disbenefits ✗✓	Benefit ✓
Carbon sequestration	Unclear ?	Benefit ✓	Unclear ?
Resilience	Benefit (assumed adaptation) ✓	Unclear ?	Benefit (assumed adaptation) ✓
Visual impact	May be a benefit (naturalistic) or disbenefit (messy) ✗✓	Disbenefit (unnaturalistic, tree guards are unsightly) ✗	May be a benefit (naturalistic) or disbenefit (messy) ✗✓
Income generation	Disbenefit (products and services unlikely) ✗	Benefit (timber and other products) ✓	Benefit (timber and other products) ✓
Time to establish	Disbenefit (lengthy) ✗	Benefit (quick to establish) ✓	Benefit (speeds natural establishment) ✓

Source: Fuentes-Montemayor, E., Ambrose-Oji, B., Braunholtz, L., Burton, V., Fleiss, S., Gilbert, H., Guy, M., Hughers, S., Koricheva, J., Metzger, M. J., Orchard, R., Park, K. J., Pearson, M., Silva, T., & Watts, K. (2025). *Working with natural processes for woodland creation – Key messages from recent research*. [Research Briefing]. Forest Research.

Uptake of natural colonisation:

- Of grant aided, most (87%) delivered as part of tree planting schemes
- Most smaller areas (mean 2.2-2.7 ha) than those planted (mean 6.7 ha)
- Outcome uncertainty and time = RISK
  - Context specific
  - Species assemblages?
  - Utility?
  - Finance?
  - Compatibility with biodiversity payment schemes?

Hybridity emerges as important



Source: graphic produced by TreePlaNat project 2024 from an original idea by Kevin Watts

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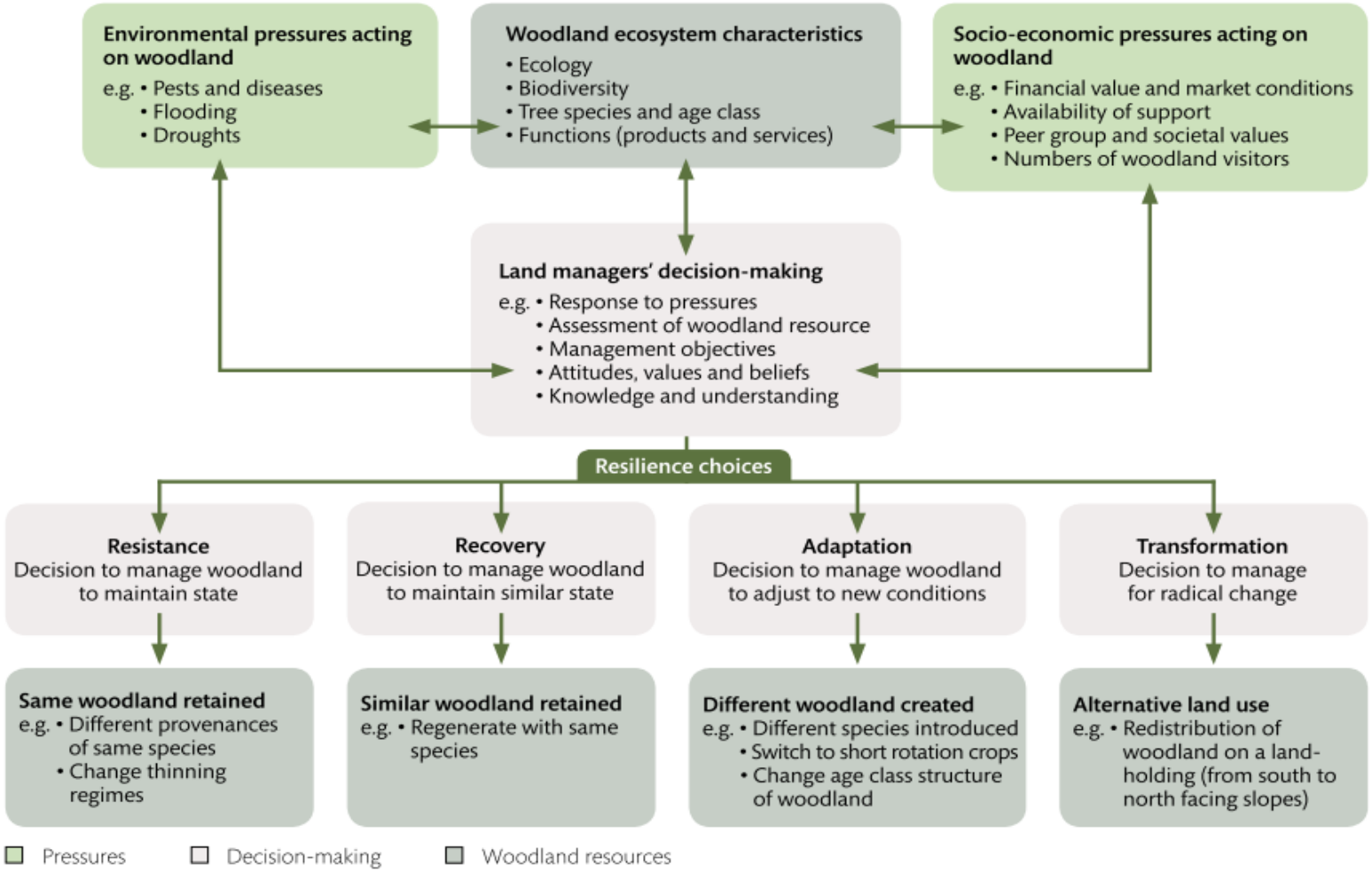
Resilience, protection and management

Co-design for action

Figure 1 Influences on land managers' decision-making, leading to different resilience outcomes.

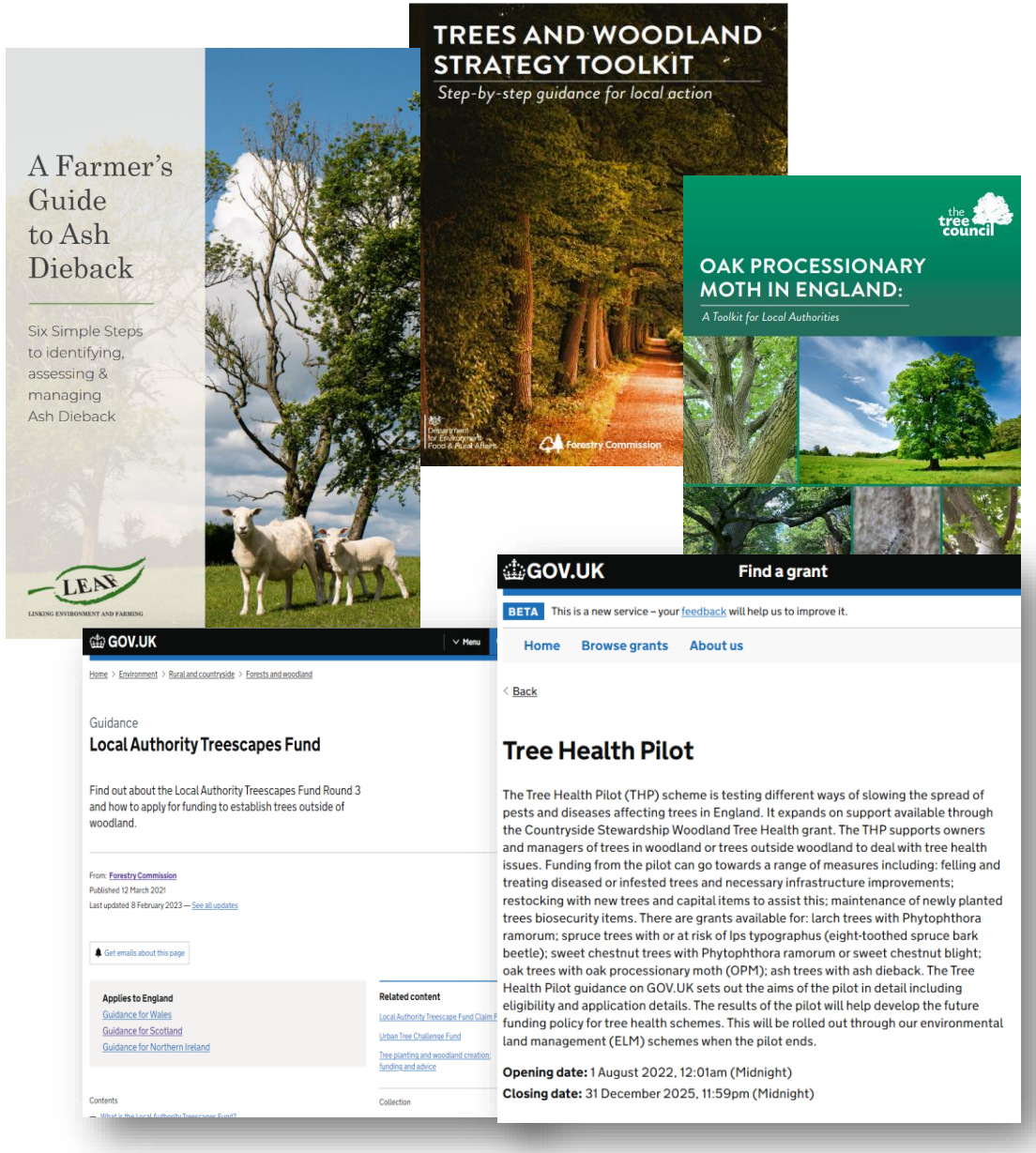


Source: [Woodland managers' understanding of resilience and their future information needs - Forest Research]

Behaviour and co-production

- Co-designed policy tools
  - OPM management plans
    - 5+12 land managers, 6 partners
    - 24 month process
  - Local Authority Treescapes Fund (2020/21)
    - 25 Local Authorities
    - 10 month process
  - Tree Health Pilot co-design (Ambrose-Oji et al 2024)
    - 250-350 land managers engaged
    - 40-60 through the 2.5 year process

- Co-produced toolkits
  - Farmers Guide to Ash Dieback (2023)
    - c. 30 farmers and advisors, 22 partners
    - 24 month process
  - Oak processionary moth (OPM)
    - 38 Local Authorities, 15 NGOs
    - 36 month process
  - Trees and Woodland Strategy toolkit (Allan et al 2022)
    - c.80 individuals, 22 Local Authorities, 18 partners
    - 24 month process



Tree Health Pilot

Phytophthora ramorum - mass death of larch trees

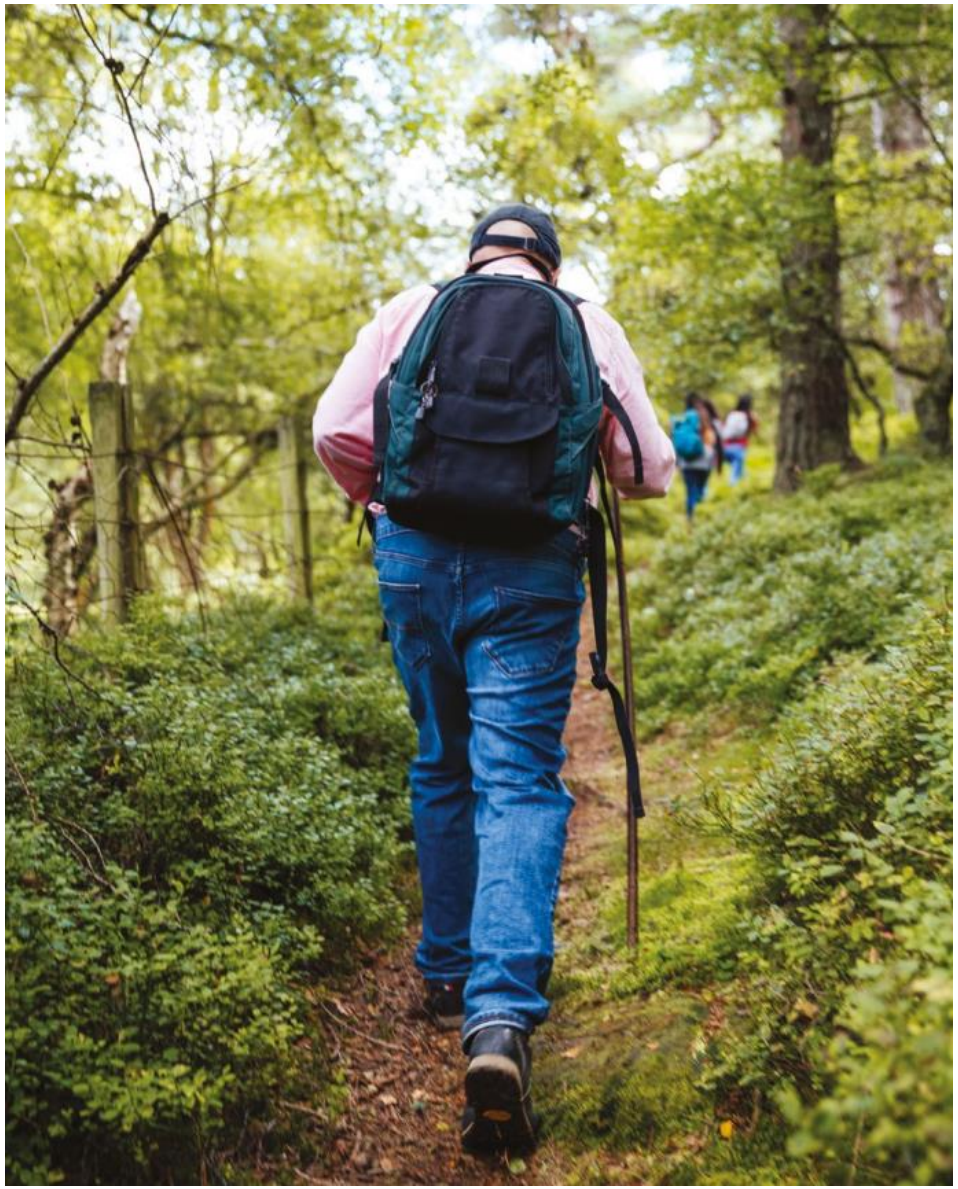
Ips typographus - mass dieback of stressed conifer species

Oak processionary moth – defoliating oak trees

- Regulatory framework
  - Statutory Plant Health Notice SPHN
  - No obligation to restock
  - Natural regeneration problematic
- Forest owner/business
  - Loses money
  - Loses interest in forestry (conversion)
  - Small-scale businesses unable to act on regulations
  - Wellbeing impacted
- Tree health Pilot
  - c. 650 owners/managers took part in policy co-design process
  - Identification of support mechanisms
  - Adaptive policy development

Wellbeing and nature connection

Valuation of cultural and other services



Wellbeing: economic evidence

- Woods In and Around Towns – WIAT (Ambrose-Oji et al 2014)
  - 17-25% more visitors from lower income groups
  - Value of additional health benefits (using QUALYs) £14m per year

- Active Forest Programme Evaluation (O'Brien et al 2011 and 2020)
  - Significant increases in numbers of women, Mixed ethnic backgrounds, and young people from between 2-15%
  - changing supported activities can sustain interest and increase activity levels of the less frequent participant

- Mental health benefits of UK woodland visits (Saraev et al, 2021)
  - avoided mental health-related costs = £185 million (2020 prices)

- Impacts of COVID (O'Brien et al 2020, 2021, and 2024)
  - Visits to woodlands dropped 20% overall, but less than the c.50% drop to other outdoor settings
  - Active people (>150 mins exercise p.week) increased activity, intended to continue, and felt more connected to nature
  - Less active (<30 mins exercise p.week) were seen to reduce their visits to outdoor settings
  - Fewer visits for low income groups than for high income groups

- 91% believed access to woodlands was beneficial for wellbeing
- 57% in England believed public access negatively impacted commercial activities
- 65% thought public access had negative impact on biodiversity
- Reported problems?
  - 54% minor inconveniences
  - 27% a few major problems

Source: https://sylva.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BWS2024-Report.pdf

Thank you

https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/

Photo by Sandra Seitamaa on Unsplash