

# You Said, We Listened

## Savernake: Our Shared Forest

This report summarises the response to the public consultation on the draft *Savernake: Our Shared Forest Land Management Plan* in Spring 2022. We have reviewed the comments and points raised by nearly 1,500 respondents. It is positive that we received such a large and strong response to the Land Management Plan. We recognise and commend the passion felt for Savernake Forest and its management, and the significance of the Forest to those who love it.

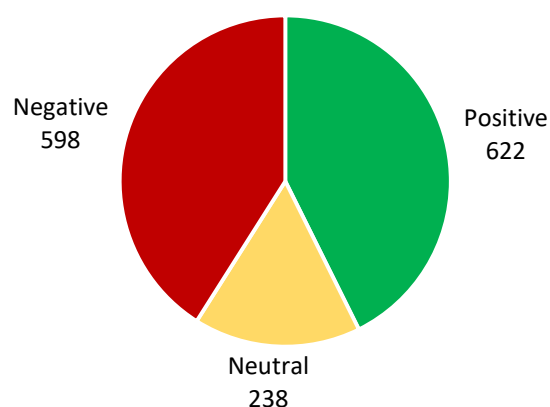
The result of the consultation was skewed considerably towards public access and recreation following the publication of the document *Savernake: A Way Forward* midway through the consultation period. That paper explored hypothetical long-term options for managing public access and recreation in the Forest with the landlord, the Savernake Estate.

It is evident from the consultation that we need to clearly explain the role of the Land Management Plan, how it fits with our forest planning process, and therefore the level of detail, scale, and timescale of our proposals. We also need to clarify the complexities of Forestry England's management arrangements and tenure, and how this influences what we can do. The absence of this from the Land Management Plan has highlighted lack of trust in Forestry England and clouded responses with a feeling that we are trying to hide information and our intentions.

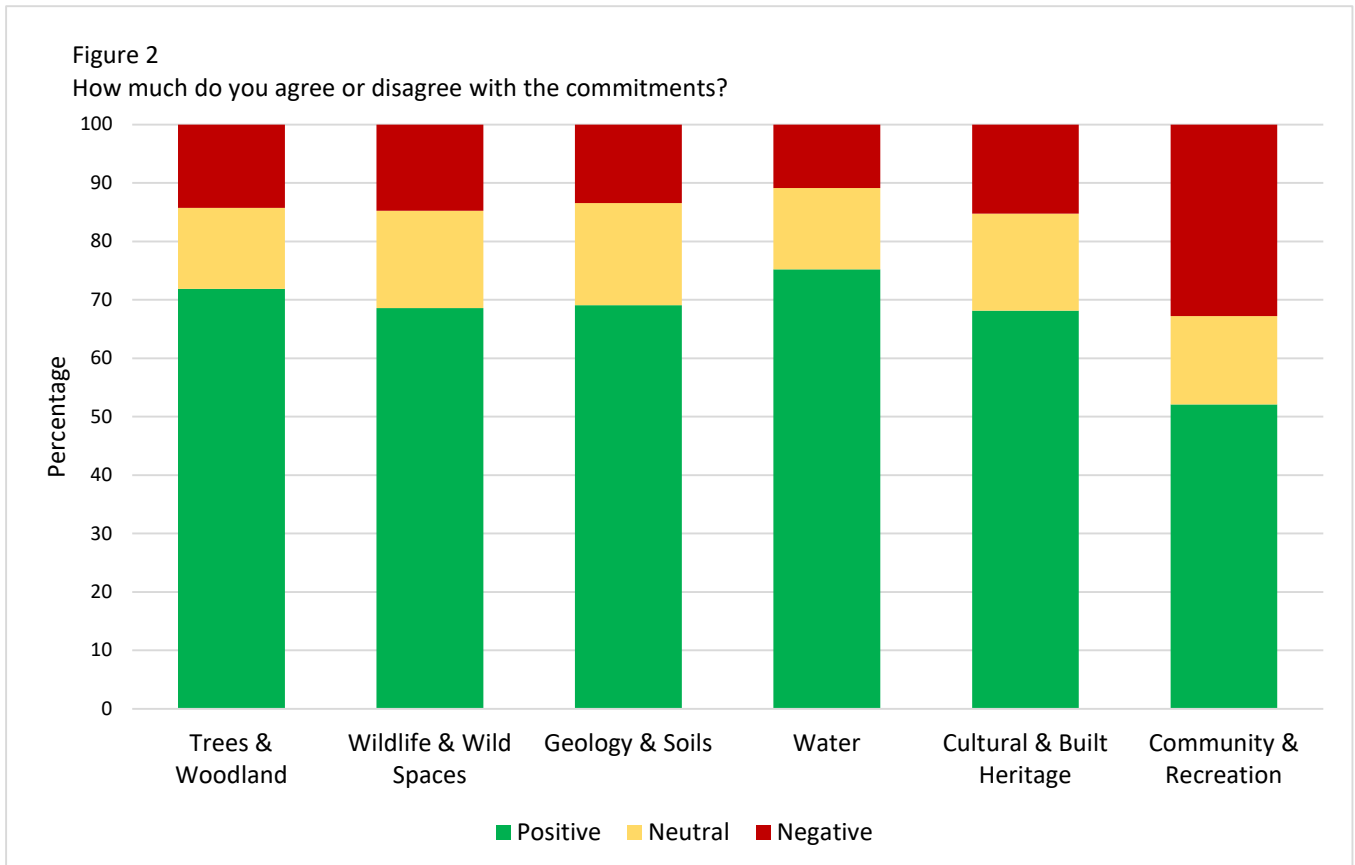
### Vision

People did not respond well to the vagueness of Forestry England's vision for Savernake Forest, querying terms such as 'diverse and inclusive' and 'forward-thinking forestry'. This lack of clarity, compounded by the reaction to *Savernake: A Way Forward*, led to 41% of respondents disagreeing with the long-term vision for land management of Savernake Forest (illustrated in Figure 1).

Figure 1  
How much do you agree or disagree with the long-term vision for land management of Savernake Forest? (number of responses)



However, the broad response to the majority of commitments was positive (illustrated in Figure 2). This seems to demonstrate that people supported the proposed intentions, in principle. The exception to this is the ‘Community & Recreation’ commitments which we explore in this report.



## Themes

Several key themes emerged from the consultation, which we highlight here. As is standard with open consultations, these will also be addressed when revising the Savernake: Our Shared Forest Land Management Plan.

### Access and Recreation

#### You Said

The matter of public access and, in particular, restricted access, ‘managed’ recreation, and commercialisation of the forest was consistently raised by respondents. Without question, this was the area of biggest concern for consultees (Figure 3 - Comments 1, 2 & 3). While these responses can be somewhat attributed to the Community and Recreation commitment to ‘Review opportunities to enhance visitor facilities’ and the *Savernake: A Way Forward* paper, the theme permeates the consultation responses to many questions.

Consultees challenged the rationale for reviewing recreation facilities, questioning the implied biodiversity impact of current public access and the suggestion that the Grand Avenue is a thoroughfare. Implications for public health and disability access were raised.

There were also concerns around the safety and viability of Postern Hill as a reasonable place to focus efforts to offer recreation facilities (Figure 3 - Comments 4 & 5).

Figure 3

Example comments on Access and Recreation

<sup>1</sup> We don't want or need a Disney style visitor centre

<sup>3</sup> I think the local community needs to understand what you mean by managing access. There is a strong sense that you intend to restrict free access and provide a managed and presumably paid for access only.

<sup>5</sup> It's difficult to disagree with any but the last point. However, I am strongly opposed to restricting access to ONLY a few designated paths and tracks, and do not want to see a large car park and cafe at Postern Hill. The toilet block could be improved.

<sup>2</sup> I feel that closing the avenue is more likely a commercial decision, resulting from maintenance costs. The whole plan appears to be driven financially

<sup>4</sup> The forestry management plan is excellent, but the proposals to limit points of access for the public are very questionable, and will cause problems. Limiting visitors to certain areas only will create stress on those areas and concentrate footfall on vulnerable areas.

### We Listened

The complexities of Forestry England's tenancy and the continuing growth of public use of Savernake over the years requires us to plan how we will provide safe and enjoyable forest visits, while protecting and enhancing the fabric and intrinsic value of the forest.

We need to reassure communities that Forestry England is not interested in creating sanitised tourist attractions. Indeed, we entered our careers because of our love for the outdoors and creating safe, natural places for people to enjoy. There is a view that we are attempting to restrict and dilute people's enjoyment of nature. This couldn't be further from the truth. We are trying to ensure that nature is here to be enjoyed now and in the future.

We strive to uphold the Forestry Commission value of openness and honesty. We will better define our intentions within the Our Shared Forest Land Management Plan. We will be clearer in our communications with the public. The beauty and tranquillity of Savernake Forest are what make it so special and this needs to come first.

Moving forward, we will involve key community groups, such as local councils and access forums, when communicating our intentions around recreation, access, and parking. We will strive to ensure communities' needs are properly met and keep the public up to date as our management of public access and recreation at Savernake evolves.

### Detail and Jargon

#### You Said

Some respondents reported that the wording of the Our Shared Forest Land Management Plan was too generalised and corporate. Comments focussed on the language feeling opaque, unclear, ‘glossy’, and using too many buzzwords (Figure 4 - Comments 1 & 2). Other consultees wanted to see more tangible detail in the Land Management Plan so that they could relate our commitments to what might happen next (Figure 4 - Comment 3). Some felt that the Plan lacked the detail and specificity they wanted to be able to give full feedback. Aspirational sentiments like ‘global example of forward-thinking forestry’ were interpreted as Forestry England’s intention to commercialise or monetise Savernake.

The phrasing of our commitments and long-term aspirations made it difficult for people to disagree with the broad direction of travel. However, the lack of detail meant that some people felt unable to give specific feedback. Others felt that the lack of detail meant Forestry England was avoiding providing a full picture of its intentions (Figure 4 - Comment 4).

Figure 4  
Example comments on Detail and Jargon

<sup>1</sup> While I understand some of your commitments may originate from somewhere that is not invariably un-English I think what you intended may have been lost in translation somewhere

<sup>2</sup> "a programme of protocols" - what does that mean in plain English?

<sup>3</sup> The commitments as they are written are all positive, however we are not told the detail of how these aims are to be accomplished, and therein will be the items that I strongly disagree with.

<sup>4</sup> You may be trying to gloss over your real intentions with your talk using key buzz words such as sustainable development, however some of us are not so easily fooled or manipulated

#### We Listened

In our attempt to make the Our Shared Forest Land Management Plan palatable, digestible, and flexible, our language is intentionally concise and non-specific. Unfortunately, this has come across as “vague marketing spiel” and has left room for varied interpretations. The language we use needs to be more explicit, clearer, and less generalist.

We will work hard to make the language in the Land Management Plan more accessible and tangible. We will review the phrasing and terms used so that it is clear to people what we mean. We will try to minimise technical terminology to better define our intentions.

We will explain more clearly where the Land Management Plan sits in Forestry England's forest planning process. The Land Management Plan is a multi-decade document, and a more-detailed, shorter term Forest Plan will follow for public consultation in the coming months. This will provide some of the details that consultees feel are missing.

### Trees and Habitat Management

#### You Said

Savernake Forest is cherished for its cultural and ecological significance and natural beauty. A common theme raised was that Forestry England should not change or actively manage Savernake (Figure 5 - Comments 1 & 2). Combined with strong feelings about the impact of forest management and protection of ecological features and soil, this area of concern was coloured by Forestry England's perceived insensitive past management (Figure 5 - Comment 3). Grazing and the existence of fencing, or fear of more fencing, was consistently raised by consultees (Figure 5 - Comment 4). There were differences of opinion about whether there should be more ponds, trees, signage etc. or the forest should be more open, 'wild', and unmanaged.

Concerns were raised about the use of non-native tree species, chemicals, and mechanised intervention. A number of consultees questioned the skills, expertise, and resources within Forestry England and its ability to implement the Land Management Plan (Figure 5 - Comment 5).

Figure 5  
Example comments on Trees and Habitat Management

<sup>1</sup> I don't believe that the forest needs to be so micromanaged. The forest has evolved quite naturally over hundreds of not thousands of years. Man has a habit of interfering with the natural rhythm of things and often has to draw back having destroyed the very things it's trying to protect.

<sup>2</sup> These commitments sound great. But there isn't much scope for letting nature do what it wants to do. This is an ancient woodland that needs to be given time and space to regenerate.

<sup>3</sup> This rhetoric sounds like attempts to justify the unjustifiable desiccation of the forest rather than preserve it.

<sup>4</sup> I think that the grazing is a brilliant idea BUT without the forest being divided into masses of different sections. If the wire fencing (or other type of fencing) bordered the perimeter of the forest, with cattle grids at either end, then this would have a much more natural effect, and would protect deer and other animals which might otherwise injure themselves in the wire.

<sup>5</sup> I don't believe the FC has the knowledge, resources or commitment to carry out these objectives.

### **We Listened**

We will explain more clearly that the Forest that exists today is the product of human intervention. More importantly, that even to maintain the Forest as it is now requires us to act differently to counteract climate change and other shifting influences. We need to address concerns about over-management by raising awareness of the history of forest management and explaining that, in a changing environment, even just staying the same requires evolution.

We will build better links and networks with local and national experts to enhance our own knowledge and help inform our management of Savernake Forest's trees and habitats. We are open to innovations in forestry practice that protect the intrinsic value of the Forest, particularly when undertaking operations, so that the soils and the trees are preserved. In the forthcoming Forest Plan, we will be explicit about what management is required, where, and why, to ensure the forest's longevity is maintained in the context of the climate change crisis and biodiversity collapse.