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Guidance

Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: advice for making planning decisions

How to assess a planning application when there are ancient woodland, ancient trees or veteran trees on or near a proposed development site.

From:
Natural England (/government/organisations/natural-england) and Forestry Commission (/government/organisations/forestry-commission)

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Applies to England

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This is the Natural England and Forestry Commission ‘standing advice’ for ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees. It is a material planning consideration for local planning authorities (LPAs).

You should take this advice into account when making planning decisions that affect ancient woodland, ancient trees or veteran trees.

Natural England and the Forestry Commission will only provide specific advice on planning applications as set out in the 'when to contact' sections, or in exceptional circumstances.

This guidance may be useful for decision makers who are responsible for major infrastructure projects, such as road and rail schemes.

Ancient woodland

Ancient woodland takes hundreds of years to establish and is defined as an irreplaceable habitat. It is a valuable natural asset important for:

- wildlife (which include rare and threatened species) - there is also standing advice for protected species (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-species-how-to-review-planning-applications)
- soils
- carbon capture and storage
- contributing to the seed bank and genetic diversity
- recreation, health and wellbeing
- cultural, historical and landscape value

It's any area that's been wooded continuously since at least 1600 AD. It includes:

- ancient semi-natural woodland mainly made up of trees and shrubs native to the site, usually arising from natural regeneration
- plantations on ancient woodland sites - replanted with conifer or broadleaved trees that retain ancient woodland features, such as undisturbed soil, ground flora and fungi

They have equal protection in the National Planning Policy Framework (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2) (NPPF).

Other distinct forms of ancient woodland are:

- wood pastures identified as ancient
- historic parkland, which is protected as a heritage asset in the NPPF

Many of these do not appear on the ancient woodland inventory (AWI) because their low tree density does not register as woodland on historic maps.

You should consider wood pastures identified as ancient in the same way as other ancient woodland when making planning decisions.

'Wooded continuously' does not mean there's been continuous tree cover across the whole site. Not all trees in the woodland have to be old. Open ground, both temporary and permanent, is an important component of ancient woodlands.

Ancient and veteran trees

Ancient and veteran trees can be individual trees or groups of trees within wood pastures, historic parkland, hedgerows, orchards, parks or other areas. They are often found outside ancient woodlands. They are also irreplaceable habitats.

Ancient trees

An ancient tree is exceptionally valuable. Attributes can include its:

- great age
- size
- condition
- biodiversity value as a result of significant wood decay and the habitat created from the ageing process
- cultural and heritage value

Very few trees of any species become ancient.

Veteran trees

A veteran tree may not be very old, but it has significant decay features, such as branch death and hollowing. These features contribute to its exceptional biodiversity, cultural and heritage value.

All ancient trees are veteran trees, but not all veteran trees are ancient. The age at which a tree becomes ancient or veteran will vary by species because each species ages at a different rate.

Making decisions

When making planning decisions, you should consider:

- conserving and enhancing biodiversity
- avoiding and reducing the level of impact of the proposed development on ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees

You should refuse planning permission if development will result in the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees unless both of the following applies:

- there are wholly exceptional reasons
- there's a suitable compensation strategy in place (this must not be a part of considerations of wholly exceptional reasons) - see paragraphs 33 and 34 of the planning practice guidance (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#biodiversity-geodiversity-and-ecosystems) on compensation guidance

You should make decisions in line with paragraph 180 (c) of the NPPF.

Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees are irreplaceable. Therefore, you should not consider proposed compensation measures as part of your assessment of the merits of the development proposal.

Assess the effects of development

When making decisions on planning applications, you should assess the direct and indirect effects of development on:

- ancient woodland
- ancient trees and veteran trees

You should consider both the construction and operational effects of the proposed development.

Consult inventories

You can use inventories to help you decide whether a development proposal will affect ancient woodland (including wood pastures identified as ancient) or ancient and veteran trees:

- Natural England's AWI - download the data (https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/Defra::ancient-woodland-england/about) or view it on the Magic map system (http://magic.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx?chosenLayers=ancwoodIndex,bapdecIndex,orchardIndex,bapwoodIndex,backdropDIndex,backdropIndex,europeIndex,vmlBWIndex,25kBWIndex,50kBWIndex,250kBWIndex,miniscaleBWIndex,baseIndex&box=207763:417195:576753:592195&useDefaultbackgroundMapping=false) (zoom in to see local detail)
- the Woodland Trust's ancient tree inventory (http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/) (ATI) (click on 'Tree search' and enter a postcode) - only a small proportion of ancient or veteran trees are recorded on this inventory
- Natural England's wood pasture and parkland inventory (includes ancient sites) (http://magic.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx?chosenLayers=bapwoodIndex,backdropDIndex,backdropIndex,europeIndex,vmlBWIndex,25kBWIndex,50kBWIndex,250kBWIndex,miniscaleBWIndex,baseIndex&box=207763:417195:576753:592195&useDefaultbackgroundMapping=false) on the Magic map system (zoom in to see local detail)

Ancient woodlands smaller than 2 hectares may not appear on these inventories. Local record centres (https://www.alerc.org.uk/) may hold data on smaller ancient woodlands.

You should use this guidance for all ancient woodlands and ancient and veteran trees whether they're on the inventories or not. New data can be added to the AWI and ATI at any time. A review of the AWI is ongoing.

You should contact Natural England if a site has evidence of ancient woodland on it and is not on the inventory.

Direct and indirect effects of development

Development, including construction and operational activities can affect ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees, and the wildlife they support on the site or nearby. Use this assessment guide (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1044856/Ancient_woodland_assessment_guide.docx) (MS Word Document, 82.2 KB) to:

- help you make planning decisions in line with the NPPF
- keep a record of your assessment

You'll need to download the assessment guide and save it to your desktop to fill it in.

Direct effects of development can cause the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees by:

- damaging or destroying all or part of them (including their soils, ground flora or fungi)
- damaging roots and understorey (all the vegetation under the taller trees)
- damaging or compacting soil
- damaging functional habitat connections, such as open habitats between the trees in wood pasture and parkland
- increasing levels of air and light pollution, noise and vibration
- changing the water table or drainage
- damaging archaeological features or heritage assets
- changing the woodland ecosystem by removing the woodland edge or thinning trees - causing greater wind damage and soil loss

Indirect effects of development can also cause the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees by:

- breaking up or destroying working connections between woodlands, or ancient trees or veteran trees - affecting protected species, such as bats or wood-decay insects
- reducing the amount of semi-natural habitats next to ancient woodland that provide important dispersal and feeding habitat for woodland species
- reducing the resilience of the woodland or trees and making them more vulnerable to change
- increasing the amount of dust, light, water, air and soil pollution
- increasing disturbance to wildlife, such as noise from additional people and traffic
- increasing damage to habitat, for example trampling of plants and erosion of soil by people accessing the woodland or tree root protection areas
- increasing damaging activities like fly-tipping and the impact of domestic pets

- increasing the risk of damage to people and property by falling branches or trees requiring tree management that could cause habitat deterioration
- changing the landscape character of the area

Providing evidence

You should work with the developer to make sure there's enough suitable evidence to make a decision. This may include fieldwork and historic maps.

You should ask developers for a tree survey and an ecological survey, where appropriate. The tree survey should follow guidance in British Standard BS 5837 'Trees in relation to demolition, design and development' (https://shop.bsigroup.com/ProductDetail/?pid=000000000030213642). Ecological surveys should follow best practice guidance. You can get further information from the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management resource hub (https://cieem.net/i-am/resources-hub/) and from Natural England's protected species standing advice (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-species-how-to-review-planning-applications).

You must make sure the developer includes mitigation measures in their development proposal to avoid and reduce harm caused by development on ancient woodlands, ancient and veteran trees. They may also need to include a suitable compensation strategy.

Avoid impacts, reduce (mitigate) impacts, and compensate as a last resort

You and the developer should identify ways to avoid negative effects on ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees. For example, selecting an alternative site for development or redesigning the scheme.

You should decide on the weight given to ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees in planning decisions on a case-by-case basis. You should do this by taking account of the NPPF and relevant development plan policies.

If you decide to grant planning permission that results in unavoidable loss or deterioration where wholly exceptional reasons are demonstrated, you should use planning conditions or obligations to make sure the developer:

- avoids damage
- mitigates against damage
- compensates for loss or damage (use as a last resort)

This is known as the mitigation hierarchy. You should apply the mitigation hierarchy in line with NPPF paragraph 180a to avoid significant harm to biodiversity.

See the government policy for woodland and trees (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keepers-of-time-a-statement-of-policy-for-

englands-ancient-and-native-woodland) describing the opportunities for improving ancient and native woodlands.

Existing condition of ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees

Where a proposal involves the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland or ancient or veteran trees you should not take account of the existing condition of the ancient woodland or ancient or veteran tree when you assess the merits of the development proposal. Its existing condition is not a reason to give permission for development. A woodland or tree in poor condition can be improved with good management.

Mitigation measures

Mitigation measures will depend on the type of development. They could include:

- putting up screening barriers to protect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees from dust and pollution
- measures to reduce noise or light
- designing open space to protect ancient or veteran trees
- rerouting footpaths and managing vegetation to deflect trampling pressure away from sensitive locations
- creating buffer zones

Use of buffer zones

Buffer zones can protect ancient woodland and individual ancient and veteran trees and provide valuable habitat for woodland wildlife, such as feeding bats and birds. The size and type of buffer zone should vary depending on the:

- scale and type of development and its effect on ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees
- character of the surrounding area

For example, larger buffer zones are more likely to be needed if the surrounding area is:

- less densely wooded
- close to residential areas
- steeply sloped

Buffer zone recommendations

For ancient woodlands, the proposal should have a buffer zone of at least 15 metres from the boundary of the woodland to avoid root damage (known as the root protection area). Where assessment shows other impacts are likely to extend

beyond this distance, the proposal is likely to need a larger buffer zone. For example, the effect of air pollution from development that results in a significant increase in traffic.

For ancient or veteran trees (including those on the woodland boundary), the buffer zone should be at least 15 times larger than the diameter of the tree. The buffer zone should be 5 metres from the edge of the tree's canopy if that area is larger than 15 times the tree's diameter. This will create a minimum root protection area.

Where assessment shows other impacts are likely to extend beyond this distance, the proposal is likely to need a larger buffer zone.

Where possible, a buffer zone should:

- contribute to wider ecological networks
- be part of the green infrastructure of the area

A buffer zone should consist of semi-natural habitats such as:

- woodland
- a mix of scrub, grassland, heathland and wetland

The proposal should include creating or establishing habitat with local and appropriate native species in the buffer zone.

You should consider if access is appropriate. You can allow access to buffer zones if the habitat is not harmed by trampling.

You should not approve development proposals, including gardens, within a buffer zone.

You should only approve sustainable drainage schemes if:

- they do not affect root protection areas
- any change to the water table does not negatively affect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees

Compensation measures

Compensation measures are always a last resort. These measures can only partially compensate for loss or damage.

Compensation measures should be appropriate for the site and for the scale and nature of the impacts on it. A compensation strategy could include measures to:

- create new native woodland or wood pasture and allow for natural regeneration
- improve the condition of the woodland
- remove invasive species
- restore or manage other ancient woodland, including plantations on ancient woodland sites, wood pasture and parkland

- connect woodland and ancient and veteran trees separated by development with green bridges, tunnels or hedgerows
- produce long-term management plans for new woodland and ancient woodland - including deer management
- manage ancient and veteran trees to improve their condition
- plant or protect individual trees that could become veteran and ancient trees in future

The compensation strategy should include monitoring the ecology of the site over an agreed period.

Create new native woodland

Planting new trees and creating new native woodland is not a direct replacement for lost or damaged trees or woodland.

You can accept large-scale woodland creation as a compensation measure alongside other measures. This could be on soil that has been moved from the destroyed area of ancient woodland (soil translocation) which could include other ancient woodland ecosystem features, such as:

- tree hulks
- coppice stools
- saplings

You cannot accept plans to move an ancient woodland ecosystem because:

- it's not possible to replicate the same conditions at another site
- it's no longer an ancient woodland

You should not accept plans to relocate individual trees as a compensation measure. It may not be possible to do and would also break connections with the woodland ecosystem.

See 'A habitats translocation policy for Britain' (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20080718180931/http:/www.jncc.gov.uk/pdf/habitats_policy.pdf) published by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (2003) for more about moving habitats.

New woodland creation can be effective where it links to and extends existing woodland, as long as it does not affect:

- other semi-natural habitats
- heritage features
- protected species

Restore or improve ancient woodland

Proposals can partially compensate for loss or damage of ancient woodland with measures to:

- improve and restore plantations on ancient woodland sites
- improve the management of nearby ancient woodland sites and connecting them better to semi-natural habitat
- improve the condition of important features of ancient woodland
- improve access for management purposes

Proposals can partially compensate for loss or damage to wood pasture by restoring semi-natural open habitat, managed by grazing, with open grown trees.

You may need to ask for a management plan. You can monitor the ecology of the site, over an agreed period, to help you advise on management measures.

Proposals to create new woodland, or to restore or improve ancient woodland should follow the UK Forestry Standard (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uk-forestry-standard).

Compensate for the loss or deterioration of ancient and veteran trees

Proposals can partially compensate for the loss or deterioration of ancient and veteran trees by planting:

- young trees of the same species with space around each one to develop an open crown
- new trees near to the trees they're replacing

Proposals should include compensation measures to manage nearby ancient and veteran trees (including dead and dying trees) to help prolong their life. You should tell developers to get advice from a registered tree consultant (arboriculturist) before they carry out work on veteran trees by contacting the:

- Arboricultural Association (https://www.trees.org.uk/Other-Pages/Contact-Us)
- Institute of Chartered Foresters (https://www.charteredforesters.org/contact-us/)

They should leave the intact hulk of the ancient or veteran tree where it is (preferably standing) to benefit invertebrates and fungi. If that's not possible, move it near other ancient and veteran trees or parkland in the area.

Ancient woodland, ancient and veteran tree management

For more information on management practices, read:

- How to manage and protect woodland wildlife (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/manage-and-protect-woodland-wildlife)
- Veteran trees: a guide for good management (http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/75035) published on Natural England's evidence catalogue

- Managing ancient and native woodland in England (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-ancient-and-native-woodland-in-england)
- Ancient and other veteran trees: further guidance on management (http://ancienttreeforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ATF_book.pdf) published by The Tree Council
- Ancient tree guide 3: trees and development (https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications/2011/12/ancient-trees-and-development/) and other ancient tree guides (https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications/?q=ancient+tree+guides+&p=1) published by The Woodland Trust
- Managing England's woodlands in a climate emergency (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-englands-woodlands-in-a-climate-emergency) published by the Forestry Commission

When to contact Natural England

Natural England is a statutory consultee (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/consultation-and-pre-decision-matters#Statutory-consultees) for proposals that affect any sites of special scientific interest (http://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/). For all other proposals that affect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees, you should use the guidance on this page. Natural England will only provide advice if consulted on other cases in exceptional circumstances.

> Natural England
> Electra Way
> Crewe Business Park
> Crewe
> Cheshire
> CW1 6GJ

Email: consultations@naturalengland.org.uk

Telephone: 0300 060 3900

When to contact the Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission is a non-statutory consultee (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/consultation-and-pre-decision-matters#Non-statutory-consultees) for development proposals that include or are likely to affect ancient woodland. You should use the guidance on this page to assess proposals.

Contact your Forestry Commission area office (https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/forestry-commission/about/access-and-opening#area-offices) for issues not covered by this standing advice.

You should consult Forestry England (https://www.forestryengland.uk/our-offices) for planning proposals close to, or affecting a public forest in England

(https://www.forestryengland.uk/visit).

620 Bristol Business Park
Coldharbour Lane
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