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Capturing planning decisions that affect ancient woodland: a pilot study in south-east England

Report Authors : A J Smith, S Dackombe & P M Jackson 2003

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Introduction

Ancient woodland is seen as being under threat from development, new housing, roads, airports etc. Little of this is within the protected sites series, so the protection of such sites relies on an awareness of the value of ancient woods among those operating the planning system. What scope is there for improving the way in which ancient woods are treated under the planning regimes?

What was done

Key individuals in three planning authorities in south-east England (where most loss appears to be occurring) were consulted about how planning decisions affecting non-designated ancient woodland were dealt with.

Results and conclusions

Examples of large-scale developmental threats were identified as important, for example the expansion of housing at Ashford, Kent, but also incremental losses such as the creation of outbuildings or paddocks attached to existing dwellings. Cumulative losses were particularly difficult to deal with as previous planning applications and their outcomes were not always easily accessible. There is no central record of the extent to which ancient woodland is being cleared through development.

Not all local authorities had clear policies relating to the protection of ancient woodland and nor did they necessarily appreciate the key role they could play in ancient woodland protection.

The ancient woodland inventory was seen as a key document in assessing planning applications, but the limitations in its current form (particularly with respect to boundary errors and lack of coverage of small woods) created problems.

Clearer national guidance on the role of local authorities towards ancient woodland is desirable.

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English Nature's viewpoint

English Nature does not have the resources to become involved in planning applications affecting non-designated ancient woodland. Other bodies, particularly those with responsibilities under S28 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act may be better placed to act, given that most ancient semi-natural woodland is included in one or other of the priority habitats under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

We have sought stronger protection for ancient woodland under the forthcoming planning guidance from central government.

We are also improving the accuracy of the digital ancient woodland maps to make it easier for planning authorities to relate applications to ancient woods.

Selected references

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Further information

For the full report or other publications on this subject, please contact the Enquiry Service on 01733 455100/101/102 or email enquiries@english-nature.org.uk

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