

Forestry Sector Skills Plan

Statement of problem

Overview and summary

There are not enough people with the right skills to support current and anticipated needs in the forestry sector. To change this there are several drivers which must be addressed and four key barriers to overcome; data availability, sector structural barriers, promotion and provision.

The Current Landscape

1. The numbers of people working in the sector is decreasing.

This is due to several factors;

- The workforce is aging, retirement rates are forecasted at an attrition rate of 10% by 2025 and it is projected that 20% of the existing workforce will have left by 2030 (Forestry Workforce Research report 2021).
- New people are not joining the sector in sufficient numbers. The numbers on full-time forestry courses have been falling and uptake of technical apprenticeships are very low with only 5 starts at Level 3 for the first quarter of the academic year 2023/24 and of the total 51 Level 6 Professional Forester apprenticeship starts, only 17 are from non-government organisations.
- T-levels and forestry bootcamps are not seen as fit for purpose to get people ready for working in the sector.

2. There are new and emerging skills required.

Changes in forestry practice resulting from technological advances, increased impact of pests and diseases, new emerging approaches to forestry and woodland planning and management, means that new skills are needed to future-proof the sector. Currently there is a lack of adaptability in the workforce due to an ageing population with entrenched ways of working, a lack of investment in career pathway development/life-long learning and not enough forestry specific expertise delivering forestry education and training.

3. There is an increased need for forestry and woodland management skills

The Government has set a statutory target to increase woodland cover to 16.5% by 2050. Additionally, there are aspirations to increase the area of woodland in management to 75% by 2040. Research and analysis has estimated the sector will need an additional 3,500 skilled people (at least) working in core forestry by 2030 to meet tree planting targets.

Impact

Insufficient people with the right skills at all levels has created supply-chain risks across the sector. This includes:

- A threat to the Government's ability to meet its statutory and non-statutory targets around tree planting and woodland management.
- A threat to timber supply from commercial forestry companies with difficulty finding and retaining staff and contractors; specific areas of weakness include machinery operators and forest works managers.
- NGOs and Community Forests notably having difficulty finding contractors for operations especially planting.
- Difficulty finding people with the right skills able to manage small woodlands.

Issues and barriers

The fundamental issues and barriers that need to be addressed fall into four areas:

1. Data availability

The existing data on the current and future workforce does not provide a reliable picture and relies on a small pool of primary data sources. Current reports on labour market intelligence and provision intelligence are out of date. Reliable data insights are necessary to understand the existing issues in the forestry workforce and to allow the sector to act proactively to prevent future issues from arising.

2. Sector structural barriers

The sector is small and fragmented with low levels of collaboration. This prevents the sector from effectively attracting new and upskilling existing employees. At a technical level, the sector is dominated by micro-businesses working from contract to contract: unable or unwilling to commit to education, training or apprenticeships, resulting in a lack of investment further down the supply chain. Additionally, there is a widely recognised lack of diversity (gender, ethnicity, age etc) across the sector reducing the breadth and diversity of skills, knowledge, and experience within the sector.

3. Career pathways and promotion

There is an absence of career pathways and a lack of clarity around pathways that are there for new starters, progression or specialisation. This makes it difficult to enter, and progress within, the forestry sector. Perceptions of the sector are poor re pay, roles, availability of courses etc Further to this, the low level of promotion for entry roles, and the low awareness of the variety of roles and available career opportunities are preventing the forestry workforce from upsizing and upskilling. Information on careers can be difficult to source and there is no one place to go to find roles and opportunities.

4. Provision

Full-time education

At all levels the market for forestry courses is failing to provide the skilled people needed to meet present or future needs. At a technical level, forestry education and training is expensive and requires specialist equipment and access to woodland for training: demand is poor and there is a major shortfall in the number of forestry tutors, lecturers, instructors and assessors. As such it is a challenge for colleges to offer. Forestry content is not well-represented in schools at GCSE level or other early formal education.

Work-based learning

For similar reasons, there is a lack of work-based provision – i.e. apprenticeships, T-levels, Skills Bootcamps, career path development. The quality and availability of education and training currently is inconsistent, with forestry often being an ‘add on’ to other courses. With shorter and lower-level courses there is a real concern that people completing education and training do not have the skills or experience to begin work. Forestry contracting businesses often lack the capacity to employ and supervise new entrants in their post education and training consolidation period.

CPD and short-course technical training

Short courses have recently been given a boost from the Forestry and Arboriculture Training Fund. However, there is still both strong demand and a strong need for this type of education and training. There is a gap in the planning for future CPD subject needs. This has resulted in skills education and training such as, developments in silviculture, agroforestry, green finance etc., not being delivered at the required volume.

Statement of scope

The steering team has agreed to focus on core forestry workforce and skills. Specifically, focus will be on activities within the woodland, field or forest 'gates'. Out of scope are activities looking back beyond the 'entry gate' to areas such as, seed sourcing, nurseries, forestry related science and research roles. Also not in scope are activities looking beyond the 'exit gate' such as, haulage, sawmilling, first and secondary wood processing. Flexibility will be retained to create actions which work across subjects (e.g., Arboriculture & Agroforestry), nations and the supply chain which improve the core forestry workforce and/or increases the availability of skills needed to meet the anticipated future demands placed on the forestry sector.

The plan will focus on England actions only, but the other UK nations should be engaged and there should be opportunity for cross border collaboration.

If this plan is a successful catalyst for strategic action, consideration can be given in future to creating plans for other sectors or wider supply-chain activity.