**Frith and Conigree forest plan – external consultation – Spring 2021**

**We asked, you said, we did…**

The external consultation for the Frith and Conigree forest plan was open for five weeks in April / May 2021. Posters were put up at entrances to both woods, directing people to an online survey. The vast majority of the 90 respondents to the survey describe themselves as walkers / forest users and neighbours, but there were also comments from a footpath officer and a Scout leader, and representatives of the Conigree freeholder, Malvern Hills AONB, Ledbury Town Council and Sustainable Ledbury.

Respondents scored functions of the forest plan in terms of importance to them / their organisation. Biodiversity, climate change, recreation and community were the deemed to be the most significant, all with over 85% of people scoring them as ‘important’ or ‘very important’.

82% of respondents said that the forest plan addresses their needs and interests (or those of their organisation) ‘very well’ or ‘well’, with plenty of **positive feedback** including:

* “It seems to me that the plan has thought carefully about every relevant consideration.”

Forestry England’s response:

* + Thanks. A great deal of time has been spent trying to balance the functions of the woodlands, so that they deliver for people, nature and, where appropriate, economy, now and into the future.
* “I am encouraged that the plan is to conserve and enhance the woods in terms of biodiversity.”

Forestry England’s response:

* + Frith and Conigree are such ecologically valuable woods that conservation and enhancement of their biodiversity will always be one of our principle objectives.
* “Good to see plans for coppicing.”

Forestry England’s response:

* + We’re really excited about our plans for coppicing because of the diversity of changing habitats that it creates, at the same time as generating a sustainable supply of small timber products. Most ancient woodlands have been managed using coppicing for centuries, so it feels right to practice it in Frith and Conigree into the future. That’s not to say it won’t be a challenge – coppicing regularly on a small scale is time-consuming to manage, and regrowth is often at risk of damage by deer and squirrels.

18% of respondents said that the plan addresses their needs ‘ok’, ‘poorly’ or ‘very poorly’.

In this category, the main contention is around mountain biking in Frith and Conigree Woods. Several respondents expressed concern about the increasing number of mountain bikers who dig and then ride on paths and jumps through sensitive habitats, while an equal number of respondents believe that there should be designated mountain biking areas in both woods, because of the benefits that mountain biking provides – fresh air, exercise etc.

Forestry England’s response:

* + Frith and Conigree are sensitive woodlands, with areas that are home to important (but often unnoticed) species such as spreading bellflower. While some of our forests are much less vulnerable and can accommodate mountain bikers, it would be entirely inappropriate for us to designate a biking area here. We understand the appeal of riding through these lovely woodlands, but we have to ask all mountain bikers to please respect Frith and Conigree, stick to the main stone tracks in Frith or the public bridleway in Conigree when on your bike, and enjoy the rest of the woods on foot.

Other concerns included:

* the decision to fell conifers in Conigree – the mixture of evergreen and deciduous trees gives it a sense of beauty, and they provide habitat for crossbills;

Forestry England’s response:

* + Conigree currently has 24.5 hectares of conifers (that’s 40% of the total area); we propose to fell less than 6 hectares of these over this 10 year plan period, which will create temporary open space, and allow the woods to regenerate as native broadleaf woodland in line with national policy. More conifers will be removed over decades to come, but very gradually and in line with the needs of the woodland and its wildlife at the time. Before any forest operations are started, we go through a site planning process, at which point the ecologist and other experts are consulted in order to ensure that management decisions are appropriate.
* access – there is inadequate car parking at the northern end of Frith; tracks in Conigree become very wet, and tracks in both woods are sometimes overgrown;

Forestry England’s response:

* + We are aware of the parking issue in Frith, having arrived on several occasions recently to find the gateway blocked, but unfortunately we are unable to improve car parking, as we do not own the access track or parking space. We can only encourage people to walk to the wood wherever possible rather than arriving by car.
	+ There is not much we can do about the mud, but we will do our best to keep vegetation cleared from the main paths. Forest users should contact us if paths are particularly overgrown.
* incidents of camping, anti-social behaviour, fires and rubbish;

Forestry England’s response:

* + We want people to enjoy Frith and Conigree, but camping and campfires aren’t allowed. Forest users should contact us to report anti-social behaviour.
	+ We don’t usually put bins in the woods – as it tends to encourage people to leave their litter on top of the bin or next to it – we’d rather everyone took their rubbish home.
* the ‘ecological desert’ created by brambles after trees are cleared;

Forestry England’s response:

* + When trees are cut down, the ground suddenly receives more sunlight, so the brambles appear. Although they may look unsightly, they actually provide benefits including habitat and food for birds and dormice (a European protected species), and protection for the next generation of trees against deer browsing. They are usually only temporary as they are subdued by the growing trees.
* whether the plan will be monitored effectively;

Forestry England’s response:

* + The forester, ecologist, forest planner and other colleagues will visit Frith and Conigree regularly and record progress against the plan objectives, and the plan will undergo a detailed review after five years to ensure that it is still fit for purpose.
	+ We have many years of ecological records from Frith and Conigree Woods, and hope to work with Ledbury Naturalists in the next few years to carry out a detailed survey. However, we always welcome forest users to contact us if they spot something interesting or unusual!

Forestry England – westengland@forestryengland.uk

June 2021