

Business Plan

2023 - 2024



An Agency within the Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

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Chief Executive Foreword



I am pleased to present the Forest Service Business Plan 2023/2024. The plan represents the Agency's priority work areas within which targets are set for the business year. The targets complement the continued delivery of the previous DAERA Minister's policies and Departmental priorities, and are subject to review by an incoming Minister.

The focus of our work is to deliver the 8 Key Targets and 15 Supplementary Measures in this business year in the context of ongoing budgetary and resource challenges across the public sector.

DAERA is leading on the development of Northern Ireland's Climate Action Plan (CAP), for the carbon budget period 2023-2027, as required by the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The Agency's activity and work programmes, set out in this Business Plan, contribute to DAERA's preparation of actions for CAP. Forest Service's primary contribution will be through: establishing the basis to support significant annual increases in the rate of afforestation; and the restoration of peatland habitats, as components of the Land use and Land Use Change, Forestry (LULUCF) policies and proposals.

In this carbon budget period, our forests will contribute to the pathway to net-zero by 2050 and we will review the existing Strategy for Sustainability & Growth 2009, to ensure that future forestry activity aligns positively with climate mitigation policies.

In 2023/2024 Forest Service will implement and embed new and emerging arrangements for the movement of plant and plant products from GB to NI within the relevant legislative framework.

Wider NICS resourcing pressures and an overall shortage of professional and technical capacity within the forestry and plant health sectors continues to impact on staffing levels and recruitment. This Business Plan prioritises the work of the Forest Service for 2023/2024 within our existing staff resource and provides for staff development and recruitment to meet new work challenges

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'John Joe O'Boyle'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Joe O'Boyle
Chief Executive



Purpose and Status

Forest Service delivers forestry and plant health functions on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), operating as an Executive Agency since 1 April 1998 and further classified as a Non-Financial Public Corporation (PC) from 1 April 2020. The Agency is subject to the overall direction of a DAERA Minister, who determines the policy framework within which it operates, the scope of agency activities and the resources available for its work. Pending reformation of an Executive and Ministerial appointment, targets within this Business Plan are set in line with current Departmental priorities and may be subject to review or change.



Strategic Context

The Agency's strategy 'Northern Ireland Forestry - A Strategy For Sustainability & Growth' states forest policy as:

- A steady expansion of tree cover to increase the many diverse benefits that forests provide; and
- The sustainable management of existing woods and forests.

This strategy is implemented principally through the primary legislation 'Forestry Act 2010 (Northern Ireland)' which sets out the general duty for the Department to promote the expansion of forest cover and sustainable forestry; and to manage its forest estate for timber production in support of economic growth; and in a way that provides greater opportunities for Northern Ireland citizens to benefit from enhanced biodiversity, recreation and tourism.

With an estate consisting of 75 thousand hectares of forest land and biological assets with a combined value in excess of £600M, Forest Service delivers a regulatory framework for forestry and plant health in Northern Ireland. The Agency's activities support the Department's vision of '**Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone**'; and contributes to the DAERA and wider government priorities.

The priority work streams and targets presented in this Business Plan align with DAERA's Interim Business Plan for 2023/24, Sustainability for the Future – DAERA's Plan to 2050 and its vision for 'Green Growth'. Additionally they support DAERA's preparations in respect of the climate emergency and net carbon emissions through Northern Ireland's Climate Action Plan under development by the Department.



Forest Service Corporate Plan

Effective from 1 April 2021, the Forest Service Corporate Plan sets out the framework within which the Agency will invest in work streams that are prioritised and aligned with wider Government aims, including the Draft Green Growth strategy and a commitment to achieve net-zero carbon by 2050.

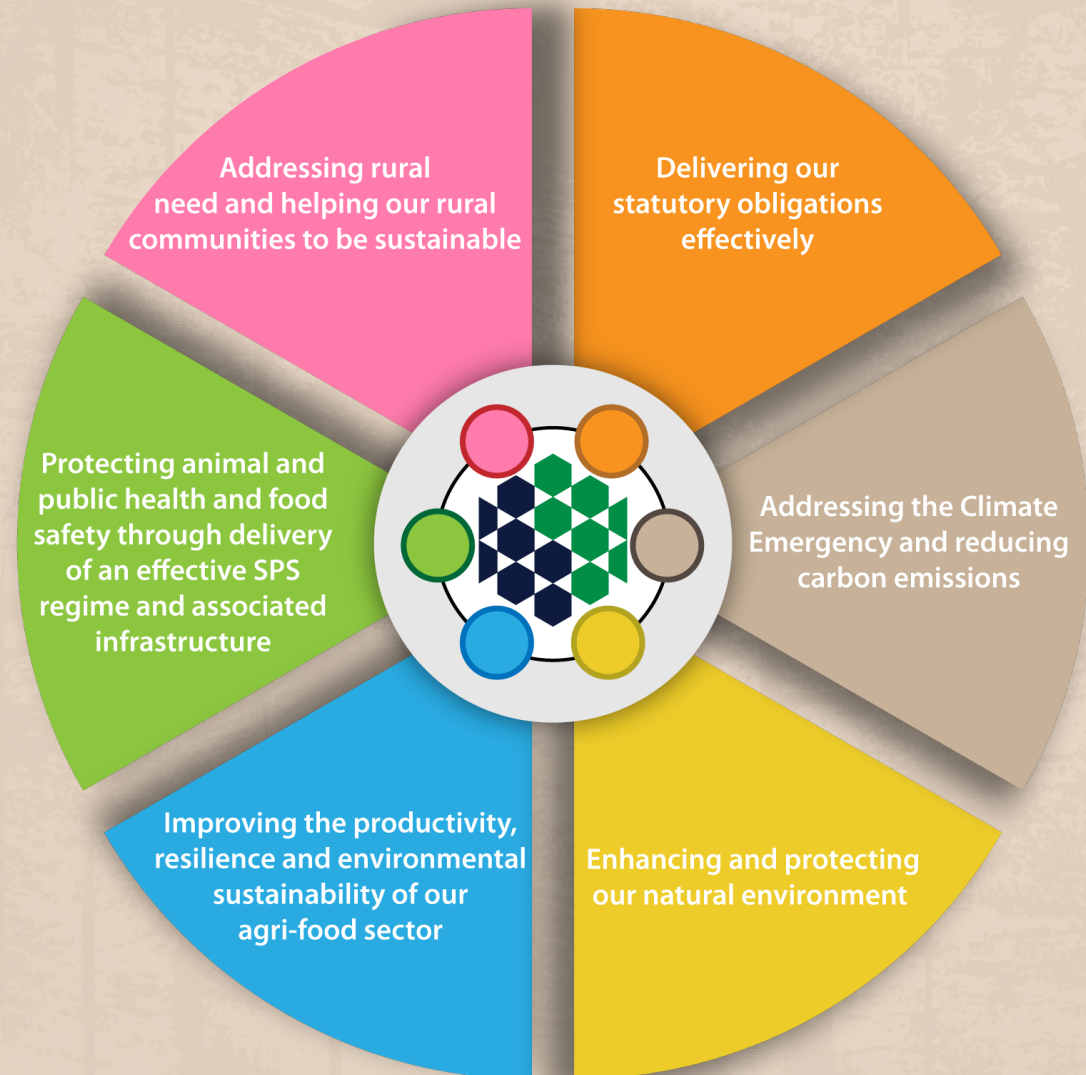
In line with the Corporate Plan, and through this Business Plan for 2023/2024, the Agency will seek opportunities to provide investment in:

- creating new woodlands;
- enhancing forest biodiversity and ecosystem services;
- supporting sustainable economic growth and rural employment through the supply of timber;
- protecting plant and plant products from threats posed by damaging pests, diseases and activity; and
- sequestering carbon and transitioning operational activities towards net-zero carbon.



Operating Environment

In 2023/2024 the Agency will deliver a programme of forestry and plant health activities in line with the following core Departmental priorities and within current budgetary constraints.



New Forests and Woodland

In this business year Forest Service will continue to increase the woodland cover in NI, and has set a Key Target to achieve the Forests for Our Future programme of 600 hectares in 2023/2024. In support of this Key Target the Agency has also set a Supplementary Measure to grant aid land owners to plant at least 400 hectares of new woodland. These new woodlands will contribute to the policy aim to increase woodland in NI to 12% of land area by 2050, actions to reduce

the impact of climate change and the Department's vision for 'Green Growth'.

In 2023/2024 Forest Service will revise its forestry grant schemes, in consultation with stakeholders, for implementation in 2024/2025. These schemes will support an increased level of afforestation and enable landowners to improve the resilience and sustainability of existing agricultural activity, and the environment.



Net Zero Carbon

Northern Ireland's forests and woodlands sequester approximately half a million tonnes of CO₂ each year. Supplying timber from Forest Service forests to the wood processing industry, offers the opportunity for increased carbon storage in wood products produced from sustainably managed forests.

In 2023/2024 Forest Service will contribute to the development and implementation of the Northern Ireland Climate Action Plan under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022. The Climate Action Plan will set out policies and proposals to achieve the carbon budget in the period 2023 to 2027. In this business year the policy areas for Forest Service contribution to

emissions mitigation are Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF), peatlands restoration and increased afforestation. Building on work carried out in 2022/2023 Forest Service has set a Key Target and two Supplementary Measures for 2023/2024 to commence restoration of gateway peatland restoration sites, and to develop plans and capacity for further peatland restoration.



Sustainability

Forest Service will contribute to requirement of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, through implementing forestry strategies and sustainable forestry management programmes that support climate change mitigation. The Forestry Strategy for Sustainability & Growth 2009, will require to be reviewed to ensure that future forestry activity aligns positively with climate mitigation policies.

Forest Service will continue to manage its forests in 2023/2024, in compliance with the UK Forestry Standard. In this business year the Agency has set a Key Target to retain independent certification, that its forestry management complies with the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). Forest Service reviews and updates its forestry plans in line with forestry standards

and best practice guidelines. These form the basis of its operational delivery programmes which ensure that forests contribute to NI's natural environment and the enhancement of its biodiversity.

In this business year, Forest Service will continue to regulate tree felling in compliance with the statutory obligations as set out in the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010. Through the issuing of felling licences the Agency will protect woodlands and regulate forestry operations in line with applicable forestry and environmental standards. By implementing the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (as amended), the Agency will ensure that afforestation and woodland removal projects, are considered and assessed in respect to wider environmental impacts.



Maintaining N Ireland's High Plant Status

Forest Service delivers plant health Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Official Controls on behalf of DAERA. In 2023/2024 the Agency will review and update NI plant health legislative arrangements and Standard Operating Procedures and implement Official Controls in compliance with the Windsor Framework, UK and EU regulatory requirements. Through horizon scanning and a programme of surveillance and monitoring, threats to NI's plant health status and potential impacts for the environment and agri-food sector will be risk assessed and managed.



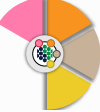

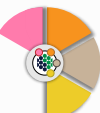



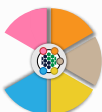

Forest Based Economic Stimulus

In 2023/2024 Forest Service's sustainably managed forests will continue to provide economic and associated societal benefits to rural communities. Setting a Key Target to provide 400,000 cubic metres of timber to the local wood processing industry, creates employment in rural areas and generates £60M-£80M for the local economy from value added products.

The forest estate continues to expand recreational and tourism provision which now accommodates over 9M visits per year. In recent years, working in partnership with service providers including local government, has generated opportunities for creating new and developing existing recreational services. These services provide a safe outdoor environment for more people to enjoy, avail of associated health & well-being benefits and support rural tourism.



Targets/Measure	Link to DAERA Core Priorities	What we are going to do
Key Target 1		Deliver the 2023/24 Forests for Our Future programme to plant 600 hectares of new woodland, by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Support at least 400 hectares of new woodland through grant aid by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Issue Forestry Grant Scheme offers to at least 95% of applications deemed to meet Forestry Standards and scheme requirements by 1 December 2023.
Key Target 2		Develop a revised funding scheme to support delivery of the Forests for Our Future programme by 31 March 2024.
Key Target 3		Implement afforested peatland restoration operational plans for 3 gateway sites by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Establish procurement and delivery arrangements to develop and build capacity in peatland conservation, restoration and management by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Review forest management plans for all forest areas on deep peat, where growth rates are below the threshold to deliver a positive carbon balance by 31 March 2024.
Key Target 4		Provide at least 400,000 cubic metres of timber from sustainably managed forests to customers by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Provide at least 40,000 cubic metres of timber from thinning from well-managed forests.
Key Target 5		Hold independent certification that the management of Forest Service forests meets sustainable Forestry Standards by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Implement corrective action on findings from the 2023 certification audits, to ensure that Forest Service forests continue to be sustainably managed by 31 March 2024.

Supplementary Measure		Secure 1,200 hectares of previously unregistered land on GIS and submit a further 700 hectares for first registration process by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Extend forest recreational facilities at 3 sites, with recreation partners in support of tourism and health and wellbeing benefits by 31 March 2024.
Key Target 6		Achieve an income of at least £12M from all sources by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Achieve an income of at least £10M from timber sales by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Develop a Forest Service Investment Plan for the effective utilisation of Agency Reserves by 31 March 2024.
Key Target 7		Establish current priority and future training needs of the Agency, in a Forest Service Corporate Training Plan by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Extend existing Forest Service Training plan beyond 30 September 2023.
Supplementary Measure		Achieve a Forest Service Employee Engagement Index of 65% by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Complete a feasibility study for the development of a forestry apprenticeship scheme for NI by 31 March 2024.
Key Target 8		Review and amend domestic plant health legislation to ensure compliance with the Windsor Framework, UK and EU regulatory requirements, by 31 March 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Establish a risk register to quantify the risks associated with high priority hazardous pests and pathogens moving in trade from outside NI by 31 January 2024.
Supplementary Measure		Design pest specific control plans for the highest priority hazardous pests associated with trade moving to NI.

Organisation and Resources



Forest Service continues to operate as a subsidised Executive Agency of DAERA. Classified administratively as Non-Financial Public Corporation due to its income generating capabilities, the Agency is enabled to build cash reserves which provides for ongoing programme delivery and mitigates market shocks. As at 1 April 2023 the Agency holds cash reserves of £18.5M that underpin forward planning to deliver business priorities and investment opportunities in line with the Forest Service Corporate Plan.

Timber production and sales continue to underpin the Agency's ability to generate income and in 2023/2024 the Agency has set a Key Target to achieve income of £12M from all sources, with a Supporting Measure to achieve at least £10M from timber sales. Forest Service expect to generate a further £2M income from recreational and other services provided by the estate. The Forest Service subsidy from DAERA's budget allocation for 2023/2024 has been provided for

by the Secretary of State for NI as a consequence of the wider 'Budget for Northern Ireland' via a Written Ministerial Statement of 27 April 2023. This budget will be brought into legislation by the Northern Ireland Budget Bill in 2023.

The Forest Service dedicated industrial and non-industrial workforce continues to be at the heart of priority programme delivery. In 2023/2024 Forest Service has set Key Targets aimed at enhancing skills and capability to meet new emerging work priorities.



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Staff are also based at other DAERA Direct offices.
Should accessible formats such as large type, audio cassette or a language other than English be required, please contact Forest Service Headquarters and appropriate arrangements will be made as soon as possible.

