

South West Forest Services

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Area Director

Mark Prior

Date 17 June 2019

Your Ref: TR010056-000002

Marnie Woods
Major Casework
Temple Quay House
2 The Square
Bristol
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By Email Only

Dear Ms Woods,

Planning Act 2008 (as amended) and The Infrastructure Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (the EIA Regulations) – Regulations 10 and 11

Application by Highways England (the Applicant) for an Order granting Development Consent for the A417 Missing Link (the Proposed Development)

Scoping consultation and notification of the Applicant's contact details and duty to make available information to the Applicant if requested

Location: A417 Gloucestershire

Thank you for seeking our advice on the Scoping Consultation for the application above.

The Forestry Commission is the Government's expert on forestry & woodland and a statutory consultee for major infrastructure (Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects) that are likely to affect the protection or expansion of forests and woodlands.

The Forestry Commission's responsibility is to discharge its consultee role as efficiently, effectively and professionally as possible, based on the forestry principles set out in the UK Forestry Standard (4th edition published 2017).

The Forestry Commission has prepared [joint standing advice](#) with Natural England on ancient woodland and veteran trees to which we refer you since this application affects presumed ancient woodland, which is an irreplaceable habitat. While this standing advice doesn't directly apply to NSIPs it is still very relevant to how ancient woodlands can be properly catered for within any development.

As highlighted in the *Irreplaceable habitats including ancient woodland and veteran trees* section of the **National Policy Statement National Networks (NPSNN)**: Paragraph 5.32

“Ancient woodland is a valuable biodiversity resource both for its diversity of species and for its longevity as woodland. Once lost it cannot be recreated. The Secretary of State should not grant development consent for any development that would result in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats including ancient woodland and the loss of aged or veteran trees found outside ancient woodland, unless the national need for and benefits of the development, in that location, clearly outweigh the loss. Aged or veteran trees found outside ancient woodland are also particularly valuable for biodiversity and their loss should be avoided. Where such trees would be affected by development proposals, the applicant should set out proposals for their conservation or, where their loss is unavoidable, the reasons for this.”

The UK Forestry Standard (p15) states that “The UK is committed to maintaining or increasing its forest area, and to enhancing the social, environmental and economic values of forest resources. It is particularly important to retain, extend and enhance ASNW because of its unique qualities, but maintaining all woodland area is central to the Forest Europe criteria; it helps assure the many benefits provided by forests, and is critical in the context of world deforestation and climate change.”

I note that there is a proposal to remove an area of presumed ancient semi-natural woodland which is too small to be on the register but which will be treated as ancient woodland. Our advice would be that no presumed ancient woodland should be removed. It is important that there is no net deforestation so any loss of woodland should be compensated for. Ideally schemes will lead to an increase in woodland cover.

The **25 Year Environment Plan** (2018) states the government’s intention of “Increasing woodland in England in line with our aspiration of 12% cover by 2060: this would involve planting 180,000 hectares by end of 2042”. It also states that “New development will happen in the right places, delivering maximum economic benefit while taking into account the need to avoid environmental damage. We will protect ancient woodlands and grasslands, high flood risk areas and our best agricultural land”.

I note the reference to the opportunities to create new broadleaved woodland habitat, which we welcome. We look forward to finding out more about the extent and nature of the new habitat proposed. We will be very happy to discuss these proposals with the developer. We welcome any opportunities to link woodlands together by creating more woodland or hedgerows, which will benefit biodiversity.

The **EIA Regulations** require the identification of the ‘likely significant effects of the proposed development on the environment’ (Schedule 4, Part 1, Para 20). We note in the Scoping Consultation Report that measures have been identified to mitigate potential environmental impacts and will be further refined as the scheme design is finalised.

Although there are no large woodlands on the proposed route, there are several existing felling licences and woodland grant agreements in the vicinity of the proposed scheme. It will be important to ensure that the new scheme design does not make it difficult to access and manage any existing woodlands, or to make the recreational use of woodland less enjoyable. Ideally it will enhance opportunities to access, carry out work and extract timber from sustainably managed woodlands.

This response highlights matters which should be resolved as part of the pre-application process. We believe that these issues should be addressed by Highways England and the Examining Authority as part of the Environmental Statement.

- Ancient woodlands and veteran trees must be included in all future habitat and species surveys in relation to this scheme and the size and nature of the impact quantified.
- All woodland is a priority habitat and so we would request that all woodland should be included in surveys and the impact on all woodland habitats should be quantified. We would encourage this to take into account likely impacts related to tree health issues, especially ash dieback, since this will affect future woodland and tree cover in the area.

- We would also encourage an assessment of hedgerows and in-field trees affected by the scheme.
- All European Protected Species should be included in surveys and impacts on populations assessed, as well as the impacts on designated sites in the vicinity.
- Impacts on watercourses should be assessed to consider whether this will affect ancient woodland flora downstream.
- We draw attention to the fact that where significant harm to biodiversity cannot be avoided or mitigated, as a last resort, appropriate compensation measures should be sought.
- We would welcome mitigation works that result in an increase in woodland, hedgerow and field tree cover in this area, without impacting on other valuable habitats, especially where this improves natural flood management or water quality.
- We would encourage you to ensure that productive forestry is also considered and that access to any woodlands affected is maintained or improved to ensure that they can be managed efficiently and sustainably after the development takes place.

For the loss of any woodland, the Forestry Commission would ask:

1. To explore with you how this loss could be further reduced.
2. How best to target the creation of new woodland to compensate for the loss of trees and woodlands.

We look forward to hearing from you at the next consultation stage for these proposals. Please send all documents to southwest.fce@forestrycommission.gov.uk. For specific enquiries, you can email me at kate.tobin@forestrycommission.gov.uk or ring me directly on 0300 067 5870, or write to us at the above address.

Yours sincerely,

Kate Tobin
Local Partnership Adviser