



National Infrastructure Planning
Temple Quay House
2 The Square
Bristol
BS1 6PN

22nd August 2023

Dear Jo Dowling,

Reference: London Luton Airport Expansion

As the UK's leading woodland conservation charity, the Woodland Trust aims to protect native woods, trees and their wildlife for the future. We own over 1,000 sites across the UK, covering over 30,000 hectares and we have over 500,000 members and supporters. We are an evidence-led organisation, using existing policy and our conservation and planning expertise to assess the impacts of development on ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees. Planning responses submitted by the Trust are based on a review of the information provided as part of the application to the Planning Inspectorate.

Impact to ancient woods and trees

The Trust **strongly objects** to the proposed scheme on the basis of direct impact and likely loss of T343, an ancient ash tree set to be translocated for the project [reference: AS-085], plus potential detrimental impacts to surrounding ancient woodlands from increased nitrogen deposition.

Ancient Trees

Natural England's standing advice on ancient trees states that they "*can be individual trees or groups of trees within wood pastures, historic parkland, hedgerows, orchards, parks or other areas. They are often found outside ancient woodlands. They are also irreplaceable habitats. An ancient tree is exceptionally valuable. Attributes can include its: great age, size, condition, biodiversity value as a result of significant wood decay and the habitat created from the ageing process; cultural and heritage value.*"

Ancient Woodland

Natural England and the Forestry Commission, the Government's respective bodies for the natural environment and protecting, expanding and promoting the sustainable management of woodlands, define ancient woodland as follows within their standing advice¹:

"Ancient woodland takes hundreds of years to establish and is defined as an irreplaceable habitat. It is a valuable natural asset important for: wildlife (which include rare and threatened species); soils; carbon capture and storage; contributing to the seed bank and genetic diversity; recreation, health and wellbeing; cultural, historical and landscape value. It has been wooded continuously since at least 1600AD. It includes:

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-ancient-trees-and-veteran-trees-advice-for-making-planning-decisions>

- *Ancient semi-natural woodland [ASNW] mainly made up of trees and shrubs native to the site, usually arising from natural regeneration.*
- *Plantations on ancient woodland sites – [PAWS] replanted with conifer or broadleaved trees that retain ancient woodland features, such as undisturbed soil, ground flora and fungi”*

Both ASNW and PAWS woodland are given equal protection in government’s National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) regardless of the woodland’s perceived condition, its size, or features it contains.

Planning Policy

The Airports National Policy Statement, Paragraph 5.103 states: *“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 **National Planning Policy Framework**, paragraph 180, states: *“When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should apply the following principles:*

c) development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons⁶³ and a suitable compensation strategy exists;”

Further to this, paragraph 174 of the NPPF states the following: *“Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by: minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures”*. Where an application involves the loss of irreplaceable habitats, such as ancient trees, net gain for biodiversity cannot be achieved.

Reducing Carbon Emissions

A number of important developments in UK climate change policy have occurred in recent times. The recently adopted target of net zero carbon by 2050 represents a major policy challenge of which transport emissions is a central component. The UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) reports that *“aviation emissions accounted for 7% of UK GHG emissions in 2019 and were 88% above 1990 levels”²*.

The Woodland Trust's own State of Woods and Trees report³ recognises the impact that climate change will have on ancient woodlands and recommends the following with respect to tackling the impacts of climate change on woodland: *“... tackle climate change by*

² [REDACTED]

³ [REDACTED]

radically reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions from all sectors and ensuring forests and peatlands can play their part in locking up and storing carbon for the long term".

Any decision regarding the London Luton Airport Expansion scheme must be consistent with the UK's international commitments regarding carbon emissions. The court decision concerning plans for a third runway at Heathrow highlighted the need for consistency in the Government's legal objectives regarding emissions cuts and major infrastructure development proposals which are predicated on increasing transport movements. While the court decision was overturned, the Government must lead the way in cutting emissions if the UK is to remain credible at climate negotiations.

We also question the creation of substantial additional car parking facilities at London Luton Airport as part of the proposals, as this will further encourage and facilitate the use of vehicles to travel to the airport yet furthering the climate contributions of this scheme.

Impact to Ancient Trees

It is essential that no ancient trees are lost as part of the development. The loss of any such trees can have a significant impact on local wildlife, particularly those which depend on the habitat provided by ancient and veteran trees. Any loss of ancient trees can also be highly deleterious where there is a wider population of ancient/veteran trees within close proximity, which may harbour rare and important species.

Trees are susceptible to change caused by construction/development activity. As outlined in 'BS5837:2012 - Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction' (the British Standard for ensuring development works in harmony with trees), construction work often exerts pressures on existing trees, as do changes in their immediate environment following construction of any new infrastructure. Root systems, stems and canopies, all need allowance for future movement and growth, and should be taken into account in all proposed works on the scheme through the incorporation of the measures outlined in the British Standard.

While BS5837 guidelines state that trees should have a root protection area (RPA) of 12 times the stem diameter (capped at 15m), this guidance does recognise that ancient and veteran trees need particular care to ensure adequate space is allowed for their long-term retention. It is imperative that Natural England and Forestry Commission's standing advice on root protection areas for ancient trees is taken into account in planning decisions. This advice states: "*For ancient or veteran trees (including those on the woodland boundary), the **buffer zone should be at least 15 times larger than the diameter of the tree. The buffer zone should be 5 metres from the edge of the tree's canopy if that area is larger than 15 times the tree's diameter. This will create a minimum root protection area. Where assessment shows other impacts are likely to extend beyond this distance, the proposal is likely to need a larger buffer zone.***"

Impacts to Ancient Woodland

Furthermore, the Trust holds concerns regarding potential nitrogen deposition on the ancient woodlands surrounding the proposed development. Chapter 7 (Air Quality) of the Environmental Statement [AS-076] outlines a likely increase towards the critical load of Winch Hill Wood (4% of Lower critical load) [7.9.16] and Kidney/Bulls Wood (18.7% of lower critical load) [7.9.28].

We are of the opinion that development must be able to demonstrate that any resulting increase in the levels of nitrogen will be insignificant (<1% of the critical load) at all ancient woodland sites. The scheme may need to be amended to include further control measures or other proposals in order to attempt to reduce the process contribution to <1%.

Conclusion

Ancient trees are irreplaceable habitats, once lost they are gone forever. Any development resulting in loss or deterioration of ancient woods and trees must consider all possible measures to ensure avoidance of adverse impact.

Yours sincerely,

Nicole Moses
Campaigner – Woods Under Threat
Woods Under Threat Team