

A Study of Current and Future Skills in the Forestry Sector in England and Wales

Forestry Skills Study 2017 Executive Summary

Introduction

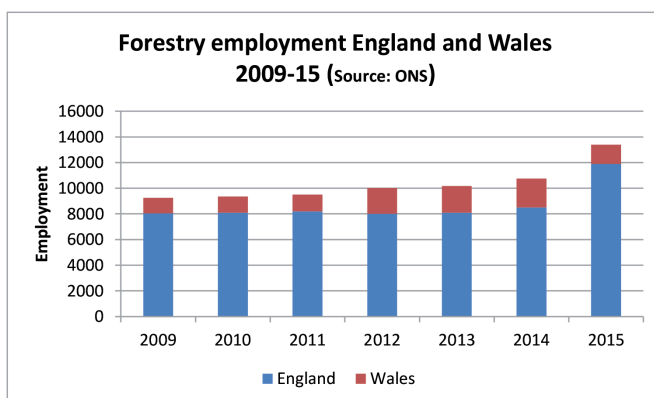
A key priority for the forestry sector, supported by Government policy, is to achieve continued growth through planting more trees and increasing the active management of existing woodlands. This will require a workforce that is skilled and responsive to future opportunities and demands, including those arising from the UK's departure from the European Union. To address this need the Study was commissioned by the Royal Forestry Society with the support of Woodland Heritage, Forestry Commission England, University of Cumbria and the Scottish Forestry Trust, on behalf of the Forestry Skills Forum in order to provide a baseline of data, seek views of employers and stakeholders, and to set out recommendations for adoption in a forthcoming Action Plan.

Forestry in England and Wales

There are over 1.6 million hectares of woodland in England and Wales, supplying feedstock for a forest products industry which employs nearly 16,000 people in timber processing and a further 100,000 in value adding activities. Recent investment in timber processing facilities means the UK now has a world class forest products sector. Despite this, the UK imports the majority of its timber products, valued at £7.5 billion in 2016. Forests also provide a wide range of eco-system benefits such as carbon sequestration, flood attenuation and bio-diversity. Forests are enjoyed by people as places for recreation and tourism, benefit public health and well-being, and improve the landscape of our countryside and towns alike. With demand for increased tree planting and woodland management, plus the need to produce more timber, the forestry sector needs more, highly skilled people in all areas.



Profile of the industry



The forestry sector is characterised by a large number of small companies, which makes collecting definitive statistics a challenging process. However, by comparing a variety of sources, it can be said that:-

- Approximately 13,000 people are employed in the forestry sector in England and Wales.
- This represents a significant increase since 2010 when the total was about 10,000, probably accounted for by improved timber prices which has led to increased harvesting and forest management
- Employers report an ageing workforce although there is insufficient data to support this view. Anecdotally, there is evidence that the sector lost a large proportion of its workforce during a period of low timber prices from the 1990s through the 2000s, leading to a shortage of 'mid-career' people, with consequences for passing on skills and business succession.
- Forestry is overwhelmingly a male-dominated industry, with less than 25% of the workforce being female. In the contracting sector over 90% of employees are male. Similarly, there is very little ethnic diversity, with 95% of the workforce being of UK British origin.
- Approximately 25% of staff are employed in professional, technical, managerial or administrative roles, 45% in skilled occupations and the remainder in elementary occupations. 50% are qualified to NQF Level 3 or above and 50% to NQF Level 2 or below.
- Employers are more confident about the availability and suitability of staff than they were previously. This is in part due to the skills funding and other initiatives which have enabled contractors to upskill in recent years. There is also some evidence to indicate that employers are recruiting from a wider field, which has skills training implications as recruits have fewer core forestry skills.
- Geography, and the nature of forestry practiced, was a significant factor in how employers responded. Those engaged primarily in timber harvesting expressed the greatest concerns regarding skills whilst employers where a more mixed land management remit was common were more able and willing to recruit staff who had an appreciation of other land uses e.g. farming, country sports etc.
- Machine operation is an area which continues to experience shortages, both in terms of availability and the skill levels of existing operators. Employers need operators who are more technically able and able to work in more demanding situations e.g. smaller woodlands with variable crops, thinning etc.
- Chainsaw operators, in particular those able to fell larger hardwoods, and planters are also noted as being in short supply, with a large number of employers stating that if planting targets are to be met, investment in training is required.
- Many employers expressed a concern that graduate recruits lack technical skills which they need, such as mensuration, soils and GIS. Others are concerned about the lack of business and managerial ('soft') skills amongst new recruits.



Current training provision

- Higher Education (HE) provision of forestry courses has declined in recent years as a result of a lack of demand from students, although there is evidence of an increase in 2017/18. There are currently 5 HE Institutions offering degree level courses with forestry content at Undergraduate level in England and Wales and 2 at Postgraduate level.

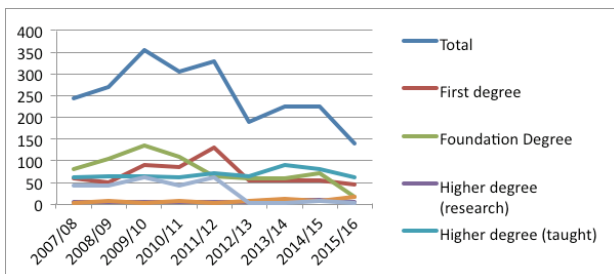


Figure 1: Higher Education Forestry & Arboriculture Students by Type of Degree and Academic Year (England & Wales)

- There is a wide range of Further Education (FE) provision across England and Wales, with 19 colleges offering forestry in some form.
- The Level 2 Trailblazer Apprenticeship is now available for Forest Operatives, and industry is being consulted on the demand for a higher level apprenticeship, which could address the need for supervisor level entrants. As in many industries characterised by micro and small companies, the forestry sector faces challenges in taking advantage of formal apprenticeships. Few employers understand the process or feel they have the required time.



Appropriateness of provision and current and future needs

- A recurring theme amongst employers is for HE graduates with more 'work ready' skills. Creating stronger links between employers and HE institutions could be one way of achieving this, whilst at the same time ensuring that courses are 'future proofed'.
- FE provision is a matter of concern for many, with a widespread call for students who are more competent at the technical tasks required of them.
- Informal training, networking and CPD-type courses are all valued by employers as means to improve skills amongst their staff and to adapt to new demands and opportunities.
- The absence of funding for skills training in England has caused a reduction in numbers able to undertake training and some employers expressed fears that this may lead to a reversal in recent improvements.



Routes to employment and career progression

- Forestry still faces a challenge in being an attractive career proposition for school leavers and others. Few school pupils are made aware of forestry as a profession and those entering the sector find out about it through other sources.

- A lack of a clear career path or opportunities for new entrants from FE courses led to many entering arboriculture rather than forestry.
- New entrants at graduate level valued opportunities for practical experience alongside their academic studies. They were optimistic about their careers and wanted to remain in forestry. Students were similarly committed to the sector with a sense of forestry being a positive career choice.

Recommendations

Issue/Opportunity	Action
1. Attractiveness of the forestry sector to school leavers as a careers option	Continue to promote forestry as a career through existing mechanisms, in addition identify more young new entrants who are willing to act as 'ambassadors' for the sector and provide them with the means (e.g. social media channels, access to schools, careers fairs etc) to promote forestry as a career. Explore opportunities to introduce forestry into the National Curriculum (through e.g. Geography and Biology) in order to make pupils aware of forestry as an industry at an earlier age. Work with other land based sectors to achieve impact on educational and skills agendas within government.
2. Encourage more female school pupils to consider forestry as a career option	Focus on identifying young female new entrants to undertake activities as above and identify particular avenues for promotion to female school pupils.
3. Improve college provision at Further Education level	Identify FE colleges with good quality provision and seek to improve industry liaison. Consider setting up a network of 'centres of excellence' in FE provision with appropriate levels of geographic coverage and focus on these.
4. Improve liaison at Higher Education level	Ensure each HE provider with forestry provision has access to an industry liaison group either at a local or national level which can (i) advise on curriculum and syllabus development (ii) provide opportunities for field trips and practical exercises that reinforce academic learning (iii) identifies where 'guest lecturers' may be available to provide skills and knowledge on particular areas (iv) identify potential for industrial placements, sandwich years and holiday work which provides practical experience
5. Increase awareness of Trailblazer Apprenticeships and extend higher provision	Promote Apprenticeships to companies and organisations throughout the forestry sector, using examples of existing apprentices and the benefits that have accrued to their employers.
6. Investigate ways in which small and micro businesses can take on apprentices	Investigate group schemes such as that provided by the FC and some national park authorities whereby an employing organisation takes on responsibilities around trainee wellbeing, health & safety, mentoring etc whilst providing work experience in smaller companies.
7. Improve and extend Machine Operator Training provision	Support Machine Operator training both as a standalone provision and through apprenticeships and other FE courses. Extend provision to more marginal types of forests e.g. scale, thinning operations, mixed species etc.
8. Investigate scope to develop 'Forest Technician' grade	Investigate need for and viability of a 'Forest Technician' grade, initially on an informal basis but with a view to formalising this through appropriate structures e.g. higher grade apprenticeships.
9. Improve technical skills of new entrants and mid-career forest managers	Investigate further the range of technical skills required by employers of new entrants and mid-career forest managers and create CPD programme to fulfil needs.
10. Investigate means to increase numbers of skilled planting contractors	Consider means of training workers in areas where significantly increased tree planting may occur (e.g. uplands post Brexit) in basic tree planting and establishment skills, the creation of a register or list so that contractors can recruit according to seasonal need.
11. Consider ways in which to involve experienced operatives in training provision	Investigate ways in which experienced operatives could be trained up as trainers and provide or support provision of training in practical skills.
12. Consider ways to develop informal professional development within and between organisations and companies	Development of professional development networks, create discussion groups and other informal learning opportunities, ensuring a mixture of experience, ages, work types etc.
13. Improve understanding of the educational system amongst employers	Provide summary information on up to date educational qualifications, courses etc. to employers with 'real life' examples of what to expect from new entrants with these qualifications and 'demystify the jargon'.
14. Retain and improve funding for generic and vocational skills in 'post-Brexit' rural funding	Work with other rural land management sectors to press government for holistic package of support for generic and vocational skills in replacement for Common Agricultural Policy funding.

For further information about this report go to www.rfs.org.uk/news/hot-topics/future-of-forestry-skills-study or email education@rfs.org.uk