

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Government consultation response to the intended abolition of the Home Grown Timber Advisory Committee (HGTAC)

October 2014

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Introduction

We invited comments from interested stakeholders on Government proposals for the abolition of the Home Grown Timber Advisory Committee (HGTAC). We also placed the consultation documents on the 'gov.uk' website.

The HGTAC was the advisory panel/committee appointed by the Forestry Commissioners to advise them on their regulatory functions and duty to promote the establishment and maintenance of adequate reserves of growing trees across Great Britain. The Committee ceased operations in 2005 and no longer functions because it was decided (by the Commissioners and the final members themselves) that as forestry operates on a devolved basis, it would be more appropriate for advice to be received at national level. The HGTAC's former functions are therefore now discharged through separate arrangements in each Administration but the legislation which established it is still in place.

Shortly after the 2010 election, the Government announced that it would review its arm's-length bodies in order to reduce the numbers and costs of these bodies and improve accountability. An announcement about the future of Defra's arm's-length bodies, including HGTAC, was made in October 2010. The Government announced its intention to abolish this defunct Committee as part of its public body reform programme. However, its abolition was postponed pending the outcome of the work of the Independent Panel on Forestry which would look afresh at forestry policy overall in England. Following the Panel's report, the Government developed its new Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement for England, (published in January 2013). Nothing in that new policy statement requires retention of the HGTAC and in discussion with the Forestry Commission and Scottish Government, it was agreed that we should proceed with these proposals.

The Government has now proposed to use the powers in the Public Bodies Act 2011(PBA) to make an Order to repeal parts of sections 32, 37, 38 and Schedule 1 of the 1967 Forestry Act that relate to HGTAC, which will legally dissolve it.

The PBA requires that Ministers consult on their proposals before laying a draft of the Order before Parliament for its approval. All responses have been given due consideration and the relevant sections of the 1967 Act will now be repealed.

The consultation period lasted from 14 April to 30 May.

Conducting the consultation exercise

As well as publishing the consultation documents on 'gov.uk', we emailed directly all of our key stakeholders that have attended the Forestry Stakeholders' Forum; these stakeholders represent a range of relevant forestry interests. Given the relative simplicity of the consultation issues, we did not consider it necessary to hold specific meetings with stakeholders.

In response to the consultation, we received five responses. Three of the respondents agreed with the intended abolition, while two offered objections or raised wider issues. The responses came from the following sectors: three organisations from the forestry/woodlands sector; one from a conservation-oriented Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO); and one from an organisation that chose 'N/A' when asked 'What is your organisation?'

Key findings and future actions

We found that three respondents out of five supported the abolition of the HGTAC. With regard to the comments made by the remaining two respondents:

- We do not consider that it was a function of the HGTAC to act as a “public face for British timber” as suggested by one objector and this suggestion did not dissuade us from the case for its abolition;
- Having considered the issues raised about the role of the HGTAC and the arrangements subsequently put in place following devolution of forestry, including those that serve in place of the former HGTAC in each Administration, we remain of the view that there is no need to retain this body.

We will now proceed with its abolition which we expect to come into effect in Spring 2015.

Summary of responses and government responses to these

Three of the respondents agreed with the intended abolition and did not raise any objections to this.

One objection came from an independent timber merchant, who wanted to see a 'public face of British timber' and thought that the HGTAC might provide this. The functions of the former HGTAC however remain prescribed in the relevant legislation and these were specifically to advise the Forestry Commissioners with regard to their duties and the exercise of their regulatory powers. The forestry sector provides its own 'public face', most recently for example through the sector-led "Grown in Britain" initiative.

The second objection came from a conservation-oriented NGO. Its objections centred around ensuring that there is adequate oversight of the Commissioners' duty to achieve a "reasonable balance" between its forestry and conservation objectives. The NGO queried what abolition of the HGTAC would mean for ensuring 'sustainable forestry' and implied that the devolved arrangements that have superseded the defunct HGTAC might not be sufficient.

The NGO also offered wider comments on how forestry management and policy might be better implemented and suggested that sustainable forestry "needs oversight, scrutiny and advice at UK, GB and country levels for environmental content, credibility and rigour".

Whilst these additional views were of interest, they went wider than the immediate question of the HGTAC and its specific statutory remit. We have responded directly to the NGO on these and remain of the view that there is no genuine need to retain the HGTAC.

It is our view that with the support of the current devolved advisory arrangements, it is for the Forestry Commissioners to determine how they should be delivering their balancing duty in providing sustainable forestry, and that it is ultimately for the relevant Ministers in England and Scotland to intervene should the Commissioners be failing in their statutory remit.

Annex

List of consultees who responded:

Confor

UK Forest Products Association

Westover Woodlands

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

Matt Edwards (no organisation listed)

Responses from the consultees above can be viewed at:

<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/landscape-outdoor-recreation-and-forestry/intended-abolition-of-the-hgtac>



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