The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
From the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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Neil Parish MP
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Dear Neil,

Thank you for your letter of October 17 and please accept my sincere apologies for not replying before.

I recognise your concerns and I am determined to take action to drive up planting rates. The Countryside Stewardship scheme has not been attractive to landowners and in response, we are already making changes to the Woodland Creation Grant for 2018, which will open for applications on 2 January.

As Thérèse Coffey said in her letter of 23 October, we have improved application forms and released guidance three months earlier than in the previous year; are funding additional options that applicants had asked for; and have introduced a woodland creation campaign which aims to persuade more landowners to plant woodland. For 2019, I therefore expect landowners to apply in greater numbers – I have asked my department to monitor the level of applications as they come in and identify more ways to drive up those numbers.

Looking at Countryside Stewardship more generally, the process for applying for multi-year agreements has been simplified and I continue to push this further. Some of our actions remain limited by our continued membership of the EU and the CAP, and we look forward to the opportunities that the UK’s departure from the EU will open. To address the concerns now, however, I have discussed with the Chairman, Chief Executive and Board of Natural England the need for radical reform to improve efficiency and increase uptake of the scheme. I hope to update you on the progress when we next meet.

With respect to why we haven’t taken forward the “one stop shop” approach to Countryside Stewardship which applied to earlier woodland creation schemes, I am told that the existing arrangements are deeply integrated into the delivery mechanisms of Natural England, the Rural Payment Agency, and the Forestry Commission. I am keen to interrogate this further and consider how such an approach could operate in future. The Forestry Commission is already piloting a one stop shop approach to the delivery of the Woodland Creation Planning Grant and Woodland Carbon Fund. I intend to use what we learn from both these one stop shop approaches and Countryside Stewardship to inform
any grant schemes introduced by the Government after the UK leaves the European Union.

The Woodland Carbon Fund, designed by the Forestry Commission to promote forestry growth, has a budget of 19 million pounds but I am deeply concerned that no one has yet drawn down those funds. We have therefore ordered significant changes to the Fund to help increase applications, including lowering the planting threshold to 10 hectares, providing funding for forest roads, and enabling a second stage payment for successful woodland establishment available at 5 years after planting at a rate of £1000 per hectare. My officials will examine whether there is scope for further refinement, in particular to enable us to give money rapidly to increase planting rates without bureaucracy.

I am committed to delivering our manifesto commitment to see 11 million more trees planted in this parliament as well as 1 million urban trees. As you will know, I have been fighting the destruction of urban trees in Sheffield and arguing for a principle of net environmental gain (and not just no net loss) to be applied to all planning decisions and infrastructure projects.

We have a commitment to stop irresponsible tree cutting by errant local authorities. My Department is working to identify a suitable vehicle for this.

The Government remains committed to providing stronger protection for our ancient woodlands. We will communicate how we propose to do this as part of the Government’s response to the consultation on the Housing White Paper, ‘Fixing our broken housing market’.

I want to scrutinise the regulatory and bureaucratic burdens that impeded rapid additional planting and make improvements to the administration of schemes that support it.

I am also reviewing all the incentives, grants and other tools we have to encourage more tree planting, with a view to simplifying how we make progress and driving forward greater growth. I am keen to think imaginatively about how new environmental payments to farmers for public goods can secure much more woodland creation.

I hope to write back to you early in the New Year with progress on all these fronts. I will keep you and the committee updated.

With every good wish,

Michael Gove