Dear Neil,

I am writing to update you and the committee on afforestation following my appearance before the committee in the last session.

We have been working with farmers to make it easier and simpler to apply for Countryside Stewardship (CS). We are continuing to look for ways to improve the scheme as far as possible within the current EU framework.

As for the delivery of CS, Defra’s Head of the Operational Delivery Profession has now joined Natural England and conducted an operability review. As a result, a new Defra group CS transactions hub will be created, working with Defra, Natural England (NE), the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) and the Forestry Commission (FC). A Programme Plan is being developed as part of this review. This will cover operational structures, organisational culture, operational systems and processes and IT. The Programme Plan will also make sure that previous commitments on delivery improvement will be met.

In the meantime, short term improvements to processing include focusing processing efforts, reducing duplication and unnecessary checks, and increasing resource.

Since the committee reported, changes have been made to the CS Woodland Creation Grant. These include improved application forms and release of guidance three months earlier than in the previous year, funding for additional options that applicants had asked for, and the introduction of a woodland creation campaign which aims to persuade more landowners to plant woodland. The FC are also promoting woodland creation through a new large-scale woodland creation unit, which will provide a single point of contact for advice on large-scale woodland creation that may be supported by either CS or the Woodland Carbon Fund, which has also been improved in line with applicants’ feedback.

The FC have continued working closely with stakeholders to improve guidance, mapping information, and provide support to landowners to ensure the smooth passage of applications that meet the UK Forestry Standard.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Therese Coffey MP