Working Towards Ireland's Shared Vision for Forestry and a New Forest Strategy

Report of the Foróige Youth Dialogue

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Introduction

In October 2021, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) approached Foróige with a proposal to host a youth dialogue as part of the consultation process for the development of a Shared National Vision for Forestry and the new National Forest Strategy. The purpose of the youth dialogue was to consult young people on what they believe should be Ireland's vision for forests over the next decade, through to 2050 and beyond.

Methodology

It was agreed that the youth dialogue event would be organised online via Zoom in January 2022, with participants recruited from within Foróige's membership. The rationale for an online event was to maximise reach, allowing young people from across the country to participate easily. An online event would also ensure compliance with public health advice.

A one-page document, 'Working Toward a New Forest Strategy for Ireland: A Guide for Young People", was produced for circulation to participants in advance of the event, briefly outlining the development of the National Forest Strategy, the purpose of the youth dialogue, and how the feedback gathered would be recorded and used. The "Proposed Vision for Trees, Woods and Forests by 2050" was also appended to the document. A copy of the guide can be found in Appendix A. The document was disseminated to participants along with the link to a video: The many benefits of our forests, produced by Teagasc.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbpQX2-buGk&feature=youtu.be

The structure of the youth dialogue included a number of questions provided by DAFM to support interactivity and engagement of participants on the topic.

The questions covered were as follows (with follow-up prompt questions in italics):

1. **Do you like trees? What do you like or not like about them?**

2. **When was the last time you took part in an activity in a forest / woodland area? What would encourage you to do more activities in places like this?**
   Prompts: Do you have any favourite memories of walking in the countryside among trees and forests?

3. **Do you think trees are important for our society? If yes, why are they important?**
   Prompts: What are the most important things that forests do for us?

4. **If you think about forests in Ireland in the future: what does that vision look like?**
   Prompts: Should we plant more trees and forests, or less?
   If you were planting a forest today, what would it look like in 5 years? 20 years? 50 years?

The event took the following format:

- Opening of event by Sarah Haslam, Foróige Director of Training, Programmes & Research

- Welcome and introduction to the event by Minister Pippa Hackett

- A short input from Fergus Moore, Head of Forest Sector Development Division, providing background on forestry in Ireland and the development of the National Forest Strategy

- Opening circle and icebreaker: "If you were a tree/plant, what would you be?"

- Facilitated discussion of the consultation questions in smaller groups, using the break out rooms function

- Feedback from each group on the key points of their discussion

- A Mentimeter activity

- Information presented on the timeline, next steps in the consultation process, and how the information captured would be recorded and used

- Close of event

Participants were split into two smaller groups, to allow more in-depth discussion. Each small group was facilitated by two Foróige staff, one of whom had responsibility for taking notes of participants' feedback.

Alongside facilitated discussion, two interactive methodologies were used to enable young people to contribute their views through different modes, thus making the consultation process as accessible and easy to engage with as possible. These were *Padlet* (an online pinboard) and *Mentimeter* (a word cloud generator). Padlets were set up for each small group, as a supplement to conversation where participants could submit written comments, images, or GIFs. The Mentimeter activity was incorporated as a large-group activity to close the session - young people were asked to log on and submit one or more words to summarise how they were feeling about the future of Ireland's forests. Young people were also given the option of using the chat function on Zoom, as well as the emoji reactions on Zoom, to indicate their views.

Young people were given the opportunity to ask questions throughout the session, to ensure open dialogue and a participative approach. It was made clear, both in advance and during the event, that all feedback would be recorded anonymously, to ensure that young people felt fully able to contribute their views honestly through the course of their discussions.

The youth dialogue was scheduled for Tuesday, 25 January 2022, 18.30 to 20.00. Ten young people registered to attend, with seven logging on to the Zoom link; one participant was unable to take part due to a very poor internet connection.

Findings

This section presents a detailed analysis of the feedback gathered from the youth dialogue. It is divided into the four overarching questions above: how young people feel about trees and forests; their interactions with forests and woodland areas; their thoughts on the role of trees and forests in our society; and their vision of the future of trees and forests in Ireland.

Quotation marks (" ") are used to indicate direct quotes from young people. Recommendations arising from the participants' feedback are embedded throughout this section and summarised at the end of the document.

How young people feel about trees and forests

Young people unanimously reported very positive feelings about trees and forests, with strong emotional associations to feelings of serenity and enjoyment when thinking about trees and forests. When asked what they like about trees, they cited aesthetically pleasing qualities such as the changing colours of leaves over the seasons and the interaction between trees and wildlife such as eagles, beavers and deer. They also mentioned the uniqueness of trees and forests to different areas and locations, and how they are an integral part of the landscape in all settings - for instance, tree-lined avenues in cities, or views in their home environment. Thinking of trees evoked positive childhood memories as well as more recent ones, such as spending time with family and friends or walking the dog. Young people referred to trees as being "part of your family, childhood, and environment."

Another clear connection that was mentioned as a reason why young people like trees was their function as part of wider ecosystems, and the environmental benefits that trees confer: in particular, how trees capture carbon dioxide and improve air quality by producing oxygen.

In terms of drawbacks, the key point made was the length of time it takes for trees to grow and how young people can feel impatient for this process to take place more quickly. One young person also pointed out that, particularly in urban settings, trees can be a nuisance if they are not well maintained or pruned regularly to remove low hanging branches.

Being asked how they feel about trees was a surprise for some participants, and they reflected on the fact that we take trees for granted - that we do not often think about or even take notice of them day-to-day. However, young people felt that they would notice the absence of trees in both the urban and rural landscape, and would miss their presence.

Young people's interactions with forests and woodland areas

Young people were asked to consider their experiences of activities in forests and woodland areas, both recent and further in the past. These ranged from dog walking and family walks and trips, to spending time with their friends in forest areas, orienteering and hiking, and practising nature photography. Many of these memories were in areas close to home for participants - be it in more rural locations or local parks. While some experiences were not always wholly positive, especially where they involved getting lost or navigating rough terrain, they were nevertheless seen as a formative learning experience and ultimately enjoyable.

Young people associated these experiences with feelings of peace and fun, and several referred to woodland areas as a place of escape from the stresses of work, study, and isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. They also discussed the fact that every time you visit a forest it is a unique experience - you might try a different path or go off the beaten track and find new and unexpected things such as animal tracks.

When they were asked what would encourage them to engage more in activities in forests and woodland areas, many young people talked about the difficulty they have accessing these areas, even though some of them are from rural parts of the country. The lack of transport links is a barrier for young people, as they are reliant on the availability of public transport or a family member who can drive in order to get there. A further point was made in relation to physical accessibility for people with particular needs, such as disabilities. Some mentioned that they were not aware of any woodland areas close to where they live, and for others who did have better access, the lack of paths or forest management was an issue that, if addressed, would make the area more accessible and easier to engage with.

> **Recommendation 1:** *Barriers to accessing forests and woodland areas should be considered and mitigated, including but not limited to the lack of public transport links, the needs of people with particular accessibility needs, and the need for proper forest management.*

Another challenge that was discussed was how busy young people are - for many, especially those going through senior cycle, spending time in nature is not a priority compared to their school or college work. Thanks to social media and digital technologies, young people have become accustomed to instant gratification, and participants flagged this, along with a lack of understanding about the benefits of getting outdoors, as a block for their peers. They felt that the key to addressing this is supporting young people to feel ownership over trees and forests, through: more education on the benefits and importance of trees and forests; more opportunities for young people to spend time outdoors (possibly guided by a family member, teacher, or other adult); and a wider range of activities being readily available to link knowledge and education to practical actions (such as tree planting, nature trails, and forest schools).

> **Recommendation 2:** *A range of schemes, initiatives and activities should be developed to enable greater awareness and opportunities to engage with nature.*

The role of trees and forests in society

When asked to consider why trees are important in our society and the role that they play, young people were clear that the environmental functions that trees fulfil are foremost in their minds. They detailed the environmental benefits of trees and forests, including: forests as the "lungs of our planet", cleaning the air, producing oxygen and capturing carbon; releasing nutrients into the soil and producing natural fertiliser; acting as a natural barrier and reducing soil erosion; and providing habitats to increase biodiversity of both plants and wildlife and support the wider ecosystem. Participants deemed these environmental aspects to be especially relevant to native tree species, recognising that native species have additional and enhanced advantages for the Irish ecosystem and pointing out the potential negative effects of non-native and invasive species.

Young people also cited the key role played by trees and forests in Irish culture, heritage, and national identity. They talked about this being reflected in music, literature, folklore, and common beliefs and practices such as fairy doors and forests, or collecting conkers to keep spiders away. One young person mentioned a superstition passed down from their grandparents that a solitary tree in a field should not be cut down for fear of bad luck. This cultural association with trees and forests was also linked to a sense of Irishness and Irish national identity, as well as the history of the island - for instance, one young person pointed out that many Irish forests were felled by the British during the plantations of the 16th and 17th centuries. Young people emphasised the role of native Irish species in this context and that "we need to protect them - it's important to preserve what is our own."

Similarly, it is important for young people that the positive impact of trees and forests on health and wellbeing are recognised and promoted. Forests and wooded areas are vital as places to escape the stresses of daily life and recharge our batteries, as has become apparent over the last two years and during Covid-19 public health restrictions.

The social and economic aspects of forests were further discussed, focused in particular on forests as spaces of recreation, tourism, and education. They see an important role for forests to play in helping young people to learn about nature, and as spaces that they can go to have fun and new experiences. Participants acknowledged the role of forest-related industries in supporting the economy through job creation, providing timber, and supporting housing and infrastructure, although they said that the economic aspect is not as high in their consideration and did not immediately come to mind. They felt that this might be because it is not a main focus of their interactions with trees and forests, and in particular the approach to learning about nature in formal education which concentrates on biology and the environment.

> **Recommendation 3:** *The benefits of trees and forests must be more widely promoted, to support greater recognition and understanding of the importance of trees and forests to many aspects of our lives.*

The future of trees and forests in Ireland

Finally, participants were invited to think about their vision for the future of trees and forests in Ireland. A dominant theme that emerged was the importance of native species being protected and prioritised over non-native species in order to best support native ecosystems, for instance by preferring broadleaf and hardwood tree species to coniferous forests. Young people want to see forests that are healthy and thriving, that are not uniform or systematically laid out in evenly spaced rows but instead are planted to reflect natural growth patterns, and that feature a diverse array of plant and animal species.

> **Recommendation 4:** *Native species should be protected and promoted, in particular broadleaf and hardwood tree species.*

> **Recommendation 5:** *Tree planting should be done to mimic natural growth patterns.*

Forests must also be well managed, including by maintaining paths and trails for the public to use, and removing dead and diseased trees to maintain the forests' overall health and enable forest-floor species to flourish. Currently forest cover in Ireland amounts to 11% of the land area; young people want to see this increase to at least be in line with the global average of 30.6%.

> **Recommendation 6:** *Forests and woodland areas should be properly managed to support overall forest health and maintain accessibility for visitors.*

> **Recommendation 7:** *Forest cover in Ireland should be expanded to meet the global average of 30.6% of land area at a minimum.*

By contrast, participants discussed the drawbacks they see with commercial forests. They felt that these forests tend not to have native species and trees are often planted in uniform rows and very close together, which does not allow the soil to regenerate properly and is detrimental to biodiversity in terms of both plants and wildlife. Young people see commercial forests as being homogeneous or monocultural, and not supporting biodiversity - "there's no atmosphere in commercial forests, no birds." While young people recognised the need for some commercial forestry and its associated economic benefits, they emphasised that they want there to be a balance – and that this needs to be done sustainably to allow nature to regenerate and ensure that the positives of forests are not inadvertently lost (creating wildlife habitats, improving soil health). They would like to see robust monitoring of commercial forestry with this in mind, and putting environmental sustainability first above economic concerns. Moreover, commercial forestry related industries should proactively employ staff with a specific remit for supporting biodiversity, ecosystem health, and sustainability. Forest industries should not be "a way to make money"; instead, they should be "a way to protect our culture, landscape, and ecosystem."

Recommendation 8: *Commercial activity should be tempered by the need to ensure environmental sustainability and ecosystem health, and must be subject to robust monitoring.*

Beyond the make-up of forests, participants want to see more educational opportunities to improve knowledge of different types of trees, planting and looking after trees, and the significance of trees and forests as a natural and national resource - and not just for themselves and their peers, but starting at an early age and going through to adulthood. In addition, young people want to see schemes to bring people into contact with forests and woodland areas and "join up the dots" between education and practical action. This could include a scheme to support schools in urban areas to bring young people out for day trips as a fun learning opportunity, more forest schools, and guides and rangers being available to give talks and tours. It is felt that initiatives like this will help young people to feel ownership of the trees and forests around them.

Recommendation 9: *Educational opportunities to learn about trees and forests should be rolled out comprehensively and expanded, both through formal and non-formal education, as well as the provision of dedicated outreach staff.*

Young people expressed that they want a public reimagining of what makes a forest, by breaking down the distinction between forests and urban areas. They said that they want trees to be better integrated into urban environments and cityscapes, by using whatever space is available to its fullest potential and planting trees "anywhere and everywhere" that they can be planted. Urban areas need to be more biodiverse and efforts to support biodiverse ecosystems should not be confined to the countryside.

Recommendation 10: *Urban environments should be a key part of Ireland's forest strategy and vision.*

Finally, as a closing question, participants were asked how they were feeling about the future of Ireland's forests, using the online platform Mentimeter to create a wordcloud of their responses. As can be seen in *Fig.1* below, the most common responses have positive connotations, with young people feeling 'excited' and 'hopeful'. Other responses demonstrate apprehension and worry ('concerned', 'precarious'). It is also notable that there is a sense of investment in the future of forests in Ireland, with young people feeling 'curious', 'interested', and that this conversation should be a 'priority' moving forward.
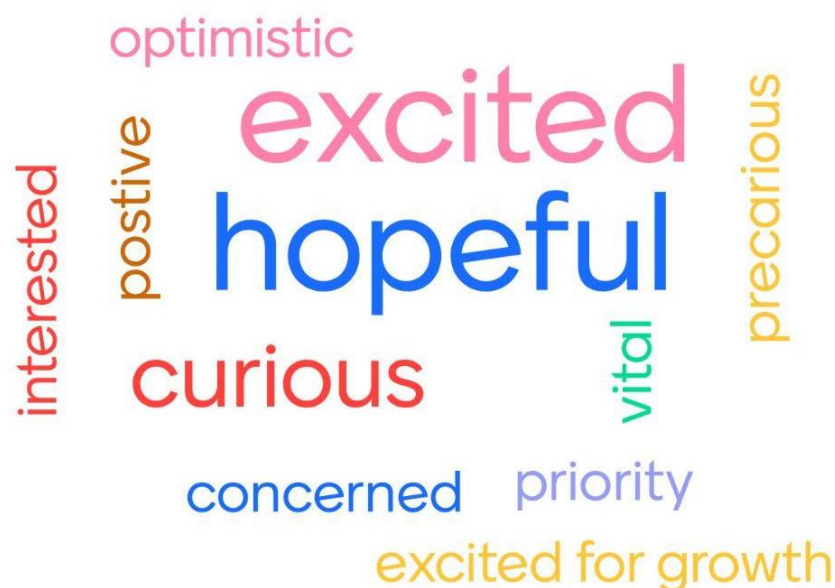

Fig.1 Mentimeter wordcloud, 'One word to describe how you are feeling about the future of Ireland's forests

Summary of Recommendations

1. Barriers to accessing forests and woodland areas should be considered and mitigated, including but not limited to the lack of public transport links, the needs of people with particular accessibility needs, and the need for proper forest management.

2. A range of schemes, initiatives and activities should be developed to enable greater awareness and opportunities to engage with nature.

3. The benefits of trees and forests must be more widely promoted, to support greater recognition and understanding of the importance of trees and forests to many aspects of our lives.

4. Native species should be protected and promoted, in particular broadleaf and hardwood tree species.

5. Tree planting should be done to mimic natural growth patterns.

6. Forests and woodland areas should be properly managed to support overall forest health and maintain accessibility for visitors.

7. Forest cover in Ireland should be expanded to meet the global average of 30.6% of land area at a minimum.

8. Commercial activity should be tempered by the need to ensure environmental sustainability and ecosystem health, and must be subject to robust monitoring.

9. Educational opportunities to learn about trees and forests should be rolled out comprehensively and expanded, both through formal and non-formal education, as well as the provision of dedicated outreach staff.

10. Urban environments should be a key part of Ireland's forest strategy and vision.

Appendix A

Working Towards a New Forest Strategy for Ireland:
A Guide for Young People

Thank you so much for taking part in the youth dialogue on Ireland's new Forest Strategy! We've put together this brief guide to help you understand what's involved.

Why forests?

Trees are a vital part of Ireland's natural heritage. Ireland needs more of them, with the right trees planted in the right place for the right reasons. For a variety of historical reasons, Ireland has one of the lowest levels of forest cover in the European Union. Paradoxically, this means that Ireland has a special opportunity to improve its natural heritage, by investing in our forests in a way that is sensitive to the landscape and environment, and that allows citizens to benefit from the many benefits offered by it.

Why do we need a Forest Strategy?

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) is developing a new Forest Strategy to ensure that trees and forests are maintained, protected, and expanded in a sustainable way. It's important for forests to meet the needs of Irish citizens, and for us to recognize and value everything that forests offer us. The Strategy will establish what we think the role of forests in Ireland should be, both now and in the future, and how we can achieve this.

Why are we hosting this youth dialogue?

The Department wants to hear from young people on what you see as the role of trees and forests of all shapes and sizes in Ireland. Your input is crucially important to creating a shared national vision and a new Forest Strategy for trees and forests in Ireland's future.

Why should we look after existing forests and create new ones?

- Forests are one of the most effective ways we can mitigate **climate change**
- Forests are complex ecosystems and support **biodiversity** for plants and animals
- Forests produce **timber** for buildings and other wood products, which is an environmentally sustainable material
- Forests can be **social spaces** for recreation**,** fun activities, and learning
- Forests can help support our physical, mental, and social **health and wellbeing**
- Forests can have **economic benefits** by creating new jobs and incomes

What will happen to young people's feedback?

Your conversations will be facilitated by adults who will also be taking notes. These notes will be kept anonymous and will be compiled into a report to the Department.

If you have any questions, please email Marina Lambrakis (marina.lambrakis@foroige.ie).

Proposed Vision for Trees, Woods and Forests by 2050

The right trees in the right places for the right reasons with the right management - supporting a sustainable and thriving economy and society and a healthy environment.

By 2050, Ireland's forests and woodlands will be seen as a symbol of the transformational social, economic and environmental changes that were needed to address the climate, biodiversity, housing and health emergencies of the 2020's. A much larger and more diverse forestry and woodland footprint is being successfully managed to balance and deliver forestry's multiple objectives and benefits for climate, nature, wood production, people, the wider economy and rural communities. It is co-existing in harmony with farming, urban and other landscapes and valued highly by citizens. It is also supporting a thriving and growing forest industry, long term quality employment, ecosystem services and public, educational and recreational amenities.

Forestry is at the centre of the circular and green economy with Irish grown timber being the material of choice for new Irish homes. It is providing a profitable diversification option for farmers, with people living in rural, urban and suburban communities feeling a sense of connection and pride in their local forests and woodlands, and the many benefits that they provide. Legacy environmental issues associated with past forestry practices have been successfully resolved, building on the improvements in management evident under the 2014-2020 Forestry Programme. The Irish landscape now features a rich variety of trees, woods and forests, established for multiple purposes and delivering multiple benefits for the environment, economy and society on both public and private land.