

Assessing afforested deep peat to inform restocking decisions

Guidance note

Reference number: GN 039

Document Owner: Head of Business for Natural Resource Management

What is this document about?

This document provides guidance on how to undertake a peat assessment in line with UKFS requirements related to afforested deep peat (please note this document is not the country guidance referred to in the UKFS). It helps owners and managers of afforested deep peat sites make informed decisions about whether restocking is the most appropriate future management of their site after harvesting activities, and provide relevant information when applying for felling licences or submitting forestry management plans.

Who is this document for?

This document is for the owners and managers of existing forests and woodlands that are known to be, or may be, located on deep peat, or hydrologically connected (see Annex 1: Glossary) to deep peat.

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Version History

Document version	Date published	Summary of changes
1.0	06-2026	Document published

Review Date: 06-2027

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Crynodeb Gweithredol

Mae'r nodyn canllaw hwn (GN 039) yn cefnogi perchnogion a rheolwyr coetiroedd i fodloni gofynion Safon Coedwigaeth y DU (UKFS). Bydd yn helpu i benderfynu ai ailstocio yw'r opsiwn rheoli mwyaf priodol o ystyried effeithiau carbon a bioamrywiaeth ar gyfer safleoedd sy'n cynnwys, neu sydd wedi'u cysylltu'n hydrolegol â mawn dwfn (≥ 50 cm).

Mae mawn dwfn yn darparu gwasanaethau ecosystem pwysig fel storio carbon, darparu cynefinoedd, a rheoleiddio dŵr, ond dim ond pan fydd mewn cyflwr da. Mae'r canllaw hwn yn darparu dull strwythuredig, sy'n seiliedig ar dystiolaeth, i lywio penderfyniadau rheoli coedwigoedd.

Mae'r canllaw hwn yn berthnasol i bob cais am drwydded cwmpo coed neu Gynllun Rheoli Coedwig lle gall mawn dwfn fod yn bresennol neu wedi'i gysylltu'n hydrolegol. Os yw'n berthnasol, dylai defnyddwyr naill ai ddatgan neu ddarparu tystiolaeth nad oes mawn dwfn yn bresennol neu wedi'i gysylltu'n hydrolegol, neu ddilyn yr Offeryn Asesu os oes mawn dwfn yn bresennol.

Mae angen casglu gwybodaeth benodol i'r safle i gwblhau'r Offeryn Asesu, sy'n cyfuno sgôr mawn â gwybodaeth am Ddosbarthiad y Cnwd i lywio dewisiadau rheoli. Yn seiliedig ar yr asesiad cyfunol hwn, nodir tri phrif opsiwn i'w hystyried:

- Ailstocio - fel arfer lle mae cynhyrchiant coed yn uchel a sgoriau mawn yn isel.
- Coetir olynol - newid i fosaig o goetir olynol, cors wlyb, ac ailstocio cymysg mewn ardaloedd sychach, fel arfer lle naill ai: mae'r mawn yn rhy wlyb i dyfu cnwd pren cynhyrchiol, ond nid yw'n addas i'w adfer yn llwyr i gynefin mawndir; neu mae'r pren yn rhesymol gynhyrchiol ond mae'r mawn yn rhan o gorff mawn mwy o werth bioamrywiaeth presennol neu bosibl.
- Adfer mawndir - argymhellir yr opsiwn yma ar gyfer clystyrau o goed â chynhyrchiant isel neu safleoedd lle mae gwerth y mawn yn uchel neu o bwysigrwydd hydrolegol.

Mae'r canllawiau'n sicrhau penderfyniadau cyson a thryloyw sy'n cefnogi'r hinsawdd, bioamrywiaeth a rheoli tir cynaliadwy.

Executive Summary

This guidance note (GN 039) supports woodland owners and managers in meeting the requirements of the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS). It will help determine whether restocking is the most appropriate management option considering carbon and biodiversity impacts for sites containing, or hydrologically connected to, deep peat (≥ 50 cm).

Deep peat delivers important ecosystem services such as carbon storage, habitat provision, and water regulation, but only when in good condition. This guidance provides a structured, evidence-based approach to inform forest management decisions.

This guidance is relevant to all felling licence or Forest Management Plan applications where deep peat may be present or hydrologically connected. If applicable, users should either declare or provide evidence that no deep peat is present or hydrologically connected, or follow the Assessment Tool (AT) if deep peat is present.

Collecting site specific information is needed to complete the AT, which combines a generated peat score with Yield Class (YC) information to guide management choices. Based on this combined assessment, three primary options are identified for consideration:

- Restocking - typically where timber productivity is high, and peat scores are low.
- Successional woodland - converting to a mosaic of successional woodland, wet bog, and mixed restocking in drier areas, usually where either: the peat is too wet to grow a productive timber crop, but it is not suitable to be wholly restored to a peatland habitat; or the timber is reasonably productive but the peat forms part of a larger peat body of existing or potential biodiversity value.
- Peatbog restoration - recommended for low-productivity stands or sites where the peat value is high or of hydrological importance.

The guidance ensures consistent, transparent decisions that support climate, biodiversity, and sustainable land management.

Introduction

This guidance note supports forest managers in delivering the requirements of the UKFS related to afforested deep peat. For the purposes of this document, deep peat is defined as equal to or greater than 50cm depth. This guidance note is not the “country guidance”, as referred to in the UKFS. This guidance note will be updated once Wales Country guidance is available.

A definition of all key terms is provided in the Glossary in Annex 1.

This document is divided into two sections:

- Section 1: the process for determining whether deep peat is present.
- Section 2: an Assessment Tool (AT) which needs to be completed if deep peat is present.

Why do I need to consider deep peat?

While there is a policy presumption in Wales against deforestation, the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) includes the guideline (page 109):

‘consider, informed through tools such as a peat assessment, the balance of benefits for carbon and other ecosystem services before the making the decision to restock (or regenerate) on soils with deep peat, ensuring the decision complies with relevant country policies’

The Assessment Tool in this Guidance Note will enable you to meet this requirement. Furthermore, this underpins other requirements within the UKFS, such as: for biodiversity, page 26 “opportunities to restore and enhance biodiversity should be considered and implemented”; for climate change, page 41 “forest management should enhance the potential of forests to help society and the environment adapt to the various effects of climate change”; and for general forestry practice, page 13 “forests should be designed to provide a range of habitats, using a variety of site-adapted species and species mixtures to produce a diversity of stand structures appropriate to the scale, context and ecological potential of the site”.

Deep peat supports a range of habitats and species of high ecological importance; regulates water flows (helping flood mitigation); and retains and sequesters carbon (minimising and regulating our contribution to climate change). However, peat only provides these benefits when in good condition.

In poor condition, carbon is released into the atmosphere, further contributing towards climate change. Most areas of deep peat on drained sites, which include afforested deep peat sites, will be in poor condition. So, if land managers wish to permanently remove trees from a deep peat site in order to provide carbon benefits and ecosystem services, it is that vital that deep peats are brought into good condition via restoration.

However, the carbon balance of afforested deep peat sites are complex as trees also sequester and store carbon, so it is important to be able to balance the potential future carbon sequestration in trees against carbon emissions from the drying out of the peat.

This guidance outlines an approach that gives options for balanced land-management choices by considering both peat factors and timber yield. It also takes into account the wider benefits of carbon storage and other ecosystem services when deciding whether to restock with trees or restore to peatbog on deep peat.

Does this guidance apply to my woodland?

The guidance applies to you if you are submitting a Felling Licence Application (FLA) or Forest Management Plan (FMP) application, and your site meets any one of the following criteria:

- Shown as peat on the [Peatlands of Wales Map](#)*
- Known to be deep peat (based on existing survey data or knowledge)
- Shows characteristics that may indicate deep peat is present (e.g. checked trees)
- Hydrologically connected (see Annex 1: Glossary) to an area mapped as deep peat.
- Hydrologically connected to an area that shows characteristics that may indicate there is deep peat present.

*Please note that the Peatlands of Wales Map may include areas where the depth of peat does not meet the 50cm definition in this Guidance Note. We will accept your survey data (undertaken to the specification in this guidance note) to accurately determine the presence and extent of any deep peat.

Section 1:

What do I need to do?

As part of your FLA or FMP application, you will be asked about peat at your site and will need to either:

- Declare or provide evidence confirming no deep peat is present at your site, and no peat on your site is hydrologically connected to another peat body off-site; or
- Provide details of the extent and depth of deep peat present at your site together with a completed AT which considers both Yield Class (YC) and peat attributes.

How do I do it?

You will need to follow a step-by-step process, explained in the following sections, and presented visually in the flow chart at the end of this section.

If you know your site meets one of the criteria

If your site meets at least one of the criteria listed in 'Does this guidance apply to my woodland?' then you will need to undertake a detailed survey to confirm the extent and depth of peat at the site, or provide existing evidence to confirm the same information. A detailed site survey methodology is provided in Annex 2.

Assuming your detailed survey verifies the presence of deep peat, and you have recorded its extent and depth, the next step is to determine the YC of the crop and then complete the AT. This will inform management decisions at the site, and details can be included in your FLA or FMP.

If your detailed survey confirms that your site does **not** meet at least one of the criteria, then you will only need to record and retain this evidence which confirms that no deep peat is present at the site and no peat is hydrologically connected to another peat body off-site. You need to retain the information because it may be requested as part of your FLA or FMP. In this scenario, no further work is required, and you do not need to complete the AT.

If you don't know whether your site meets one of the criteria

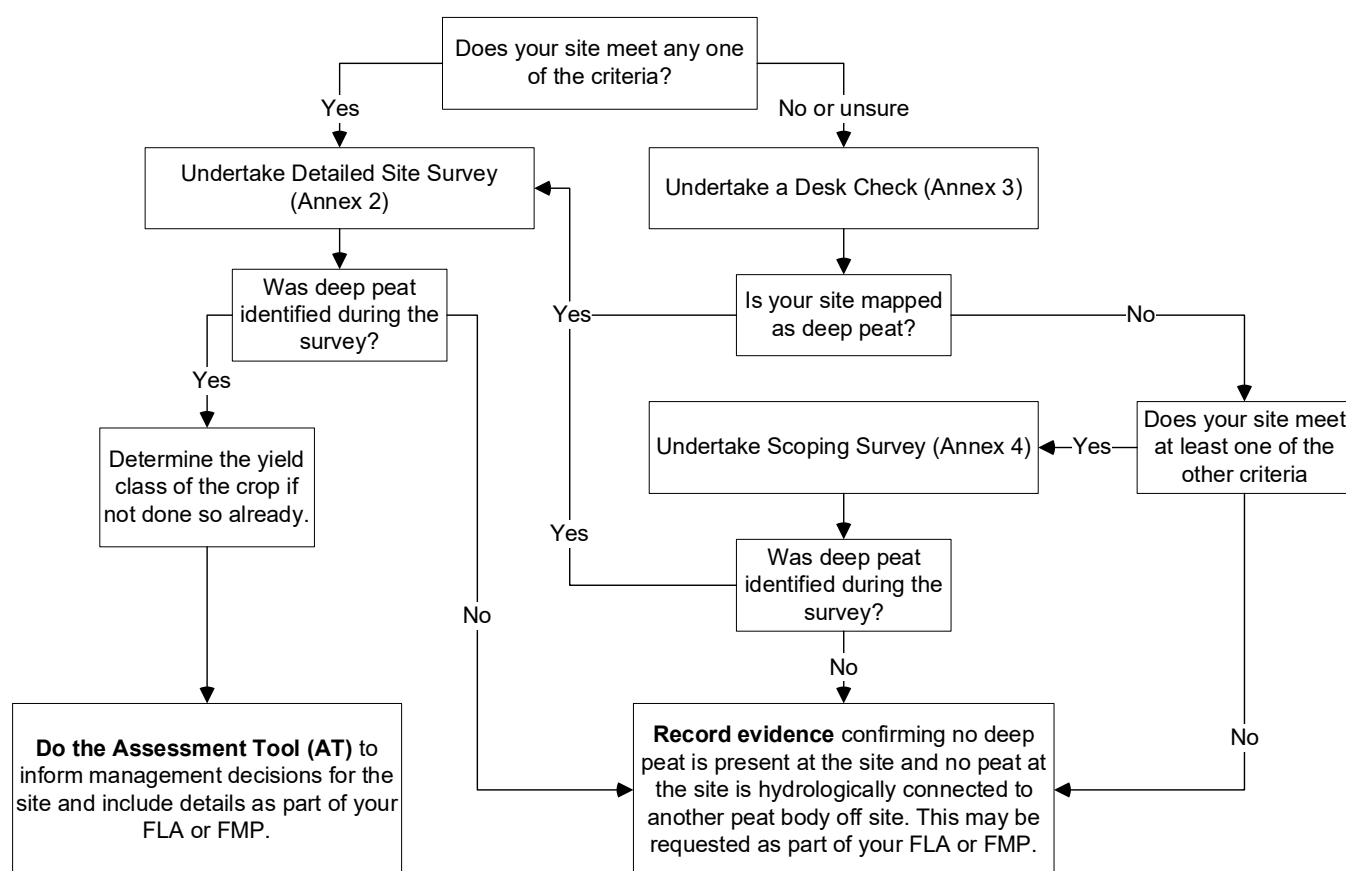
If you don't know whether your site meets at least one of the criteria listed in the previous section titled 'Does this guidance apply to my woodland?', it is recommended that you initially undertake a desk-based check before considering a survey. A methodology for undertaking a desk-based check is provided in Annex 3.

If your desk-based check indicates that deep peat is likely to be present or hydrologically connected to a peat body off-site, then it's recommended that you initially undertake a scoping survey (Annex 4).

If the scoping survey **indicates that no deep peat** is present and there is no hydrological connection to an off-site peat body, then you can stop at this point, and you don't need to complete the AT. All you need to do is record and retain the evidence as it may be requested when you submit a FLA or FMP.

If the scoping survey **indicates that deep peat is present** or there is a likely hydrological connection to an off-site peat body, then you should proceed to complete a detailed survey (Annex 2). Having completed a detailed survey, the next step will be to confirm the YC of the crop and complete the AT.

Figure 1: how to determine the presence of deep peat or hydrological connectivity with an off-site peat body. All of the criteria are listed in 'Does this guidance apply to my woodland?' section.



Section 2:

Assessment Tool (AT)

This section is applicable if you have determined that deep peat is present at your site, or if your site is hydrologically connected to a peat body off-site. You should complete the AT as you will need to include it when your FLA or FMP is submitted. The AT can only be completed if you have first undertaken a detailed survey at your site (Annex 2).

The AT comprises three steps:

- Step 1: Use your detailed site survey data to calculate a peat score for the site.
- Step 2: Determine YC.
- Step 3: Consider the most appropriate management options based on combining YC data with the peat score for the site.

When completing the AT, you should cover the extent of all deep peat present at the site. If the site has clearly distinct areas (e.g. some flat, some on a slope, some checked trees, some with better growth), then obtain a peat score for each of these units separately. A justification / description will be required for each distinct unit.

Step 1: Calculating a peat score

Steps 1a-1d will produce scores for soil type, peat depth, area, and slope. These will be used in step 1e to calculate an overall peat score.

Step 1a: Soil type score

The soil type score is an indicator of biodiversity benefits linked to the peat. Using the publication [Identification of soils for forest management](#) (Kennedy, 2002), determine the soil type(s) present across the site. If more than one soil type is identified across the site, this should be shown separately on a map. Use the dominant soil type to determine the soil type score for each unit.

Table 1: Soil types and scores

Soil type	8	8a	8b	8c	8d	9	9a	9b	9c	9d	9e	10	10a	10b	11	11a	11b	11c	11d	14	14w	14h
Score	2	8	4	0	8	3	2	2	4	4	6	10	10	10	8	6	8	8	8	8	10	8

Step 1b: Depth score

The peat depth score is an indicator of the amount of peat carbon per unit area.

Calculate the score by doubling (multiply by 2) the average peat depth in metres. The maximum depth score is 16.

Step 1c: Area score

The area score is an indicator of the water and carbon sink benefits of restoring the site.

Calculate the score by dividing the area of deep peat within the unit (in hectares) by 5. The maximum area score is 12.

Step 1d: Slope score

The slope score is an indicator of feasibility, ease, and cost of restoration.

For any slope <20% (11 degrees) = 0

For any slope >20% (11 degrees) or greater = 10

(note that the slope score is subtracted in the overall peat score calculation)

Step 1e: Overall peat score

The overall peat score may apply to the whole site or multiple units depending on site specific characteristics.

Overall peat score = Soil type score + Depth score + Area score – Slope score

Example Calculation:

- Soil Type 11b, therefore Soil type score = 8
- Average peat depth for the unit is 1.5 m, to be multiplied by 2, therefore Depth score = 3
- Area of deep peat within the unit is 7.5 ha, to be divided by 5, therefore Area score = 1.5
- Average slope of the unit is 22%, therefore Slope score = 10
- Overall peat score = 8 + 3 + 1.5 - 10 = 2.5

Step 2: Calculating Yield Class (YC)

YC is a factor which describes the relationship between the age of the stand in years and the mean annual increment (growth) in timber size. The standard for assessing YC is detailed in [Forest Yield \(and handbook for forest growth and yield tables for British Forestry\)](#). You may wish to seek the advice of a professional forester if you do not already know the YC of your crop.

Step 3: Considering options for management.

To consider the balance of benefits for carbon and other ecosystem services (as required by the UKFS), management decisions should be informed by Table 1. Your FLA or FMP should include how you have chosen to consider these options for areas of deep peat. Your site as a whole may include different options for different areas, as appropriate.

Table 2: Management options based on peat score and yield class

Peat Score	Yield Class	Management Options	Option
0-14	10 and higher	Restock.	1
0-14	8 and below	Restock or allow natural regeneration (with appropriate maintenance) of native broadleaves/successional woodland or consider peat restoration.	2
15+	10 and higher	Restock or allow natural regeneration (with appropriate maintenance) with native broadleaves or consider peat restoration for sites with very deep deposits of peat, and locations where the peat forms part of a larger peat body of existing or potential biodiversity value.	2
15+	8 and below	Peat restoration.	3

There is often a mosaic of these options depending on the nature of the site and the extent of deep peat so more than one can be chosen.

Option 1: Restocking for timber production

Restocking for timber production is likely to be most appropriate for sites with crops of YC10 and above, and/or with a low peat score.

Option 2: Successional woodland

Where the peat is too wet to grow a productive timber crop, but it is not suitable to be wholly restored to a peatland habitat, you could convert to a mosaic of successional woodland, wet bog, and mixed restocking in drier areas.

Successional woodland is low density, open woodland habitat of mixed woodland species in a matrix with open space and peatland habitat, delivering an intimately mixed habitat for predominantly environmental or landscape improvement. If you have specific queries not covered by this guidance, you can contact NRW via the email address on the first page.

If you choose this option, you need to develop a restocking plan for the area which factors in the following:

- Linking open habitats and successional woodland with other similar habitats to create and enhance connectivity, both within and outside the woodland, rather than create isolated pockets.
- Take account of the intricacies of geology, soils, and hydrology.
- Timber can be grown on drier ground, but this approach is unlikely to be appropriate on designated sites. Make sure that restocking is well designed to ensure that the timber can be extracted at a later date while avoiding or minimising impacts on deep peat.
- Avoid retaining woodland areas at risk of windblow or that would lead to excessive edge trees.
- Where successional woodland is proposed, this may be left to develop through self-seeding as this will create a free feathered edge, but you will need to ensure a woodland develops.
- Consider whether the site can be rewetted to retain carbon and preserve peat profiles. Consider peat restoration for sites with deep deposits of peat, and locations where the peat forms part of a larger peat body of existing or potential biodiversity value.
- The long-term management of the area.

Option 3: Peatbog restoration

Where sites are YC8 and below or else represent a particular priority for peatland restoration; and where the peat is too wet or can be restored to or maintained as peatland habitat; the site could be restored to or maintained as peatland habitat. These sites may include:

- Habitats listed on section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 or features of Natura sites, Ramsar sites, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) or National Nature Reserves (NNRs).
- Sites or parts of sites where restocking is likely to adversely affect the functional connectivity (hydrology) of a priority habitat associated with an adjacent peatland habitat.
- Sites where deforestation/no re-stocking and restoration of peatland habitat would contribute to the delivery of the National Peatland Action Programme.

If you choose the restoration option, then the costs will likely be at the landowner's expense, although [National Peatland Action Programme \(NPAP\)](#) grants for restoration may be available.

To facilitate deep peat restoration, it will usually be necessary to raise the water table post harvesting. A wide range of techniques are now available for achieving this, which means most formerly afforested peatlands are suitable for rewetting to preserve carbon stores in the ground.

For an unconditional felling licence to be granted with a view to restoring the site, applications must demonstrate that restoration can successfully be achieved in a reasonable timescale, and that once restored, the site can be maintained indefinitely

through routine management. This could be demonstrated through a funded restoration plan or forest management plan.

Annex 1: Glossary

Peat: A largely organic substrate consisting of partly decomposed plant material forming a deposit on acidic, boggy ground.

Deep peat: For the purposes of this document, the definition of deep peat is from 50cm. This applies as long as there is no superseding country policy in place for Wales.

Deforestation: The creation of permanent open ground that decreases the area of the woodland. The internal re-design of woodlands to meet the open space requirements of the UKFS is not considered deforestation.

Hydrologically connected: A peatland is considered hydrologically connected when its water balance, ecological functioning, and peat-forming processes depend on water supplied from surrounding land, including surface runoff, groundwater flow, and upslope contributing areas. In the JNCC SSSI guidelines, such hydrological connections are recognised as essential components of the peatland's functional unit, meaning that adjacent land—whether peat or mineral soil—may be critical to maintaining the peatland's natural hydrology and ecological integrity.

Peatland: A landscape with or without vegetation with a naturally accumulated peat layer at the surface.

Annex 2: Detailed site survey methodology

The following methodology is recommended for a detailed site survey. The aim of this survey is to confirm the extent and depth of deep peat at your site, with a focus on determining the edges of the peat body (subject to land ownership / boundary constraints).

Having completed this detailed site survey, you will need to produce an evidence report which includes:

- Details of the surveyor
- A brief description of the site
- A survey boundary
- Clear photographs illustrating:
 - Each soil core, laid out with a tape measure clearly visible
 - Different vegetation types present at the site
- A record of the peat depths at each probe/core/pit location
- A map of the site showing each probe/core/pit location and include any clearly distinct areas (e.g. some flat, some on a slope, some checked trees, some with better growth)

Equipment you will need:

- Peat core sampler (or a spade).
- Peat probe (or a bamboo cane of sufficient length)
- A relevant reference guide which provides information on vegetation for different soil types. For example, [Identification of soils for forest management](#) which is freely available to download.
- Clinometer or pre-calculated slope from Lidar Mapping (e.g. [LiDAR viewer | DataMapWales](#))

The following approach is recommended:

- Undertake 10 peat probes and one core/pit per hectare of mapped or suspected deep peat or a hydrologically connected area. If you have first completed a scoping survey (Annex 4) this may help you decide the best locations to focus on. Samples at approximately 35m will give at least 9 samples per hectare (100m x 100m).
- Record locations of peat probes and core samples on a map and record the GPS location.
- Include peat probe and core information in a table including the National Grid Reference of the location, measurement of peat depth (to the nearest centimetre), and vegetation type.
- Provide clear colour photographs of all core samples and vegetation at the core sampling point, clearing showing the surrounding vegetation.
- If the site has clearly distinct areas (e.g. some flat, some on a slope, some checked trees, some with better growth) then detail these on a map.

How to measure peat depth

Peat depth is measured by probing. This is done by using a peat probe made of a steel rod or tube, high-density plastic, or bamboo. The peat probe should be put in the ground

until an obvious increased in resistance is felt. The probe should then be removed. Note the depth reached at the surface by reading off the peat depth on the side of the probe, to the nearest 1cm.

It is worth recording two points at each location (separated by at least 1m) in case striking a piece of bog wood, for example, gives a misleading impression of depth. Peat is easily penetrated with a probe and will not feel gritty or sandy as the probe is inserted.

As well as probes, peat cores also need to be taken to ensure that peat is present and not soft in-wash clays.

Avoid measuring peat depth in obvious hollows. Choose a location that is representative of the average surface.

Prescribing a generic sampling intensity is difficult but it needs to be sufficient to be able to reliably map peat depths of 50cm or more. Sampling at typically 10m intervals along GPS marked transects can be considered where changes to other soil types are suspected.

It is good practice in between samples to clean the probe from excess soil material using a stick, boot cleaning tool, or tissue. Do not use your finger for this as the edges of the probe could cause injury.

Annex 3: Desk-based study

The following methodology is recommended to complete a desk-based study.

- Use the [Peatlands of Wales' Map](#) to establish if some or all of your site is mapped as deep peat. Please note that the Peatlands of Wales' Map may show areas as deep that a survey will subsequently reveal to not meet the definition of deep peat for the purposes of this guidance (i.e. 50cm).
- Check aerial imagery of the site for characteristics that may indicate there is deep peat present at the site. There are several freely available sources online of helpful information, but you should consider the following:
- Areas where the trees show signs of check (poor growth)
 - Areas of poor establishment
 - Whether there is any open ground within or adjacent to the boundaries of the crop
 - Whether there are areas with ground vegetation indicative of wet conditions and particular soil types, with information available in [Identification of soils for forest management](#) (Kennedy, 2002).

Having completed these checks for your site, your need to follow the same process again to consider if your site is hydrologically connected another peatland. We recommend that you consider a buffer area of at least 100m extending way from your site, but it may need to be more depending on the topography of your site and the surrounding area.

Examples of imagery showing characteristics that may indicate peat is present

Image 1: Areas where the trees show signs of check (poor growth).



Image 2: Areas of poor establishment.



Image 3: Open ground within or adjacent to the boundaries of the crop.



Image 4 and 5: Areas of ground vegetation indicative of wet conditions.



Annex 4: Scoping survey methodology

The following methodology is recommended to complete a scoping survey. A scoping survey is the next step if a desk-based check indicates that deep peat is likely to be present or hydrologically connected to a peat body off-site.

A scoping survey will involve a site walkover with survey points in areas identified by the desk-based check.

Equipment you will need:

- Peat core sampler (or a spade).
- Peat probe (or a bamboo cane of sufficient length)
- A relevant reference guide which provides information on vegetation for different soil types. For example, [Identification of soils for forest management](#) which is freely available to download.

The number of survey points will depend on the size of your site and the variation in the vegetation. The following is recommended:

- For all sites, a minimum of 2 probes and 1 core/pit. The maximum depth of peat should be recorded.
- In addition, a minimum of one further probe per 1 hectare rounded up, and one additional core/pit per 10 hectares rounded up.
- The total number of points should be spread evenly across the survey area in a grid and cover all vegetation types. If you have not identified the extent of the peat body, you will need to extend the survey area, where possible.
- If an area was identified in the desk-based check as possibly peat, then there be at least one core/pit located in this area.

You should collect the following evidence:

- Photos of each soil core/pit
- Depth of peat probe/core/pit in centimetres
- Photos of the different vegetation types at the site
- A map of the site with the locations of the probe/core/pit locations, including the site boundary.

From the results of the survey:

- If you identify that deep peat (greater than 50cm) is present, you will need to undertake a detailed site survey (Annex 2) to determine the extent and depth of the deep peat.
- If you identify that deep peat is not present, then you will need to record your findings and keep as evidence to support your FLA or FMP.

How to measure peat depth

Peat depth is measured by probing. This is done by using a peat probe made of a steel rod or tube, high-density plastic, or bamboo. The peat probe should be put in the ground until an obvious increased in resistance is felt. The probe should then be removed. Note

the depth reached at the surface by reading off the peat depth on the side of the probe, to the nearest 1cm.

It is worth recording two points at each location (separated by at least 1m) in case striking a piece of bog wood, for example, gives a misleading impression of depth. Peat is easily penetrated with a probe and will not feel gritty or sandy as the probe is inserted.

As well as probes, peat cores also need to be taken to ensure that peat is present and not soft in-wash clays.

Avoid measuring peat depth in obvious hollows. Choose a location that is representative of the average surface.

Prescribing a generic sampling intensity is difficult but it needs to be sufficient to be able to reliably map peat depths of 50cm or more. Sampling at typically 10m intervals along GPS marked transects can be considered where changes to other soil types are suspected.

It is good practice in between samples to clean the probe from excess soil material using a stick, boot cleaning tool, or tissue. Do not use your finger for this as the edges of the probe could cause injury.