



**A Deep Dive into the Housing Needs of Forestry
and Coppice Workers Operating in and around the
High Weald National Landscape**

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of interviews conducted with forestry and coppice workers local to the High Weald to gain a better understanding of their housing needs. It aims to provide richer narrative accounts of individual life stories and the workers’ experiences with finding suitable housing in the area. Nine workers were interviewed and discussed issues such as the unaffordability of housing in the High Weald; the lack of suitable housing for their line of work; issues with space for yards, workshops, parking, and tool storage; security costs; and low salaries. These accounts illuminate a dire housing situation for rural workers, involving unsuitable living conditions and lifelong compromise. It is apparent that change must be enacted, and a wider survey of housing needs should be conducted to reinforce these findings. This evidence can then be used to better inform policymakers of the specific needs forestry and coppice workers have when seeking housing.

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Commissioned by the [High Weald National Landscape Partnership](#)

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Introduction and Brief

The High Weald National Landscape covers 1461 km² across Kent, Sussex, and Surrey*. It is an area of countryside designated by the government where the landscape's character, associated wildlife, natural systems, and cultural associations must be protected so that people (now and in the future) can enjoy its natural beauty. National Landscapes are protected by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act), which asserts that the legal purpose of the designation is to 'conserve and enhance natural beauty'. The High Weald's *natural beauty* is defined in the [AONB Management Plan 2024-2029](#).

This report is part of a wider project to gather evidence about affordable housing in the High Weald. The stories included here will inform a position statement about affordable housing in the National Landscape to ensure that partners develop consistent policies across the area which meet the housing needs of local communities while conserving the distinctive character and natural beauty of the landscape.

Traditional land management underpins the High Weald's distinctive character and natural beauty. Rural workers supporting land-based industries such as agriculture and forestry are vital to its future, supporting the sustainable production of food and materials alongside the restoration of wildlife and natural systems. Currently many rural workers are struggling – incomes remain low while yard space and housing are becoming increasingly unaffordable.

This report focuses on forestry and coppice workers, representing the largest segment of land-based workers who manage the woodlands and trees which cover 30% of this National Landscape. It also builds on a previous survey of rural workers' housing needs prepared in 2009[†] by eliciting from participants more textured and rich narrative accounts about their stories and experiences with housing. These qualitative accounts will contribute towards helping policymakers understand the specific needs of rural workers. Additionally, information about these issues can help the High Weald Unit reconfigure a future standard housing needs survey to better capture rural workers' needs.

Approach and Interviews

Information was gathered for this report through ethnographic semi-structured interviews with forestry and coppice workers, allowing them to produce their own narrative accounts of their experiences. The interviews, which primarily took place face-to-face in the worker's homes (alongside some interviews over the phone), aimed to explore their life stories, career pathways, current living situation, history with housing, hopes for the future, and essential or desired housing needs. The template of core interview questions formulated to cover these areas is included as an appendix.

Participants were identified using a waterfall method and qualified for inclusion if they currently primarily worked a coppice or forestry job or, alternatively, had previously worked in the industry as their main job and continued to do so currently as a secondary job. Interviews were preceded by an explanation of the project, signing a consent form, and filling out a biographical information form. All interviews were audio-recorded and written up into profiles on the stories of each worker.

Nine workers were interviewed who lived and worked in and around the High Weald. There were seven men and two women, with ages ranging from 36 to 65. Amongst the workers taking part, there were two couples residing together with similar housing needs and thus these were included as joint profiles: resulting in seven stories total.

* <https://highweald.org>

† <https://highweald.org/document-library/research/housing-needs-survey-of-rural-workers-in-the-weald-forestry-and-coppice-workers/?!layout=default>



This report will continue in the next section by presenting these stories in a series of profiles. The profiles include the life and housing experiences of the workers, alongside a list of their housing needs. A discussion will follow of the main areas of interest raised, a tabulation of key results, and recommendations for further work.

Their Stories...

Oscar and Natalie

Main Occupation: Foresters

Age Group: 30s

Oscar and Natalie live in the High Weald with their thirteen-month-old daughter and have a business together. While Oscar is a forester working in timber harvesting and hauling (buying standing timber from farmers/estates, coppicing it, getting it roadside, and selling it), Natalie mainly works with the machinery. Oscar grew up in a home that ran on logs for fuel, helping out logging with his family when he was a child. When he was around 15, friends of his were getting into motorbikes and scooters so he did some work with his father to earn money for a scooter himself in winter. He cut ash and sold it green, paid his father £5 a load for fuel, split it with an axe, and delivered it locally – this went so well that by the end of the season he bought a tipping trailer, a log splitter, and (as he added, grinning) a scooter. He also did pheasant rearing at 16 with his father which eventually snowballed into his current work. Natalie began as a wildlife assistant, getting into forestry after meeting Oscar and moving in together whilst she was studying at college. She initially did log splitting but moved into working with machinery using skills from her farming background. Ever since her first time jumping on a digger to move some trees, Natalie says she has been hooked.



The couple are both passionate about living off the land. Oscar mentions with pride that his daughter's first food was from their vegetable garden, which is "what it's all about really" to him, and notes that he values having outdoor space for a garden or woodland even more highly than the housing itself. Natalie loves that through their work they can really see the difference they make to woodland habitats. She gets excited about anything and everything with animals, having grown up on a farm, and undertakes dormouse surveys in her spare time. Oscar's favourite aspect of his work is getting to skyline timber and is a strong proponent for its use, evident from how much his eyes light up when he discusses this extraction technique. Both Oscar and Natalie mention dependability on weather as one of the main downsides of such an outdoorsy job: "a good job can turn into a complete nightmare or a complete loss just because of the weather". This uncertainty has even led Oscar to contemplate changing careers or working for someone else rather than having his own business just to get a stable income. However, they are happy in the industry and feel "at peace" living and working in the High Weald.

Currently, the pair live in a combination of a mobile home and a shed on Oscar's parents' land with their young daughter and two dogs. Their house has a beautiful wooden veranda, which they built themselves, and a covered walkway between the two living spaces. When Oscar's father fell ill in the 2000s, he gifted them their current home "in exchange for a lifetime of logs" and it holds much sentimental value for Oscar. He even has a photograph of his mother, pregnant with him, standing in front of the shed his father built that now forms half of his home. Nevertheless, they do still want to improve their living situation as it was put together in somewhat of a rush to make space for the baby



(who scampers around the garden in a children’s pedal-car, cradling her teddy duck, nibbling happily on bananas, and impressively reproducing the different sounds made by tractors or Land Rovers accurately on command).

Their current home apparently does meet their essential housing needs (e.g. garden space, a yard, parking, secure storage, security by being off the beaten track, etc.), but they count themselves extremely lucky and say this only came after twenty years of effort (alongside loans). At some point, Oscar would like to build a workshop but admits that they would need another substantial loan to do so. He points out that a yard in the middle of nowhere with no one on-site to keep an eye on things is “a prime target for theft”, further highlighting the importance of having tools, machinery, and vehicle parking or storage located near the home. However, he also contends that it is nearly impossible to achieve this in the area because even places with very limited or dilapidated housing on a plot with yard space would be priced near to a million due to the location.

Oscar and Natalie believe that “there is just nothing for people like us to buy” and it is far more feasible to do a self-build than find somewhere that suits your needs – providing you already own land to do this. Their ideal future home would be a self-build on their current plot, but both raise concerns about the cost of a huge mortgage. For Oscar, he hopes this could be undertaken within the next two to five years (dependent on money and weather conditions), but Natalie is more sceptical. She matter-of-factly shrugs that their dream may never be achievable. Money is their biggest barrier to more suitable, long-term family housing, particularly in terms of the risks taken investing in this when they have a business to run that does not provide a stable or guaranteed income.

The expense and bureaucracy of the surveys involved also disincentivise doing a self-build, according to Natalie. With the ecological surveys, she expresses concern over the training and experience of those undertaking them due to some instances where she had observed crucial gaps in their knowledge. Although she supports the importance of these surveys to protect habitats, she has concerns over their implementation and who is conducting them: “it’s made more complicated than it needs to be”. As they do not feel that suitable housing exists in the area for them, what the couple really want and hope for is to be able to build an oak frame home living off the land with their family using local resources and “being country bumpkins” – but they are unfortunately precluded from this too, due to the financial uncertainty that comes with working in the industry.

“There’s no security of what’s coming in at the end of the month.”

Housing Needs

- Outdoor space like a garden and/or woods
- A yard and workshop near the home for security
- Tractor parking
- A boot room and/or lockable storage ideally in the house itself for smaller valuable tools like chainsaws
- A three-bed house minimum to accommodate the family
- Off-road parking for work vehicles and machinery (which must be secure for storing tools in vehicles)
- Security measures for tools and machinery

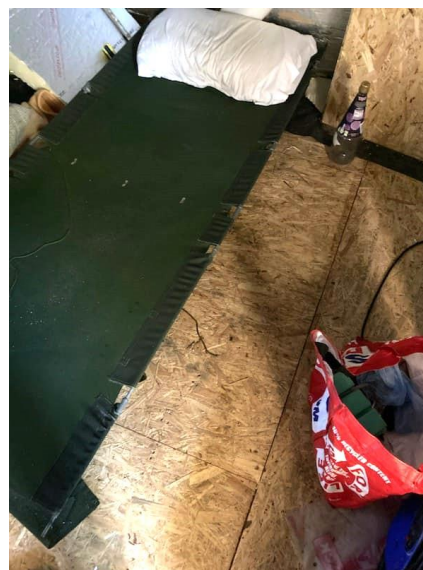


John

Main Occupation: Fencer and Landscaper

Age Group: 30s

Thirty-six-year-old John says his job is doing anything he can to pay the bills. Having previously worked manufacturing chestnut post and rail, he now mainly does fencing or landscaping jobs, taking coppice work when it becomes available. He got into the industry as a teenager, following in the footsteps of other friends and family members, but went to train as a plumber when he left school. Unfortunately, his training was cut short after the 2008 recession when the government withdrew funding for apprenticeship schemes – preventing John from acquiring the necessary qualifications and leading him back into woodland work. It was tough starting out because of customers who tried to dodge paying for his time and farmers that he says often took liberties with youth workers. Although he loves the freedom of this line of work and has a clear fondness for wildlife (cheerfully commenting “I like the green” of the High Weald), John understandably struggles with the financial instability it involves.



This is felt especially keenly with his current housing situation. After living in a static caravan in a friend's garden and running out of money while building a shed to live in, John now sleeps on his parents' sofa. He has been unable to live where he wanted or needed to live for work for his entire life. He says that this is mainly due to financial reasons as rent is unaffordable in the area on a forestry salary (let alone buying). Furthermore, he has found that “there's just no housing around here, full stop” that is affordable or suitable for a rural worker. John is desperate to get off his parent's sofa, but he also sorely wants to remain in the area where he was born and bred, as generations of his family have been.

John would love to build his own home made from sustainable materials but has given up when it comes to housing: “I used to work every hour under the sun [...] I worked flat out for years and years and years and it got me nowhere”. He notes that his experience is very different to that of his father's generation, where one could own a home on a forestry workers salary, and highlights that this issue goes beyond just his own industry because “most working-class people nowadays can't afford to buy”. However, as other interviewees mention, even if John's salary was higher or more stable, there is just no suitable housing available. He believes the problem arises because there is a lack of building *homes* rather than just properties and claims the council does not allow suitable affordable housing in the area.

Like many in the industry with a history of housing instability, John has strong opinions on what needs to change – identifying where current policy is letting people like him down and making suggestions for what could help. Regarding social housing for forestry and coppice workers, he points out that there needs to be a mix of housing available for those in different stages of life as there are different needs for single young people versus families or the elderly who have retired from the industry. He wishes that council-owned land would be released as plots with agricultural ties so that it can go to those who need it in his line of work. However, he points out that, if this were to happen, there could not be restrictions on the types of dwellings built (e.g. not allowing caravans) because low-income, land-based workers can often only afford those types of housing. He adds that “if they don't want to spend the money to build these places, they're going to have to allow people to build their own houses”. In this vein he also suggests that gated communities of agricultural housing on farms would provide both the necessary security for tools/machinery and create communities of agricultural workers using



shared facilities like yards and workshops. He believes that this would be ideal because residents would all “have each other’s back”.

John, who took part in the 2009 survey on housing needs, says that unfortunately “it’s only got worse since”. There is a distinct note of despair in his responses about the future. He wants to remain in the area and in the industry, but should not have to endure the endless housing issues that seem to come with the territory. He admits that, at this stage, he has “just lost hope” and “stopped caring really” about where he gets to call home.

Housing Needs

- At least two bedrooms
- Parking for at least two cars and/or a truck with a trailer on the front drive
- Well-insulated and cost-effective
- Access to the back garden for a lockable toolshed
- A workshop or large shed that a truck fits in
- Garden space to grow vegetables for mental wellbeing

Billy

Main Occupation: Forestry Contractor

Age Group: 40s

Billy does a “a mixed bag” of ground-based work as a forestry contractor, alongside arboriculture work up trees, coppicing, natural flood management, and training. Growing up in the High Weald he fondly remembers playing in the woods with his family all the time, later getting into outdoor-pursuits instruction as a teen. He went to agricultural college for arboriculture training, got his qualifications, and started out in farmwork.



Billy then set up a business with his brother. After they each did master’s degrees, he realised he was done with desk work and much preferred being outdoors doing a practical job. He did contracting alongside running the business to help with cash flow because it was not a stable income, but the business eventually folded. Solvency is a common problem for those running their own business in the industry because, Billy notes, “there are these long periods where you have very little money coming in, but you have a lot of costs going out”. Unfortunately, he believes that practical skills like his are not well valued in society, leading to a persistently low income.

Nowadays, Billy feels that he is in the best living situation he could realistically be in because he has his own home with his wife and two small children. It includes offroad parking, enough space for some tools to be stored overnight in an outbuilding, a small garden space, and it runs on timber. However, this was only achievable due to financial help from family members and a big mortgage: “we’re the exception, not the rule, in this industry”. Still, even with this nearly ideal setup, Billy has had to adapt and compromise

“The second you pick up a tool, you drop several pay brackets; the second you pick up a tool outside, you drop several more pay brackets.”



to make this housing suitable for his line of work – converting a garage into a workshop, storing his machinery elsewhere on a plot of land, and renting a shipping container on a nearby farm.

He says that finding suitable housing is always a challenge as a forestry worker and points out that typically when you are starting out in the industry, the only thing you can afford is “everything you don’t want” like living in a town, renting a flat, or not having sufficient parking space. Billy argues that this is one of the few industries where workers actually require 4x4 cars to do the job in rural locations – and these specialist vehicles are taxed highly, needing offroad secure parking. The issue of security impassions Billy, who has been robbed many times before and expresses exasperation about the time and money wasted on this problem: “it just absolutely dominates, every decision it’s in the back of your mind”.

Furthermore, his wife (who works a non-rural job) needs their home to be near a train station for her commute, highlighting the issue of making housing that suits a variety of families where not everyone living there is a forestry worker. Billy believes that affordable housing is a persistent problem in the industry, and has noticed when looking at new-builds in the area himself that not one of them was even close to being suitable for rural workers. He desperately wants to have a yard on the same property as his home, but it is not something he thinks is an achievable dream for anyone in the Southeast of England these days. That is especially true, in his view, for those doing a job like his where one cannot ever earn enough to make it feasible. Billy has found that he must live a long way from where he works in order to find anywhere affordable to rent and asserts that “if you want to live in a proper grown-up house, then you have to compromise on both commuter distance and probably not have all the things that you want alongside it”.

After listing his modest housing needs, accompanied by acknowledging the compromises and concessions that he and others make which are less convenient but still doable (e.g. having to travel to reach one’s yard/workshop or storing vehicles/tools elsewhere), he affirms that “none of us have delusions of anything more than that” – just their basic requirements to maintain this career.

Housing Needs

- Offroad parking for work vehicles and machinery
- Secure storage for tools
- Parking for a trailer
- A workshop or yard nearby, ideally on the property
- A family-sized home
- Proximity to a train station

Fiona and Rob

Main Occupation: Horse-Loggers and Environmental Foresters

Age Group: 50s

Fiona and Rob are a couple who both work in the industry together for their own business as horse-loggers: extracting timber from woodlands using horses to access difficult sites and avoid the damage otherwise caused by large forestry equipment doing the same job. They also describe their work as environmental forestry and do tree-surgery or planting on the side. Fiona started out young doing rural odd jobs locally because she always loved woodland, finding it “inspiring”, and now jokes that for work they do anything asked of them that they are capable of doing. Rob, who fell into tree-surgery and forestry, first connected with Fiona to do some work for her and now they have two lovely twin daughters. The couple are both passionate about woodland restoration, caring for undermanaged woodlands and seeing the change their work can have in bringing them back to life. However, they highlight that the work they love comes with the downside of low wages.



“People don’t recognise the skill required of a forest worker – the time it’s taken them to train, the cost of the whole job, the insurance, the work involved. It’s a highly skilled job, it’s really dangerous, and none of that gets factored in – I don’t know why that is...”

Fiona and Rob feel very lucky with their current housing situation, saying it suits them brilliantly, but it has “taken everything” to get there. They live in a mobile home and caravan on their own land (bought by Fiona 27 years prior) with their daughters and an array of friendly animals, including sheep, horses, chickens, guinea pigs, dogs, and occasionally a cat. They have a stable for the horses, a garden, some grazing land, and a homely veranda decked out with plants, art sculptures, and Rob’s own woodwork creations.



Although currently living in the Low Weald, they say they would have liked to live in the High Weald due to working there often and the funding opportunities available for people like them. However, the cost and lack of any suitable housing makes it impossible. They praise the “extraordinary landscape” of the Weald, saying that it feels “like being at home” and provides a human connection to nature. The journey to their current housing situation has been “a very hard road” as they have both lived below the breadline at times, often in caravans, and experienced difficulty – now owing a lot of money in a substantial mortgage. However, they love where they live and would like to stay in the area to be near family, friends, and colleagues.

When asked what her housing needs were, Fiona simply replied, “unaffordable”. Their current setup has a lot of the essentials needed to run their business like being able to live on-site with the horses and storage for tools; but these benefits come with limits like not living in a spacious family house. Security is also a big concern to them, as with others in the industry. Fiona and Rob acknowledge that the lack of affordable housing is “without a doubt” a problem and call the social housing situation “pathetic”. They point out that this is particularly a problem when trying to revitalise the forestry industry and bring in new blood, as Fiona asserts, “if you’re wanting to encourage people into the industry, how can they ever be encouraged in if they have nowhere to live – it’s ridiculous”.

Long term, the couple would like to replace their current mobile home with a self-build eco-home using their own timber as they have many of the skills and materials required themselves to get it done. At the moment this is far too expensive for them because of the costs of planning permission, building, and taking time off work to do it. They mention that neither of them have savings or a pension, which makes this ambition just too much of a risk for now: “like most people in forestry, we just need a lottery win and then we’d be fine”, Fiona laughs sombrely.

Housing Needs

- Woodland and grazing land
- Space for horses, horse trailers, a workshop, and stables
- Storage for tools, chainsaws, and machinery
- Parking space
- Enough room for a family
- Security and a place off the beaten track
- A dwelling on the same site as the horses/workshop



Bruno

Main Occupation: Tree-Surgeon and Woodland Manager

Age Group: 40s

Bruno has his own firm where he mainly takes on tree-surgery work in a variety of locations (e.g. private gardens, country estates, schools, golf courses, etc.). In winter his work is more centred on woodland management doing small-scale, low-impact forestry. He operates specialist equipment to work on tricky sites dealing with his “niche”, that is, issues like ash dieback and other diseased or infected trees.



Bruno is from the area, starting out after agricultural college as a gamekeeper for a decade which provided him with the necessary woodland management and chainsaw skills that led to his current career. While he does mention the annoyance of dealing with mud and rain in the winter, he is grateful for the “privilege” of living and working in the “gorgeous” High Weald.

Bruno and his wife recently bought their own home which they live in with their young daughter. He also rents a yard space a short commute away for his business with a garage and lockable storage for tools. Before this they rented a mobile home for three years to save up for a deposit, enduring some quite “squalid living conditions” in winter. This was a necessary step for them to get their own home as they had found that renting houses locally in rural areas was far too expensive, preventing them from saving up. When he and his wife were younger and both working as gamekeepers, they were often provided with agriculturally tied housing through their employment – allowing them to live in beautiful, scenic places but with the catch that their salaries were so “rubbish” that they could not afford to live anywhere else or save for future housing. This financial constraint on housing has affected their business plans as well as living situation. Bruno mentions that he once wanted to set up a tree nursery and build a home next to it, but the cost of land was far too high and so this dream had to be abandoned.

One of the biggest struggles Bruno had when searching for suitable housing was finding somewhere with a yard space next to the home. Having access to a yard is essential for his business as he has equipment to store, a sawmill, shipping containers, and tools. He calls having a yard attached to his house the

“The property prices in rural village locations in the High Weald are prohibitively expensive for someone on an agricultural tradesman’s wage.”

“number one dream” but claims that properties with this amenity are “nigh on impossible” to find in the High Weald within his budget. Echoing Billy’s earlier comment, he suggests that these would likely costing over a million pounds. There are several reasons why Bruno would prefer to have a yard closer to home. For example, he does emergency tree-surgery callouts, sometimes at night, and not commuting would drastically reduce callout times. Additionally, security is a prime concern. He has invested a lot of money in CCTV, alarm systems, fences, and padlocks – lamenting having to stay up late checking security cameras regularly in fear of theft. He argues that business costs would be substantially reduced by just living on the same property as his yard, as well as the peace of mind it would give him.

Bruno acknowledges that housing is definitely a problem in the industry, mentioning that most of his employees are living with their parents or in shared housing. Trying to find somewhere in a rural



location with a low salary, a 4x4 car, and space for logging or shooting without disturbing neighbours is unachievable.

He spends most Sundays doing maintenance for his business, often on machinery, which causes noise and so in a less rural location it is just not feasible to do that at home: “I can’t run up a chainsaw at 8am on a Sunday with all my neighbours next door!”. Bruno does believe that suitable housing is out there in these rural locations, but that it is completely unaffordable or being left empty by wealthy landowners who can afford to not rent out spare homes. Similarly, any land that becomes available, he shrugs, is bought up by developers who build expensive housing unsuitable to rural workers. It is disillusioning for those who appreciate the landscape, work in maintaining it, and want to stay – “I’d like my daughter to be able to grow up in the countryside and experience what I did when I was growing up: walking out the back door into the fields and not being stuck in a town environment”.

Housing Needs

- A yard for his business, ideally near the home
- Security measures to store tools and machinery safely
- A storage area for timber and woodchip
- Somewhere to have regular bonfires (that does not disturb neighbours)
- A garage for lockable chainsaw storage in the home
- Off-road parking for a 4x4 vehicle

Dylan

Main Occupation: HGV Driver

Age Group: 30s

As a Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) driver for a woodland management firm, Dylan is involved in hauling: he moves cut wood (usually firewood) from sites to yards. He has been working this job for just over two years after his current employer put him through the necessary lorry driving qualification and hired him to haul wood, having previously moved bricks for another firm. Like many in the industry, his main complaints relate to dependability on weather conditions. What should be a simple job, he says, can be complicated by bad weather that affects business greatly. For him in particular, bad weather can cause adverse driving conditions when transporting logs offroad on tracks in woodland. Nevertheless, he loves being outside for his job and enjoys other countryside pursuits like fishing and shooting.



After a breakup a few years ago, Dylan was unable to afford his own place and so moved back in with his elderly parents. He has two children, one approaching their teenage years, and wishes he had more space so that they could have their own rooms when staying with him (something not currently possible with his living situation). He does point out that he earns just above the threshold for council/social housing and considers his income decent, but says that it is still not financially viable to get his own place due to the high costs of everything from council tax to bills – meaning he would have almost nothing left to live on after these expenses and so (though technically well enough off to pay rent) he cannot get his own place. This is aggravated by the very high rent prices in his area. He highlights the problems for those like him “on the fringe” of being able to get help with housing: he has an income not quite low enough to get on the council list, but not high enough to buy or reasonably afford rent, and “there’s no in-between really”.



With his particular job, unlike other forestry workers, he has relatively simple housing needs similar to those working outside of the industry. He has access to a company yard where any vehicles or machinery are stored, and so has no requirements for secure storage or additional parking at home. Dylan thinks he would be suited to a spacious mobile home because of the lower costs of such a dwelling over a house (although he still highlights the importance of having enough room for his children). He is currently saving to move out from his parents' home, but the issue he encounters is then finding a rental somewhere local to his elderly parents and children which is within his budget.

Unfortunately, thus far his search has been fruitless, concluding that there is just nothing suitable nearby currently that he can afford. It is disheartening, as Dylan was born in the High Weald and expresses his love for the area: “you take it for granted [...] all year round really, you go for walks and you stop somewhere for a view you’ve never seen before (even though you’ve lived there thirty-seven-odd years) and you’ll see this view you’ve never seen in your life... it takes you by surprise”. Even for someone like Dylan, with what should be easily meetable needs, he struggles in the area due to costs and the unavailability of housing.

Housing Needs

- Two or three-bedroom house to have space for his children
- Local to family in the High Weald
- Ideally off-road parking, a garden, and a shed

Alfie

Main Occupation: Tree-Surgeon and Gamekeeper

Age Group: 60s

Alfie and his partner have lived in or around the High Weald for well over a decade. He says that it is “a very powerful thing” being there, fondly admitting that it has a “positive effect” on him; that it is great for his mental and physical health; and that it is a privilege to live where he can “imbibe with this fantastic little landscape”. His job mainly involves running pheasant shoots and groundskeeping, alongside some conservation work and operating as a tree-surgeon on specialised trees. When friends need an extra pair of hands, he also often does chestnut cutting.



Having grown up on a logging camp in Borneo until he was six, forestry work has been in Alfie’s blood since birth. After moving back to the UK and going to art school, he became a photographer. When his mother died, he returned home to her farm and ended up staying there for several years. Alfie loves photography, but found since leaving London where he worked that being in the countryside doing farming with “nice people” was much healthier for him, more relaxed, and kept him fit. After farming he got into his current job of gamekeeping. Although he likes being outside and says that you meet very interesting people in this line of work, he dislikes what he calls the “politics” of the shooting business and adds that his least favourite component is “making sure that I earn enough money” – as a low wage in this field is somewhat of a guarantee.

Game and groundskeeping have provided Alfie with a lot of his housing over the years as this type of work often supplies accommodation on expansive sites in rural areas. He currently lives on a large farm in a rented cottage with his partner and their cat as his children are all grown up. The farm is owned by his landlords who wanted someone to keep an eye on the place and they have an arrangement



where he pays a reduced amount of rent in exchange for doing some tree-work on the land when needed. He likes this arrangement and his landlords, feeling very fortunate to live in his current home because the generous acreage of the farmland and the cottage on it are “not something I could ever afford”. However, for this type of housing the main method for finding rented homes is by word of mouth with a network of private landowners who are only willing to rent to him due to positive character references from their friends. He manages to avoid commercial “cutthroat” landlords this way and has built up a good reputation as a tenant/groundskeeper, but this, he accepts, is not viable for the majority of people in the industry. He is also not guaranteed his home long term and can only hope that his current landlords continue to allow him to stay.

Alfie asserts that a lack of affordable housing is indeed a problem in the industry, causing people to “end up living in inappropriate places” because they cannot access suitable housing – a resource which he says is just “not there anymore”. For his line of work, he needs ample parking for a truck and a trailer; a shed to store a wood-chipper; lockable storage for tools; a workshop space bigger than a domestic garage; and ideally somewhere not in a town. Security is paramount as he has had chainsaws, gear, and tools stolen before many times. He emphasises the gravity of housing issues for those in the industry because of the lack of appropriate housing which has pushed some people he knows into living in flats in towns without the necessary facilities. For example, he mentions knowing others who have had to park wood-chippers in small driveways or trailers on the roadside, and one friend who stores his chainsaws inside plastic Ikea boxes in his living room that he then uses as a coffee table due to having no other place to put them.

Alfie brings up one suggestion to improve the current problem that has some historical precedent. He points to the notion of council farms* – small holdings of homes with a bit of land around them – which were set up in the early 20th Century as social housing for agricultural workers and have now mostly been sold off. Nevertheless, Alfie argues that they should be implemented again to meet the current housing needs of today’s workers.

Housing Needs

- Secure storage for tools, kits, and chainsaws
- A workshop bigger than a domestic garage with security measures
- Ample parking for a truck and trailer
- A shed for a woodchipper
- Good insulation and heating
- Ideally somewhere quiet off the beaten track in woodland

Discussion and Conclusion

What these forestry and coppice workers’ stories illustrate is an unmet need for suitable, affordable homes for them in the High Weald. The current housing situation is simply untenable – resulting in long-lasting housing struggles, financial instability, inconvenient compromises on location or facilities, improper conditions for running a business, and an inaccessibility of suitable homes.

Emerging from these accounts is the finding that affordable housing and land must be made more readily available due to the often-low salaries of those working in the industry. Properties either need to be accessible to buy which have the necessary facilities these workers discussed, or affordable land must be available for them to build suitable premises themselves. In addition, the current social housing system does not account for the requirements of these rural workers, which only exacerbates the problem for those most in need.

It is saddening to hear from these workers of their financial hardships and struggles juggling multiple jobs with seasonable work (having to be skilled in several different areas) to obtain a salary

* <https://www.cpre.org.uk/explainer/country-farms-explainer/>



that makes ends meet. There are also others who have been driven from forestry work because of these low salaries and unworkable housing situations. Thus, the problem arises of maintaining this occupation if people are having to leave it, or are unable to enter it in the first place, due to housing issues. The difficulties of finding affording housing as a young person starting up in forestry or coppice work is concerning for the longevity of this vital industry.

The following table consolidates the housing needs discussed in the workers’ interviews, presenting the most frequently cited essentials for a suitable home.

Common Housing Needs:

	Oscar & Natalie	John	Billy	Fiona & Rob	Bruno	Dylan	Alfie
Ample offroad parking for work vehicle(s), trailers, and/or other machinery							
Lockable storage near/in house for tools and equipment							
A large shed or workshop							
A family-sized home							
A rural home near woodland/grazing land							
Garden/outdoor space for vegetable growing							
Space for a yard at or near the home							
Well-insulated, heated, and cost effective housing							
Space for animals and/or pets							
A boot room							
Proximity to a train station							

Evidently, for many types of workers in this industry the key requirements are space for a workshop, a yard, work vehicle or machinery parking, and storage facilities for tools or equipment. Security was a high priority and these crippling costs, according to the workers, are best addressed by having these facilities on the same property as the home so that they can keep an eye on things themselves. Furthermore, due to preferences for gardens, space for growing vegetables, woodland or grazing land for animals, and noise issues from machinery, it appears that these homes must be in rural locations away from larger towns. As not all households are alike or work together, diverse homes suitable for families where people are in and outside of the industry, at different stages of life, and with varied needs must be considered. There are also other costs in the industry mentioned in these interviews that affect people’s housing decisions which should be taken into account: e.g. the high costs of machinery; insurance cost for businesses and work vehicles; security expenses; and the additional costs associated with self-builds like surveys or planning permission.

The workers were forthcoming with suggestions of how to improve the current predicament, some of which have been mentioned thus far like repopularising council farms and similar gated farmsteads of agriculturally tied properties. In this vein, many commented on how there should be more



affordable agriculturally tied properties to facilitate these going to the people who need them in the industry. This would also be more likely to ensure the specific facilities necessary for those in this line of work, like yard spaces or workshops and grazing land, are retained rather than being built upon or replaced by garages and other facilities that would make the property less suitable for a rural worker.

It was suggested that there should be schemes specifically targeted at helping forestry and coppice workers buy or rent suitable housing. One interviewee suggested that the council should free up plots of land for those in the industry, emphasising the importance of these being well-managed so that large firms and developers could not acquire them or exploit the system. Bruno argued that there should be standardised pricing for land sales so that big developers are prevented from driving up the prices. He also proposed increased taxes for empty second-homes unused by wealthy landowners or time limits on how long these can stand vacant before they must be rented or sold. He believes that this is a major problem in the affluent High Weald, as many of these homes are highly suited to rural workers but are kept out of circulation. Billy highlights the irony of forestry and coppice workers “reverse commuting” due to having to live in cheaper accommodation in towns and then driving out every morning to rural areas for work – while most of those living in the rural areas are driving the opposite way to commute up to London. Clearly, the current system is flawed.

This report carries some limitations due to the holistic, qualitative approach taken to capturing the stories of a small sample of workers in the High Weald. The findings are only applicable to this geographical location, and more data should be gathered elsewhere to gain a more national picture of the problem. Additionally, some difficulties arise with classifying the interview sample as forestry or coppice workers exclusively because many do multiple jobs which may overlap with or be separate from the industry. However, for this report, interviewees whose main job is or has been in forestry or coppice were included. It would be greatly beneficial to expand this further to capture the housing experiences of other types of rural and agricultural workers. Furthermore, a study collecting quantitative survey data on the housing needs of those in the industry should be conducted to provide results representing a larger, more diverse sample of workers.

What is discernible from these accounts is that these are people who love the High Weald and its’ landscape, who desperately want to stay and continue doing their jobs, but are encountering difficulties at every turn when it comes to finding and affording suitable homes. If there is to be any hope in the survival of an essential industry that contributes so much to the character and maintenance of the High Weald, then housing policy must change to better support these workers.



Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Background on family and career pathway:

- What work do you do and what does it involve?
- Could you please give me some quick background about where you are from and what led you into your current line of work?
- What is your favourite thing about your work? And your least favourite?
- What are your other interests or hobbies?

Current housing situation:

- What type of housing do you live in?
- Who lives with you in your home?
- Do you have any issues with your current living situation?
- Do you want to stay in your current home or area?
- Do you live/have you ever lived in the High Weald or another protected landscape?
 - If yes, how long for?
 - If you do not currently, why is that?
 - How would you describe the protected landscape you live/lived or work in? How does it make you feel?

Housing needs:

- What are your housing needs?
 - How many bedrooms do you need?
 - Do you require access to a workshop or yard near your home?
 - Do you require any additional outside storage for work related tools, materials, or machinery at your home?
 - Do you require any additional parking for work related vehicles like trucks or trailers at your home?
 - What are your concerns or needs about security in your home?
 - Do you require any further home amendments or facilities that I haven't mentioned yet?
- Have you ever been unable to live in your preferred location or somewhere you need to be for work due to housing issues? What were these?

Financial and future aspirations:

- Would you say that the lack of affordable housing is a problem for your industry?
- What would be your ideal living situation? And what are your current barriers to achieving this?
- What is your long-term [realistic] accommodation plan?



Glossary

High Weald National Landscape	One of the 46 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in Britain protected by law. See the High Weald National Landscape's website for more details.
Rural workers	People who work in rural areas on agricultural, handicraft, or related jobs (e.g., farmers, foresters, and woodworkers).
Coppicing	A traditional woodland management method which involves periodically cutting trees down to the stump to encourage new growth.
Forester	Someone who manages or works in woodland to create usable timber from a crop of trees, alongside other outputs like recreational value and conserving habitats.
Skylining timber	A timber extraction method which uses a skyline crane and cables to transport felled timber from the harvesting location to a point where it can be moved from the site.
Post and rail	A traditional fencing style ideal for farm fencing, widely used in the rural communities of Britain.
Arboriculture	The study and practice of the cultivation, management, and establishment of trees, vines, and other woody plants for the benefit of society.
Tree-surgery	The process of taking care of trees through pruning dead or diseased branches, stump-removal, pollarding, or other techniques (often using chainsaws).
Environmental forestry	A forest management practice that balances socioeconomic needs with environmental needs, using forest resources responsibly and conserving them. Also known as sustainable forestry.
Low Weald	The peripheral area around the High Weald consisting of a gentler rolling landscape than the hills of the High Weald.
Agriculturally tied housing	Planning restrictions issued by local authorities that limit who can live in some properties in the countryside to agricultural/forestry workers and facilitate planning permission for these workers in areas people may otherwise be denied.

