Thank you for your letter of 31 March to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State about biodiversity offsetting. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

We recognise the importance of ancient woodland as an irreplaceable habitat and there are no plans to change the current protection for it in the planning system. Press coverage has suggested that Government’s plans for a national biodiversity offsetting system could alter the protection of ancient woodlands but this has never been the case. The mitigation hierarchy in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) will remain in place and offsetting would not result in any change to the protections for ancient woodlands.

The protection of ancient woodland is outlined in the NPPF:

“planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland and the loss of aged or veteran trees found outside ancient woodland, unless the need for, and benefits of, the development in that location clearly outweigh the loss” [paragraph 118, NPPF]

Work is also ongoing in relation to several other points raised by the Woodland Trust. For example, Natural England is currently reviewing its strategy for woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest with specific consideration being given to the adequacy of coverage for ancient woodland. At present, England has over 360,000ha of ancient woodland of which approximately 20% is already notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Natural England has also recently hosted a workshop with a range of partners, including the Woodland Trust, to discuss the future role of the Ancient Woodland Inventory and what different interests would like from it.
There have been several concerns raised by the Woodland Trust as part of its campaign. You will no doubt be pleased to know that the Secretary of State has invited the Chair of the Trust to meet and discuss these issues. We are particularly interested in exploring how the Government and the Trust can best work together to ensure that our ancient woodlands remain well protected.

Our policy on biodiversity offsetting will be made in light of all the evidence and opinion available to us, which includes consideration of the views expressed by our stakeholders. The Environmental Audit Committee has recommended that Defra waits until the six offsetting pilots have finished and been independently assessed and analysed before making any policy decisions on offsetting. The Government has agreed with this recommendation. The pilots have now completed but will require several months of analysis before they can fully inform our thinking. There are no plans at this stage to announce a way forward on biodiversity offsetting.

I hope this reassures you and clarifies the position regarding biodiversity offsetting and ancient woodland.

[Signature]

[Signature]