What’s the issue?

Wood is an absolutely essential commodity for M&S. It provides the base material for many different products, most notably furniture, but it’s also present in hundreds, if not thousands, of other products from tissues through to hairbrushes and greeting cards. It’s also a critical material for packaging – cartons, sleeves and labels, and can be found in multiple different component parts throughout our stores, offices, distribution centres and construction sites.

As a business committed to sustainability through Plan A, it’s essential that we find ways to guarantee the best possible environmental and social stewardship for wood. This challenge takes us to the heart of a broader global issue: how best to use the finite land resources for multiple demands – land to produce raw materials (food, fuel, clothing and homes), land for habitation, and land set aside to preserve earth’s natural balance. It goes without saying that we must get the best possible value from land we use to produce raw materials - the highest possible outputs from the lowest inputs - minimal water and energy use, minimal waste, minimal disruption to people and nature.

In an ideal world, we would address this issue ‘at source’, working directly with growers. In some supply chains this is possible. For example, our furniture manufacturer operates near to the forest and saw mill. But in cases where wood is processed into pulp, paper, plywood or MDF, where supply chains are more complicated, we need a different approach. For example a pack of copier paper will be made of wood mixed and blended from many different species and sources. M&S uses almost 100 different timber species from 47 different countries – quite a challenge.

What are we doing about it?

As is the case for many other aspects of Plan A, we’ve set a challenging target to drive us forward, committing to source all our wood from the most sustainable sources by 2020. FSC and recycled sources meet our standard, but so do others that credibly protect forests and communities.

Since we launched Plan A in 2007, we’ve evolved our strategy to meet our targets, shifting from a commitment to FSC certified wood alone, which restricted our ability to progress, to a policy that sets the bar high, but provides different ways to get over it. So, today, we give preference to FSC, but will purchase non-certified wood if we have sufficient evidence that forests and communities are protected. This policy also reflects the reality of the different ways in which we use wood. For example, in construction and food packaging it is ambitious but achievable to demand 100% FSC certification, whereas when sourcing materials such as clothing tags from India or Christmas decorations from China, it is almost impossible to enforce the same standards.

We don’t believe this greater flexibility means a lowering of standards. It reflects our determination to find ‘real world’ solutions. We’ve built in safeguards and are developing processes that ensure we source wood produced in the most sustainable ways possible. These include a simple RED/ GREEN rating system that M&S buyers and suppliers can use and a range of training resources for all involved, such as webinars, guides and a help desk. We also map our supply chains so we can understand better the root causes of non-compliance. And we don’t take self-assessment as sufficient evidence – we ask each and every one of our suppliers for documentation to back up claims. This adds time and complexity but is absolutely necessary to have confidence in the information provided.
What happens next?

We’re working hard to maintain the progress we’ve made and continue working towards our 100% 2020 target – we’re currently at 96%. We’re also using our relationship with FSC and other standard setting organisations as an opportunity to work collaboratively with other stakeholders - retailers, processors, growers, NGOs and others - to argue the case for a more sustainable approach to the way in which wood is grown and sourced around the world. The sobering fact is that stakeholders have been working on sustainable sources of timber for over 20 years, it is one of the commodities with the most advanced standards and greatest enforcement due to EU Timber Regulations. However, in complex supply chains it is still far from easy to guarantee sustainable sources, no matter how sincere your intents are.

What have we learnt?

Over the past seven years we’ve learnt some important lessons:

• Wood and other commodity supply chains are long and complex - we need to identify and influence critical relationships to achieve our Plan A goals, traders and processors as well as growers

• Our influence is limited – we will support supply chain partners who want to improve, but if they fail to match our commitment, we will walk away

• We need to listen to suppliers, but cannot assume they are always right and must be ready to challenge and test them

• It’s important to choose the best partners - for example, working with Rainforest Alliance to define our standards and Strategic Environmental Consulting to add clarity and rigour to our assessment and reporting approach

• Always be ready to act, review and improve - we need to keep trying, learning and making improvements on the basis of what we discover, which is what Plan A is really all about

• We need trees and forests. We must be demanding of our relationships but also make sure the standards we rely on are fit for purpose to drive scale in the market place and achieve positive impact on the ground.