

## Westminster Hall debate on Woodland Creation

11<sup>th</sup> February

### Summary

2026-2030 are crucial years to turn the tide for nature and climate. Trees, existing and new, must play a central role. England is one of the least wooded countries in Europe with just 14% woodland cover compared to the European average of 37%<sup>1</sup>. The Environment Act 2021 set a legally-binding target to reach 16.5% tree cover across England by 2050, which the Government aims to achieve by planting 30,000 hectares per annum. Thanks to much effort over recent years such as the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO), the 2023/2024 tree planting season had the highest planting rate for over 20 years.<sup>2</sup>

Despite progress, however, the pace of woodland creation is still not enough to achieve the national targets. To keep the momentum of new growth it is important to:

- ensure all saplings receive good aftercare, long term management, monitoring and protection. For this, policy and guidance should emphasise ‘tree establishment’ rather than tree planting,
- build a skilled workforce to deliver tree establishment, woodland expansion and management activities,
- increase natural regeneration, particularly around ancient woodlands buffer zones.

While the Government has made positive progress on tree numbers, tree and woodland management requires more attention. Woodland specialist wildlife continues to decline despite an overall increase in the UK’s canopy cover throughout the 20th century, demonstrating that woodland creation must not be an isolated target.<sup>3</sup> Pests, diseases, pollution, climate change, inappropriate and/or poor management and inadequate legal protection contribute to substantial tree loss, reduced habitat connectivity and increased fragmentation. Without landscape scale consideration and action to address these threats, the significant amount of public money spent to increase tree cover is at risk of being wasted.

In addition to woodland creation, the tree policy lens must focus on:

- restoring woodland health by managing pests, diseases and pollution through investment and improved policy,

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<sup>1</sup> [Provisional Woodland Statistics](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://forestrycommission.blog.gov.uk/2025/06/27/a-year-of-growth-tree-planting-rates-hit-their-highest-level-in-over-20-years/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://stateofnature.org.uk/>

- giving full legal protection to the most important nature sites, including all ancient woodlands.
- Publishing an updated UK Government deer management strategy with landscape scale actions

### **Recommendations for woodland creation and tree planting**

#### **Increasing natural regeneration and natural colonisation**

Government policy has focused strongly on tree-planting, but less progress has been made on natural regeneration, where woodlands are allowed to recover and expand. Natural regeneration approaches can produce more diverse and ecologically resilient habitats, often at lower cost. Natural regeneration (woodland expansion through locally self-seeded trees) and natural colonisation (trees naturally spreading and establishing on previously unwooded land) should be recognised as primary methods for increasing native and resilient tree cover (where suitable ground conditions and seed sources from existing high-quality native woodland or hedgerow areas exist). Natural colonisation should also be named as the default tree cover expansion method in 100 metre buffer zones around ancient woodlands. Adequate funding should be available for land managers to pursue this method of woodland expansion, with support for fencing, deer control, and planting of seed islands where needed, and funding terms must allow flexibility for natural dynamics.

#### **Closing the skills gap**

The UK Government has a role to ensure that there is a strong, skilled workforce to deliver tree planting, establishment, management and restoration activities needed to reach its tree cover targets. Given the popularity of training schemes such as that under the previous Nature for Climate Fund, there is a case for a broader land use sector skills strategy to target a range of conservation land management roles and design a system to build generational skills and long-term stewardship, targeting career starters, switchers and small businesses. Skills England should be engaged to ensure a cross-government approach. This should also include support for educators and trainers.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Transitioning EWCO into Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs)**

Defra should provide clarity and associated stakeholder engagement and government agency staff training for the transition from EWCO into ELMs, ensuring public money delivers public

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<sup>4</sup> <https://trees.org.uk/Trees.org.uk/media/Trees-org.uk/Documents/AA/AA-Strategy-Document-2025-2027-WEB.pdf>

goods that benefit biodiversity. Landowners should be encouraged to embed a mosaic of habitats and features to cater to different woodland species and those associated with open grown trees, improving connectivity and reducing fragmentation.

### **Urban forestry**

Just 27.6% of UK urban wards have a tree canopy cover higher than 20%<sup>5</sup> - the minimum urban canopy cover recommended by Forest Research (15% for coastal towns) .<sup>6</sup> The Environmental Improvement Plan specified that a new England Trees Action Plan will contain further details to support access to woodlands, and this should first be targeted to where there are the greatest inequalities when it comes to who has access to green spaces.

### **Other factors for consideration**

#### **Sustainable woodland management**

The forestry sector is essential to meet legally binding climate, and nature recovery targets such as halting and reversing the decline of species. It is possible to have a sustainable forestry sector that delivers benefits for nature, climate and people. The percentage of woodland area in the UK that is certified against agreed environmental standards has stagnated in recent years, despite a long-term positive trend.<sup>7</sup> For England alone there is a short-term deteriorating trend.<sup>8</sup> Woodlands must be brought into sustainable management through targeted funding and expert advice and support for woodland owners.

#### **Strengthening biosecurity and the management of invasive non-native species (INNS) and investing in the domestic tree supply industry**

Between 2009 and 2021 the annual cost of INNS to the UK economy increased by 135% to an estimated £4 billion.<sup>9</sup> The greatest costs are felt by the agriculture and forestry sectors, largely due to fungal pathogens, with respective impacts of £2,321 million and £1,010 million a year.

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<sup>5</sup> Sales, Kris; Walker, Hannah; Sparrow, Kate; Handley, Phillip; Vaz Monteiro, Madalena; Hand, Kathryn L.; Buckland, Annabel; Chambers-Ostler, Alexander and Doick, Kieron J. (2023). The canopy cover Webmap of the United Kingdom's towns and cities. *Arboricultural Journal*, 45(4) pp. 258–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071375.2023.2233864>

<sup>6</sup> [https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr\\_fc\\_treecanopydata\\_leaflet.pdf](https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr_fc_treecanopydata_leaflet.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ukbi-sustainable-forestry/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/england-biodiversity-indicators/area-of-forestry-land-under-certified-sustainable-management-schemes>

<sup>9</sup> Eschen, R., Kadzamia, M., Stutz, S., Ogunmodede, A., Djeddour, D., Shaw, R., Pratt, C., Varia, S., Constantine, K. and Williams, F. (2023) An updated assessment of the direct costs of invasive non-native species to the United Kingdom. *Biological Invasions*, 25, pp. 3265-3276. Available: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10530-023-031072>

The border is an active pathway for the introduction of many harmful pests and pathogens, and the Horticulture trade is likely responsible for 40% of INNS in Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> Investing in domestic tree nurseries to reduce reliance on imports and developing a strong and bio-secure supply of British-grown trees is a win-win for the economy, the environment and for local businesses. Market confidence is the biggest barrier for a robust British tree supply chain and the most common concern expressed by forestry nurseries.<sup>11</sup>

Establishment of new plant pests and diseases will seriously undermine Government initiatives to raise tree canopy cover. Scientists from the University of Exeter estimate that more than half of new tree growth could be lost by 2050 due to the arrival of new tree pests, compared with growth rates if no additional pests or diseases were to arrive.<sup>12</sup> Under current trends, they predict potential severe losses for ecologically and economically important species like oak, apple, poplar and pine. The authors recommend that “*strengthening phytosanitary regulations, improving surveillance of trade pathways, and fostering international cooperation will be critical*”.

The UK-EU SPS agreement has a trade-off for biosecurity. Access to EU data system TRACES is positive, but the loss of routine import control checks carries substantial potential cost to precious species and the UK economy from invasive pests and disease. The UK should seek protected Zone status for priority pests and pathogens, including *Xylella fastidiosa* and plane wilt (*Ceratocystis platani*). Checks should also remain for imports with the greatest risk, e.g. large trees, mature trees and trees which are root-balled and in soil.

### **Protection and restoration of ancient woodlands**

Ancient woodlands include England’s oldest semi-natural woodlands, plantations on ancient woodland sites, ancient wood pasture and parkland, ancient and veteran trees. These environmental monuments each hold a crucial place in the ecosystems and communities they are part of. However, there is no robust legal protection for these rarest and most wildlife-rich trees and woodlands. Their protection relies largely on policy provisions in the NPPF planning policy, which can too easily be overridden. This leaves a glaring gap in the legal framework for nature protection in England. It is not possible to replicate or replace the ecosystem services of ancient woodlands or ancient and veteran trees in the environment

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<sup>10</sup> [Horticulture PAP for Great Britain » NNSS](#)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/dzkneja/strong-roots-report.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Bebber, D. P., Maclean, I. M. D., Mosedale, J. R., & Youngman, B. D. (2025). Potential impacts of plant pests and diseases on trees and forests in the United Kingdom. *Plants, People, Planet*, 7(5), 1538–1550. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.70023>

with planting new saplings. To fully protect these irreplaceable habitats there must be new bespoke full legal protection that applies to all ancient woodlands as described above.

**Further detail can be found in the following documents from Wildlife and Countryside Link:**

- Briefing for the new England Tree Action Plan - [WCL Briefing Priorities for a new England Tree Action Plan Dec 2025.pdf](#)
- Woodland Creation briefing - [Link Briefing Woodland Creation.pdf](#)
- Ancient woodland briefing - [Link Briefing Ancient Woodland Protection.pdf](#)
- Woodland Management briefing - [Woodland Management - Link briefing.docx](#)

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Wildlife and Countryside Link is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 94 organisations to campaign for nature, climate and a healthy environment for everyone. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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