

Achieving net zero and nature's recovery: the role of trees and woods

Tree and woodland expansion principles for England

- 1. A significant net expansion in trees and woodland cover is needed** to respond to the climate and biodiversity crisis, deliver net zero commitments and compensate for the loss of diseased trees. To drive nature's recovery, the majority of new woodland should be native.
- 2. Funding and support must be made available** by Government to deliver the woodland expansion, tree planting and management needed. A role for the private sector is also crucial.
- 3. New trees and woodland expansion should favour native trees and woodland**, naturally regenerated or from UK-sourced and grown planting material except in exceptional circumstances and where rigorous safeguards are put in place.
- 4. A new spatial strategy is needed** to guide woodland expansion, as part of a broader land use strategy for England.
- 5. New woodlands and tree rich landscapes should deliver multiple benefits for climate, nature and people** and be sustainably managed.
- 6. Better protection of existing species, habitats and potential restoration sites and sensitivity to existing public access, archaeology and cultural landscapes** must accompany expansion of our tree and woodland resources, underpinned by project-level surveying prior to conversion to woodland.
- 7. A more ecological approach to commercial forestry is needed** which delivers biodiversity enhancement alongside other benefits, with the nation's forests managed as an exemplar.
- 8. High standards of delivery for new trees and woodland** should be backed up by transparent monitoring and reporting on woodland expansion and its benefits, including regular national canopy surveying.

Introduction

An expansion of woodland cover and more trees in the landscape can play a key role in tackling climate change and ecological breakdown, and help improve health and wellbeing. The recent UK legal commitment to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the 2017 Clean Growth Strategy and reports from the Climate Change Committee¹ create a strong imperative to act now. Recent research^{2,3} highlights the critical importance of trees as part of the response to climate change. This is in the context of ongoing losses of biodiversity and natural forest ecosystems around the world, as recently highlighted by the United Nations⁴. The UK net zero target therefore presents an unprecedented opportunity to expand woodland cover, and restore nature.

¹ *Net Zero: the UK's contribution to stopping global warming* (2019); *Land use: Reducing emissions and preparing for climate change* (2018); and *Reducing UK emissions – 2019 Progress Report to Parliament*

² Bastin et al (2019) The global tree restoration potential. *Science* 365, 6–9

³ Lewis et al (2019) Regenerate natural forests to store carbon. *Nature* 568, 25–28

⁴ IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

Rates of woodland creation remain low in England. Having more trees and woodland in the landscape represents an opportunity to make more space for nature, but needs to be done well to ensure positive benefits for climate, biodiversity and people. Ensuring the increase in tree cover meets both climate and biodiversity aspirations will require a radically different approach than has been taken in the past. We do not want to repeat – in the rush to lock up carbon – the inappropriate afforestation driven by tax breaks in the 1970s and 1980s, that led to 20% of the UK blanket bog resource being damaged, at huge cost to both the climate, landscape and wildlife.

We therefore need a greater emphasis on the potential to deliver multiple benefits for climate, biodiversity and people through the expansion of high-value woodland habitats and a greater number of trees throughout England. There is a parallel need to guard against the loss of existing woodlands of significant nature and carbon value, and to ensure that tree-planting does not have a negative impact on existing places and habitats with high ecological, carbon or cultural value.

We believe that following the eight principles will help to achieve this balance, and secure new woodlands and trees that work for wildlife, climate and people.

Eight steps to achieve more trees and woodlands

- 1. A significant net expansion in native tree and woodland canopy is needed to respond to the climate emergency, deliver on commitments to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and compensate for the loss of diseased trees.**

The Committee on Climate Change recommends an expansion of UK woodland cover from the current 13% to 19% by 2050. The recent amendment to the Climate Change Act commits the UK Government to delivering net zero by 2050, and evidence increasingly points to an earlier date being needed. We support a target for net zero of 2045 at the latest, leading to the need for higher ambition for woodland and other natural climate solutions.

- 2. Funding and support must be made available by Government to deliver on the level of woodland expansion and tree planting needed, including via the private sector**

Public money must be available to support the creation and ongoing management of high-value woodland habitats and more native trees, which deliver multiple public goods such as supporting biodiversity, enhancing wellbeing and mitigating climate change. Funding must be well administered to prevent barriers to new woodland, such as those that have inhibited tree planting via current and previous grant schemes.

- 3. Woodland expansion should favour native trees and woodland, naturally regenerated or from UK-sourced and grown planting material except in exceptional circumstances and where rigorous safeguards are put in place.**

Expansion of permanent native woodland cover has the potential to provide major benefits for wildlife, people and the climate, and will play a key role in meeting the 25 year environment plan commitments to create 500,000ha of new priority habitat through a Nature Recovery Network and the 180,000ha of new woodland committed to in the Clean Growth Strategy. The focus for public money should be on providing a diversity of wildlife rich, native woodland habitats and trees in the landscape, with necessary species and structural diversity to incorporate resilience to climate change and disease. Increases in native woodland cover should be delivered in a variety of ways, including natural regeneration as well as tree planting, and in time, can be an important source of valuable hardwood timber. The choice of trees planted should reinforce the natural character of an area.

Imported trees present a huge risk to UK reforestation efforts and the health of existing trees through introduction of pests and diseases. For example, soil of imported trees is a high-risk pathway for introduction of invasive invertebrate species⁵. New tree stock should therefore, wherever possible, be UK-sourced and grown, and stricter phytosanitary standards and biosecurity screening, including of soil, should be applied to imports.

4. Woodland expansion should be guided by a new spatial strategy

A strategic approach to woodland expansion is needed to realise opportunities and avoid the mistakes of the past. This should include productive forestry expansion, agroforestry and creation of both priority wooded and open habitats to deliver policy commitments including a Nature Recovery Network, increasing engagement with the natural environment and tackling flood risk. Greater spatial planning for woodland should be part of a broader land use strategy for England, in which the needs of local communities and stakeholders are recognised and incorporated into woodland expansion programmes.

Fresh research will be needed where understanding is lacking, including on how to maximise the contribution of natural climate solutions to meeting net zero. Existing tools should also be employed, such as National Character Area (NCA) statements, which provide a comprehensive summary of the key features that distinguish each type of landscape in England.

5. There is a huge opportunity for new woodlands and tree rich landscapes to deliver multiple benefits for climate, nature and people, and to be sustainably managed

Trees and woodlands have a central role to play in supporting biodiversity, enhancing wellbeing, mitigating climate change and supplying raw materials. This must be fully recognised in future policies, maximising opportunities to achieve win-win approaches towards multiple targets. Trade-offs will be inevitable in some cases, for instance, increased management in broadleaf woodlands can benefit biodiversity but reduce woodland carbon stocks in the medium-term. The spatial strategy recommended above will be critical in order to make informed decisions.

Planting trees can also benefit farm businesses. Agroforestry, in particular, demonstrates significant potential to deliver carbon savings and numerous other goods, such as a diverse range of food, timber and fodder products.

6. Expansion of our tree and woodland resources must be accompanied by better protection of existing species and habitats and sensitivity to existing public access, archaeology and cultural landscapes. Woodland expansion should be underpinned by project-level surveys

Woodland creation at the pace and scale that is needed comes with inherent risks for landscapes that are already valuable for people and wildlife, or have high restoration potential for other habitats. Restoration and reconnection of these priority open habitats, such as peatlands, species-rich grasslands and heathlands, is essential and must continue alongside woodland expansion. In some cases, restoring these habitats, many of which are threatened themselves, will involve the removal of previous, misguided plantation forestry schemes.

Large-scale woodland creation projects should be informed by a clear consideration of the existing ecological value of the site and result in no net loss in public access. Likewise, the most important archaeology and cultural landscapes require sensitive woodland planning and design in order that

⁵ Comprehensive analysis of pathways of unintentional introduction and spread of invasive alien species – report of the UK. May 2019

they are not adversely affected. Retention and full implementation of Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations is a key part of this process, as well as guidance such as National Character Area statements and Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments.

7. A more ecological approach to commercial forestry is needed which delivers biodiversity enhancement alongside other benefits, with the nation's forests managed as an exemplar

Achieving targets for woodland expansion and biodiversity recovery will require going beyond minimum standards for commercial forestry, for example through increased uptake of the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification and adoption of species advice within the Woodland Wildlife Toolkit⁶. Large-scale commercial timber production is important, but as a commercial activity should not rely on public funds. However, where schemes include native woodland creation, and other priority habitats beyond that required by the UK Forestry Standard, they should remain eligible for public support. The risks of commercial and large-scale planting for bioenergy (with or without carbon capture and storage) must be carefully considered and the widespread use of insecticides and peat in commercial tree cultivation should be reduced.

There is huge potential for the nation's forests to be used as an exemplar to demonstrate this more ecological approach, including expanding the area of new native woodland on the public forest estate, with a view to increasing the domestic supply of hardwood timber in the future.

8. High standards for delivery of new trees and woodland should be backed up by transparent monitoring and reporting on woodland expansion, and the benefits it is providing. This should include regular national canopy surveying

Public interest in woodland expansion should be reflected by access to information, and a comprehensive system of timely monitoring and evaluation. There should be opportunities for consultation, and mechanisms for feedback on new woodland proposals, to ensure the buy-in of local communities, with comprehensive monitoring and evaluation to assess the benefits provided.

Next steps

Our organisations are united in an aim to see more woods and trees across England, for people, for climate and for nature. The need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050 or sooner, and to enhance the natural environment for the next generation, provide an opportunity to create more wooded landscapes, and integrate trees into the way we manage and farm our countryside, and to provide health and wellbeing benefits for local communities.

Such large-scale and potentially rapid woodland expansion presents inevitable risks, and it is imperative that these are recognised, managed and mitigated. These principles are intended to set a clear foundation for this effort, and to inform a conversation about woodland expansion with Government, industry and the public.

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⁶ <https://woodlandwildlifetoolkit.sylva.org.uk/>

These eight principles are supported by the following Wildlife and
Countryside Link members

