

Woodland Creation briefing

July 2024

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) and covers how England and the UK can deliver their woodland creation targets.

Introduction

England is one of the least wooded countries in Europe with just 10% woodland cover compared to the European average of 37%.¹ Increasing tree cover from new planting and natural colonisation and regeneration are essential responses to the nature and climate crisis and will bring England closer to reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

England and UK woodland creation targets in law and policy have not yet been followed by sustained delivery. The Environment Act 2021 led to legally binding targets for at least 16.5% of land in England to be covered by woodland and trees outside woodland by the end of 2050.² This is a 2% increase on the current total tree cover of 14.5%. The Environmental Improvement Plan sets a (non-binding) interim target to plant the equivalent of 34,000 hectares in England by January 2028.³ The England Trees Action Plan (2021) aimed to treble tree planting by the end of the current Parliament. As a result, the Action Plan states that ‘England will have at least 12% woodland cover by mid-century’.⁴ Most recently, the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework 2023 set a target to increase tree cover by 3% of total land area in Protected Landscapes by 2050 (from 2022 baseline).⁵ If delivered well, these targets should work in harmony with other Environment Act targets and commitments in the Environmental Improvement Plan to protect 30% of land and sea for nature (30x30), halt the decline in species by 2030, recover protected sites and help to reduce exposure to the most harmful air pollutants.

Tree planting targets were missed every year of the last Parliament⁶ but this does not have to be the case over the new Parliament. The England Tree Action Plan and the Nature for Climate Fund engaged a variety of stakeholders—foresters, farmers, conservation groups, and others—in efforts to increase tree cover in England. With these foundations in place and with new targeted funding and plans in place together with the promised UK-wide tree planting task force, there is the potential to end the

¹ [FFF 2022.pdf \(forestresearch.gov.uk\)](#)

² https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/90/pdfs/ukxiem_20230090_en.pdf

³ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64a6d9c1c531eb000c64fffa/environmental-improvement-plan-2023.pdf>

⁴ [Tree planting in the UK - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ <https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2023/06/PWS-statsnotice-15jun23.pdf>

run of missed targets and to secure meaningful progress towards achieving, if not exceeding 16.5% tree cover in England by 2050.

The benefits of tree planting

Tree planting is an opportunity to bring new life to areas lacking in tree cover, providing a more beneficial and biodiverse space for wildlife and people. This potential covers both landscape scale woodland creation projects, such as in the National Forest⁷ and single projects such as Wild Ennerdale, where 40,000 native trees were planted within a mosaic of habitats.⁸

Evidence suggests that natural regeneration, the process by which native trees and shrubs self-seed and spread, is a key tool for supporting native woodlands and wildlife to adapt and build resilience to climate change⁹, pests and disease, and that it reduces losses of soil organic carbon¹⁰, especially in the case of wet woodland. Woodland creation and tree planting beside watercourses can provide effective natural flood defences by absorbing rainwater, slowing the flow, and reducing flood peaks by up to 65%. Soil in wooded areas is porous, with pore spaces that can soak up and store rainwater 60 times more effectively than soil in grasslands.¹¹ Woodlands also act as a buffer to prevent pollutants from entering nearby watercourses, improving rainwater infiltration, and reducing soil erosion.

What does good woodland creation look like?

To maximise the benefits of new woodland, it is essential to carefully consider the location of tree planting, the scale of the project and the tree species that will be planted. A management plan for the aftercare of the saplings is essential to ensure that they have the best chance to reach maturity.

Urban tree planting is incredibly important and woodland creation must also be considered at a landscape scale to best achieve wider ecosystem benefits and to ensure that rare and threatened species are not adversely impacted. Trees and woodlands create connections for wildlife to thrive by offering shelter, protection, food sources and nesting sites for many characteristic species¹², particularly for Britain's 25 specialist birds which breed and feed within closed canopy woodland.¹³ New woodland should boost these species by providing new habitat connections and buffers to protect ancient woodlands from harmful stressors including root compaction and air pollution. Habitat

⁷ <https://www.nationalforest.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Planting%20Hope%20Final%20Web-Accessible%20Version.pdf>

⁸ <https://rewildingeuropa.com/rew-project/wild-ennerdale/>

⁹ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0252466>

¹⁰ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0636/POST-PN-0636.pdf>

¹¹ [The benefits of woodland creation: Woods and Water - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/444444/The_benefits_of_woodland_creation_Woods_and_Water_-_GOV.UK.pdf)

¹² <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/animals/>

¹³ <https://www.smallwoods.org.uk/assets/Uploads/Mercian/Advisory-notes/Trends-in-woodland-management-and-the-status-of-woodland-birds.pdf>

connectivity is particularly important for less mobile species of bats¹⁴ amongst other species, for example moth abundance and diversity increases with woodland connectivity.¹⁵

Selecting the right species for the conditions of a given site is essential to maximise the chance of survival and longevity of the trees. Planting native broadleaves should be prioritised wherever possible. Native broadleaf trees left to grow for 100+ years in suitable locations will store as much carbon as conifers while providing better opportunities for wildlife¹⁶, as biodiversity is higher overall in woodland habitats comprised of mainly native trees in good condition.¹⁷ In places that are not already high carbon, conservation or community value, or highly productive farmland, well-managed new native trees and woodlands can be part of a better, bigger more joined up priority habitat network for woodland wildlife species to recover in.

The below policy recommendations set out how good woodland creation can be encouraged across the country.

Policy recommendation 1: Publish a new Tree Strategy.

The England Tree Action Plan 2021-2024 has so far served as the primary mechanism to deliver woodland creation targets. It is unclear what will provide this central, coordinating drive when the Action Plans ends in 2024. An updated and improved Tree Strategy must be published swiftly, to ensure there is no strategy gap, informed by the delivery problems that have dogged the 21-24 Action Plan.

In line with the recommendations by the National Audit Office¹⁸, Link would like to see an updated tree strategy which prioritises:

- Guiding investment in woodland creation to the places that bring most benefits for people, nature and climate. Government should invest in a Public Nature Estate to strategically purchase land to create public and community owned, accessible, wildlife-rich woodland in locations where this is currently lacking.¹⁹
- Improving protection of irreplaceable habitats of ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees by giving them additional legal weight in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and forthcoming National Development Management Policies (NDMP), so that development resulting in their loss or deterioration be refused unless for wholly exceptional reasons.
- Reducing the threat of pests and/or diseases by growing more trees domestically through investment in commercial, local authority and community tree nurseries, scaling up the Tree Production Capital Grant and ending the dangerous reliance on tree imports.

¹⁴ <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/eap.1546>

¹⁵ [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ddi.13599#:~:text=Main%20conclusions,\(and%20consequently%20gamma\)%20diversity](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ddi.13599#:~:text=Main%20conclusions,(and%20consequently%20gamma)%20diversity)

¹⁶ <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/1438141>

¹⁷ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/state-of-uk-woods-and-trees/>

¹⁸ <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/planting-trees-in-england/>

¹⁹ See Link proposal for a Public Nature Estate:

https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Nature_2030_Report_18.07.2023.pdf

- Creating jobs by tackling the trees and forestry skills gap by establishing a National Nature Service to provide paid work and training programmes.²⁰ Increase the current Nature for Climate Fund training fund of £700,000 to at least £10 million from a growth and skills levy²¹ to help the sector develop the skills and capacity needed to meet woodland targets.

Policy recommendation 2: set targets to ensure a minimum 20% of tree canopy cover at urban and semi-urban levels.

There is an opportunity for the next Government to bring trees to people in places where woodland and tree cover is currently sparse. Growing evidence shows access to nature, including woodland improves mental and physical wellbeing which in turn reduces costs to the NHS.²² Tree Equity Scores reveal that areas of lower tree cover are linked directly to more pollution and poorer air quality.²³ Trees have the unique ability to address both urban heat and air pollution by bringing the temperature in urban areas down by 3-4°C²⁴ and removing some particulate pollution, one of the greatest health threats in the UK which shortens thousands of lives each year.

There are currently no specific tree targets for urban areas, but this is where people need trees the most. Tree canopy cover is a useful indicator of tree presence and Forest Research suggests the minimum acceptable cover for UK towns is 20%, with most falling short of the minimum. Currently only 27.6% of urban wards have a tree canopy cover higher than 20%.²⁵ Government has pledged for all people to have a green or blue space within a 15-minute walk, but this is not currently met for 90-100% of the population in more than 1 in 10 neighbourhoods, particularly in the most deprived communities.²⁶

To address this, the next Government should set targets in the NPPF and forthcoming NDMP for local areas to have at least a minimum 20% of tree canopy cover, with a duty for local authorities to deliver this and LNRS to support where suitable. For new housing developments a 30% tree canopy cover is recommended to ensure streets are lined with trees and residents have access to nature-rich woodlands, while retaining mature trees where possible²⁷, which could be delivered through Biodiversity Net Gain where suitable.

Policy recommendation 3: Provide new incentives for woodland creation.

The Nature for Climate Fund has given the majority of the £750+ million of funding to tree planting

²⁰ See Link proposal for a National Nature Service:

https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Nature_2030_Report_18.07.2023.pdf

²¹ <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>

²² <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/news/health-projects-save-nhs-time-and-money>

²³ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/press-centre/2023/12/new-tree-equity-map-shows-tree-cover-inequality/>

²⁴ <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/why-we-need-green-spaces-in-cities.html>

²⁵ <https://oro.open.ac.uk/91185/>

²⁶ <https://www.wcl.org.uk/huge-nature-access-gap-for-15-minute-nature-promise.asp>

²⁷ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/52202/trees-and-woods-at-the-heart-of-nature-recovery-in-england.pdf>

over recent years, but its future is uncertain. Future woodland creation grants are set to be delivered through the Countryside Stewardship Plus scheme and the Landscape Recovery Scheme stream of the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMs). This money is needed to tackle nature loss and environmental challenges across multiple habitats and landscapes, not just woods and trees, and so the current level of budget which is not ringfenced is unlikely to be able to deliver the scale of tree planting that is required. It also will not fund key activities needed to make tree cover expansion successful, such as supporting tree nurseries to grow the trees needed, local creation projects, community forests, skills or advice.

With 70% of land in the UK being used for farming there is a real opportunity to increase tree canopy cover and hedgerows in these areas through agroforestry and wood pasture. By combining trees and shrubs with livestock and crops, farmers can boost livestock health, increase yields and open up new income streams, a win for farm profits as well as nature.²⁸ Despite its ancient traditions and many benefits there has been slow progress in agroforestry becoming widely adopted.

The next Government should address these risks and support new woodland creation and agroforestry through ELMs by doubling the annual budget for nature friendly farming and land management to at least £6 billion a year.²⁹

Additionally the updated Tree Strategy (policy recommendation 1) should commit to continue the successful Nature for Climate Fund or an equivalent which covers key additional activities needed to make woodland expansion successful, including community forests, tree nurseries and developing skills and training. New ELMs incentives must be matched with offers of effective and targeted, streamlined and trustworthy advice to land managers to maximise smooth delivery on the ground.

Policy recommendation 4: Surveyed applications for smooth and sped up delivery.

Currently it can take two to three years for a planning application for a tree-planting proposal to be processed and likely even longer for large scale landscape projects, but proper guidance and surveys could speed this up and provide better value for money.

There are now useful tools for policy and decision makers to identify areas lacking adequate tree cover and to help inform decisions on where and how to expand tree cover, alongside proper site visits and expert analysis. For example, Friends of the Earth³⁰ and the Woodland Trust³¹ have helpful mapping tools to pinpoint where land is right for planting, including where communities are missing out. Government guidance, linked to the new strategy, should encourage use of these tools. The Forestry Commission has also mapped low sensitivity areas which are potentially the least risky sites for

²⁸ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/agroforestry-benefits/>

²⁹ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Nature_2030_Report_18.07.2023.pdf

³⁰ <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/trees-map-where-could-we-create-woodland-england>

³¹ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/protecting-trees-and-woods/benefits-of-urban-trees/tree-equity/>

planting³² as part of the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO), although the methods for these approaches would benefit from cross-sectoral co-design.

The EWCO sensitivity mapper is a useful tool to identify low risk sites, but it should not be used in isolation without site visits. It is critical to recognise ‘low risk’ does not mean ‘no risk’ as interactions between habitats and biodiversity are complicated. To prevent saplings failing and landowners from having to return their funding, the proposed site must be surveyed in person by fully trained staff at the right time of year to check that, for example, it is unlikely to be hampered by weather events such as flooding, the soils are appropriate for the chosen species to thrive in and existing conservation values can be maintained or enhanced.

Policy recommendation 5: Action on invasive non-native tree species

An increasingly diverse range of tree species are being considered for planting for their potential resilience to adapt to climate changes, but this should never include invasive tree species or species where the invasive potential is unknown. Black locust/False Acacia (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), a north American native is one of the most invasive tree species in Europe for its ability to spread quickly and widely threatening grasslands, plants and invertebrates³³. Unfortunately, this species has been funded for planting through EWCO.³⁴

The risk of pests and diseases is rising³⁵, exacerbated by global trade and climate change. The latest establishments of the eight-toothed spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*)³⁶ pose a great risk to spruce trees and timber/forestry industries and the importation of wood and trees are a key risk to further introductions of this threat.

The next Government should invest in prevention over cure to create the required domestic nursery stock for tree planting, rather than importing trees that could have new pests or diseases. Since 2022 the Tree Production Capital Grant has funded the domestic production of tree seed and saplings through investments in facilities and equipment. As this funding was through the expiring Nature for Climate Fund, the updated Tree Strategy (policy recommendation 1) should continue a similar grant to scale up investment in commercial, local authority and community tree nurseries to enable a rapid expansion of UK and Ireland sourced and grown trees. All trees planted with public money should be UK sourced and grown to protect from imported pests and diseases.

Policy recommendation 6: Support for natural regeneration and colonisation

³² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/a-guide-to-forestry-commissions-sensitivity-maps-for-woodland-creation>

³³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378112716309124>

³⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/636ce2dde90e076193991020/FC_Case_Study_Blenheim_Final.pdf

³⁵ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/0/Stemming_the_Flood_of_Invasive_Non_Native_Species_3.pdf

³⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/eight-toothed-european-spruce-bark-beetle-ips-typographus>

The updated Tree Strategy (policy recommendation 1) should prioritise natural regeneration and colonisation as one of the primary methods for increasing native tree cover where suitable ground conditions and seed sources from existing high-quality native woodland or hedgerow areas exist. It should also be named as the default tree cover expansion method in 100 metre buffer zones around ancient woodlands. Successful natural colonisation costs time and resources but it can deliver a high early wildlife habitat value and reduce pressure on domestic nursery stock.

In March EWCO added the funding option of £121.85 per hectare for scarification to create a suitable seed bed for natural colonisation, and a ‘Nature Recovery – premium’ payment option (£3,300 per hectare) to encourage natural colonisation of highly biodiverse woodlands next to ancient woodland. Despite putting funding for natural colonisation in place only circa 5% of the Government funded woodland creation has used natural colonisation between 2021 – 2024.³⁷

The next Government must prioritise incentivising this method of tree creation by pivoting grant funding from tree planting to natural colonisation and adjusting grant regulations to allow more time for it to succeed (recent research suggests at least 19 years³⁸), in addition to targeted promotion and direct advice and training to land managers.

Tree creation will count for little without protecting and restoring already existing woodland.

The next Government has an opportunity to create a legacy where trees and woodlands in the UK thrive now and for generations to come. Efforts to increase new woodland should be delivered alongside measures to improve the management of existing trees and habitats that are under pressure now. To help reach the 30x30 on land target, in conjunction with new habitat creation, Ancient Woodlands should be given full statutory protection, and all habitats that are not in good condition must be improved in order to qualify as being a well-protected site for nature.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 83 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals. 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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The following organisations have inputted into this briefing:

³⁷ Data of Natural colonisation uptake from Forestry Commission England, received 25th June 2024.

³⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/rec.14004>



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