apse association for public service excellence

Tree planting schemes

Progress, challenges and opportunities for local councils

Why the sudden interest in trees?

Trees have multiple **environmental, economic and social** benefits. benefits including::

- Clean the air by filtering pollutants and releasing oxygen.
- **Combat climate change** through carbon sequestration, managing intense rainfall and providing cooling effect through shade particularly in urban areas.
- Root systems stabilize soil.
- Trees provide essential habitats for flora and fauna.
- Provide timber for construction, etc.
- Health and well being benefits.
- **Climate Change and Falling levels of biodiversity**

Trees in the UK – the facts

The area of woodland in the UK on the **31 March 2024** is estimated to be 3.28 million hectares.

- This represents **13% of the total land area** in the UK.
- 19% in Scotland,
- 15% in Wales,
- 10% in England,
- 9% in Northern Ireland.
- Conifers account for just under one half (48%) of the UK woodland area, although this proportion varies from 71% in Scotland to 23% in England.
- It is estimated the total woodland cover in the UK has the potential to sequester a total of 11.3 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over their lifetime of up to 100 years

Tree Planting Targets

England canopy cover: Increase woodland and tree canopy cover from 14.5% to 16.5% by 2050.

Annual planting target (UK-wide): Create 30,000 hectares of new woodland every year by 2025. - approximately 90 to 120 million trees per year.

Unfortunately, this number has not been reached with the UK repeatedly missing its annual planting targets, (across all nations), although planting rates have been increasing significantly in recent years.

Some of the reasons put forward have been a lack of government priority and funding, a lack of expansion of the UK's tree nurseries to provide stock, demand for domestic timber and co-ordination of efforts across the UK.

"The State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2025 reveals that the nation's once rich, complex woodlands have become simpler and less biodiverse over time.

New Tree Planting

- The total area of new planting in the UK in 2023/24 was 20.66 thousand hectares.
- Broadleaves accounted for 55% of the total area of new planting .
- Most new planting (95%) took place on private sector land .
- Seventy-three percent (73%) of the total new planting took place in Scotland,
- 22% in England,
- 3% in Wales and
- 2% in Northern Ireland.

It is not just about numbers.

We need all sorts of trees and woody habitats to deliver nature recovery, carbon sequestration and timber production,

Woodlands will need to be designed specifically for improving biodiversity levels, commercial tree plantations, scrub and trees outside of woods and on our city streets, even agroforestry schemes on farmland.

Natural reforestation needs to be encouraged alongside new planting .

Woodland creation proposals are in areas of 'low sensitivity' e.g. away from designated sites, deep peat, and the best and most versatile farmland.

It is estimated that there are 3 million ha of this land, and we only need around 8.5% (260,000 ha) to achieve the legally binding tree cover target without having negative impacts on food security.

The importance of tree equity

- The UK is estimated to have around 3 billion trees, which amounts to one thousandth of the global total.
- Based on the UK's population , a Briton has a tenth as many trees as the average citizen of the world.
- Added to this is the fact that many less affluent and densely populated areas of the UK have fewer trees; missing out on the essential health benefits trees can bring, like cleaner air.
- Neighbourhoods with the highest income levels have more than double the tree cover per person than less affluent neighbourhoods, and they have nearly 20% less of the toxic pollutant nitrogen dioxide (NO2).
- The Woodland Trust's *State of the UK's Woods and Trees Report (2025)* reported that urban tree cover varies wildly, ranging from as little as 3% in Fleetwood, Lancashire to 45% in Farnham, Surrey.

Government Action and Support

- As a growing awareness of the importance of nature has developed, and in particular the importance of trees, their numbers have begun to increase; there are now more trees in the UK than at any time in the past 100 years, covering approximately 13% of the UK.
- Of the 31,380 square kilometres of forest in Britain, around 30% is publicly owned and 70% is in the private sector.
- The Government has recognised the need to increase levels of tree planting and has set up a Tree Planting Taskforce to oversee planting of millions of trees across the UK.
- Launched in November 2024, it will oversee the planting of millions of trees to meet net-zero targets and enhance woodland resilience.
- This will require cross-government working , sharing of best practice and identifying and resolving barriers to tree planting.

Community Forests

- Community forests in the UK are a network of partnerships focused on transforming landscapes through tree planting and woodland creation in and around towns and cities.,
- These projects involve communities, local authorities, and landowners aiming to improve the environment and provide social, economic, and environmental benefits.
- Community Forests have specialist local teams which work closely with private and public landowners to design, fund and plant woodland for the benefit of farm businesses, communities and the environment.
- Farms and private landowners have taken up the challenge (and grants), by planting in-field trees on productive areas of a farm which allows farmers to reap multiple benefits, such as providing shade and shelter to crops or livestock.
- This approach has helped improve the overall resilience of farm businesses while maintaining or enhancing productivity.

City of York Council: Buying land and leasing it for 120 years with the Forestry England Woodland Partnership

- City of York Council purchased an 80 ha site on the outskirts of York to establish a new community woodland from 2022.
- The council recognised that they will still need to offset their emissions to achieve net zero.
- After working in close partnership with local Forestry Commission staff and other bodies, the land will be leased to Forestry England for 120 years.
- During this time, it will be established and managed as a quality community woodland with the council claiming the Woodland Carbon Units. In return, Forestry England will provide the council with a negotiated annual rent.

- **Woodland Creation Case Studies Helping local authorities respond to the climate emergency How woodlands can support your net zero plans**
- https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63eb8777e90e077bb2487a34/CFT_Local_authority_net_zero_case_study_Feb_23.pdf

National Forests

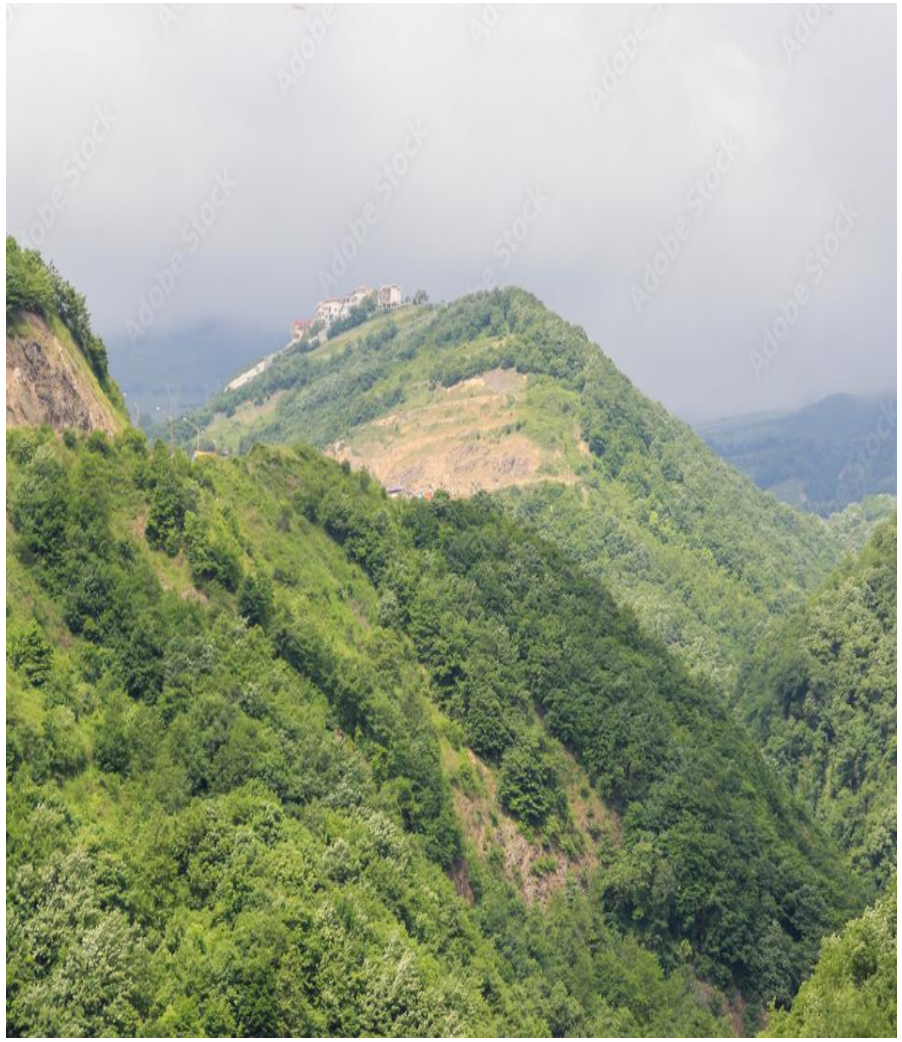
- National forests are long-term, large-scale initiatives that create new forested landscapes and aim to increase woodland cover, by connecting woodlands, including both existing and newly planted trees
- National Forests also aim to will help deliver national renewal for communities, drive economic growth while enhancing nature and bringing trees closer to where people live.
- The forests will not be wall to wall, trees but will be made up of a mosaic of landscapes and land uses: where towns and villages, industry and farming, open habitats and wetlands, are all framed by trees.
- The first national forest in England was in the Midlands covering 200 square miles with over. 9.5 million trees having been planted to date
- The Western Forest UK has been named the first of three new national forests, it will cover areas including Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Somerset, and the Cotswolds. This initiative aims to plant 20 million trees, create 2,500 hectares of new woodland, and increase woodland cover in the region to 20% by 2050

How are local authorities contributing to increased tree planting/cover? APSE Survey Results 2025

- Most council respondents **(80%)** have declared an **intention to deliver tree planting** schemes across their local authority areas, suggesting there is a strong and widespread commitment to expanding urban and rural tree cover.
- Most councils have annual goals ranging from **1,000 to 50,000 trees per year** or area-based targets of around 9.5 to 444 hectares annually.
- Most councils have already begun tree planting, with activity starting at various points over the past decade. The majority reported starting between 2019 and 2024, often linked to climate emergency declarations or the launch of tree strategy programmes.
- The sites chosen for tree planting were largely as would be expected, on council land, be it **urban parks, streets, school grounds, highway verges etc**. But it was noticeable that many were also working with farmers and wildlife charities to provide larger areas of planting thereby allowing larger networks of tree planting/woodlands to be created.
- Most of the tree planting itself seems to be carried out by contractors although many did say council staff and volunteers also played an important part.

- Most councils are planting between **3,000 and 20,000 trees per year**, with some reporting higher averages of around 21,000 trees annually.
- Reported tree cover across councils ranges from 6% to 42%, with most falling between **10% and 21%.**
- The **average canopy cover is 15%,** indicating a moderate level of tree cover overall, though there is significant variation between authorities depending on local geography and land use.
- Councils **expect tree cover to rise to between 17–21%.** This suggests a moderate but meaningful uplift in canopy cover across most areas.
- A significant number of authorities are **prioritising native species**, often for woodland creation and habitat restoration. Common species mentioned include Oak, Birch, Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Rowan, Hazel and Alder.
- Many respondents also highlighted that they are also planting a **mix of native and non -native species**.
- A common approach is to use native species in rural or woodland settings, while incorporating non -native and ornamental species in urban areas for resilience and aesthetic diversity.

- A key theme from several authorities is a principle - driven, rather than species-led, approach which emphasises planting the "**right tree in the right place**," prioritising suitability for the specific site, **future climate resilience** and function over a strict native-only policy.
- Some councils noted the importance of shifting focus from tree -planting numbers to canopy cover and long - term establishment, reflecting a more strategic approach to urban forestry management.
- There is still the issue of having the resources and funding necessary to manage existing and future tree stocks.
- The simple fact is that we are simply not planting enough trees or maintaining the stocks we have in a fit and proper manner.



Tree Search

Species / Common Name : [ ] Native Species: [ ] yes [ ] no User Notes Search Clear

Leaf Habit
- Deciduous: [ ]
- Evergreen: [ ]

Potential Size
- Small (<10m): [ ]
- Medium (10-20m): [ ]
- Large (>20m): [ ]

Soil
- Dry soil: [ ]
- Moist soil: [ ]
- Wet soil: [ ]
- Sandy soil: [ ]
- Loam soil: [ ]
- Clay soil: [ ]
- Acid soil: [ ]
- Neutral soil: [ ]
- Alkaline soil: [ ]

meet *all* of these criteria ( )
meet *any* of these criteria (•)

Environment
- Tolerates exposure: [ ]
- Partial shade: [ ]
- Min. USDA Hardiness Zone: [ ] ?
- Drought tolerance: [ ] ?
- Waterlogging tolerance: [ ] ?

meet *all* of these criteria ( )
meet *any* of these criteria (•)

Ornamental Qualities
- Cultivars available: [ ]
- Bark: [ ]
- Foliage: [ ]
- Autumn Colour: [ ]
- Flowers: [ ]
- Fruits: [ ]
- Architectural forms: [ ]

meet *all* of these criteria ( )
meet *any* of these criteria (•)

Uses
- Specimen: [ ]
- Street: [ ]
- Background: [ ]
- Shelter: [ ]

meet *all* of these criteria ( )
meet *any* of these criteria (•)

Additional Attributes
- No thorns and spines: [ ]
- No poisonous fruits or seeds: [ ]
- Info. available on root spread: [ ]
- Limited litter/debris: [ ]
- Limited falling limbs: [ ]
- No suckers: [ ]
- Not invasive: [ ]

meet *all* of these criteria ( )
meet *any* of these criteria (•)

Forestry Commission NATURAL ENGLAND RHS MAYOR OF LONDON the tree council Forest Research

Pluses and minuses

- Tree planting has risen significantly over the last few years, but it is still only 45% of the target set.
- Added to this, is the fact the original target for canopy cover by 2050 has been lowered from 17.5% to 16.5%, which means that the target is no longer aligned with the Climate Change Committee's recommendations for afforestation rates.
- This reduced target remains dependent on the proportion of woodland that will be coniferous, which is expected to double.
- From a nature recovery perspective, this is concerning. Although conifers are fast-growing, they are typically harvested on a regular cycle for timber, meaning they do not remain in the ground for long, as opposed to diverse broadleaf native woodlands which are usually are usually left to mature providing a far richer range of habitats for wildlife.
- Losses of trees to disease is a particular problem and climate change will threaten both existing and newly planted trees – climatic conditions are also expected to change over the next 50 years when many trees should be reaching maturity – will they be able to cope?

Concluding comments

- It would be easy to say we must do more, regardless of all the other priorities government and local authorities face, but the inescapable reality is that **we really must do more**.
- National and devolved governments as well as local authorities will need to take the lead, through increasing funding, more partnership working and engaging more widely with local communities.
- It is vital that all of us concerned with this area of work need to ensure that tree planting, and its wider management must be given a higher profile.
- Without raised awareness and championing, tree targets will continue to be missed, management will decline, leaving our tree stocks to the vagaries and impacts of climate change, continuing biodiversity loss and the growing list of pests and diseases.

Good Luck