



association for public service excellence

Tree planting schemes

Progress, challenges and opportunities for local councils



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Table of contents

1	Background	3
1.1	Growing Importance of Trees.....	4
2	Current state of UK trees	5
2.1	Government Support.....	5
2.2	Community Forests.....	6
2.3	National Forests.....	6
2.4	Are we making enough progress?.....	8
3	Findings of the APSE Survey	9
	Have you declared an intention to deliver tree planting schemes across your local authority area?.....	9
	What is your total tree planting target as part of the scheme?	9
	Has planting started? And if so when did it start?.....	9
	Where are you trees planted?	9
	How many trees have you planted per annum as part of the scheme so far?.....	10
	What is your current percentage of tree cover?	10
	What do you expect it to rise to when the tree planting scheme(s) has been delivered?.....	10
	What species of trees are you intending to plant?	10
	What sizes of trees are you procuring.....	11
	Prevalence of Ash Dieback.....	12
4	Conclusion	13

Tree planting schemes: Progress, challenges and opportunities for local councils

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1 Background

In 2015, geospatial data estimated that there are around 3 trillion trees worldwide – roughly three times higher than previous estimates.¹ While this initially seemed like good news, subsequent studies revealed that global tree loss was occurring at a much faster rate than previously understood.

This work has been instrumental in helping establish a baseline regarding the scale of tree planting needed worldwide.

Looking closer to home, the UK has less tree cover than almost anywhere in Europe. This is a very worrying statistic as woodlands and trees are essential to reducing the impacts of climate change, supporting wellbeing, providing sustainable timber and providing homes to some of our most important species.

It is now acknowledged that the need to create new woodlands is an urgent one if we are to capture carbon and help biodiversity to the scale required.

In the Environmental Improvement Plan for England (2023) there is a commitment to increase tree cover from 14.5% to 16.5% by 2050.² But the plan also makes clear it is not just about numbers. Importantly, it makes the point that we need all sorts of trees and woody habitats to deliver nature recovery, carbon sequestration and timber production. This includes woodlands 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.

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 hectares 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.

Experts state that we can plant trees incredibly quickly. But the Woodland Trust, the UK's largest woodland conservation charity, says several things need to happen to encourage a huge tree-planting programme:

- Far more people need to be involved in tree-planting schemes at national and local government levels, and within statutory bodies.
- The UK needs to substantially boost its stocks of trees for planting.
- More money or grants need to be found for farmers and other landowners to persuade them to plant trees.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-34134366>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan>

- Natural reforestation needs to be encouraged alongside new planting.³

With just 13% woodland cover (some estimates say 14.5% if hedgerows and single trees are included), the UK needs billions more trees to tackle climate change and save nature.

1.1 Growing Importance of Trees

The UK is estimated to have around 3 billion trees⁴, 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.⁵

So why is it important that we have a good tree cover or 'tree equity' as it is often referred to both from a rural and urban perspective?

Studies have shown that trees in general, but particularly in urban areas, can:

- reduce air pollution, quieten noise and keep cities shaded and cool;
- improve ecosystems and boost biodiversity;
- create a sense of place, beauty and heritage;
- create attractive environments where businesses want to invest and people want to live, work and play;
- alleviate stress, stabilise blood pressure, ease anxiety and depression; and
- provide opportunity for healthy, active lifestyles.

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/50591261>

⁴ <https://www.woodlands.co.uk/blog/woodland-economics/how-many-trees-are-there-in-the-uk-will-tree-planting-help-much/>

⁵ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/state-of-uk-woods-and-trees/>

2 Current state of UK trees

Following the last Ice Age, large areas of Britain were covered by wildwood, a mix of forests and grasslands shaped by natural processes and early human activity. Common tree species included birch, pine, hazel, elm, and oak, with varying dominance depending on location.

As agriculture developed, wildwoods were cleared to make way for farming, leading to a decline in woodland cover.

Most of the remaining forest disappeared during the 16th and 17th centuries to provide timber for boats or charcoal for the iron industry. Since this time, and in particular over the last 150 years, more of our woodlands have been cleared with very few of the scattered original or 'ancient' woodlands remaining.

The UK's supply of timber was depleted still further during the First and Second World Wars, when imports were difficult, and the forested area bottomed out at under 5% of Britain's land surface in 1919. That year, the Forestry Commission was established to produce a strategic reserve of timber.

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 (12,120 sq mi) of forest in Britain, around 30% is publicly owned and 70% is in the private sector.

Conifers account for around one half (51%) of the UK woodland area, although this proportion varies from around one quarter (26%) in England to around three quarters (74%) in Scotland. Currently Scotland has delivered around 75% of all new woodlands in the UK with a large amount being coniferous.

But as mentioned earlier, this reliance upon single species is unsustainable. Although there is still a need to increase numbers, these must include a greater diversity of species to ensure future sustainability and resilience, particularly in light of the impacts of diseases such as Ash Dieback as well as climate change.

2.1 Government Support

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.⁶ 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.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-treeplantingtaskforce-to-oversee-planting-of-millions-of-trees-across-our-four-nations>

Government is further allocating up to £400 million for tree planting and peatland restoration over 2024-2026 to help achieve broader tree cover across the UK as well as achieving the legal target of 16.5% tree cover across England by 2050.

2.2 Community Forests

In the past, the Government has supported the creation of new woodlands, both large-scale sites and smaller areas on urban fringes known as 'community forests'.

The Community Forest Programme was established in the 1990s and was targeted at those urban areas where tree coverage was less than 7% with the aim of increasing this to 30%. As well as the Forestry Commission and the Countryside Agency, local authorities were seen as key players in establishing these new forests. The reasoning behind the scheme was to address the increasing levels of deforestation, loss of habitats for flora and fauna and to create access to green spaces for urban residents.

In 1991, the first two community forests were created in the north west of England. The Mersey Forest covered large parts of Merseyside, as well as North Cheshire. The second forest, Red Rose Forest, which is now known as 'The City of Trees', was established in Greater Manchester. Eight more forests have since been created.⁷

Tree planting in the new Community Forest areas is supported by England's Community Forests' Trees for Climate fund, which is part of the Government's Nature for Climate Fund.

By planting trees and bringing woodlands back into use for both people and wildlife, community forests continue to provide new opportunities for leisure, recreation, and cultural activities, enhancing biodiversity and helping the UK become more resilient to climate change by helping to mitigate the impact of climate change by capturing and storing carbon for generations.

These forests are also being planted with tree species that are suitable for the UK's changing climate and thereby helping communities adapt by providing cooling shade, preventing flooding, improving air quality, boosting people's wellbeing and creating habitats for wildlife.

2.3 National Forests

Loss of woodland cover prior to and including the first world war led to the creation of the Forestry Commission in 1919 to help establish better levels of strategic tree stocks. Its initial focus was to acquire land, particularly in Scotland where it planted vast stands of conifers.

⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61bb50d3e90e070441bcf9f5/Woodland_Creation_Partnership_-_England_s_Community_Forests_Gov.uk_page.pdf

The Commission's role has expanded over time to include managing existing forests, promoting sustainable forestry practices, and providing public access to forests.

However, new priorities have changed the way the Forestry Commission now sees the value of forests and, as such, The National Forest Company was established in 1995 to create a new forest in the Midlands, aiming to increase woodland cover and promote various land uses.⁸

This has led to further large-scale national forest developments including The Northern Forest, a partnership led by the Woodland Trust, which is working with The Mersey Forest, City of Trees, White Rose Forest, Humber Forest and the Community Forest Trust.

This forest will increase woodland cover while bringing endless benefits and opportunities to the people of the North. Furthermore it will:

- help tackle climate change and encourage nature-rich landscapes;
- reduce the risk of flooding;
- create thousands of new jobs;
- cool and clean air in towns and cities; and
- improve health and wellbeing.

The Northern Forest has recently planted its 10 millionth tree, with a target of 50 million trees to be planted by 2043.⁹

More recently, a new Western Forest spanning three regions is set to be created – the first ‘national forest’ in more than 30 years spanning Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and West of England (Bristol, Bath & NE Somerset, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset).

In its first five years, the new national forest will plant at least 2,500 hectares of new woodland and other tree habitats, with 20 million trees to be planted by 2050. Alongside accelerating tree-planting in local areas, the project will work to revitalise existing woodlands and other important habitats to create a forest network for people and wildlife at a truly landscape scale.

By planting 20 million trees, they could absorb approximately 2.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide and also help reach the Government’s net zero and nature targets including halting the decline of species and protecting 30% of land for nature by 2030.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-forest-company/about>

⁹ https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-plant-trees/the-northern-forest/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=923099488&gbraid=0AAAAAD4sptw-pVDMWMCrD0lInQtOOP00b&gclid=EAlaIqObChMI9ZWc2rWFjgMVup1QBh02KTUIEAAYASAAEgK5S_D_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

2.4 Are we making enough progress?

Bearing in mind the scale of these two schemes, together with community forests, it would appear that the combined works of government, local authorities and other interested stakeholders will lead to significant increases in tree cover across the UK.

Despite these increases, in its recent 'State of the UK's Woods and Trees 2025', report, the Woodland Trusts identifies that:

*'...despite strong policy and funding focus, woodland creation targets are still not being met.'*¹⁰

Even though there has been notable progress during 2020–2024, where an average of 45% of annual targets were being achieved, this still means that tree planting targets are falling well short. Exacerbating this is the increasing numbers of pests meaning levels of woodland biodiversity, particularly birds and butterflies, are continuing to fall.

It's important to remember that while more trees are being planted, questions remain about how resilient both existing and newly planted trees will be to the impacts of climate change and the growing threats from pests and diseases.

The report makes the important point that, *'The resilience of woodlands depends on their size, condition and connectivity. More, bigger, better and more joined up woods are far likelier to withstand change.'*

It is the issue of management which the report highlights as being critical to the future sustainability of our existing and new woodlands, stating that, *'Only by increasing levels of sensitive management can woods and trees continue to deliver the benefits people and wildlife rely on'.*

¹⁰ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/state-of-uk-woods-and-trees/>

3 Findings of the APSE Survey

Prior to the publication of the aforementioned report, APSE carried out its own survey amongst its local authority members to ascertain how they were progressing with regards to delivering their local tree planting schemes.



Have you declared an intention to deliver tree planting schemes across your local authority area?

The vast majority of councils (80%) have declared an intention to deliver tree planting schemes across their local authority areas. This demonstrates a strong and widespread commitment to expanding urban and rural tree cover.

What is your total tree planting target as part of the scheme?

Tree planting targets vary widely across respondents. 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. Several authorities have set long-term ambitions to increase tree canopy cover – typically aiming to double it or reach between 17% and 21% by 2050. Some have large-scale pledges such as planting 225,000 to 250,000 trees, or “one tree per resident,” while a few work on a site-by-site basis or have no fixed target.

Has planting started? And if so when did it start?

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. Several noted specific planting seasons such as winter 2020/21, 2022/23, or 2023/24, while a few schemes began earlier (as far back as 2012 or 2018) or are scheduled to start in early 2025.

Where are you trees planted?

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. Surprisingly, no respondents said they were looking to increase existing areas of woodlands, preferring instead to increase tree in urban streets, parks and create new areas of woodland. 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.

How many trees have you planted per annum as part of the scheme so far?

Most councils are planting between 3,000 and 20,000 trees per year, with some reporting higher averages of around 21,000 trees annually. A few have achieved much larger totals, including one authority that has planted up to 200,000 trees per year, and another that has planted 418,000 trees to date, with annual figures varying widely. Several respondents measure progress in hectares rather than tree numbers, with examples including 84.6 ha planted to date and 345 ha targeted up to 2025. Overall, the data shows strong and varied planting activity, reflecting differing land availability and measurement approaches across councils.

15%

"Current % of tree cover"

What is your current percentage of tree cover?

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.

19%

"Expected % tree cover after delivery"

What do you expect it to rise to when the tree planting scheme(s) has been delivered?

Councils expect tree cover to rise to between 7% and 64% once their planting schemes are fully delivered, with most projecting increases to around 17–21%. This suggests a moderate but meaningful uplift in canopy cover across most areas, while a few councils anticipate much larger gains depending on the scale and scope of their programmes.

What species of trees are you intending to plant?

The survey responses reveal a wide spectrum of approaches to tree species selection, with no single strategy dominating. The answers can be grouped into several common themes:

- 1. Predominantly Native Focus:** 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. One respondent specifically references the W10 National Vegetation Classification (NVC) as their guide for local woodland types.
- 2. Deliberate Mixed Planting:** Many respondents explicitly state they are planting a mix of native and non-native species. The rationale for this varies:

- Urban vs. Rural Settings: A common approach is to use native species in rural or woodland settings, while incorporating non-native and ornamental species (e.g., Liquidambar, Acer platanoides, Tilia cordata) in urban areas for resilience and aesthetic diversity.
 - Specific Schemes: Some note that non-natives are included in government schemes like the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCf) or Miyawaki forests to meet diversity and resilience goals.
- 3. A Pragmatic, Site-Led Philosophy:** A key theme from several authorities is a principle-driven, rather than species-led, approach. They emphasise 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.
- 4. Focus on Specific Types:** The responses show a variety of planting forms:
- Whips: Primarily native species for large-scale woodland establishment.
 - Standards: A greater proportion of non-native ornamental trees for immediate impact in streets and parks.
 - Fruit Trees: Several authorities list varieties of apple, pear, plum and damson for public orchards or urban planting.

What sizes of trees are you procuring

The survey responses indicate that local authorities are procuring a very wide range of tree sizes, from small whips to large, mature standards. The choice is highly dependent on the specific project and location.

The most common theme is a two-tiered approach:

1. Small Whips for Large-Scale Planting: The vast majority of authorities are procuring large quantities of whips (typically 40-60cm or 60-90cm) and cell-grown saplings. These are used for cost-effective, large-scale planting such as woodland creation, hedgerows and biodiversity schemes.
2. Larger Standards for Urban and High-Impact Areas: For urban streets, parks, and areas requiring immediate visual impact, authorities are procuring larger trees. This includes feathers, light standards, and extra-heavy standards, with girths commonly mentioned in the 8-10cm, 10-12cm, 12-14cm, and 14-16cm ranges.

In essence, the strategy is one of "right size for the right place," balancing the need for large-scale, affordable establishment with the demand for instant effect and resilience in public spaces.



95%

*"ADB is a problem
in their area."*

Prevalence of Ash Dieback

Survey responses show that Ash Dieback (ADB) is present in 95% of participating council areas, indicating near-universal impact. Despite this, most councils report minimal direct impact on their tree-planting targets, largely because ash is no longer included in new planting schemes.

Where impacts are reported, they relate mainly to resource pressures, such as the need to redirect staff or undertake additional replanting to replace diseased or removed ash trees. A smaller number of councils highlight wider implications for canopy cover, noting that ash losses can outpace regeneration in some areas.

The majority of authorities have adopted strategies such as avoiding ash in new planting, operating replacement policies (often on a 2-for-1 basis), and increasing species diversification to improve long-term resilience.

While quantitative planting targets are generally unaffected, several respondents emphasise 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.

4 Conclusion - *‘There is no Wi-Fi in the forest, but I promise you will find a better connection.’ Ralph Smart*

There are clearly positives and negatives in relation to trying to increase the tree canopy cover of the UK. Tree planting has risen significantly over the last few years, but it is still only 45% of the target set. Despite valiant efforts many areas are running to stand still as, although new trees are being planted, many trees are being lost through Ash Dieback.

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.¹¹

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. In contrast, diverse broadleaf native woodlands are usually left to mature providing a far richer range of habitats for wildlife.

Monoculture conifer plantations offer limited ecological value and, due to their dense planting, restrict light from reaching the woodland floor. This inhibits the development of ground flora and further reduces potential habitats for wildlife.

Trying to increase the tree canopy of the UK is complicated. Conifers grow quickly but offer little to biodiversity whereas native broadleaf trees offer far more biodiversity opportunities but are slower to mature. Losses of trees to disease is a particular problem and climate change will threaten both existing and newly planted trees. Much of the UK’s tree cover is disproportionate, with some areas having high tree cover whilst others are sparsely covered. Tree cover across the UK is currently around 13% in England, close to 20% in Scotland and Wales and only 10% in Northern Ireland. The average across the EU is 38%, whilst the global average is around 31%. It is acknowledged that this disparity may be related to population densities, suitable land for new planting and other demands such as housing.

However, even if some of these problems can be resolved, there is still the issue of having the resources and funding necessary to manage existing and future tree stocks.

This report has shown that trees, and the often-neglected network of hedgerows across the UK, play a crucial role in combating the effect of climate change and increasing biodiversity levels. They also provide a wide range of ecosystem services, including cooling urban areas during periods of extreme heat, improving air quality, reducing flood risk and supporting human health and well-being through their associated flora and fauna.

¹¹ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-Sixth-Carbon-Budget-The-UKs-path-to-Net-Zero.pdf>

Yet despite their multiple benefits, we are still falling well short of the necessary tree planting rates. Coupled with this is a seeming inability to provide the necessary resources to manage existing trees and woodlands many of which are in a neglected and declining state. This was highlighted in a 2021 report by the Woodland Trust which revealed that only 7% of the UK's native woodlands are in good condition, stating that the once rich, complex woodlands have become simpler and less biodiverse over time.

The simple fact is that we are simply not planting enough trees or maintaining the stocks we have in a fit and proper manner. 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, and 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.

As the impacts of climate change are felt more regularly and the consequences of these impacts are likely to increase, then we need to realise that new priorities may have to be accepted, and that nature-based solutions such as increased tree planting and better tree stock management need to be more properly funded and resourced.

In 2017, UK woodland was estimated to have absorbed 18 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, equivalent to 4% of the UK's total greenhouse gas emissions for that year. Added to this, trees also provide other valuable ecosystem services, such as reducing flooding, improving air quality, conserving energy, and enriching biodiversity as well as improving health and well being for many communities and individuals.

There is a real danger that tree planting and issues such as Ash Dieback will begin to drop off agendas. Therefore, 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 this 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.

Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

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