



# Ancient Woodlands in England

April 2025

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) and calls for stronger protection for all habitats under the ancient woodland umbrella in England.

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## Introduction

Ancient woodlands are those that have existed continuously since at least 1600. They are amongst the most ecologically and historically valuable woodland in England.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient woodland inventory has identified over 52,000 pockets of ancient woodland across the country. These often small, fragmented and isolated patches, squeezed between different land uses covering just 2.78% of England's land (approximately 360,000 hectares).<sup>1</sup> Only 16% of England's ancient woodlands have Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) status, and the protections this confers.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, they are often in poor condition and vulnerable to further loss (from housing, infrastructure development and ongoing commercial forestry) and damage (by pests, diseases and climate change).<sup>3</sup>

**This briefing sets out options to help prevent this ongoing damage and potential loss.**

## What are ancient woodlands and why are they important?

Ancient woodlands are irreplaceable habitats, and the ecological and climate benefits they provide cannot be replicated. A wide range of priority species of conservation concern have formed complex ecosystem relationships with ancient woodlands over hundreds and even thousands of years, requiring ancient woodland habitats to thrive. Many valued plant, fungi, insects<sup>4</sup> and mammal species, which are often protected and scarce like the barbastelle bat<sup>5</sup>, prefer or are only found in habitats that have been continually wooded for a long time, relying on undisturbed soils and decaying deadwood and plant matter. 138 plant species have been proposed to indicate ancient woodland, including the charismatic bluebell which the UK holds

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keepers-of-time-ancient-and-native-woodland-and-trees-policy-in-england/keepers-of-time-ancient-and-native-woodland-and-trees-policy-in-england>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/52202/trees-and-woods-at-the-heart-of-nature-recovery-in-england.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/51705/state-of-the-uks-woods-and-trees-2021-thewoodlandtrust.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ancienttreeforum.org.uk/ancient-trees-ancient-tree-ecology-wildlife/invertebrates/>

<sup>5</sup> Carr, A., Zeale, M.R. K., Weatherall, A., Froidevaux, J.S.P. & Jones, G. (2018) Ground-based and LiDAR-derived measurements reveal scale-dependent selection of roost characteristics by the rare tree-dwelling bat *Barbastella barbastellus*. *Forest Ecology and Management*, 417, 237-246, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foreco.2018.02.041>



approximately half of the global population.<sup>6</sup> These plant species have poor dispersal abilities and are largely confined to ancient woodland, leaving them vulnerable to habitat loss.<sup>7</sup>

Ancient woods retain important parts of our cultural history, including archaeological features and can protect large features like earthworks from damage. These sites also store vital amounts of carbon in their large, old trees and undisturbed soils. Though only accounting for 25% of woodland in the UK, ancient woodlands store 37% of all the carbon in trees, equal to approximately 77 million tonnes of carbon and this is projected to double over the next century as they continue to sequester carbon.<sup>8</sup>

Ancient woodland is broadly categorised into three types of irreplaceable habitat, protected equally in planning policy:

#### **Ancient semi-natural woodland (ASNW)**

Ancient woodlands comprise native flora and fauna. The flora includes the native trees themselves, which have often regenerated through natural processes or woodland management techniques such as coppicing. Around half of Britain's ancient woods are ASNW.

#### **Plantation on ancient woodland sites (PAWs)**

During the 1950s, 60s and 70s, large areas of ancient woodland were felled and replanted with non-native trees, often conifers, in response to a policy drive to become more self-sufficient in timber production. Around 40% of remaining ancient woodland is PAWs, most of which is privately owned. Defra has a new target in their Keepers of Time policy to bring the majority of these damaged and critically at-risk sites into restoration by 2030.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Ancient wood pasture and parkland (AWP)**

The majority of concentrations of ancient and veteran trees are found in these habitats which is why ancient wood pasture is of great international significance. These priority habitats, for example Windsor Great Park, Richmond Park and Bradgate Park, have a long history as medieval hunting grounds, medieval deer parks and wooded commons which have been grazed, resulting in a mosaic of habitats and wealth of species<sup>10</sup>, and resulting in distinctly different management needs to closed canopy ancient woodland.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kirby, K. (2006) Ancient Woodland Indicator (AWI) plants. In: The wildflower key (ed. F. Rose), pp. 558-561

<sup>7</sup> Kimberley, A., Blackburn, G.A., Whyatt, J.D., Kirby, K. and Smart, S.M., (2013) 'Identifying the trait syndromes of conservation indicator species: how distinct are British ancient woodland indicator plants from other woodland species?'. Applied Vegetation Science, 16(4), pp.667-675. Available at: <https://nora.nerc.ac.uk/id/eprint/503324/1/503324PP.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/habitats/ancient-woodland/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keepers-of-time-ancient-and-native-woodland-and-trees-policy-in-england>

<sup>10</sup> <https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/8a93f17c-15ca-4de6-bbb4-760be06d9298/SSSI-Guidelines-2a-Woodlands-2018.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ancienttreeforum.org.uk/ancient-trees/british-treescapes/wood-pastures/>



## How are ancient woodlands being lost and damaged?

This highly fragmented and vulnerable ecosystem is under the strain of several significant threats including development<sup>12</sup>, neglect, inappropriate management, overgrazing, climate change, nitrogen pollution, pests and diseases and invasive non-native species.<sup>13</sup> AWP is particularly vulnerable to development of all types due to the higher proportion of characteristic open space, which if unprotected or mismanaged, could be infilled by recreational facilities or tree planting, destroying their open habitat and associated wildlife.

Public support for protecting ancient woodlands is high. 2023 polling from the Woodland Trust revealed that 81% of people in Britain believe it is usually or always unacceptable to build new road infrastructure that involves damage to or destruction of ancient woodland.<sup>14</sup>

### **Neglect**

The neglect of ancient woodland in private ownership is a particular problem, often resulting in a lack of open space within woodland areas where dense vegetation dominates and shades out other plants, reducing habitat complexity. Forest Research records lack of open space to be one of the indicators of lowest performing woodland for nature recovery.<sup>15</sup> AWP sites such as Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire and Savernake in Wiltshire are examples where grazing had lapsed or they have been partially infilled with plantations of native and non-native trees, resulting in overshadowing decline and death of their ancient and veteran trees.

### **Woodland management**

Management of ancient woodlands must be appropriate for species native to the habitat. Many charities and private landowners are leading by example with their rate of PAWS restoration and schemes like the Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) require certified organisations to plan to restore PAWS.<sup>16</sup> However, the Forestry Commission reported that they supported only 1 hectare of PAWS outside of the national forest into restoration in 2022/23 and 6 hectares in 2023/24.<sup>17</sup> This is among the worst performances towards any Defra environmental target.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/43620/impacts-of-nearby-development-on-the-ecology-of-ancient-woodland.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b35fa57ed915d0b53021ae1/FCPG201.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> [https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/hqlv1wozx4/WoodlandTrust\\_AncientTrees\\_230515\\_GB\\_FULL\\_W.pdf](https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/hqlv1wozx4/WoodlandTrust_AncientTrees_230515_GB_FULL_W.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> [https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr\\_nfi\\_condition\\_scoring\\_exec-summary.pdf](https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr_nfi_condition_scoring_exec-summary.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <https://ukwas.org.uk/standard/natural-historical-and-cultural-environment/#section-3>

<sup>17</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6673e4a3d427ab249955cea7/Forestry-Commission-Key-Performance-Indicators-Report-2023-24\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6673e4a3d427ab249955cea7/Forestry-Commission-Key-Performance-Indicators-Report-2023-24_.pdf)



### **Invasive non-native species (INNS)**

INNS are a persistent threat to ancient woodlands and to native species. Invasive mammals, plants, pests and pathogens are estimated to cost the UK economy over £4bn each year. In total, ash dieback alone (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*) is predicted to cost the UK £15 billion, and it is often down to private landowners, farmers and charities to deal with the cost.<sup>18</sup>

The case study below shows how government actions to deal with threats can sometimes have perverse outcomes that undermine the condition of ancient woodland.

#### ***Ips typographus* on spruce; a threat to ancient woodlands**

To control the spread and the impacts of the larger eight-toothed spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*), the most economically damaging pest of spruce trees in Europe, landowners can be paid by Government to remove spruce in the Demarcated Area/Proactive Spruce Removal Area. They can then receive grants from the Forestry Commission to replant the space with new trees, which may have unforeseen consequences for ancient woodland.

When this happens in a PAWS site, the removed spruce can be restocked with other non-native conifers (other than spruce). This is not in line with the Keepers of Time Policy's strategic objective to 'maintain and enhance the existing area of ancient woodland.'

**Restocking grants in PAWS should apply only to appropriate native species which will aid in the restoration and improvement of ancient woodland.**

The Forestry Commission estimated there to be 98.7 thousand hectares of *Rhododendron ponticum*, one of the most damaging and widespread non-native terrestrial plants in Britain with a devastating impact on ancient woodlands in the temperate rainforest zone, growing within and in close proximity to woodlands in Britain.<sup>19</sup> Invasive mammals, including Reeves Muntjac, Fallow Deer, Sika Deer and Chinese Water Deer, inflict further harms by limiting natural regeneration of the woodland as they consume young saplings, and are becoming increasingly recognised as a threat to many bird species which rely on understory canopy.<sup>20</sup>

### **Planning policy**

Current planning laws in England do not do enough to prevent loss or damage of ancient woodlands, including AWP and ancient or veteran trees outside woodland. Paragraph 193 c)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-05-08-ash-dieback-predicted-cost-%C2%A315-billion-britain#:~:text=Ash%20dieback%20is%20predicted%20to,in%20Britain%20%7C%20University%20of%20Oxford>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/51702/rhododendron-in-the-rainforest-policypaper.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Phillips, G.E. and Cristol, D.A., 2024. Mechanisms of deer (Cervidae) impacts on birds: A comprehensive review. *Biological Conservation*, 290, p.110454. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2024.110454>



of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that 'development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exists'.<sup>21</sup> The protection afforded by this NPPF statement is not legally binding and its implementation varies within local authorities making planning decisions.

Defra recently published a review<sup>22</sup> of the implementation of the planning protections afforded ancient woodland in the NPPF and found that "Almost half of applications were approved without a proper assessment of possible loss or deterioration and without mitigation measures in place to avoid negative impacts to the ancient woodland/ancient veteran trees."<sup>23</sup> Potential solutions to this include ensuring sufficient arboriculture and ecological resource at both local planning authority and Statutory Nature Conservation Body level, improved access to GIS mapping data for woodlands, improved data on AWP and ancient and veteran trees, and more detailed definitions of 'wholly exceptional' reasons.<sup>24</sup>

Natural England and the Forestry Commission have issued guidance for development and ancient woodland to assist both developers and Local Planning Authorities with designing and decision-making on planning proposals.<sup>25</sup> The use of buffer zones in planning proposals affecting ancient woodlands can help to reduce the impact of noise, light and dust pollution (amongst others) from development proposals. However, current guidance recommends the maintenance of a minimum 15 metre buffer from the boundary of the woodland, which is not necessarily guaranteed to prevent damage, depending on the scale of the development.

### Addressing the threats to ancient woodland

New policies, legal designations and better incentives are needed to improve ancient woodland protections.

Recommendations:

1. **Designate all habitat under the umbrella of ancient woodland (incl PAWS and AWP) as SSSI.** This would require the designation of an additional 300,000 ha of ancient woodland and an unknown amount of AWP. It would offer additional requirements of

<sup>21</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/675abd214cbda57cacd3476e/NPPF-December-2024.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> [Review of the implementation of the NPPF para 186 \(c\) in applications and appeals in or within 15 metres of ancient woodlands or near ancient and veteran trees - AE1903](#)

<sup>23</sup> Based on a sample size of 109 planning applications submitted in or within 15m of ancient woodlands or near ancient and veteran trees

<sup>24</sup> <https://treecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Protecting-Trees-of-High-Social-Cultural-and-Environmental-Value-Final-Report-October-2024-v3.0-APRIL-2025.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> [Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: advice for making planning decisions - GOV.UK](#)



favourable management and some additional protection from development. This should be accompanied by sufficient investment to bring SSSIs into favourable condition, currently 50% of SSSI woodland area is in unfavourable (recovering) condition and 34% in favourable condition. Improving the condition of SSSIs could play a central role in delivering the 30 by 30 commitments. As the existing SSSI legislation and purpose is not designed to comprehensively cover an entire habitat type, this should be enacted in conjunction with other recommendations below.

2. **Introduce new bespoke full legal protection that applies to all ancient woodlands (including PAWS), analogous to The Management of Hedgerows Regulations (2024).**<sup>26</sup> This change would allow bespoke protection to be enacted without the need for individual site assessment, as currently stands with the hedgerow regulations.
3. **Launch an ancient woodland recovery plan to address the critically low levels of damaged ancient woodland entering the Forestry Commission England (FCE) grant schemes and AWP entering ELMs.** This should include a review of existing grant offers, payment rates, advice and support mechanisms for private landowners to deliver Defra targets.
4. **Modernise the existing felling licence legislation to introduce new powers to allow FCE to add conditions to felling licences that would prevent ongoing damage to ancient woodland. Including revising 5m<sup>3</sup> exemption such that ancient, veteran and large individual trees also require a felling licence.** For, example, conditions that require the remnant features of the ancient woodland to be protected during felling and replanting operations. This is already a requirement in the UK Forestry Standard, but FCE have no legal mechanisms to implement or enforce this currently. The Welsh Government has recently updated their felling licence legislation to enable them to add conditions to felling licences that enable them to protect ancient woodlands, which could be a model to learn from.
5. **Modernise tax rules to give tax relief on ancient woodlands, PAWs, AWP and ancient and veteran trees which meet protection criteria or are in the process of restoration, realigning existing forestry tax breaks.** Tax breaks are set up to reward commercial forestry and private income generation only, not the delivery of public benefits (not delivered by a market). This new method would use existing fiscal measures to work for ancient woodlands and ensure better public value for money for existing tax relief.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2024/680/made>



6. **Create 50 metre buffer zones where natural colonisation from the seed source (trees and ground flora) is incentivised whenever land use change is planned (for whatever purpose) adjacent or close to ancient woodlands.** Less soil carbon is lost through natural colonisation than when planting new trees and provides a better and longer lasting habitat for early successional and woodland edge specialist species in the most natural way possible.<sup>27</sup> This method does not give protection to the woodlands themselves but offers some protection from nearby development. It must therefore be adopted in conjunction with the other recommendations.
7. **Map the location of all ancient wood pasture sites, with an assessment of their condition.** Unlike closed canopy ancient woodland, mapping the location and quality of AWP sites is very incomplete. These sites need to be mapped, and their condition included on databases so that they can be protected and managed appropriately.

The review of the Environmental Improvement Plan<sup>28</sup> provides a key policy vehicle to commit to above recommendations, secure better protection and restoration of ancient woodland habitats and trees and deliver multiple Government targets in the process. The evidence suggests this would be very popular publicly.

Progress in this area will contribute to wider environmental targets including target 2 of the Global Biodiversity Framework to restore 30% of all degraded ecosystems by 2030<sup>29</sup> which has been enshrined in the Environment Improvement Plan to protect and manage at least 30% of England's land for nature recovery by 2030. The Office for Environmental Protection report showed that there has been limited progress to achieve this.<sup>30</sup> Link recently assessed that only 2.93% of land in England is effectively protected and well managed for nature.<sup>31</sup> With less than 5 years to achieve the target, it is crucial that appropriate action is ramped up at pace. Defra has previously estimated that protecting additional areas of woodland could contribute 5.8% of land to this target.<sup>32</sup> Ancient woodland protection would deliver 2.4% to 30 by 30 and including AWP would increase this considerably. There is no other woodland type as deserving of greater protection and inclusion than ancient woodland.

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<sup>27</sup> Melin, M., et al. (2018) 'Living on the edge: utilising lidar data to assess the importance of vegetation structure for avian diversity in fragmented woodlands and their edges'. *Landscape Ecol* 33, 895–910 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-018-0639-7>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan-rapid-review>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.theoep.org.uk/report/government-has-chance-get-track-meet-legal-environmental-commitments-window-opportunity>

<sup>31</sup> [https://wcl.org.uk/docs/Link\\_30x30\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2024.pdf?trk=public\\_post\\_comment-text](https://wcl.org.uk/docs/Link_30x30_Progress_Report_2024.pdf?trk=public_post_comment-text)

<sup>32</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65807a5e23b70a000d234b5d/Delivering\\_30by30\\_on\\_land\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65807a5e23b70a000d234b5d/Delivering_30by30_on_land_in_England.pdf)



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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 88 organisations to campaign for nature, climate, animal welfare 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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The following organisations have inputted into this briefing and support greater protection of ancient woodlands:

RSPB

Woodland Trust

Trees for Cities

Friends of the Earth

CPRE, the countryside charity

Peoples Trust for Endangered Species

Bat Conservation Trust

Rewilding Britain

Plantlife