Branching from strong roots: Priorities for a new England Tree Action Plan

December 2025

This briefing is on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) and covers the key priorities for a new England Tree Action Plan.

Introduction

The England Tree Action Plan 2021-2024 was a welcome publication and there has been good progress toward a number of the ninety actions in the plan. An undoubtable focus has been towards trebling tree planting to reach 16.5% tree cover across England by 2050. This kickstarted a positive trend leading to the highest tree planting rate for over 20 years in the 2023/2024 season.[1] It is now crucial to keep up the momentum of new growth, as well as build skills, bring trees to urban areas and secure thorough protection of existing trees and restoration of healthy woodlands.

As a first step Defra should evaluate the success of each of the actions, identifying which have been fully, partially or not achieved to understand how a new plan can add value. We recommend the use of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (i.e. SMART) targets in the new plan to enable monitoring of ongoing progress.

The ETAP must not be developed in isolation. Instead, there should be clear alignment and integration with other initiatives to collectively support and deliver Government priorities, including the Environmental Improvement Plan. A range of emerging initiatives—such as the Local Nature Recovery Strategies, Green Infrastructure Framework, Land Use Framework, Farming Roadmap, the seventh Carbon Budget and Net Zero pathway, Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy, Air Quality Strategy and planning policy reviews—may offer additional opportunities to strengthen and advance trees and woodland policy. Also, using initiatives like the Nature Recovery Network and Local Nature Recovery Strategies will help determine where the most gain can be achieved at a landscape scale, including habitat buffering and connectivity.

An additional role for Government is to ensure that there is a strong, skilled workforce to deliver the actions of the plan and so people must be considered the bedrock of the ETAP. It

[1] https://forestrycommission.blog.gov.uk/2025/06/27/a-year-of-growth-tree-planting-rates-hit-their-highest-level-in-over-20-years/

is becoming easier to get capital funding for tree planting from the private sector but a continued skills shortage to deliver tree planting, establishment & management and restoration activities will significantly undermine the success of the strategy. This opportunity for investment and job creation is in total alignment with Government priorities for prudent spending and economic growth.

The contribution of trees and woods to nature and climate objectives is further limited by the continued threats from pests, diseases, pollution, inappropriate or poor management and inadequate legal protection. These factors contribute to the substantial tree loss at a scale that will prevent England from becoming a carbon sink unless things are turned around. We encourage reframing the language to aim for actions towards 'tree establishment' rather than just planting.

The significant amount of public money going into increasing tree cover is at risk of being wasted with low value for money if policy focuses narrowly on planting without good aftercare, long term management and monitoring, and green career development. Monitoring tends to be short term to collect survival rates but there is an opportunity to address key knowledge gaps with greater long term monitoring.[2] One of the more well-known threats is the fungal disease that causes ash dieback, which is estimated in total to cost £15billion in tree works, replacement of trees, and lost ecosystem services.[3]

The pest *Ips typographus* is a significant challenge for commercial plantations of spruce too. It is therefore fundamental that tree planting is not considered the single overarching priority of the new plan, and that it includes steps to protect and restore urban & rural trees and woodlands that are already living, storing carbon, providing valuable habitat and resilience to flooding, pests and disease. Doing so represents good sense and good value for money. This includes widespread woodland management activities which consider biodiversity, encourage a mosaic of habitats and designate areas of minimum intervention, improve connectivity and avoid fragmentation.[4]

The new ETAP must set out a plan for:

- Legislative reform and comprehensive guidance for regulators to better protect existing trees
- Public investment in trees and woods over at least the next four years.

[2] https://treecouncil.org.uk/science-and-research/tree-establishment-monitoring-boosting-evidence-to-improve-practice/
[3] https://treecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-Tree-Council-Ash-Dieback-Toolkit-March-2025-FINAL.pdf
[4] Woodland Management - Link briefing.docx

- Utilising investments like the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) and others to bring tree planting to the target of 10,000 hectares per annum and improve habitat connectivity.
- Raising urban tree cover, with the correct support and education, and setting a deliverable target for urban canopy cover, especially in areas of deficiency.
- Bringing a target number of hectares of plantation on ancient woodland sites (PAWS) into restoration by 2030, as included in the interim Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), and providing clarity on how much PAWS is in a restoration plan.
- Be clear how trees and woodlands will help in the achievement of all relevant targets in the 2025 EIP.
- Investing in and developing a range of suitably skilled workforce in sufficient numbers to deliver the actions of the plan
- Upscaling biosecurity provisions by strengthening cross-sector working and improving the domestic tree supply industry.
- Managing threats and pressures on trees and woodlands, including publishing the Deer Management and the Grey Squirrel Action Plans.
- Increasing natural regeneration and colonisation by recognising both processes as primary methods for increasing native and resilient tree cover (where suitable ground conditions and seed sources from existing high-quality native woodland or hedgerow areas exist).
- Bringing Government departments together (e.g. DEFRA and MHCLG), within nations and across UK wide, to better collaborate on trees policy, protection and action.

Futureproofing

To ensure the lasting success of the strategy, investment must extend beyond the immediate costs of tree planting, recognising that people are the foundation of both economic growth and environmental stewardship. The central challenge is not capital for trees, but the shortage of skills and capacity to establish, manage, maintain, and steward trees and woodlands effectively and the lack of diversity in the sector. The Arboricultural Association emphasises the lack of consideration, investment and support for educators and trainers who are developing the skills in the next generation. "Simply put, without them our profession does not have a future."[5]

A key principle of this plan must be to develop a stronger identity for the sector, and to pivot towards sustained investment in staff, training, and job creation and engagement of target audiences that are currently underrepresented (particularly for urban forestry). An example of good developments in this area can be seen in the United States International Society of Arboriculture credentials scheme.[6]

(1) The new ETAP should set out a pipeline of Government actions to increase the workforce to deliver the actions of the plan. Including:

- Pivoting investment to bolster skills and careers in forestry, arboriculture and ecology (not least aquatic ecology).
- Working with the Department for Education and with Skills England to embed green careers as viable throughout schools, colleges and professional bodies, and, developing targeted, alternative and paid routes for school leavers into green employment other than further education.

The plan must seek to address existing challenges of the sector including low pay, a lack of funding for further development and progression opportunities. The Forestry Commission developed a training fund as part of the Nature for Climate Fund which was well subscribed. Given the popularity and desire for these training schemes, there is a case for a broader land use sector skills strategy to target a range of conservation land management roles and design a system to build generational skills and long-term stewardship. This should accompany the Land Use Framework and should target career starters, switchers and small businesses. It should also recognise and address the shortage of expertise within local authorities to extract information from initiatives such as the Land Use Framework and Local Nature Recovery Strategies to identify suitable tree planting locations on a landscape scale.

[5] https://trees.org.uk/Trees.org.uk/media/Trees-org.uk/Documents/AA/AA-Strategy-Document-2025-2027-WEB.pdf
[6] International Society of Arboriculture > Credentials > Types of Credentials > ISA Certified Urban Forest Professional

Protecting existing trees and woodlands

It will not be possible for Government to meet targets of nature restoration unless stronger safeguards are put in place for the most ecologically significant and irreplaceable habitats. The lack of robust legal protection for the rarest and most wildlife-rich woodlands - ancient woodlands (comprising ancient semi-natural woodlands, plantations on ancient woodland sites, ancient wood pasture and parkland, ancient and veteran trees) —is a national failure.

The Tree Council was commissioned by Defra to study how we should better value and protect trees of high social, cultural, and environmental value outside of woodland. Top suggestions from key stakeholders included granting improved legal protections for important trees, developing an 'action plan' to manage the trees, and a public and private funding framework to support landowners and managers.[7] To fully protect these important sites there must be new bespoke full legal protection that applies to all ancient woodlands as described above. This protection must be statutory, so the ETAP should clearly set out the Government's intention to work with MHCLG to legislate/regulate protections under planning law. The plan should include commitments to:

(2) Develop a time-bound delivery plan for the Keepers of Time policy (2022) to speed up restoration and improve protection.

Critically low levels of damaged ancient woodland are recovering through grant schemes despite the Government commitment to restore PAWS. In 2022/23 Forestry England supported only 1ha of privately owned PAWS restoration, rising only to 6ha in 2023/24. The plan must review existing regulation, identify strategic actions, partnerships and the resource required to deliver Government targets and policy. Defra should quantify exactly how much PAWS is in a restoration action plan and identify where the gaps are.

Attention should also be given to ensure that deadwood is included in woodland management plans, particularly in ancient and long-established woodlands. Over 2000 invertebrates in the UK are associated with the deadwood habitats supported by veteran trees, and the loss of deadwood has been identified as a principal threat to 188 'species in peril', as studied by Natural Resources Wales.[8] However, Forest Research's National Forest Inventory data reveals that 8 in 10 native UK woodlands have an unfavourable amount of deadwood, and almost half (46%) have no deadwood at all.[9]

[7] https://treecouncil.org.uk/science-and-research/valuing-and-protecting-important-trees-outside-woodlands/
[8] https://cdn.cyfoethnaturiol.cymru/4bqlg3ic/nrw-evidence-report-818-species-in-peril.pdf
[9] https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/53901/state-of-the-uk-s-woods-and-trees-2025.pdf page 15

(3) Modernise the licencing system for forestry operations to prevent ongoing damage to ancient woodland.

This is an existing requirement in the UK Forestry Standard, but Forestry England have no legal mechanisms to implement or enforce this currently. Wales have adopted similar modernisation to add conditions to felling licences to better protect ancient woodlands.[10]

(4) Map the location of all ancient wood pasture and parkland sites and provide an assessment of their condition.

Ancient wood pasture is a stronghold of ancient and veteran trees which, when managed well, can support a mosaic of habitats. Not knowing the location of these sites increases their chance of falling into neglect or harmful land management, including inappropriate infill planting. Natural Resources Wales reveals that woodland parkland and scrub is the most important of 13 ecosystems for '*Species in Peril*', with nearly a third of all species (1076 species) restricted to this ecosystem.[11]

(5) Publish an updated and funded delivery plan to recover England's temperate rainforests.

This internationally significant habitat has been reduced to 1% of land in Great Britain, but this could be doubled with investment that supports the natural regeneration of rainforests. The rainforest plan was published in 2023 and acknowledged that *'protecting and enhancing them will contribute towards government commitments'* but delivery since then has stalled.

(6) Consult on strengthening protections for ancient woodlands within the National Planning Policy Framework.

Including consideration of 'long-established woodlands' in the planning system. Such work should be done closely with MHCLG. We have previously suggested policies to protect ancient woodland from development, available here.[12] [13]

The ambition for planting trees that are likely to be resilient to Climate change impacts, such as drought, flooding and wildfire and associated rises in pests and diseases is unanimous. Forestry England have published a strategy for resilience and have named species diversity a pivotal route to this. Their '*Species for the Future*' list of 30 trees has a mix of broadleaf,

[10] Amending the Forestry Act 1967: principles of implementation The Forestry Act 1967 has been amended so that illegal felling now carries an unlimited fine, and NRW can now include environmental conditions in a felling licence. https://www.gov.wales/ancient-woodland-strengthening-protection

[11] https://cdn.cyfoethnaturiol.cymru/4bqlg3ic/nrw-evidence-report-818-species-in-peril.pdf

[12] https://wcl.org.uk/docs/2025/Link_response_review_planning_advice_for_ancient_woodland_and_AVTs.pdf

[13] Link_Briefing_Ancient_Woodland_Protection.pdf

conifer, native and non-native tree species scientifically selected for their resilience which are to be planted in appropriate settings. It is still very important that native broadleaf woodlands are enhanced and restored in the name of resilience with native broadleaf tree species, for example as PAWS are restored. There is growing research that supports greater attention to seed sourcing climate resilient native trees from Europe and growing them domestically for use in new native woodlands. Natural colonisation should remain the first choice in buffer zones around Ancient Woodlands. The recently published Future of London's Public Realm trees report speaks to this and may have lessons nationally.[14] Additionally, natural regeneration should be considered a very important tool in the wheelhouse at improving resilience in native woodlands.

(7) The ETAP should:

- **recognise natural regeneration and colonisation as primary processes for increasing native and resilient tree cover** (where suitable ground conditions and seed sources from existing high-quality native woodland or hedgerow areas exist),
- **name natural colonisation as the default tree cover expansion method in 100 metre buffer zones around ancient woodlands, and;**
- **specify actions to increase the uptake of natural regeneration and colonisation capital grants.** For example, by working with the Forestry Commission to change the stocking density terms of the Woodland Carbon Code to that of the EWCO natural regeneration grant.

[14] Hirons, A. D. and Martin, K. W. E. (2025) Future climate suitability of London's public realm trees. Urban Plant Lab https://www.london.gov.uk/media/110943/download

Reduce pressure on existing habitats and new saplings

Without actions (managing pests, disease and pollution) to improve the environment for trees and woodlands to flourish, the many saplings being planted may not survive nor even live long enough to grow to maturity let alone eventually become ancient trees. Unless existing threats are managed the significant amounts of public money being spent to increase tree cover could be wasted. The EIP promised that a 2026 Trees Action Plan would set out commitments and timescales to reduce the risks of pests and diseases. Prioritising actions to improve tree health in the ETAP is vital if the new tree health resilience strategy is to be incorporated within it rather than a standalone document.

Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) now include funding for the management of invasive species such as grey squirrel, deer, American mink and plant species including rhododendron. There is potential for this to have a very positive impact, but uncoordinated and piecemeal removal of species risks wasting public spending particularly for INNS impacting freshwater or riparian habitats which easily spread through a catchment. Additionally, the threat of invasive seeding of non-native trees onto semi-natural habitats needs to be considered.

Research has predicted substantial plant pests and disease risks for the UK over the next 25 years, and policymakers are advised to strengthen phytosanitary regulations, improve surveillance of trade pathways, and foster international cooperation to manage the risks.[15] Instead, new trade agreements that propose reducing border checks for plant and animal products risk increasing opportunities for pests and pathogens to enter the UK at the border.

We recommend the ETAP should:

(8) Ensure that INNS removal is strategic and has the desired result at a landscape scale. Defra must commit to reviewing the effectiveness of this method and introduce regional targeting in priority landscapes such as temperate rainforest.

(9) Establish and maintain strong coordination between Government departments to uphold and strengthen biosecurity at the border.

Defra and APHA must be involved in trade decisions to ensure that changes do not weaken biosecurity and raise the risks of plant pests, pathogens and diseases to the UK. Crucially,

[15] Bebber, D. P., Maclean, I. M. D., Mosedale, J. R., & Youngman, B. D. (2025). Potential impacts of plant pests and diseases on trees and forests in the United Kingdom. Plants, People, Planet, 7(5), 1538–1550. https://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.70023

routine checks on higher risk imports such as large, mature trees must be upheld. These imports are an exceptional biosecurity risk as they contain more areas for harbouring pests and pathogens.

Developing a strong and bio-secure supply of British-grown trees remains a crucial target. Annually, pests, pathogens and diseases cost the UK economy £4billion.[16] Investing in domestic tree nurseries to reduce reliance on imports is a win-win for the economy, the environment and for local businesses. It can also strengthen resilience by supporting seed sourcing native tree species from areas in Europe where they will be future climate resilient.[17]

New research by the Woodland Trust 'Strong Roots' survey identified market confidence as the biggest barrier for a robust British tree supply chain and the most common concern expressed by forestry nurseries.[18]

(10) Dedicate funding and policy support for UK grown species. The ETAP should include necessary steps to raise market confidence for British-grown trees.

The first ETAP stalled in producing the nursery notification system or a confidential information sharing system. Defra should now go further and seek to work with Scottish and Welsh Governments to develop a GB Tree Procurement Unit to secure the tree supply chain by modelling the demand for trees, issuing multi-year contracts to tree nurseries and providing capital grants to improve efficiency and capacity. More information is available here.

[16] René Eschen et al (2023) 'An updated assessment of the direct costs of invasive non-native species to the United Kingdom,' 6 July, Biological Invasions. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10530-023-03107-2
[17] Martin, K.W. and Sjöman, H., 2024, September. Navigating the future: unveiling the resilience of trees in evolving UK climates. In III International Symposium on Greener Cities: Improving Ecosystem Services in a Climate-Changing World (GreenCities2024) 1429 (pp. 77-84). (PDF) Navigating the future: unveiling the resilience of trees in evolving UK climates
[18] https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/dzklneja/strong-roots-report.pdf

Planting

Valuable Government-led initiatives to encourage landowners and agriculture businesses to work in harmony with nature have blossomed since the first ETAP. They are important to incentivise the right actions in the right places to benefit farmers and biodiversity, such as prioritising incentives for agroecology, adaptive planting and other sustainable land uses.

(11) The ETAP should set out how Defra intends to transition EWCO into ELMs and ensure that public money produces public goods that will benefit biodiversity. This includes:

- encouraging landowners to retain and embed a mosaic of habitats and features to cater to different woodland species and those associated with open grown trees. Marking areas for minimum intervention to allow for natural processes to take place benefits woodland obligates that favour darker, cluttered understorey, undisturbed woodland sites.
- improving connectivity and reducing fragmentation.

The ETAP must align with and amplify the ambitions of existing and forthcoming Government initiatives to deliver tree planting. This includes the Farming Roadmap which should improve long-term farmer engagement and investment towards wildlife-friendly farming, and encourage tree planting for biodiversity, flood management and water quality. Data from Nature Recovery Networks and Local Nature Recovery Strategies should inform tree planting at landscape scale and encompassing appropriate characteristic landscape types for the greatest benefits.

Productive forestry must be sustainable and deliver benefits for nature, climate and people. New JNCC indicators report that the percentage of woodland area in the UK that is certified against agreed environmental standards has stagnated in recent years, despite a long-term positive trend.[19] For England alone this indicator shows a deteriorating trend in the short term.[20] Woodlands must be brought into sustainable management through targeted funding and expert advice and support for woodland owners. New planting of fast-growing trees should avoid impacts to biodiversity and other ecosystem services.

[19] https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/ukbi-sustainable-forestry/
[20] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/england-biodiversity-indicators/area-of-forestry-land-under-certified-sustainable-management-schemes

Greening urban environments

Urban forestry has seen growing attention globally, with schemes like Tree Cities of the World helping to build this momentum and recognise the importance of urban trees.[21] The last ETAP did not include specific tree cover targets for urban areas, a gap that should be filled in the forthcoming plan. The EIP specified that a new Trees Action Plan will contain further details to support access to woodlands, and this should first be targeted to where there are the greatest inequalities when it comes to who has access to green spaces.

Coverage varies significantly across all geographical scales in the UK (electoral ward, LA, region, and country) and just 27.6% of UK urban wards have a tree canopy cover higher than 20%.[22] Street trees may be the only nature that people living in urban areas may see within 15-minutes from home and they provide welcome relief from extreme heat and air pollution.[23] Extending the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCF) was one of the goals of the original ETAP. As the fund has now closed, there must be clarity on how this gap will be filled to increase tree cover in urban/peri-urban areas to make sustainable, healthy and happy cities - while additionally providing the funding and resource support to engage with communities that is so essential to the success of urban schemes. Community engagement funding was lacking from the UTCF but would be a welcome addition to future iterations of urban support.

(12) Pledge to raise urban canopy cover to minimum 20%, in line with recommendations from Forest Research.[24]

All new housing developments should have a minimum of 30% canopy cover. Knowledge and data from Local Nature Recovery Strategies, Friends of the Earth[25] and Woodland Trust[26] maps will help to guide where targeted tree planting could make the greatest benefits to greening urban areas, improving habitat connectivity and buffering, and help protect people from health-harming heat and other public health aims.

(13) Improve protection for existing urban trees with a pledge to review, update and improve the Tree Preservation Order system to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

[21] https://www.treecitiesoftheworld.org/
[22] Sales, Kris; Walker, Hannah; Sparrow, Kate; Handley, Phillip; Vaz Monteiro, Madalena; Hand, Kathryn L.; Buckland, Annabel; Chambers-Ostler, Alexander and Doick, Kieron J. (2023). The canopy cover Webmap of the United Kingdom's towns and cities. *Arboricultural Journal*, 45(4) pp. 258–289. https://doi.org/10.1080/03071375.2023.2233864
[23] https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/download/urban-cooling-trees-and-green-spaces-research-findings
[24] https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/fr_fc_treecanopydata_leaflet.pdf
[25] https://policy.friendsoftheearth.uk/insight/mapping-english-tree-cover-results-ranking-and-methodology
[26] https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/press-centre/2023/12/new-tree-equity-map-shows-tree-cover-

Loose exceptions and weak enforcement from under resourced local authorities are rendering tree preservation orders vulnerable to exploitation and undermining their level of protection.[27]

Conclusion

2026-2030 are crucial years to turn the tide for nature - and trees, existing and new, must play a central role. To make the greatest impact, the new English Tree Action Plan must integrate tree-positive actions right across the board of Government initiatives. Through improved management and protection of existing habitats, the greening of both urban and rural environments, and strategic planning for a nature-friendly future, it is possible to deliver lasting benefits for people, businesses, climate, and biodiversity.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 94 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 and support this briefing:

Friends of the Earth
Trees for Cities
The Woodland Trust
Plantlife
Rewilding Britain
RSPB
National Trust
Bat Conservation Trust
Ancient Tree Forum
Peoples Trust for Endangered Species

[27] https://www.trees.org.uk/News-Blog/Latest-News/Tree-preservation-orders-Are-local-authorities-effective-in-protecting-England%E2%80%99s-valued-trees