



**COUNCILLOR  
BRIEFING:  
PLANTING AND  
PROTECTING TREES**

**CONSERVATIVE  
ENVIRONMENT  
NETWORK**

“We are in the business of planting trees,  
for our children and grandchildren,  
or we have no business to be in politics at all.”

- Margaret Thatcher  
Conservative Party Conference 1982

## Summary

- **Tree-planting is a vital nature-based solution for tackling climate change.** As one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and with a target to reach net zero emissions by 2050, trees are a vital nature-based solution to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss. Not only do they absorb carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), trees can also mitigate the worst effects of climate change, such as flooding, to make our communities more resilient, and create habitats for our precious wildlife.
- **The previous government took several measures to help increase tree cover in the UK as a means to tackle climate change.** With a target to increase England's tree cover to 16.5% by 2050, the previous government launched the [Nature for Climate Fund](#), with £500 million of the £640 million pot dedicated to tree planting. This was joined by the England Woodland Creation Offer for landowners and the creation of the Woodland Carbon Code for businesses to buy carbon offsets, to incentivise private sector tree planting across England.
- **The new Labour government has committed to ambitious tree planting efforts but has not yet laid out how it will deliver this ambition.** Commitments include creating new national forests and planting millions of trees, as well as ambitious targets to tackle climate change. However, reports suggest that Labour is planning a £100 million cut to the nature-friendly farming budget, which would undermine farmers' and land managers' efforts to plant more trees on their land.
- **Councils can play a crucial role in planting more trees and protecting existing ones.** As landowners, managers, and local leaders, there are many ways councils can support tree planting, including running awareness campaigns, planting trees on council-owned land, and supporting local landowners to access relevant funding pots.

## Background

- **UK tree cover is approximately 13% of our land.** Tree cover in the UK has increased over recent decades, rising from just 9% of our land in 1980. However, our tree cover is still far lower than the EU average of 38%.
- **The UK has legally committed to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and halting biodiversity loss by 2030.** Tree planting and woodland habitat restoration will play an integral role in reaching both of these targets. However, the Climate Change Committee's latest report announced that the UK's tree planting efforts were 'off track' in order to meet our interim 2030 targets.
- **Tree planting is a fundamentally conservative act.** A sapling is planted knowing that the person planting it will never sit under the tree's shade, but do so knowing that the next generation will be able to do so. Tree planting of a tree is an act of intergenerational exchange, a core tenet of conservatism.
- **We must protect the trees we already have as well as planting more.** Our woodlands are under threat from several pressures including invasive species like *rhododendron ponticum* and grey squirrels. It is estimated that the grey squirrel causes £37 million in damage to trees each year by damaging their bark and exposing them to disease.
- **Nature-based solutions to climate change deliver multiple benefits to local communities.** Local authorities will play an integral role in improving the resilience of their communities to the impacts of climate change, such as flooding. Nature-based solutions, such as tree planting, can be a cost-efficient option that deliver other benefits to the communities and the environment that choose to deploy them.

## The benefits of trees

- **Tree planting is a vital nature-based solution to climate change.** Trees absorb and store CO<sub>2</sub>, making forests and woodlands a valuable carbon sink and an important nature-based solution to climate change. Producing a renewable building material, trees will also play a key role in the decarbonisation of different industries, such as construction, by replacing carbon intensive materials like concrete and steel with timber. The development of the UK forestry sector and accompanying timber supply chain will also create new business opportunities and job creation.
- **Absorbing CO<sub>2</sub> is just one of many benefits that trees provide to the environment.** Trees provide vital shade, habitat, and sustenance for wildlife. They also provide ecosystem services by mitigating the impacts of flooding and drought, providing shade over watercourses which can lower the temperature of water below, and protecting the wildlife within the water. Integrating trees into agricultural land, through methods like agroforestry, can also enhance soil health.
- **Trees also deliver many non-environmental societal benefits.** Street trees and other forms of urban landscaping help to foster a greater sense of pride in the community, with studies even showing it can reduce crime and driving speeds. Access to trees and green spaces more generally also helps to improve the wellbeing of residents. Trees are also of great symbolic importance to the UK's cultural and natural heritage, even serving as the logo of the Conservative Party.

### Action by the previous government on trees

- **The last government set targets to boost biodiversity and tree planting.** The government's legally binding commitment to reaching net zero emissions by 2050 will require increased tree planting in order to sequester CO<sub>2</sub>. The previous government also committed to halt the decline of biodiversity by 2030 and, as a key habitat, trees will play a significant part in this effort. More directly, the Conservative government set the target to increase tree cover to [16.5% in England by 2050](#).
- **The Nature for Climate Fund provided £500 million to fund tree-planting initiatives in England.** Through this fund, the last government aimed to plant 30,000 hectares of trees annually by 2025 as part of the [England Tree Strategy](#).
- **The newly created Nature Recovery Networks will help connect existing woodland habitats.** These networks were created to restore and connect wildlife habitats, enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience. Efforts to restore these wildlife corridors will inherently involve more native woodland restoration and tree-planting.
- **The post-Brexit Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) pay farmers to use more nature-friendly farming techniques.** The government now pays farmers public money for the provision of public goods that, unlike food, are not rewarded by the market. Payments for [agroforestry](#) and [controlling invasive species](#) are two of the many options now available to farmers. The [Landscape Recovery](#) tier of ELMs has also funded the recovery of nature within entire landscapes, including afforestation.
- **The 2021 Environment Act contains many measures to improve environmental protection and increase biodiversity in England.** As well as the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection, this act set the tree cover target for England and mandated the creation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies by local authorities. The act also created a 10% [Biodiversity Net Gain \(BNG\)](#) requirement which came into effect in February 2024. Funded by developers, BNG will enable the creation of new natural habitats, including trees and woodlands.

### Labour's plans for trees

- **The Labour Party's manifesto included a commitment to planting more trees and new woodland creation.** As part of its plans to improve responsible access to nature, Labour has committed to establishing three new National Forests in England, whilst also planting millions of trees and creating new woodlands. However, it is currently unclear how these ambitions will be realised or funded.
- **Labour has announced a review of the Environmental Improvement Plan.** Once the existing plan has been reviewed, the government will develop a new, statutory plan to protect and restore our natural environment, which will likely involve planting trees.
- **Labour has failed to commit to the farming budget.** Whilst Labour has said it will commit to the transition towards more nature-friendly farming, it has not committed to the previous budget and is reportedly planning to cut it by [£100 million](#). This is estimated to reduce the amount of nature-friendly farmland in England by 239,000



hectares and would have a significant impact on the amount of land supported to plant more trees and restore nature.

### Resources and ideas for councillors

- **Develop a local tree strategy.** A comprehensive [tree strategy](#) that outlines long-term goals for increasing tree cover, connecting existing woodlands, improving access to nature for residents, and enhancing biodiversity can provide a method of accountability for councils to ensure they remain on track to reach local environmental objectives. The [Tree Council](#) and the [Woodland Trust](#) have both published dedicated resources for councils looking to create such a strategy.
- **Register your council for the [Trees for Streets](#) scheme.** This scheme empowers local residents to choose where they want to see new street trees planted, creates a sense of community action and pride to care for these trees, and is accompanied by a national fundraising platform to finance the planting of them. The scheme currently has 19 councils signed up. Find out more about how to get your council involved [here](#).
- **Read the wealth of tree planting guidance and resources available online.** Organisations such as [Trees for Cities](#), the [Woodland Trust](#), the [Local Government Association](#), the [Forestry Commission](#), [ADEPT](#), and the [Tree Council](#) have published many resources online that are tailored towards local authority tree planting efforts.
- **Support local landowners and farmers who want to plant trees on their land.** Help land managers to identify and apply for relevant grants and funding pots, such as the government's new scheme for [agroforestry](#), the [Woodland Carbon Code](#), and the [England Woodland Creation Offer](#).
- **Plant trees on council-owned land.** Councils can identify and allocate suitable land within their jurisdiction for tree planting. This could include pockets of unused, marginal land such as [roadsides, the edges of car parks, and other public spaces](#).
- **Increase your council's BNG requirement.** By increasing the net gain minimum of 10%, your council can deliver greater measurable improvements for nature and can help to encourage more tree planting. Studies have found that the cost of doubling BNG from 10% to [20%](#) is often very manageable.
- **Include woodland creation and protection in your [Local Nature Recovery Strategy \(LNRS\)](#).** As a key habitat and carbon store, woodland makes for an ideal habitat to be restored and can feature prominently within your LNRS.
- **Replace impermeable street surfaces with ones more conducive to tree planting.** By removing impermeable surfaces like paving slabs, tarmac and concrete, you can create space for urban greening and tree planting specifically. This [Grey to Green guide](#) provides further information on how to do this.
- **Run a social media campaign for [National Tree Week](#).** This annual campaign by the Tree Council has [conservative environmentalist roots](#). Run a digital and/or physical campaign to encourage residents to plant a tree or plan your own tree planting efforts around this week. This could involve writing about the campaign in your local newspaper, on social media, or as a blog on your website.

- **Collaborate with your local garden centre or tree nursery.** Partner with local garden centres or tree nurseries on a campaign to promote tree planting. This could include running a local competition or co-hosting an event to communicate the importance of planting the right tree in the right place, and the necessary aftercare for saplings.
- **Run an awareness campaign about grey squirrels in local parks.** Displaying posters in local parks that discourage visitors from feeding the grey squirrels and explaining why can help raise awareness of the damage this invasive species causes to trees.
- **Offset the literature you distribute.** There is no denying the vital role that physical marketing plays in campaigning, but there are steps you can take to run a more sustainable campaign. Offsetting your literature with your own tree planting or a donation to a tree planting charity is one way you can do this.
- **Adopt a more liberal interpretation of transport legislation to plant more street trees.** The Highways Act 1980 and Traffic Management Act 2004 are important pieces of legislation to manage the use, maintenance, and condition of roads across the UK. According to a report by [Create Streets](#), cautious interpretation of these pieces of legislation has prevented councils from planting street trees. Adopting a more liberal interpretation of them will enable you to plant more street trees locally.

#### Case studies

- **Two Chesham Town councillors created the [Communi-Tree](#) project to help restore the town's once tree-lined avenues.** Cllr Jane Macbean and Cllr Nick Southworth invited residents to nominate local sites for tree planting and promoted the subsequent tree planting sessions through print and social media. Their urban tree-planting project has added hundreds of trees to streets across the town.
- **East Cambridgeshire District Council has created a [tree strategy](#) to ensure the long term protection of its trees.** This 10 year strategy aims to protect existing trees and identify new planting areas by promoting consistent management, engaging the community, and ensuring that tree sustainability is considered in development decisions. It focuses on maintaining both privately and council-owned trees and identifying and addressing associated risks to local trees.
- **Cornwall Council's 'Forest for Cornwall' project connects residents with tree planting funding opportunities.** As part of the council's [climate change action plan](#), Forest for Cornwall aims to support residents to plant trees, from the whole woodland level to individual trees in gardens. The council supports landowners, residents, and groups by connecting them with [funding opportunities](#), as well as providing information on local tree nurseries, advice on how to establish saplings.
- **Hillingdon Council partnered with Trees for Streets to plant more street trees.** This partnership has enabled residents and local businesses to sponsor the planting of trees within Hillingdon's parks and streets. Since its launch, the council has received sponsorship for 276 new trees. As part of this scheme, Hillingdon Council also recruits local '[watering champions](#)' to ensure that the newly planted trees are tended to.



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