

England Trees Action Plan



Introduction

On 18 May 2021, the government released its England Trees Action Plan for 2021 – 2024. This plan was released alongside announcements on species abundance targets and the England Peat Action Plan, signalling a strong message that proactive steps are being taken to target the biodiversity crisis in England. The timing of these announcements is significant, ahead of the Environment Bill debate in the House of Commons (recommencing on 26 May 2021) and the Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of the Parties (15) in October 2021. Unsurprisingly, the UK government is keen to pitch itself as a world leader on biodiversity action. It is important that the twin issues of biodiversity decline and the climate crisis are tackled in symbiosis, therefore it is encouraging to see biodiversity commitments made alongside the net zero agenda, as there has previously been concern that due to its measurability, carbon may supersede biodiversity, when in reality the two come hand in hand.

The England Trees Action Plan provides a long-term vision for trees and woodlands in England. It brings together many of the commitments government has already made around tree planting and protection, as well as introducing new concepts. It is commendably comprehensive whilst also promoting realistic change. This briefing note highlights and discusses the key actions outlined in the plan.

Tree planting targets

The government has confirmed its commitment to increasing tree planting rates across the UK to 30,000 hectares per year by the end of this parliament, trebling current woodland creation rates. This will ensure that England has at least 12% woodland cover by 2050, in comparison to 10.1% currently and 5.1% in 1924, following the industrial revolution and the First World War. To achieve this level of afforestation, the government is intending to spend over £500 million of the £640 million Nature for Climate Fund in England between 2020 and 2025. Through promoting significant upscaling of the woodland sector, the government is hoping it can fuel a new economy of woodland establishment and management, with more private investment in trees. The mainstreaming of natural capital and the notion of 'public money for public goods' will enable society to better understand the multiple benefits and uses of woodland. The Action Plan intends to maximise and support all these benefits.

Enabling woodland creation

The Action Plan makes it clear that the government is aware that to reach its tree planting targets, it will need a step change in public and private support for tree establishment. Ultimately, the new Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery schemes (as part of Environmental Land Management (ELM)) will be the main mechanisms for publicly funded woodland creation once they are up and running from 2024. However, in the meantime, to ensure a smooth transition, the government is launching a new England Woodland Creation Offer in spring 2021. This will be relevant to a diverse range of foresters, landowners and managers and will run alongside the Countryside Stewardship Woodland Creation grant. The government is intending to support a wider range of woodland types and establishment methods through future grant funding from the England Woodland Creation Offer, and also commits to reviewing the base payment rate for all kinds of woodlands, explaining that the more benefits a woodland provides, the greater the payment rates will be. The plan does state that the government will continue to prioritise funding of native broadleaf woodlands at a large scale but will also support well designed and managed majority conifer and mixed woodlands too.

Defra intends to create a single application process for planting and maintenance payments as well as an online portal to support land managers to make informed choices between the grants available. As for new Countryside Stewardship applications, Defra guarantees that land managers who create woodlands now will not be unfairly disadvantaged by the launch of ELM, and that managers will be able to enter ELM without a penalty through annual break clauses. Defra acknowledges that tenant farmers can face challenges when establishing trees due to timescales and impacts on the land holding's status for agricultural use. Within the plan, Defra specifically commits to working with agricultural tenancy stakeholders to support woodland creation on tenanted land.

There is a proposal to require government departments and partner organisations to improve biodiversity, tree planting and woodland cover where appropriate. Interestingly, the Action Plan promises to widen eligibility of tree planting and tree plant health grant schemes so that more public bodies can access them, as well as providing guidance for local authorities to develop their own local tree and woodland strategies. The government also plans to encourage National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to include net zero and tree planting targets in their statutory management plans. The call to plant more trees is evidently intended for the widest of audiences.

Every type of tree

Within the Action Plan, the government makes it clear that it wants to support tree planting not just in woodlands and forests, but across all landscapes, whether that be on streets, in hedgerows or standalone trees in fields. It also makes specific reference to planting woodlands for the benefit of watercourses. There are 242,262 km of watercourses in England, forming a natural corridor network across the country. Establishing trees along these corridors would create new priority wet woodland habitats, improve water quality by reducing sediment and pollutant leaching, provide shade and reduce summer water temperatures, as well as slow the flow of water and therefore prevent riverbank erosion - this initiative is being called 'woodlands for water'. There will also be support for agroforestry through both the England Woodland Creation Offer and through ELM. The Climate Change Committee recommends that agroforestry be used on at least 10% of arable and grassland by 2050 to meet net zero. Therefore the government views agroforestry as an important, innovative approach to woodland creation, particularly for productive farms looking to increase their carbon sequestration.

Woodland Creation Partnerships

As well as opening up new, broader grants for tree planting, the government is setting up new Woodland Creation Partnerships to bring together local stakeholders, drawing on local expertise to identify opportunities for woodland creation and financing to deliver sustainably designed woodland within a wider landscape. The intention is that this will improve the connectivity of priority habitats and enhance natural capital value within the landscape. According to the Action Plan, the partnerships will create a natural alignment with Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

Private investment

The scaling up of woodland creation will rely not just on public funding but also on harnessing private finance for tree planting. It is envisaged that Woodland Creation Partnerships will enable collaboration for new financing methods. The plan also puts emphasis on the role of water companies in securing external private investment for tree planting that improves water quality and reduces flooding and erosion. Catchment management partnerships and plans will be important mechanisms in delivering this; the government hopes to exceed the water companies' industry target of planting 11 million trees by 2030. To encourage private investment in trees for the improvement of the freshwater environment, the government is supporting the development of a new Woodland Water Code. Defra explicitly states that it wants to stimulate private investment in woodland rather than crowd it out. The Action Plan points to the [Woodland Carbon Guarantee](#), [biodiversity net gain](#) and the £10 million [Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund](#) as key mechanisms for leveraging private investment. The government intends to launch an Impact Fund this year and adopt a principle in the design of all grant offers that it is in the landowners' best interests to participate in natural capital markets or secure other sources of private funding. The government will explore expanding the UK Emissions Trading Scheme to the two thirds of uncovered emissions, and within this will look at including nature-based solutions. A review of guidance on the tax treatment of trees and woodlands will provide greater clarity on how new trees affect tax liabilities.

Improving existing woodlands

The asset value of the UK's existing woodland is estimated to be £175 billion, but the government recognises that this value is at risk from pests, disease and climate change. In line with the Tree Health Resilience Strategy, the government will continue to lead efforts to build the resilience of existing woodlands. To support this, Defra will launch the Centre for Forest Protection to provide interdisciplinary research and expert advice. It will also open a competitive grant scheme to help land managers improve the ecological condition of their woodlands and expand tree health grants and restocking grant support in response to pest or disease. The government is committed to developing a Woodland Resilience Implementation Plan, a national deer management strategy and an updated Grey Squirrel Action Plan in order to address the environmental pressures facing existing woodland. Within the Action Plan there is reference to using conservation covenants, as proposed in the Environment Bill, as a tool to deliver lasting conservation within the woodland sector. Exactly how this mechanism will work is not yet known.

Trees are a critical part of the solution to net zero, however they are also vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Therefore a Forest and Climate Change Working Group is planned to implement its adaption plan and launch a climate change competition to highlight best practice and public guidance on managing woodlands for a changing climate. The UK will also maintain its membership of the European Forest Genetic Resources Programme to promote the sustainable use of forest genetic resources in Europe. Biosecurity risks are increasing due to increasing international trade of plant materials and therefore to reduce biosecurity risks to existing woodlands, the government will promote the Plant Health Certification Scheme and introduce a condition for all tree and hedgerow planting grants that suppliers should be able to demonstrate that they can meet the requirements set out in the Plant Health Management Standard. A new Great Britain Plant Biosecurity Strategy is promised by 2022.

Right tree, right place

Throughout the plan it is clear that despite the urgent desire to increase tree cover, the government is fully aware that it is critical that the right tree is planted in the right place. The government will review regulation around

woodland creation to both streamline the tree planting process and strengthen environmental protections. It intends to reform the felling licence system to introduce greater flexibility and improved clarity around UK Forestry Standard requirements. A new category of 'Long Established Woodland' is to be introduced for woodland that has been in situ since 1840. These woodlands will have protections through the planning system. The intention is to ensure future planning reforms will lead to more trees being planted whilst at the same time ensuring strong protection for existing trees. This is no easy task, but with new drivers and an increased understanding of the aims of planting, it is necessary. The Action Plan also proposes the introduction of new guidance to determine when afforested peat should be returned to bog and how to minimise impacts on peaty soils from tree planting,

Growing the green economy

The government is clear that woodland creation and management will play an important role in supporting the green economy, in levelling up rural areas and creating new jobs from timber processing to tourism. In order to enable this, the government will:

- Provide financial support to develop innovative timber products through the Forestry Innovation Fund and develop a policy roadmap to increase the domestic use of timber.
- Upscale employment and skills within the sector - encourage sector engagement with national education and skills policies and funding and create a new Forestry Skills Action Plan for England.
- Establish a Trees and Woodland Science Advisory Group to provide independent scientific advice for long-term sector planning. It will increase investment in tree related science and create a Science and Innovation Strategy for forestry in Great Britain.
- Provide the investment needed to scale and secure the nation's nursery capacity. The government wants to increase the diversity as well as the quantity of trees within UK nurseries and is creating a Nursery Notification Scheme to help better plan for supply and demand within the sector.

The social power of woodlands

The Action Plan has a dedicated section to connecting people with trees and woodlands. The 25 Year Environment Plan committed to ensuring the natural environment can be enjoyed by everyone. Evidence from Natural England demonstrates that the NHS could save over £2 billion in treatment costs if everyone in England had equal access to good quality green space. The government will support projects that increase accessibility to woodlands through the established Green Recovery Challenge Fund, by increasing England's Community Forests and endorsing the Queen's Green Canopy Project. Defra is also planning to work with landowners to improve the quantity, quality and permanency of public access to new and existing woodlands.

Conclusion

There is plenty of substance to the England Trees Action Plan and it certainly speaks to all areas of the forestry sector. Tackling supply, planning and skills bottlenecks will be particularly welcome investments. Despite the risk of fatigue and confusion with so many upcoming policies and strategies, most of the actions are tangible and necessary, and steps to simplify access to available grants through online portals will be welcome as we move away from a Basic Payment Scheme focussed system. It is exciting to see that Defra intends to support the development of a strong private market for woodland creation and management as well as increase public funding, but precisely how this blended approach materialises is undefined. A high level of grant funding inevitably crowds out private innovation unless the grants are well defined. The appetite for land managers and farmers to engage in managing multiple funding sources is a different issue, so the role of partnerships to foster collaboration and aggregate investment could be vital in reaching the government's ambitious targets.

This Action Plan indicates a ramping-up of the government's commitments to investing in and growing England's woodlands and its ambition is admirable, whilst feeling considered and realistic. The scale of the challenge is not to be underestimated and the call to action 'we need you to plant trees now' is clear.

Contacts



Molly Biddell
Policy Analyst
molly.biddell@savills.com
+44 (0) 207 409 9987



Andrew Teanby
Associate Director
ateanby@savills.com
+44 (0) 1522 507 312

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