

Woodlands Report

WOODLANDS : A VISION FOR 2030:

Net zero carbon through restoring nature, climate justice, adaptation and resilience.



A wealth of woodland and trees is spreading across the county, passing the national average of 13%, and now heading for 17% **land cover**.

Woodland already established in 2020 has been increased and extended by planting and natural regeneration and through the focus of **nature recovery networks** has improved corridors and steppingstones for wildlife across the county. These corridors are connecting with regenerated hedgerows, grass verges, riparian habitats and woodland on public and private land to increase biodiversity and protect and enhance nature, as well as increasing carbon absorption and storage.^{1,2,5,9,15}

Our farmers are helping to feed the county and the country by adopting regenerative and nature friendly farming techniques. Where new woodland and tree planting is ongoing on farmland, **agroforestry** practices are enhancing **soil health**, preventing soil erosion and run off, feeding and sheltering livestock, providing shade, aiding biodiversity and producing market crops (e.g. fruit) where appropriate. Larger hedgerows and trees have been introduced and extended for animals to increase access to grazing, for shade and soil stability. Woodland is now integrating farming and forestry, contributing to nature recovery networks and the rural economy.^{1,2,5,14,}

Increased use of grant aid and **carbon capture incentives** from the public and private sectors have led to farmers and landowners planting woodland for diversifying their income

into fruit production, woodland timber production and **biofuels** for local sustainable industries, or for biodiversity and/or carbon sequestration. This has had a corresponding much needed effect in increasing **skills training**, employment and local supply chain / markets connectivity and links to other policies in the broader zero carbon strategy through providing **sustainable alternatives** to building materials, fuel consumption and the foods and drinks industries etc ^{14,15,16,17}

Local communities have been encouraged to increase tree planting and woodland creation by treasury grants creating community woodlands and **orchards**. These are used for shading on village roads and streets in urban areas, flood alleviation and sustainable urban drainage near streams and rivers (where appropriate). The resilience of urban habitats and green-blue infrastructure is being assured, and more and recreation and nature-based amenities provided. These plantings are improving **air quality**^{18,19}, are beneficial to peoples **'health and well-being** and enhance the sense of sustainable communities in towns and countryside.^{10 5a}.

Schools have been encouraged to exploit these new developing amenities by being involved in their creation and setting up **forest schools** and specific projects to involve children and young people in outdoor and nature based activities. Some local communities, nature based organisations and private individuals are harvesting from woodlands for locally based **small businesses** based on woodland coppicing or orchard products. ^{18,19}

All new tree planting has been informed by the principle “**the right tree in the right place**” and the aspirations for biodiversity and natural capital¹⁵ net gains as set out in the Governments 25 year plan for the environment¹ The Environment Bill² (Currently being drafted) and the England Tree Strategy³ (Currently being drafted).

Tree species have been carefully chosen for their resilience in the face of climate change, their value to biodiversity as well as economic and location purposes.

In line with the good practice^{4,8} **new woodland creation** has been planted on marginal sites and soils not appropriate for prime arable farming or which complement existing green-blue infrastructure associated with arable land, such as uplands, riparian zones and buffer planting for protected sites. No new woodland has been created on peatland.

Management plans and processes have been put in place for the restructuring of old and full rotation conifer plantations in nature reserves and planted ancient woodland sites (PAWS) especially on forestry commission land to native broadleaf woodland. This is increasing biodiversity and improving soil quality. A greater percentage of established woodland has been brought into active management compliant with the **United Kingdom Forestry Standard⁴ (UKFS)^{4,5,6}**

Ancient, well established woodland and **veteran trees** in existence in 2020 which lock carbon, provide important refuges for native flora and fauna and have been declared cultural and biodiversity assets have been given protected status.^{1a,5,13} Their management regimes are compliant with the UKFS⁴ and subsequent aligned good practice guidance and legislation to retain the captured carbon in their soils and timber and allow people to access them for recreation.

Where appropriate some woodland and scrub / emergent woodland in the county is identified and left undisturbed so that fallen timber is not removed and trees are not

coppiced or extracted. This “natural” **non or minimum intervention management** as opposed to other silvicultural practices benefits the storage of **soil carbon** and offers significant benefits for biodiversity not found in other management systems.^{4,11,12}

Some new woodland has been created for **carbon credit schemes**, and those approved have all been on appropriate land^{4,7,8} and consist primarily of native species, or fit the ethos of the right tree in the right place for the right reason^{5, 23, 24}. With a view to climate change resilience and future market demands these include a range of genetic and provenance variation with site appropriate non-native species as approved under diversification and resilience guidance^{5,6,7,8}.

Carbon credit schemes from some investment quarters, for instance those still involved in fossil fuel extraction and industries/businesses whose behaviour and methods contradict the imperative to reach zero carbon by 2030 have not been approved.

The Forestry Commission has extended its existing holdings, improved public access and helped in landscape scale schemes to link wooded habitats across the wider landscape.

Ongoing management of commercial woodland (native & conifer) continues to directly sequester carbon, with extracted timber incorporated into an increasing range of industries’ and products, where the carbon is then fixed for the life of the building or product, replacing concrete, steel and plastics. Such products at life’s end can then be recycled into the sustainable energy market. The development of other local markets will supply sustainable products such as **biochar** (carbon storage) **or bioenergy products**. Ongoing management of commercial coniferous and mixed woodland is necessary to allow the harvesting of timber to lessen our dependence on foreign timber imports which may come from parts of the world where unregulated and unsustainable timber harvesting is damaging the environment^{15,16,17,20}

Trees have also been planted across the county to slow water flow, improve water quality and to aid **flood alleviation**.^{4,21,22}

The landscape of Shropshire is enhanced, productive, diverse and beautiful. Our woodlands and trees in towns, villages and countryside are home to an increased number of native species of fauna and flora, from pollinating insects to the iconic and now widespread pine martin. Sustainable rural economies are growing and dynamic, assisted by the range of skills available in farming, forestry and woodland skills taught by our schools, colleges and university. People are healthier and happier, flooding has lessened droughts are alleviated, and our air is clean.

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Woodland: The Current situation

National

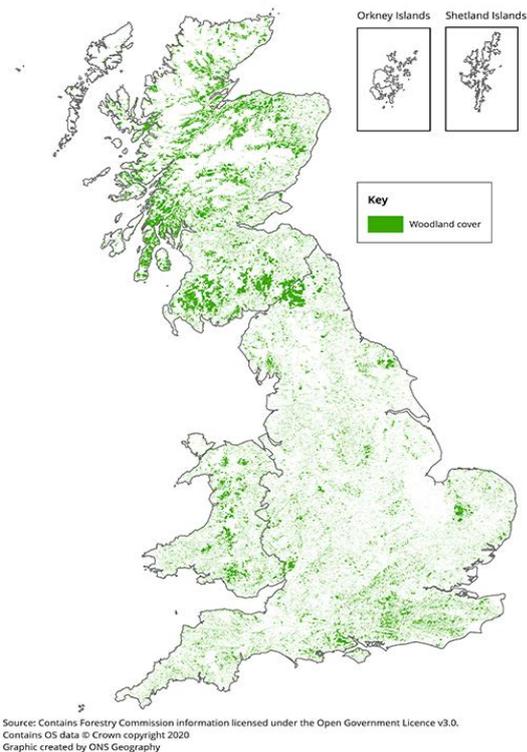
We are in a climate and biodiversity emergency. We need to rapidly remove carbon from the atmosphere, reduce our carbon emissions and restore our natural environment.

As the Woodland Trust succinctly puts it, “the UK is staring down the barrel of twin existential crises; climate change and biodiversity collapse.”¹

The UK is one of the least wooded countries in Europe. UK woodlands cover about 13% of land area and are estimated to sequester around 21 million tonnes of carbon a year.²

Average woodland cover for the whole of Europe is over 44per cent.³

Figure 1: Extent of Great Britain woodland, 2018⁴



Land covered by forestry (Figures 1) has increased steadily by 4.4% from 3.05 million hectares in 2009 to 3.19 million hectares in 2019. Scotland has 46% of the UK's woodlands, England has 41%, Wales has 10% and Northern Ireland has 4%. As a percentage of the total land area, woodlands account for:

- 13% of the UK
- 10% of England
- 15% of Wales
- 18% of Scotland
- 8% of Northern Ireland

Conifers account for approximately half (51%) of the UK woodland area in 2019 (Figure 3), with just over half (55%) of these conifers privately owned. In contrast, the majority (92%) of broadleaved woodland is privately owned.

The UK Forestry Standard⁵ is the reference standard for sustainable forest management in

the UK. It outlines the context for forestry, sets out the approach of the UK governments to sustainable forest management, defines standards and requirements, and provides a basis for regulation and monitoring. It encompasses the entire forest environment, which may include open areas, water bodies such as rivers, lakes and ponds, and shrub species in addition to the trees themselves. It applies to the planning and management of forests within the wider landscape and land-use context, and to all UK forest types and management systems, including the collective tree and woodland cover in urban areas.

Shropshire

The Forestry Commission statistics for Shropshire were last published in 2016⁶ and gave the following figures for woodland cover over 0.1 hectares as 8.5% land cover (29,482 hectares). Broadleaf woodland was at 57.7%, conifer at 29.1%, mixed woodland 8.7% and open space in woodland 3.9%. These figures do not include live trees outside woodland.

The Rural Payments Agency found Shropshire's tree cover in 2018 to be 17%.⁷

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (**MHCLG**) has land use in the West Midlands at 10% Woodland.(3 Jun 2019)⁸

Agroforestry⁹ is a land management approach with potential to increase tree cover outside of woodland and has multiple benefits. There are two main types, **Silvo-pastoral agroforestry**: which means the grazing of animals under trees. The animals enrich the soil while the trees provide shelter and fodder for the animals, and **Silvo-arable agroforestry** where crops are grown beneath trees, often in rows which are large enough for a tractor to tend to the crops without damaging the trees. Other types of agroforestry include hedgerows and buffer strips, forest farming - cultivation within a forest environment, and home gardens for agroforestry on small scales in mixed or urban settings.

This type of farming not widespread in Shropshire but here is an example:

<https://www.silvaspin.org.uk/>

Current situation – policy and opinion

Government bodies, environmental organisations, forestry associations and industry bodies e.g. CONFOR¹⁰ are in agreement that more tree cover and woodland planting is needed throughout the UK.

The Woodland Trust's Emergency Tree Plan¹¹ states that we need "Bigger, better and more joined up woodlands (as they) are important to help many species move and adapt in response to changing conditions. Woodlands and trees can also help urban areas cope with climate change due to overheating, air pollution and surface water flooding. In rural areas

trees provide shade and shelter, prevent soil erosion and alleviate flooding. The decisions we make now about how and where we expand tree cover is an unprecedented opportunity to transform our nation into a better place for people and wildlife.”

The importance of native trees and woodland.

“Much of the UK’s woodland wildlife is entirely dependent on native woods and trees. For example, there are 2,300 species dependent on oak for at least part of their life, 326 of which are only found on oak, and a further 229 species which are rarely found on any species other than oak²⁵. This highlights the biodiversity associated with native tree species. If UK wildlife is to recover and adapt in the face of climate change, then the protection, restoration and expansion of native trees have to be a major part of the nation’s response.” (Woodland Trust)¹²

“Protecting existing woodland and expanding tree cover is vital, so that we continue to lock up more carbon naturally. But it also has other benefits: more woodland for people to enjoy, cleaner air and a natural air conditioning system in cities where urban trees are planted, reduced flood risk and - of course - more homes for wildlife.”

“About 1 billion tonnes of carbon are locked up in UK woodlands, mostly in the soils. Planting more woods and allowing natural regeneration could lock up more carbon, but this must be carefully planned to maximise benefits and avoid harming other habitats.” (Wildlife Trusts).⁷

Locally there are many initiatives on-going to increase native tree cover and woodland across the marches. For instance the **Woods for the world**¹³ partnership has ambition to “take an integrated approach to land-use in The Marches and open up dialogue on how to increase woodland cover from the current average of 10% to 12% or even 17% by 2050.”

Part of Shropshire, the Shropshire Hills, is covered by one of the UK’s Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which is working in partnership with other organisations (for instance Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT), the National Trust (NT), to manage and restore the natural environment in Shropshire including woodland in the **Stepping Stones**¹⁴ project.

The Forestry Commission¹⁵ agrees with these important benefits of woodland and the need for more:

“Woodlands not only capture carbon but also deliver a wide range of other benefits. Sustainably managed woodlands perform a vital role as carbon sinks and reservoirs by capturing CO₂ from the atmosphere and storing it as a component of wood itself. Over time, the soil beneath them is enriched by adding carbon in the form of organic matter from leaf

litter, branch fall and root death. In general, woodland soils have low and infrequent levels of disturbance and the total carbon content per unit area of woodland is higher than that for agricultural soils which are subject to more frequent and significant disturbance. Beyond carbon, all trees and woodlands – wherever they are in the landscape, including our towns and cities – can also provide a range of other benefits. They improve air quality, reduce the ‘urban heat island’, provide timber, wood and wood fibre products, provide opportunities for people to re-connect with nature and new spaces to improve health and well-being, help to reduce flood risk and can reduce the costs of water treatment too” (Responding to the Climate Emergency with trees and woodland. A guide for local authorities and landowning businesses to achieve net zero” ([Forestry Commission 2020](#)))

There are other advantages to woodland that need to be taken into account. **The Woodland Capital Account UK 2020** ([gov.uk](#))⁴ points out the following:

- There were an estimated 475 million visits to woodlands in 2017, on which the public spent £515.5 million collectively.
- The non-market benefits of woodland exceed the market benefits of timber by approximately 12 times; timber represents £275.4 million out of £3.3 billion total annual value of woodland in 2017.
- The asset value of UK woodlands was estimated as £129.7 billion in 2017, with timber representing £8.9 billion (6.9%).
- The removal of air pollution by woodland in the UK equated to a saving of £938.0 million in health costs in 2017.
- Woodland in the UK removed 18.1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2017, equating to a value of £1.2 billion; this is equivalent to 4% of total UK greenhouse gas emissions in 2017.¹
- Urban woodlands cooled 11 city regions sufficiently on hot days to save £229.2 million in labour productivity and avoided air conditioning costs during 2018.

The Woodland Natural Capital Account also looks at the condition of woodland in the UK as regards ecological health. It finds many indices of good health in decline. For instance woodland butterfly index has been in severe decline since 1990, and the woodland bird index is down 29%. Across all woodland there has been decline in both deadwood and veteran tree numbers within woodlands. These are crucial to woodland health.

“Deadwood is important for woodland biodiversity. It provides an important habitat for small animals, cavity-nesting birds, insects dependent on decomposing wood and

decomposer fungi. The NFI (National Forest Inventory) considers a favourable condition for deadwood to be greater than or equal to 80 cubic metres per hectare for volume of deadwood lying or standing. Of all woodland in Great Britain, 6.1% is considered favourable for deadwood.”

There are widely differing views of how many hectares of trees should be planted across the UK annually by 2030. Zero Carbon Britain’s figure is 260,000 hectares, Friends of the Earth 100,000 hectares, the Committee for Climate Change (CCC) 50,000 hectares and CONFOR¹¹ 40,000 hectares.

Friends of the Earth believes that woodland cover in England could be doubled from the national figure of 10% (their figure) to 20% without impacting important habitats or high value farmland. They have begun to map existing and potential woodland in every local authority in England.¹⁶

In its Progress Report to Parliament¹⁷ June 2020 the **Parliamentary Committee for Climate Change** is clear on its summary of current progress so far in combating climate change including tree planting in the UK.

“the current voluntary approach has failed to cut agricultural emissions, there has been no coherent policy to improve the resilience of the agriculture sector, and **tree planting policy has failed outside of Scotland.**”

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Conclusions

Challenges

- Ash die back will likely see many trees vanish from our county over the next few years.
- Sufficient land may not be available for projects to succeed
- Tree Nursery capacity may be inadequate
- Many skilled people will be needed to grow, plant, manage harvest and use the products of these new woodlands.
- Incentives and tax implications need addressing to encourage more woodland planting and agroforestry practices.
- Established woodland, including ancient woodland and veteran trees are still at possible risk from development.
- Tree planting in new developments “can be seen by developers as an impediment to maximising the number of units and profits from a site”¹⁸
- Much of the woodland in the county is not under sustainable UKFS compatible management.

Opportunities

- The Agriculture Act 2020¹⁹
- Government grant schemes and tax incentives
- Possible Partnership schemes across nature conservancy bodies, local councils, private landowners and businesses.
- The present work across the county by numerous organisations and individuals involved in conservation, environmental consultancies, climate action groups, and local councils is a platform to launch our way forward towards a more sustainable future.
- Educational institutions from primary schools to Agricultural Colleges and universities disseminating information and researching solutions.
- Alternative funding pathways for planting and education through the creation of community and local authority owned energy or investment cooperatives.
- Improved circulation of local produce and quality measures through local produce certification schemes (Shropshire Grown).
- More people are choosing to visit accessible woodlands for recreation, health and well-being and will be more likely to support tree planting schemes.

Strategies

- **To plant the right trees in the right places in towns, villages and the countryside, following good practice guidance for forest / woodland resilience in the face of climate change, flood mitigation, and the protection and enhancement of priority habitats.**
- **Ensuring increased sustainable woodland management across the County following United Kingdom Forest Standard compatible woodland management guidance, taking account of the need for carbon capture and storage, the production of woodland for timber, improved biosecurity and woodland resilience, greater access, and the protection diversification and net gains for biodiversity.**
- **To perpetuate, protect and restore an extensive network of new and old wildlife corridors and stepping stones in line with the Government's 25 year environment plan²⁰ and policies for nature recovery networks thereby increasing biodiversity and its resilience across the county.**
- **To increase agroforestry practices on farmland to enhance soil health, prevent soil erosion, feed and shelter livestock, provide shade, aid biodiversity and produce market crops e.g. fruit where appropriate.**
- **To support skills training, apprenticeships, careers and enterprises across the forestry sector and aligned industries including the use of trees woodland and forest products in the building and energy sectors and in *social forestry (*supporting human health and wellbeing through connections with woodland).²¹**
- **To reduce the use of non-renewables by seeking a wider use and product lifespan for commercial forest and woodland products. This will be achieved through improved connectivity and dialog between timber producers, supply chains and end users increasing the use of forest produce in the building sector (replacing concrete and steel), heating systems, biochar, and a range of other wood products.**

- In line with the Government's statement of policy for England's ancient and native woodland (Keepers of Time) and guidance for the protection of ancient and veteran trees, to map preserve and protect ancient woodlands, wood pasture, and ancient / veteran trees.

Recommendations

- Communities, farmers, businesses and individuals across Shropshire take part in tree planting schemes aided by funding and advice from other agencies, e.g. Shropshire Council, The Woodland Trust, Forestry England, SWT, AONB, CPRE.
- Organisations working for connectivity across the landscape become hubs for information/expertise sharing to encourage planting of trees to assist the protection and restoration of existing and the creation of new wildlife corridors and stepping stones.
- Connect a network of farmers currently engaged in agroforestry in Shropshire and surrounding counties, along with farmers' representative bodies to promote and support new agroforestry practices. Seek funding and legislative support for these practices from government.
- Schools, colleges and universities coordinate to provide career routes in woodland management, forest schools and timber working businesses throughout the educational process. Funding is sought for these initiatives from local, regional and national sources.
- Link Shropshire producers of commercial timber to local industries within the building trade for wood extraction for sustainable industries and new-build housing.
- Identify, preserve and protect ancient woodland and veteran trees.
- Press for a review of the planning process to ensure landscaping including tree planting is given equal emphasis with the built environment, and local authorities set standards for sustainable house building.¹⁸

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