



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Tree Planting in the UK

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As of 31 March 2020, around 13% of the UK (3.2 million hectares) was covered by woodland. In England, this was 10%, compared with 15% in Wales, 19% in Scotland and 9% in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

This is relatively low compared with other developed countries: in most European countries, forest covers between 31-50% of land area, and this is also true of the US and Canada.<sup>2</sup> For example, woodland covers 32% of France's land area, 33% of Germany's and 37% of Spain's.<sup>3</sup>

Policy on trees is a devolved matter, both from an agricultural and environmental perspective. Each of the four nations has aims to plant more trees. The Government aims to treble tree planting in England by the end of this Parliament. This briefing includes UK wide statistics on tree planting together with details of policy in England and the devolved administrations.

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<sup>1</sup> Forestry Commission, [Forestry Statistics 2020](#), p10

<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Global Forest Resource Assessments (FRA), [Forest area as a percentage of total land area](#), 2020 (map)

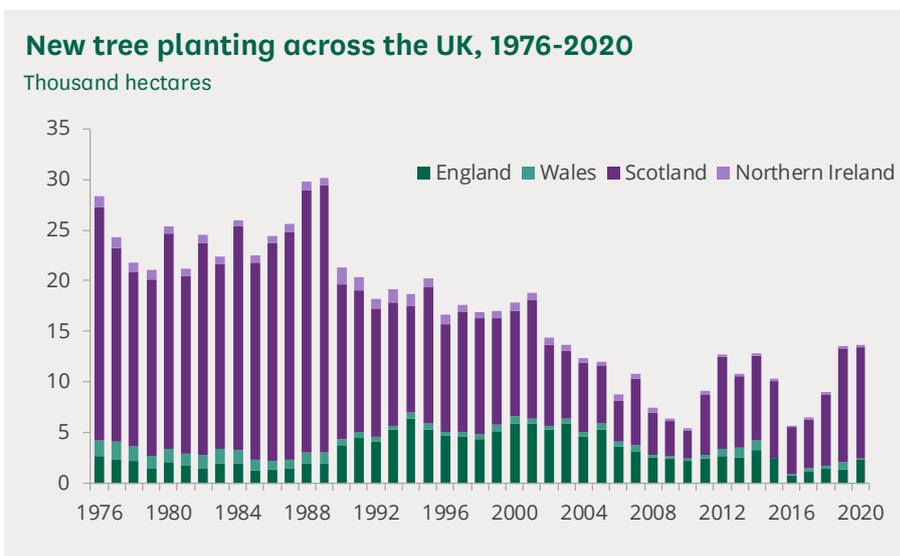
<sup>3</sup> FAO, FRA, Country reports 2020: [France](#), [Germany](#), [Spain](#)

# 1. Tree planting across the UK

The chart below shows the number of hectares of new trees planted across the UK since 1976. These figures cover the creation of new woodland on areas that were not previously woodland; they do not include the replacement of existing trees that have been cut down.

Annual planting rates averaged around 25,000 hectares between 1976 and 1989, before dropping to around 19,000 between 1990 and 2001, and declining further to about 10,000 between 2001 and 2010. Since then, rates have varied between 5,610 in 2016 and 13,660 in 2020.

The chart also shows that throughout this period, the majority of new trees planted in the UK are planted in Scotland.



Source: Forestry Commission, [Forestry Statistics 2020, data downloads](#) chapter 1

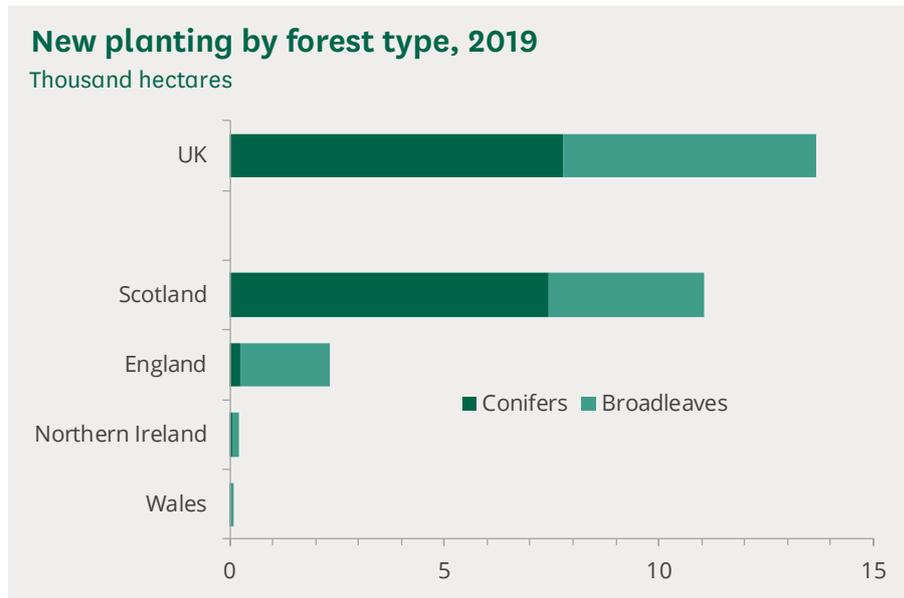
The Committee on Climate Change provided the following comparisons on historical planting efforts in the UK and France in its sixth carbon budget advice:

- A programme of afforestation after the Second World War increased UK woodland area from 6% in 1947 to around 8.7% over a 30-year period. This corresponds to planting around 22,000 hectares each year.
- Annual afforestation rates averaged 40,000 hectares in the early 1970s and close to 30,000 hectares in the late 1980s in Great Britain. If we include the restocking of existing forested areas, planting rates reached over 50,000 hectares in the early 1970s and over 40,000 hectares in the late 1980s. This serves as a useful indicator of the supply chain’s capability to meet higher levels of tree planting
- In France, woodland area expanded by almost 7% between 1990 and 2015 to 17 million hectares.<sup>26</sup> This is equivalent to an average annual afforestation rate of 46,000 hectares during the period. The UK has a similar ratio of population to land area as Germany, but Germany has over 30% of land that is forested compared to the UK’s 13%.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Committee on Climate Change, The Sixth Carbon Budget, [Sector summary: agriculture and land use, land use change and forestry](#), December 2019 p25

## 1.1 Types of planting

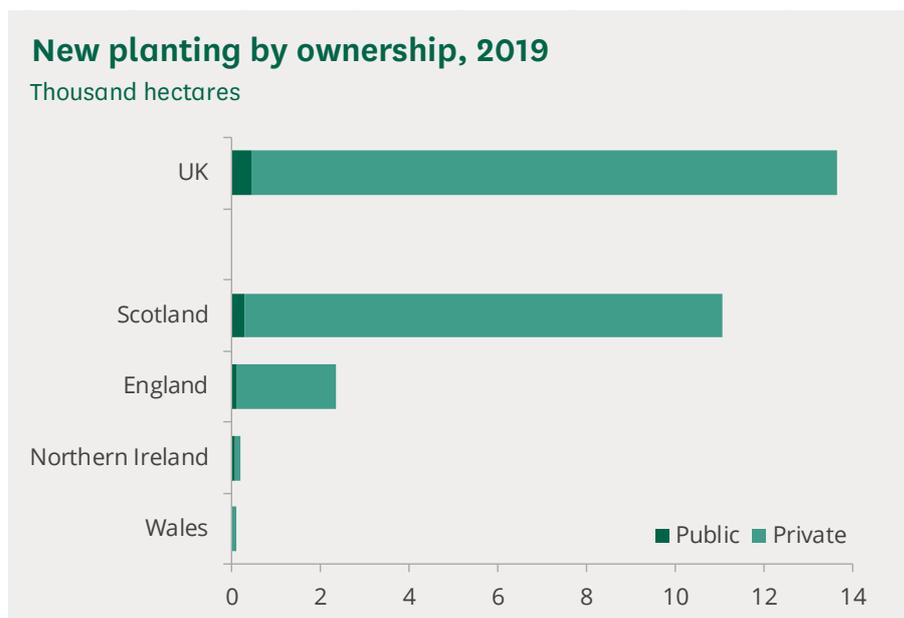
Most new trees planted in Scotland are conifers, while England and Northern Ireland plant more broadleaves and in Wales the split is broadly even. Because Scotland plants more trees overall, conifers dominate new tree planting across the UK. The chart below shows new planting by forest type in 2019 (latest available data).



Source: Forestry Commission, [Forestry Statistics 2020, data downloads](#) chapter 1, table 1.13a

## 1.2 Types of ownership

In all parts of the UK, new trees are mostly planted by private landowners. Across the UK, 97% of new trees were planted on privately-owned land in 2019. Northern Ireland had the highest proportion of new trees planted on publicly owned or managed land, 25%, compared with 4% in England, 0% in Wales, and 2% in Scotland. The chart below shows new tree planting by ownership in 2019.



Source: Forestry Commission, [Forestry Statistics 2020, data downloads](#) chapter 1, table 1.13b

### 1.3 Differences within the UK

Some local areas have more woodland cover than others. The Forestry Commission estimated that in 2016, total tree cover – including both woodlands and trees outside woodlands – was 16.5% in urban areas and 16.7% in rural areas across Great Britain.<sup>5</sup> The table below shows the ten local authorities with the highest and lowest estimated proportion of their area covered by woodland.

#### Local authorities with the highest proportion of their area covered by woodland

2019

Rank	Local authority	Woodland cover	Nation
1	Neath Port Talbot	39.2%	Wales
2	Waverley	33.8%	England
3	Bracknell Forest	33.4%	England
4	Cannock Chase	32.6%	England
5	Surrey Heath	31.2%	England
6	Moray	29.9%	Scotland
7	New Forest	29.8%	England
8	Argyll and Bute	29.5%	Scotland
9	South Ayrshire	29.4%	Scotland
10	Guildford	29.1%	England

#### Local authorities with the lowest proportion of their area covered by woodland

2019

Rank	Local authority	Woodland cover	Nation
383	Blackpool	1.7%	England
384	Thanet	1.5%	England
385	Barking and Dagenham	1.2%	England
386	Na h-Eileanan Siar	1.1%	Scotland
387	City of London	0.9%	England
388	Fenland	0.5%	England
389	Boston	0.5%	England
390	South Holland	0.4%	England
391	Orkney Islands	0.2%	Scotland
392	Shetland Islands	0.0%	Scotland

Source: Friends of the Earth, [Briefing: Getting your council to double tree cover](#), August 2019

<sup>5</sup> Forestry Commission, [Tree cover outside woodlands in Great Britain, summary report](#). More information on trees in urban areas is available from the [Urban Forest Cover website](#)

The rate of new planting also varies between areas. Between 2010 and 2018, there were 249 constituencies in England where no government-funded new trees were planted. The table below shows the ten constituencies where most government-funded trees were planted per square kilometre over this period.

**Government funded new tree planting by constituency, England**  
 Approximate number of new trees per square kilometre 2010-2018

Rank	Constituency	New trees per km <sup>2</sup>
1	Hitchin and Harpenden	1,482
2	Oldham East and Saddleworth	1,205
3	Stratford-on-Avon	1,112
4	North West Leicestershire	980
5	Houghton and Sunderland South	895
6	Bolton South East	807
7	Rossendale and Darwen	652
8	Great Grimsby	650
9	Blackpool North and Cleveleys	638
10	City of Durham	629

Source: Forestry Commission, [New planting of trees supported by the Rural Development Programme for England, and other forms of Government support: report for April 2010 to September 2018](#)

## 2. Contribution to net zero

The UK Government set a [net zero emission target for 2050](#) compared to 1990 levels in December 2019.

The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) published its advice on the Sixth Carbon Budget and the path to net zero in December 2020. The advice on the [sixth carbon budget](#), covering 2033-2037 estimates that woodland cover in the UK would increase to 17% by 2050 if the Government meets its target of planting 30,000 hectares of trees annually from 2025. The Committee suggests it would be feasible to increase planting to 30,000-70,000 hectares of trees from 2035, leading to an increased woodland cover of up to 20%.<sup>6</sup> This Committee included the aim of increasing woodland cover to 18% under their suggested Balanced Pathway to net zero:

Afforestation and broadleaf management. Woodland area increases to 18% of UK land area by 2050, most of which is under sustainable management. Forestry biomass output increases to 12 million oven dried tonnes (odt) by 2035 compared to under 5 million odt in 2019. The management of existing forests account for all the harvest, of which 60% is fuel-grade material. – Annual afforestation rates reach 30,000 hectares

<sup>6</sup> Committee on Climate Change, The Sixth Carbon Budget, [Sector summary: agriculture and land use, land use change and forestry](#), December 2019 p25

by 2025 and rise to 50,000 hectares between 2035 and 2050. An additional 15% of land is used as open ground for biodiversity.<sup>7</sup>

The CCC also referred to views that the UK could go further:

Studies by industry and the voluntary sector suggest higher levels of UK planting:

- The Confederation of Forest Industries' (Confor) call for UK planting rates to reach 40,000 hectares a year by 2030 takes account of their assessment of the industry's capacity to scaleup (e.g. nurseries and foresters).
- The Woodland Trust set out an ambition to deliver 19% of UK woodland cover by 2050, with preference given to the planting of native woods and trees.
- Friends of the Earth cite an ambition to double woodland to 26% by 2045, both to support efforts to increase carbon removals and protect and restore nature.<sup>8</sup>

Conservation groups have welcomed the focus on the [role of nature based climate solutions](#) but have concerns about how an expansion of tree planting is managed to ensure it provides biodiversity benefits. A December 2020 [article from Green Alliance](#) raised concerns about the CCC's focus on Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) and proposed a strong focus on principles and safeguards:

### **Follow principles and establish safeguards**

Driving investment and activity towards cutting carbon can result in perverse outcomes. The burning of millions of tonnes of wood pellets in UK power stations is ample evidence of this. To ensure that the outcomes for the climate also benefit, rather than harm, nature, strong principles are needed for ecosystem management. These include protecting human rights, supporting a just transition and ensuring biodiversity is not damaged. A set of international guidelines has been developed and these should be supported and advocated by governments over the next year, ahead of the UN climate conference.<sup>9</sup>

The [March 2020 Budget](#) included £640m for a new Nature for Climate Fund to plant more than 40 million trees and restore 35,000 hectares of peatland in England. Defra published an [England Trees Action Plan 2021-24](#) in May 2021 setting out Government plans on this in more detail. (see section 3 below).<sup>10</sup>

## 3. National Strategies

### 3.1 England

The [2015 Conservative Government manifesto](#) included a pledge to plant 11 million trees in England by 2020, to match the 11 million planted since 2010. However, as can be seen in Section 1, numbers of trees planted in England fell in 2016. This limited progress was set out in a [Greenpeace Unearthed investigation](#) from 2016, with the then Forestry Commission referring to poor uptake of grants from landowners as being of concern. A [BBC Reality Check](#) article from October 2017 again found that rates were still behind what would be required to meet the target:

The 2015 Conservative Party manifesto promised to plant another 11 million trees over the next five years, but planting was well behind schedule when the snap

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<sup>7</sup> Committee on Climate Change, The Sixth Carbon Budget, [Sector summary: agriculture and land use, land use change and forestry](#), December 2019 p39

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Green Alliance Inside Track, [It's time for nature to be at the heart of climate strategy](#), 10 December 2020

<sup>10</sup> Defra, [England Trees Action Plan 2021-24](#), 18 May 2021

election was called earlier this year. In 2015-16, 642,000 trees were planted in England. In 2016-17, it was 802,000.

The 2017 Tory manifesto repeated the pledge of 11 million, and added that another one million trees would be planted in towns and cities. There is some catching up to do.<sup>11</sup>

A written answer from October 2019 set out the Government's progress:

Since 2010 the Government has planted just over 15 million trees, or nearly 13,000 hectares of new woodland in England. In this Parliament over 4.1 million trees have been planted, and we are on track to meet our targets to plant 11 million trees and a further 1 million trees in and around our towns and cities.

The Government is investing £5.7 million to kick-start the development of the Northern Forest, led by a partnership of the Community Forests and the Woodland Trust. Specifically, this will fund the planting of at least 1.8 million new trees across the Northern Forest by 2022, and help the partnership develop approaches to achieve their longer-term vision of 50 million trees planted over the next 25 years.<sup>12</sup>

The Conservatives [2019 manifesto pledged](#) to plant 30 million trees per year, or 30,000 ha (75,000 acres) annually by 2025:

We will invest in nature, helping us to reach our Net Zero target with a £640 million new Nature for Climate fund. Building on our support for creating a Great Northumberland Forest, we will reach an additional 75,000 acres of trees a year by the end of the next Parliament, as well as restoring our peatland.<sup>13</sup>

## Funding

There are a number of existing grants in England to support tree planting, including the following:

- [Woodland Carbon Guarantee](#), with funding of £50m, which provides carbon credits from woodland creation schemes which can be sold to the Government or on the open market.
- Countryside Stewardship [Woodland Creation Grant](#) which provides funding to supply, plant, weed and protect young trees.
- [Woodland Carbon Fund](#), Landowners, land managers, local authorities and public bodies can apply to the Forestry England for support to plant large-scale productive woodland.
- [Urban Tree Challenge Fund](#) which was funded with £10m in the 2018 Autumn Budget.. The first and second round led to the planting of some 134,000 new trees in urban areas in England. A third round [opened to applicants in April 2021. In this round, £6 million of funding from the Nature for Climate Fund will support the planting of 44,000 trees in 2021-22 to 2022-23.](#)
- The Government announced in November 2020 that it was providing [£80m in funding](#) towards the creation of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), as well as 10 Landscape Recovery projects. This included £40m further funding for the [Green Recovery Challenge Fund](#), announced in September 2020. The Fund aims to retain and create jobs in "tree planting, environmental education and the restoration of damaged habitats, such as peatlands and wetlands".

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<sup>11</sup> BBC Reality Check, [Are millions of trees being planted?](#) 26 October 2019

<sup>12</sup> [Written Answer, Tree Planting UIN 7178, tabled on 29 October 2019](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Conservative Party Manifesto](#), December 2019

## 8 Tree Planting in the UK

- The [Queen's Green Canopy](#) –is a UK-wide tree planting initiative created to mark Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee in 2022, by inviting people to “Plant a Tree for the Jubilee”.

In May 2021, Defra announced new measures to expand tree cover in England. Funding of some £500 million will be provided over the period 2021-24 under the Nature for Climate Fund. A new grant, the England Woodland Creation Offer will also provide funding for landowners and farmers to plant and manage trees (see England Trees Action Plan 2021-24 below).

### England Tree Strategy

#### Consultation

The Government published an [England Tree Strategy consultation](#) in June 2020. The aim of the consultation was to inform how elements of the new Nature for Climate Fund of £640million could be “used to deliver against the manifesto tree planting commitments, alongside peatland restoration and wider nature recovery”. On [announcing the consultation](#) Forestry Minister Lord Goldsmith said:

This consultation will help inform a keystone strategy which will be vital for helping us deliver the government's tree planting commitment, our commitment to the recovery of nature and reaching net zero emissions by 2050.<sup>14</sup>

The announcement also set out the main points in the consultation document, focused on four areas:

#### **Expanding and connecting trees and woodlands by:**

- increasing the supply of planting material, the size of the forestry workforce and encouraging collective agreement from stakeholders to obtain widespread support for woodland creation
- providing farmers and other landowners and managers with the right incentives through improving grant funding and simplified application processes
- working with partners to increase tree cover across public land
- encouraging private investment in woodland creation by helping to develop the market for the ecosystem services generated as trees grow
- expanding tree and woodland cover to contribute to the Nature Recovery Network, which aims to create or restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat

#### **Protecting and improving our trees and woodlands by:**

- building the capacity of the domestic UK nursery sector to ensure planting stock is bio-secure and from a known provenance
- reducing damage to woodlands through the sustainable management of invasive species
- stronger protection for ancient woodland sites, building on newly proposed measures of the Environment Bill which give communities a greater say in the protection of local trees
- increasing the percentage of woodlands in active management
- adapting treescapes and woodlands to the future climate and maximising the benefits they can provide to support adaptation measures, such as natural flood management and helping improve the resilience of wildlife

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<sup>14</sup> Gov.uk, [Consultation launched on the England Tree Strategy](#), 19 June 2020

**Engaging people with trees and woodland by:**

- providing more and better-quality green infrastructure - including in urban areas – to make towns and cities attractive places to live and work and bring about long-term improvements in people’s health
- supporting Community Forests to create new woodlands and facilitate access to existing woodlands
- closer engagement with the education and health sectors, developing skills and expertise in the forestry sector to support health programmes through social prescribing

**Supporting the economy by:**

- growing the market for wood products, and supporting and upskilling farmers and land managers to add trees to their business
- supporting the sustainable timber industry and increasing the use of all domestic forest products including timber and forest biomass for energy
- designing grants and clearer policy to increase the uptake of agroforestry<sup>15</sup>

The consultation closed in September 2020. It received 20,400 responses.

**England Tree Action Plan 2021-24**

Following the consultation, Defra published the [England Trees Action Plan 2021-24](#) on 18 May 2021<sup>16</sup>. The Action plan aims to treble tree planting by the end of the current Parliament, funded by more than £500 million of climate finance.

Launching the Strategy, Defra Secretary of State George Eustice said that the plan contained measures to “better protect our existing trees and woodland and set us on the path to ensure that we have at least 12% of woodland cover by the middle of the century”. He said that more than £500 million of the £640 million Nature for Climate Fund would be “dedicated to trees” with the aim of trebling woodland creation rates by the end of the current Parliament. The UK has an overall target of planting 30,000 hectares per annum.

Mr Eustice said that:

from that £500 million, a series of funds will support the creation and management of woodland. This includes £25 million for Woodland Creation Partnerships this year, a further £6 million for the Urban Tree Challenge Fund, a £2.7 million Local Authority Treescape Fund over the next year, and substantial funding for the England Woodland Creation Offer which will launch this spring and will support traditional methods of tree establishment, as well as natural colonisation, agroforestry and critically riparian planting, with new river woods providing corridors for biodiversity as well as flood prevention benefits.

The Action Plan also includes aims to create at least three new community forests which Mr Eustice said would “enable the planting of 6,000 hectares of new woodland around our towns and cities by 2025, building on the 500 hectares planted in the last year”.

In order to better protect existing trees and woodlands, particularly veteran trees a new category for ‘long-established woodland’ is planned. Mr Eustice said that this would recognise “how woods that are old but not yet ancient are also significant in their own right and offer tremendous benefits for biodiversity”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gov.uk, [Consultation launched on the England Tree Strategy](#), 19 June 2020

<sup>16</sup> Defra, [England Trees Action Plan 2021-24](#), 18 May 2021

<sup>17</sup> Rt Hon George Eustice, [Environment Secretary to set out plans to restore nature and build back greener from the pandemic - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#), 18 May 2021

The Woodland Trust had proposed, in a [submission to the Environment Bill Public Bill Committee](#), a statutory basis for the England Tree Strategy. It proposed an amendment to be made to the [Environment Bill 2019-21](#) which is currently undergoing Parliamentary scrutiny in the House of Lords:

The Woodland Trust notes there is currently no formal mechanism to set targets for the protection, restoration and expansion of trees and woodland in England. The strong contemporary focus on the importance of trees in addressing the climate and nature crises mean that this opportunity to legislate should be taken. Such action is strongly consistent with the Environment Bill's aims of restoring and enhancing green spaces. It also complements the existing tree clauses and reflects recent legislation in Scotland which is important given the UK wide focus on increasing tree cover as part of the UK's global climate and biodiversity commitments.<sup>18</sup>

The Opposition tabled New Clause 25 during Report Stage of the Bill on 26 May 2021 which would provide statutory provisions requiring the Government to “produce targets for the protection, restoration and expansion of trees and woodland in England”.<sup>19</sup> Luke Pollard, Shadow Environment Secretary, said:

The public want to see us plant more trees, but the thing about planting more trees is that more trees are not enough. We need to be bolder and bolder in the numbers we plant and the species we plant to ensure that we have a good mix of fruit trees, deciduous trees and other varieties of trees creating a rich biodiversity of habitats for our wonderful wildlife. The Committee on Climate Change, the independent body set up to advise the Government, has been clear that we need to raise our current 13% forest cover to 17% by 2050 if we are to have any chance of meeting our climate goals. That may need to increase further if the Government continue to miss other targets along the way. But the Government are missing their tree planting targets by 40 years. If we continue at the current paltry rate of tree planting, the Government's own 2050 targets will not be met until 2091 [...]. I want the Minister to be bolder on this, and that is why we have tabled new clause 25, which would see the Government at least hit the Committee on Climate Change's target, but I want them to go further.<sup>20</sup>

The Government rejected the need for the provision since it had during the previous week published the English trees action plan.<sup>21</sup> The amendment was negated on division.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2 Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Executive [launched a Forests for the Future programme](#) in March 2020 pledging to help tackle climate change by planting 18 million trees over the next 10 years, “10 for every person in Northern Ireland”. On launching the programme DAERA Minister Edwin Poots stated:

Forest cover in Northern Ireland currently sits at 8%, well behind the UK average of 13%. We plant only 200 hectares of woodland per year, instead of the 900 hectares recommended recently by the Committee on Climate Change. That is why I have launched 'Forests for our Future'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [Written evidence submitted by the Woodland Trust \(EB57\)](#), House of Commons Public Bill Committee on the Environment Bill 2019-21

<sup>19</sup> HC Deb 26 May 2021, col 377

<sup>20</sup> As above, col 386

<sup>21</sup> As above, col 430

<sup>22</sup> As above, col 433

<sup>23</sup> Daera, [Poots' planting pledge](#), 2 March 2020

### 3.3 Wales

The Welsh Government published an strategy for woodland and trees, [Woodlands for Wales](#), in 2018. The Government has set out its [aim for woodland creation](#) as follows:

We want to see more trees and woodlands in Wales and the Welsh Government set an aspiration of 100,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030 to help Wales meet its carbon emission reduction targets. It is widely acknowledged that new woodland creation is one of the most cost-effective ways of doing so.

Estimates from a study in 2012 reveal that the overall net present value from this new planting would, over a 100-year time frame, range from £299 million (lowest estimate) to £8.6 billion (highest estimate) – that’s real green growth.<sup>24</sup>

The Welsh Government provides [funding for woodland creation](#) through Glastir, the Welsh Government’s sustainable land management scheme.

### 3.4 Scotland

The Scottish Government target is to [increase tree cover](#) from 18.8% in 2019 to 21% in 2032. 22 million trees covering 10,800 hectares were planted in 2019. The target is set out in the [Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019–2029](#), published 2019. The Strategy has a statutory basis as set out in the [Forestry and Land Management \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#). Funding for tree planting is provided through a range of [Forestry Grants](#).

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<sup>24</sup> Natural Resources Wales, [Why we need more trees – the benefits of new woodland creation](#) [website viewed 15 December 2020]

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