

# Briefing

## Getting your council to double tree cover

Friends of the Earth is campaigning to double UK tree cover – and councils have a crucial part to play. Land Registry data suggests that councils collectively own 1.5 million acres of land in England and Wales, making them even larger landowners than the Forestry Commission or Ministry of Defence. Could councils be using this land to do more to tackle the climate crisis – like increasing tree and woodland cover?

This guide is intended to help you campaign for your council to double tree cover.

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### 1. What should I ask my council to do on trees?

Our key ask is to **urge councils to double tree cover**.

We're calling on councils to do this in order to build momentum and support for our wider goal – to get the UK government to double tree cover as soon as possible.

Right now, the government is responding far too slowly to the climate emergency. Together, with council allies, we can take climate action so the government has no choice but to act too.

There are two main ways councils can be encouraged to double tree cover:

**a) Doubling tree cover on council-owned land.** This involves understanding what land your council owns, talking to councillors and council officers to build the business case for devoting more of their land to trees, and getting the council's Estate Management Plan changed.

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**b) Doubling tree cover across the whole local authority area.** This involves changing key council strategies, in order to influence wider land use across the borough or county, and might include tackling the planning system.

## **2. Understanding the current situation in your area**

### **How wooded is your local authority area?**

Average UK woodland cover is 13% – but what is it in your local area? To help you find out, Friends of the Earth has analysed Forestry Commission data on UK woodland cover and broken it down by local authority area. Click here to find out how wooded your local area is: <https://takeclimateaction.uk/node/287>

An alternative handy guide is this visually striking set of [land-use maps](#) produced by Professor Alasdair Rae at Sheffield University. However, because the methodology used to isolate areas of woodland cover is different to the Forestry Commission's, we recommend using the Commission's data.

### **Where are the street trees in your area?**

Some councils and combined authorities publish maps of an area's street trees, though these are hard to compile – many London boroughs, for instance, contain tens of thousands of street trees. The Greater London Authority has [published a map](#) of 700,000 street trees across the capital (out of an estimated 8 million in total). Some councils have used a tree-mapping tool called i-Tree to assess not just where trees are in their locality, but also quantify their benefits in terms of improved air quality, carbon storage and so on. An example is Leeds Council's [i-Tree Leeds project](#). In other areas, community groups have produced crowdsourced maps of street trees, such as the [Sheffield Trees at Risk Map](#).

### **How can you better protect existing trees in your area?**

If you're also keen to get your council to better protect existing trees in your area, you could submit a set of Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs). Please see Friends of the Earth's guide on using TPOs.

## **3. Doubling tree cover on council-owned land**

### **What land is owned by your council?**

Land Registry data suggests that councils in England and Wales own 1.5 million acres of land. Much of that will be land covered by council offices and housing, but much of it will be open green spaces like parks and farms. For example, council-owned county farms in England cover about 200,000 acres.

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Tracking down exactly what land your council owns can be a useful first step to determine if it has land suitable for establishing woodland. Councils are obliged by central government transparency guidelines to publish a list of all the land and property they own, called an 'asset register'. These asset registers should be published on council websites, usually in an easily downloadable and readable spreadsheet format.

In practice, not all councils have fully complied yet with the guidelines. To make it easier to find your council's asset register, Friends of the Earth and others have assembled a database of published Council Asset Registers, here:

<https://takeclimateaction.uk/node/284> We'll add to this over time as more asset registers are published, or as we get them released using Freedom of Information requests.

Contact your council if it hasn't published its asset register – it should really have one. But if it hasn't, you may be able to find out what land your council owns by asking around, or looking for promising sites in your area. Does your council own any country parks in the Green Belt? Any farmland? Any parks that look bereft of trees? Any patches of derelict, unloved land that are crying out for a community garden or wood?

### Who should I contact in my council about trees?

There are two groups of people to speak to in councils – councillors, local politicians who are elected to represent you; and council officers, who are recruited to do specific jobs.

#### Councillors

Contacting your local elected councillor is relatively easy. If in doubt, start here: [www.gov.uk/find-your-local-councillors](http://www.gov.uk/find-your-local-councillors) and follow the links to your council's website, and the 'contact your councillors' webpages. Alternatively, [www.writetothem.com](http://www.writetothem.com) makes it easy to contact your councillor directly.

In particular, it's worth contacting the councillor who is cabinet lead for the environment about developing a borough- or district-wide strategy for doubling tree cover.

#### Council officers

Finding the right council officer to speak to may prove harder: there are lots of officers and departments who may have an interest in trees or make decisions about them, and the structure often differs from council to council. Here are some of the types of council officer worth approaching:

- **Tree officers** are an obvious first port of call for tree-related inquiries. Many tree officers are also members of the [National Association of Tree Officers](#), which can help if you're having trouble finding yours. But as a survey undertaken by Friends of the Earth in July 2019 found, many tree officers end up spending most of their time protecting and maintaining existing trees, rather than planting new ones. So consider speaking to other officers who have more of an overview of council land, such as those in council estates departments.
- **Estate departments** are in charge of looking after the council's land and property assets. They may prove vital for seeking access to council-owned land for tree-planting and woodland creation. However, they're likely to be focused on

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budgetary considerations, particularly given the cuts that councils have faced under austerity. Many councils have had to sell off land and property assets to make up for funding cuts. What land they retain will likely be regularly reviewed by the Estates Department to consider whether income streams like rent or farm subsidies could be increased to boost council budgets.

- **Flood officers**, whose job titles can include being Civil Engineers or Climate Adaptation Officers, can be helpful to speak to about planting trees for natural flood management. They may think outside the usual Forestry Commission grant schemes for tree-planting, such as knowing how to access flood defence money from the Environment Agency.
- **Parks and countryside departments**, whose staff are sometimes called **Greenspace Officers**, are particularly important to contact if you want to discuss planting trees in council-owned or managed parks. They may have concerns about ensuring the recreation and amenity value of the parks are retained and not affected by planting more trees.
- **Arboriculturalists** may be employed by the council, in addition to tree officers, though they'll tend to focus on maintaining trees, such as pruning branches and removing dead trees. In some councils, these services have been contracted out – such as has happened in Sheffield, with tree-cutting being outsourced to the private firm Amey. If you hear that this has happened, please let us know by emailing [trees@foe.co.uk](mailto:trees@foe.co.uk) – it might be something we can help investigate.
- **Planning officers** will be particularly important to consult if you want to influence or amend a council planning document like the Local Plan (see section 4).

## Getting your council's Estate Management Plan changed

The key strategy for how the council manages land that it owns is its Estate Management Plan, also known as an Asset Management Plan or Land and Property Plan. It's usually written by the council's Estate Department, and will set out how the council intends to manage its land and property assets over a number of years; what it will spend doing so; and what it anticipates its income streams will be from its assets. It may also cover environmental aspects of estate management, such as building energy efficiency and carbon reduction targets. If it doesn't already include targets for increasing tree cover on the council's estate – why not?

## What are the best arguments I can use to persuade my council to double tree cover on its own land?

Here's a selection of arguments you can use:

- **Trees help fix the climate emergency** by drawing down carbon from the air and locking it up in their trunks, branches and leaves.
- **Nature is in crisis** – we need to create space for nature and more trees and woodlands are a vital part of that, creating habitats that support hundreds of species of insects, birds and mammals.

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- **Trees benefit mental and physical health** – trees help clean polluted air, while access to green spaces is vital to our wellbeing.
- **Trees help adapt an area to climate change** – trees provide shade, cooling urban areas in a time of rising temperatures. Trees planted in the right places can also slow the flow of water downstream and reduce flooding, especially vital as climate change brings more extreme weather.
- **More trees can contribute to local jobs** – in tourism, recreation, forestry, or sustainable woodland management.

Fundamentally, however, a council will need to be persuaded of the “business case” for planting more trees or creating new areas of woodland. Some of the elements of a business case for more trees are addressed below.

### **What are the main objections councils are likely to raise, and how could they be addressed by making a strong business case?**

- **“There’s not enough suitable land”**
  - Interrogate this claim: examine the council’s asset register in detail, ask around, and explore your neighbourhood looking for under-used space.
  - Is all this land being used in ways that could maximise nature? Is there really not space for more trees, even if just fitted into nooks and corners?
  - Of course, to get really large areas of land for new woodland, it won’t be enough just to fit in a few trees here and there – it will require decisions about not using the land in question for other ends, or using it rather differently.
  - If the land is earmarked for housing or other development, make the case for tree planting being an integral feature. If the proposed development covers a large area, there may be scope for the creation of a woodland park as part of the scheme. Friends of the Earth supports the urgent need to build more affordable, sustainable homes, and brownfield sites in towns and cities are better for this than green fields. But not all brownfield sites are suitable for housing. For example, where land is contaminated by past industrial activity or minerals workings; where it would present a flood risk; or where it’s in a remote rural location. For contaminated land, remediation over time through tree-planting or letting it rewild may be the best option.
  - What about land in the Green Belt? This isn’t meant to be developed, so there should be no conflict with house-building targets. See our blog on [greening the Green Belt](#) for more ideas.
  - Could the council repurpose some of the farmland it owns? It may have a number of tenant farmers who rely on the land for their livelihood and who provide rental income to the council. But could both the farmers and the council get more money by diversifying their farms, planting more trees and accessing things like Environmental Stewardship schemes, via the

government's farm subsidy system? What about getting grants from the Forestry Commission? The UK's farm subsidy system is being overhauled post-Brexit, with the stated aim of providing more money for "public goods" such as protecting and enhancing the environment. Councils and their tenant farmers could pioneer a new approach to land management that sees them getting paid more in future for woodland creation, agroforestry, and habitat restoration.

- **“There's no money”**
  - We get it – council budgets have been slashed after a decade of austerity. Many councils are hard pushed to deliver even basic statutory services. Street trees are sometimes seen as a burden by cash-strapped councils because of their maintenance costs.
  - But we're in a climate emergency: we can't afford *not* to fix the climate. And there are many ways that increasing tree cover can help save the council money overall, such as the reduced costs to social care budgets that could result from more green space and better mental wellbeing.
  - Can you work with a friendly council officer and / or councillor to develop a strong business case for why the council should do this? Such a case would set out the benefits and savings that could flow from more trees. It should also examine what new income streams the council could tap into, like grants for tree planting, farm subsidies, and money for natural flood measures.
- **“We're too busy”**
  - Austerity has meant councils losing staff. There used to be dedicated Climate Adaptation Officers in many councils, but most of those positions have been lost, or rolled into the job descriptions of other, over-stretched officers. Tree officers particularly may find themselves struggling to cope with core functions of street tree maintenance, let alone considering how to increase tree cover in their area.
  - This is where an enthusiastic local group could offer some help and energy. You might be better placed than a council officer to drum up local enthusiasm for a tree planting day, or to get your neighbours to turn up to a council meeting.

If you encounter councils voicing other objections, we'd be interested to hear what they are – please get in touch by emailing [trees@foe.co.uk](mailto:trees@foe.co.uk) Similarly, we'd like to hear from anyone who works with a council to develop a business case for doubling tree cover, so that we can share good practice with other community groups.

#### **4. Doubling tree cover across the whole local authority area**

Councils produce various policy documents and strategies which you can try to get amended to include a target to double tree cover – not just on council-owned land, but

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across the entire local authority area. The list below suggests some of the key council strategies worth trying to amend. To work out which is the most winnable approach for your council, talk to your council's cabinet lead for the environment.

### Corporate plans

One strategy document that may be worth trying to get tree-planting targets embedded in is a council's corporate plan. For example, [Richmond Borough Council's Corporate Plan for 2018-2022](#) includes a commitment that it will "increase the number of trees planted" by 2022; and that to achieve this it will "develop a practical borough-wide proposal which could adequately provide for an increase in tree-planting, by end 2018".

### Tree strategies

Some local authorities have dedicated tree strategies, such as [Woking Council's recent Tree Strategy](#), but not every council has one. The government has consulted on making local tree and woodland strategies mandatory for all councils, but hasn't announced the outcome. The Woodland Trust has some [best-practice guidance on tree strategies](#).

### Parks and green spaces strategies

Most councils will have a parks and green spaces strategy, to mandate how public parks, village greens and local "green lungs" are managed. Some councils in rural areas, or with jurisdiction over Green Belt, also own or manage country parks and local nature reserves. For example, [Bristol's 20-year parks and green spaces strategy](#) (adopted in 2008) includes a policy to "Manage and plant more trees to improve distribution across the city, and advocate the importance of trees in adapting to climate change."

However, parks strategies will likely focus on land with recreational use and have less to say about wider land use in the area. You may wish to consider other council strategies to encourage higher tree cover on local farmland, more trees along highways, or more street trees.

### Transport strategies

Council transport strategies typically focus on things like highways, public transport provision and parking – but could also include provision for more tree-planting along highway verges.

### Planning policies

If your council has a target for increasing tree cover in one of the strategy documents above, it may also be worth trying to get this reflected in local planning policies.

The planning system mostly deals with the built environment – where things like houses can and can't be built and operations such as quarrying and minerals extraction. Planning has little to say about how the majority of rural land is used. Most farming and forestry activities, for instance, lie outside the planning regime. But there is nevertheless scope for local planning policies to include targets to increase tree cover – if councils are encouraged to do so.

There are three tiers of local planning that you can try to influence to include targets for doubling tree cover and policies that would contribute towards achieving this. When

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councils decide whether to grant or refuse permission for new development, local planning policies provide the starting point. The tiers of planning are broadly as follows:

- **Neighbourhood Plans** are the lowest tier of planning in England, and are produced by Neighbourhood Forums (voluntary organisations designated by local authorities), or parish councils. An example of a Neighbourhood Plan that does much to promote trees is the [Exeter St James Neighbourhood Plan](#), which states that “planting more street trees in strategic spaces is a key priority of the community.” The Woodland Trust has [advice](#) for getting trees into your Neighbourhood Plan. Not every place has a Neighbourhood Plan, but where they exist they form part of the statutory “Local Development Plan” and must be taken into account by the local planning authority when deciding a planning application.
- **Local Plans** are the key local planning documents produced by local planning authorities. These plans contain policies to guide decisions on new development, identify sites and locations where development such as housing should take place, and will identify key features and characteristics of an area, including land designations such as Green Belt and protected open space. Most Local Plans contain at least some helpful policies which would lend support to tree provision and even woodland creation. For example, Rotherham Borough Council’s [Local Plan Core Strategy](#) includes a policy that commits to “increase the percentage of area in the borough covered by woodland”. As well as setting out generic policies covering trees and built development, Local Plans will set out site-specific policies including requirements for the provision of new trees and woodland (in some cases) and the retention of existing trees and woodlands.
- **Strategic plans.** Though regional planning was abolished by the Coalition government in 2010, the evolution of combined authorities and directly elected mayors has seen a rebirth of some forms of sub-regional and strategic planning, providing some direction for land use and the planning of new development across multiple council areas. These will also have implications for nature and tree planting. For example, the [draft London Plan](#) (as of July 2019) states that “in their development plans, boroughs should... identify opportunities for tree planting in strategic locations... The Mayor wants to increase tree canopy cover in London by 10 per cent by 2050.”

When making the case to update local planning policies, you may wish to refer to relevant sections of the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#) – the overarching framework for all local plan-making in England – or to the equivalent framework in other parts of the UK. The NPPF makes it clear that planning authorities should aim to enhance, and not merely protect, the natural environment, which could include increasing tree cover. Useful sections include:

- 11. Making effective use of land, paragraph 118, which refers to the potential use of brownfield land for habitat enhancement and carbon storage.
- 14. Meeting the challenge of climate change, paragraphs 148 to 169, which emphasise the need for planning to mitigate and adapt to climate change (though they tend to focus more on energy than on land-use or carbon sinks).



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- 15. Conserving and enhancing the natural environment, paragraphs 170 to 183, which discuss how planning policies should contribute to enhancing (and not merely protecting) the natural environment and biodiversity.
- Also useful is the government's [planning guidance on the natural environment](#), which mentions the need for local development plans to include “appropriate green infrastructure”, including provision for any Community Forests in the area. There are a number of [Community Forests](#) across England, which were established in the 1990s. Most of them have targets to increase tree cover in their locale, so it's worth seeing if there's one in your local authority area.

For more on the planning system in England, see Friends of the Earth's [briefing](#). For more on the planning system in Wales, see [Planning Aid Wales](#).

## 5. Putting political pressure on councils

The approaches outlined above mostly involve engaging with existing council processes, persuading council officers of the business case for more trees, and working within the system. Hopefully, your council will be responsive to these tactics. But it may refuse to listen. That's where more public-facing campaigning tactics may come in useful, to apply more political pressure on councillors to take action. You could:

- Organise a petition of local residents calling on the council to double tree cover. Friends of the Earth can provide your local group with a [digital campaigning tool](#) to make this easy to organise.
- Get your MP to write an open letter to the council requesting that it doubles tree cover.
- Get local press coverage for your campaign – for instance, about your petition, or any letters you get from supportive MPs.