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How to double tree cover in your area: briefing for councillors

Trees help to protect the climate, improve air quality, support more wildlife, reduce flood risk and improve people’s wellbeing. This briefing, compiled by Friends of the Earth's Trees campaigning team, details how councils can access land and money to double local tree cover.

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Summary

Woodlands once covered vast swathes of what is now the UK, but over the centuries they were chopped down. Now just 13% of our country is covered in woodlands, compared to an EU average of 38%.

In order to tackle the climate emergency and reach net zero emissions as early as possible, the UK needs to double woodland cover, according to research by Friends of the Earth and the Centre for Alternative Technology.

Councils can help restore nature and fight climate breakdown by doubling local tree cover. 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. Councils can also influence how land is used across their local authority areas by changing Local Plans and working with other landowners.

Local action groups, together with Friends of the Earth, are calling on councils to set this long-term goal to double tree cover in their local authority areas, as part of a local Climate Action Plan.

By publicly supporting a target to double local tree cover, councils can send a strong signal to the government to unlock more funding for trees, and encourage local landowners to grow more trees.

Many local authorities – including rural and urban councils controlled by the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party – have already publicly announced a goal of doubling local tree cover and are devising plans to access money and land to deliver it. Here are a few examples:

- Bath & North East Somerset has announced plans to double woodland cover across the district.
- Bristol City Council committed to double tree canopy cover by 2045 as part its One City Plan.
- Hackney Council has plans to double on-street canopy cover and plant 30,000 trees in parks and green spaces.
- Leeds City Council approved a report calling on tree canopy cover to be almost doubled across the local authority area.
- Oxford City Council has publicly supported doubling tree cover across Oxfordshire.
- South Gloucestershire has pledged to double tree cover by 2030 by working with landowners across the local authority area.
- Wirral Council has pledged to "at least double Wirral’s tree coverage by 2030".

As a councillor, you can help to double tree cover locally by:

- Asking the relevant cabinet member to publicly support doubling local tree cover.
- Introducing a council motion with a goal of doubling local tree cover (template below).

Why should councils double tree cover?

Trees help tackle the climate emergency by absorbing carbon dioxide from the air and locking it up in their trunks, branches and leaves. Friends of the Earth calculates that doubling tree cover across the UK could draw down 50 million tonnes of carbon dioxide?annually, which is around 10% of current UK emissions.?

There are many other important benefits to doubling tree cover in your local authority area:

- Nature is in crisis and we need to create space for it. Trees and woodlands create habitats that support hundreds of species of insects, birds and mammals.
- Trees benefit mental and physical health – they help clean polluted air, while access to green spaces is vital to our wellbeing.
- Trees help adapt an area to climate breakdown by providing shade and helping cool down urban neighbourhoods. Trees planted in the right places can also slow the flow of water downstream and reduce flooding, especially vital as climate breakdown brings more extreme weather.
- Trees can contribute to local jobs in tourism, recreation, forestry, or sustainable woodland management.

Yet despite all these benefits, many areas in the UK are deprived of tree cover. 43% of English neighbourhoods have less than 10% tree cover, and lower income areas tend to be much more deprived of trees than wealthier areas.

How to make a business case for doubling tree cover

Below we outline two key barriers for councils to doubling tree cover – and how they can be addressed by making a strong business case.

a) Is there enough money to plant and maintain trees?

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 because of their long-term maintenance costs. But we're in a climate emergency: we can't afford to not prevent climate breakdown. New funding streams are starting to become available; and if your council doesn't have the requisite funds, please consider writing to the Environment Secretary and making the case for more funding for trees.

Can you develop a strong business case that sets out the benefits and savings that could flow from more trees, including new income streams like grants for tree planting, farm subsidies, and money for natural flood measures?

There are many ways that increasing tree cover can help save the council money overall:

- Hackney Council has projected that its plan to increase tree canopy cover to 40% will significantly reduce pressure on medical services and energy demand for cooling.
- A Treeconomics report estimated that the beneficial services provided by tree in London are worth over £132 million, including pollution removal (£126 million), carbon sequestration (£4.8 million) and stormwater alleviation (£2.8million).

Several cash-strapped councils have raised new income streams to grow more trees:

- Bristol City Council has committed to double tree cover, despite earlier cuts to the parks budget, and won a grant of almost £1 million from the Future Parks Accelerator.
- Bath & North East Somerset and Bristol Council were jointly awarded almost £200,000 from innovation foundation NESTA to enhance public parks.
- Hackney Council secured £4 million in funding to increase tree canopy cover by 50% by 2022 and double it by 2024.

Austerity has meant councils losing staff, and Tree Officers may find themselves struggling to cope with core functions of street tree maintenance. But community groups can also help with tree planting and aftercare. In Oxford, over 150 people volunteered at a single community event in November 2019 to help the council plant trees in a park.

b) Is there enough suitable land?

- Examine the council's asset register of land and property in detail and explore the area for under-used space.

- If the land is earmarked for housing or other development, tree planting should be an integral feature. For large developments, there may be scope for the creation of a woodland park. In Bath & North East Somerset, which has committed to doubling tree cover, the cabinet member for neighbourhoods has said all new housing estates should have green infrastructure.
- Is there available land in the Green Belt? This isn't meant to be developed, so there should be no conflict with house-building targets. Read this blog on greening the Green Belt for more ideas.
- In England, councils own over 200,000 acres of county farms that are rented out to tenant farmers. Could farmers and the council get more money by planting trees and accessing funding from the Environmental Stewardship schemes or the Forestry Commission? Councils and their tenant farmers could also pioneer a new approach to land management that sees them getting paid more in future for woodland creation, agroforestry, and habitat restoration.
- Councils can update local plans and strategies to encourage landowners to grow more trees across the local authority areas (see section below on "how to double tree cover in your local area").

We'd like to hear from any councillors who are developing a business case for doubling tree cover, so that we can share good practice with other councils. Email us at community@foe.co.uk

What's the tree cover in your local area?

Tree cover, which also includes street trees, is a measure of the total area of land covered by tree canopy (leaves, branches and stems). It’s often expressed as a percentage of total land area.

If you’re based in England, check out our trees map for the most accurate and readily available data on tree cover by local authority area and by neighbourhood. It uses laser LiDAR imaging to map existing woodland, groups of trees, lone trees and street trees. It also shows opportunity areas for new woodland and rewilding.

If you're based elsewhere in the UK, Friends of the Earth has analysed Forestry Commission data on UK woodland cover and broken it down by local authority area (download the Excel spreadsheet to find out coverage in your area). However, this only includes woodland and doesn’t account for other canopy cover such as street trees.

Several councils and combined authorities have published local tree maps. A tree-mapping tool called i-Tree has been used to estimate tree cover in hundreds of towns and cities across the UK.

How to double tree cover in your local area

There are two main ways councils can double tree cover in the local authority area:

1. Doubling tree cover on council-owned land. This involves understanding what land your council owns, building the business case for devoting more of their land to trees, and getting the council's Estate Management Plan changed.

2. 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.

Doubling tree cover on council-owned land

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

Tracking down exactly what land the council owns can be a useful first step to identifying suitable land for trees. Councils are obliged by central government transparency guidelines to publish an asset register with all the land and property they own. They should be published on council websites, usually in an easily downloadable and readable spreadsheet format. Friends of the Earth and others have assembled a downloadable Excel database of published Council Asset Registers.

The key strategy for how the council manages land that it owns land 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 outlines how the council intends to manage its land and property assets; what it will spend doing so; and the anticipated income streams from its assets. If it doesn't already include targets for increasing tree cover on the council's estate – why not?

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 across the entire local authority area. Below is a non-exhaustive list of key council documents. To work out which is the most suitable approach for your council, talk to the cabinet member responsible for trees.

- **Trees strategies.** Some local authorities have dedicated tree strategies. The Government has consulted on making local tree and woodland strategies mandatory for all councils, although it hasn't yet announced the outcome.

- **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.

- **Parks and green spaces strategies.** Most councils will have a parks and green spaces strategy, to mandate how they are managed. 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".
- **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 is also worth trying to get this reflected in local planning policies, including neighbourhood Plans, Local Plans and strategic plans for combined authorities.

How can councillors support a commitment to doubling tree cover?

Councillors can support doubling tree cover locally by:

1. Asking the cabinet member responsible for trees to commit to doubling tree cover by 2050.

2. Introducing a council motion with a commitment to double local tree cover. Here's a template council motion you could use:

"[COUNCIL] recognises the benefits trees provide for the climate, air quality, wildlife, people's well-being and flood management; sets a target of doubling tree cover within the local authority area by 2050, including through growing more trees and woods on council-owned land; and resolves to write to the Environment Secretary to request more funding for councils to increase tree cover."

If you have any feedback on this briefing, we'd love to hear from you. Email us at trees@foe.co.uk.