

# Manifesto for the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly Elections

# Trees for Climate, for Nature, for Everyone



WOODLAND TRUST  
NORTHERN IRELAND

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of our lives and wellbeing. At the same time we are facing two equally critical issues; climate change and biodiversity loss. Native trees and woodland ecosystems offer solutions to address these challenges.

## How trees and woods deliver for climate, nature and people

### CLIMATE

It is vital that all parts of the economy and society achieve urgent reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Where emissions are unavoidable, trees and woodland ecosystems are essential for capturing carbon. Not only do trees and woodland soils store carbon, the right tree in the right place can also deliver wider benefits such as reducing the risk of flooding, improving air quality, supporting wildlife and providing spaces for people to enjoy.



1

### NATURE

Climate change and biodiversity are inextricably connected with climate change contributing to biodiversity loss and biodiversity loss making climate change and its effects worse.<sup>1</sup> Native trees and woodlands support biodiversity as they provide a home for a wide variety of plants and wildlife, with ancient woodland (woodland in existence since the 1600s) supporting more threatened species than any other land-based habitat in Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup>



### PEOPLE

Access to green spaces improves physical health, supports mental wellbeing and increases quality of life.<sup>3</sup> Green exercise such as walking and cycling not only improves physical fitness but it can also improve self-esteem and mood, reduce stress and anxiety disorders and help ease depression. Whilst a variety of accessible green space is important, woodland delivers a wide range of benefits, creates a balance between the built and natural environment, costs little to maintain and can welcome large numbers of visitors.





## What are native trees and why are they so important?

Native trees are species that arrived on the island of Ireland naturally when the glaciers melted after the last ice age, before we were separated from the rest of mainland Europe.

Our native trees include Oak, Birch, Rowan, Hazel, Scots Pine and Ash. Some Woods contain non-native trees. These are species that have been brought here by people. This may have been for ornamental gardens, timber production or for produce such as fruit and nuts.

As our native tree species arrived in Ireland around the same time that other plants and animals were colonising the land, they developed close relationships, becoming reliant on them for food, breeding sites and shelter. In contrast, non-native conifers have been introduced by people over the last 400 years from around the world. In their native habitat they support a diversity of species, but in the island of Ireland they have much lower biodiversity value as they don't provide the same resources that our native wildlife requires. This is because they do not have the same long history with other species of native plants and animals.



# Our Priorities

It is essential that the Government in Northern Ireland prioritises native trees and woodland in order to address the climate and nature emergencies and delivers a sustainable recovery from the Covid 19 pandemic.

This manifesto sets out how we can work together to protect and restore Northern Ireland's ancient and long-established woodlands and plant more native trees to combat climate change, enable nature to thrive and provide places for everyone to enjoy.

**The Woodland Trust Northern Ireland's top priorities for the next Government in Northern Ireland are:**



**Planting more native trees and woods**



**Looking after the trees and woods we have**



**Promoting locally sourced and grown trees**



**Improving access to trees and woods for everyone**



# Planting more native trees and woods

4

**Northern Ireland is one of the least wooded regions in Europe with just 9% woodland cover.<sup>4</sup> This is lower than the Republic of Ireland (11%), the UK (13%) and European Union (38%).<sup>5</sup>**

In 2006 the Northern Ireland Forestry Strategy set an ambition to double the area of woodland from 86,000 hectares in 50 years.<sup>6</sup> In order to meet this target, more than 1,500 hectares will need to be planted every year.<sup>7</sup> In 2020, the Forests for Our Future programme set an ambition to plant 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030.<sup>8</sup> Whilst this is welcome progress, more work needs to be done to increase the rate of native trees and woods being planted.

The Woodland Trust is committed to increasing woodland cover in Northern Ireland. We work with a wide range of partners on tree planting and woodland creation projects and in 2021 we acquired sites at Mourne Park and the Belfast Hills which will provide the opportunity to plant nearly 160 hectares of new native woodland for climate, nature and people.

**If we are to maximise the benefits of trees to address the climate and nature emergencies, the next Government in Northern Ireland must support the planting of more native trees and woods by:**

- Ensuring that tree planting supports nature's recovery as well as tackling the climate crisis.
- Delivering and implementing a Climate Change Act for Northern Ireland that sets a binding target for net zero emissions and supports nature's recovery.
- Introducing a Land Use Strategy that promotes nature-based solutions to address climate change biodiversity loss.
- Introducing a Tree Strategy for Northern Ireland that includes ambitious targets for native woodland creation.
- Increasing funding for forestry grants that deliver both nature and climate objectives.
- Recognising and investing in the wider benefits of trees as green infrastructure to reduce flood risk, provide noise barriers and improve air quality.
- Encouraging all councils in Northern Ireland to adopt a tree strategy or equivalent (if they do not currently have one), map their tree canopy cover and set ambitious tree planting targets.<sup>9</sup>



## Looking after the trees and woods we have

We need to plant more trees to capture more carbon, but new trees take many years to grow. The best carbon stores are the mature trees we already have; they provide the greatest benefit for wildlife and are part of our cultural and natural heritage.

**0.04%**

of ancient woodland covers the land surface



**13%**

of Northern Ireland's ancient and long established woodland has been cleared since the 1960s

**1%**

of woodland Area of Specific Scientific Interest (ASSI) area in Northern Ireland is in favourable condition





We need to plant more trees to capture more carbon, but new trees take many years to grow. The best carbon stores are the mature trees we already have; they provide the greatest benefit for wildlife and are part of our cultural and natural heritage.

Ancient woodland is scarce and in Northern Ireland it covers just 0.04% of the land surface. Centuries old, it has developed special communities of plants, insects and animals not found elsewhere. Around 13% of Northern Ireland's ancient and long established woodland has been cleared since the 1960s. Our most special woodland habitats are legally designated as protected conservation sites. However, just 1% of woodland ASSI area in Northern Ireland is in favourable condition. The main reason for this is due to alien and problematic species, such as rhododendron, which alters the natural woodland composition.<sup>10</sup>

The Woodland Trust is working to look after Northern Ireland's existing trees and woods. We support local communities to protect ancient and long-established trees and woods that are under threat and we are

restoring ancient woodland habitat across our estate including Mourne Park and the Faughan Valley.

**It is vital that the next government in Northern Ireland does more to protect and restore our existing trees and woodland ecosystems by:**

- Restoring all ancient and long-established woodland in Northern Ireland.
- Increasing funding for grants to support ancient woodland restoration.
- Supporting native tree planting that buffers and extends our precious and irreplaceable ancient woodlands.
- Investing in mapping of ancient woods and veteran trees to support better land-use and planning policy.
- Updating planning policy to provide ancient woodland, veteran trees and other irreplaceable habitats with the same level of protection enjoyed by built heritage.
- Establishing an independent Environmental Protection Agency in Northern Ireland to oversee and enforce all relevant environmental legislation.





7



## Promoting locally sourced and grown trees



With trees playing a key role in addressing the climate and nature emergencies, the demand for trees in Northern Ireland is growing.



High quality woodland creation requires a mix of species to support biodiversity and ensure greater resilience against tree disease. However, due to the limited capacity of local growers, trees are often sourced from overseas. Importing trees can inadvertently introduce new pests and diseases that can have a devastating impact on our native trees and woods. Planting locally sourced and grown trees is the most effective way to mitigate against this, whilst supporting green jobs.

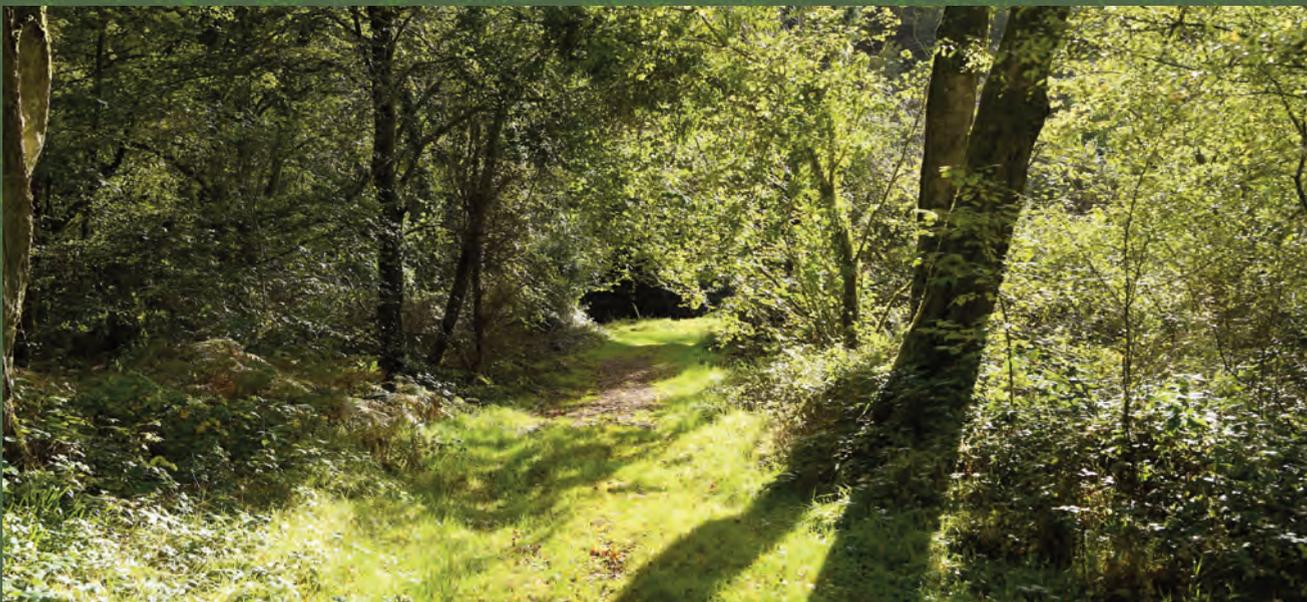
All the trees used by the Woodland Trust are sourced and grown in the UK and Ireland. We only use certified nurseries where the trees are fully traceable from seed collection through to planting. We have also provided financial support to community and voluntary organisations to establish small scale community tree nurseries in Northern Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

**If we are to plant more trees and protect against pests and diseases we need the next government of Northern Ireland to support locally sourced and grown trees by:**

- Offering financial support to enable a rapid expansion of Northern Ireland's nurseries to supply locally sourced and grown trees.
- Mandating that any publicly funded native tree planting is carried out using locally sourced and grown trees.
- Working within the North South Ministerial Council to develop common policies and approaches to strengthen biosecurity measures, and ensuring these measures are implemented in Northern Ireland.

## Improving access to trees and woods for everyone

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have demonstrated people's need to use the outdoors and increased demand requires greater provision of accessible green spaces across Northern Ireland.



9

The closer green spaces are to where people live, the more likely they are to use them. However, just 10% of Northern Ireland's population have access to a wood larger than 2 hectares within 500m of their home.<sup>12</sup> This represents the lowest provision of woodland access across the UK. Unlike Great Britain, public access to land in Northern Ireland is very limited and is generally restricted to a limited number of public rights of way, permissive path agreements with landowners and access to areas of publicly owned land. The Woodland Trust provides free access to over fifty sites across Northern Ireland and our new sites in the Belfast Hills and Mourne Park will provide an additional 310 hectares of accessible woodland. We are also enhancing public access at the Faughan Valley woodlands by developing an iconic sculpture trail, supporting infrastructure and providing targeted events and engagement programmes.

In order to benefit from the health, social, and economic benefits of trees and woods, we need the next Government of Northern Ireland to improve access to trees and woods by:

- Ensuring trees are planted close to where people live and where most benefit would be delivered to communities.
- Increase tree cover along roads and walking and cycling routes to make them more attractive, safer and healthier and better for wildlife.
- Funding landowners to implement and maintain public access on their land, including changes to the current Agri-Environment Scheme where Single Farm Payment subsidies are currently lost for areas taken out of grazing.
- Mandating that all public bodies to review their current land holdings and transfer more of this to create new publicly accessible woodland or enhance access to existing woodland.
- Making greater use of Community Asset Transfer to bring public land into community ownership.
- Investing in the next generation by creating formal and informal opportunities for children and young people to come into contact with nature.



Credit: Michael Cooper Photography





## WOODLAND TRUST NORTHERN IRELAND

### Contact Details

**Paul Armstrong, Public Affairs Manager, The Woodland Trust Northern Ireland**  
**PaulArmstrong@woodlandtrust.org.uk, 0343 248 4075**

- 1: [https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021\\_IPCC-IPBES\\_scientific\\_outcome\\_20210612.pdf](https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021_IPCC-IPBES_scientific_outcome_20210612.pdf)
- 2: Ancient woodland is woodland believed to have been in continuous existence for centuries. These ancient woodlands and their soils and wildlife have co-evolved for thousands of years, creating diverse, distinctive and valuable ecosystems that cannot be re-created.
- 3: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/health-and-wellbeing/>
- 4: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/7806/CompleteFS2020.pdf>
- 5: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/statistics/forestry-statistics/forestry-statistics-2018/international-forestry/forest-cover-international-comparisons/>
- 6: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/strategy-for-sustainability-growth.pdf>
- 7: In 2021 Northern Ireland had 119,000 ha of woodland (Forest Research, Provisional Woodland Statistics 2021). Meeting a target of 172,000 ha woodland by 2056 would require an additional 53,000 ha of new woodland. Over the next 35 years, this equates to 1,514 ha of new woodland per year.
- 8: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/news/poots-planting-pledge>
- 10: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/49731/state-of-the-uks-woods-and-trees-2021-the-woodland-trust.pdf>
- 11: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/1731/biosecurity-and-plant-imports-position-statement.pdf>
- 12: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/1721/space-for-people-woodland-access.pdf>

The Woodland Trust is a registered charity no.294344 and no.SC03888. A non-profit making company limited by guarantee. Registered in England no.1982873. The Woodland Trust logo is a registered trademark. Copyright © 2017 The Woodland Trust  
**[woodlandtrust.org.uk/Northern-Ireland](https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/Northern-Ireland)**