

I beg to move that this House has considered the 'National Tree Strategy'.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. And I declare an interest as a Metro Mayor.

With Parliament's focus understandably elsewhere today, I'm grateful to see the Minister and so many Honourable Members here this morning.

I'd also like to thank the **Petitions Committee** for linking this debate to the 'Legal rights for ancient trees' petition, to which more than 17,000 people added their name.

Our country, indeed our planet, faces two major environmental crises: climate change and biodiversity collapse.

The principle that trees harness the power to help us overcome both is one on which we can all agree.

I hope too, we can agree, as the famous Chinese proverb puts it...

"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago...

The second best time is now."

We should take encouragement from the fact that every single major political party at last year's general election committed to significantly increasing tree cover.

From **capturing carbon; to reducing soil erosion; improving air quality; alleviating flooding; supporting biodiversity; and promoting health and well-being:** the benefit that trees bring to our natural environment, our economy and our society cannot be overlooked or understated.

However, the fact remains that we do not have enough, and we are not adequately looking after the ones we have.

That's why the England Tree Strategy is so important. It represents a golden opportunity to rethink our approach to trees.

Moreover, it is a chance to show the world how the UK is leading the way in addressing the climate emergency by championing nature-based solutions ahead of COP 26.

I should say from the outset that my remarks will focus on the forthcoming England Tree Strategy, but this debate is entitled 'National Tree Strategy'. Forestry is of course a devolved matter and so it's vital we hear voices from all 4 of our nations.

Firstly, and I'm sure the Minister will address this in her remarks, I'd welcome an update on the consultation process; what work is currently being done to develop the Strategy; and when her Department expects to publish.

I'd like to turn to the issue of targets. The government – as we know – is committed to achieving Net-Zero emissions by 2050.

And while I appreciate there is considerable debate over the ambition of that date, if the government is going to achieve this goal, the UK will nonetheless require a major expansion of tree cover.

Despite the role trees play in combatting the climate crisis, there is no formal way to set targets in England.

In its Sixth Carbon Budget published last week, the Climate Change Committee was clear: **the UK needs to do more.**

According to the Committee's report, we need to increase tree cover in the UK from the current **12%** to around **20%**. This will require up to **70,000** hectares of new trees and woods to be established each year.

On our current trajectory however, we will get nowhere near this recommendation.

Take last year as an example, the provisional Forestry Commission figures show that **13,460** hectares was created, of which only **17%** was in England.

This leads me to the Environment Bill which I feel leaves a gaping hole on tree planting.

During Committee, the government was clearly reluctant to insert targets on the face of the Bill, as seen with New Clause 17 in the name of my Honourable Friend for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport.

Perhaps the Minister would consider taking another look at New Clause 19 from Committee, which I tabled with the help of the Woodland Trust.

That clause would ensure the government prepares a tree strategy for England, and produces targets for the protection, restoration and expansion of trees and woodland.

It's a proposal that has great deal of public support.

Those on the Bill Committee should have received a compendium of comments from Woodland Trust members which show a real thirst for meaningful and binding targets.

So on this issue, I'd invite the Minister to confirm whether the England Tree Strategy will include statutory targets, and also say something about the target-setting measures in the Environment Bill?

Of course, this isn't just a stats game. Quantity is important but shouldn't mean we compromise quality. We urgently need more trees, but they must be the right trees, in the right places, delivered in the right way.

A good place to start is how we calculate the expansion of trees and woods in England.

Rather than looking simply at a 'number of trees planted' figure – which is problematic for several reasons –

we need a standardised, reliable, national metric such as the 'percentage of land area covered by trees'.

We also need to establish a series of sub-targets as well, including for the expansion of new **native** woodland,

'Trees Outside of Woods' and natural regeneration.

I'd like to move on to what trees mean to people.

One of the more obvious lessons of this public health crisis has been on the importance of green space.

For many, especially those living in flats and those without a garden, the local park has been a lifeline, without which lockdown would've been even more of a struggle.

I believe the natural world should not be a faraway, abstract concept but a part of our everyday lives:

A notion that holds true regardless of whether you live in Barnsley or Benbecula, Sheffield or Shetland.

The Woodland Trust's '**Space for People**' research highlights what needs to be done in this respect.

Sadly, across the UK, only **21%** of people lived within 500 metres of accessible woodland, and **27%** did not have a larger accessible woodland within **4** kilometres of their home.

By committing to increase the number of people able to benefit from trees and woodland in our towns and cities, the England Tree Strategy can help to transform our relationship with nature.

That's why local authorities should be mandated to produce statutory local tree plans.

Crucially, the plans need to be Town Hall led rather than Whitehall driven. This means ensuring local government has the power, money and capacity to deliver green reform.

I'm pleased to say that Barnsley Council is well on the way and approved its Tree Planting Strategy back in September. And we're actively involved in supporting this work at a regional level.

Maybe a point that's better directed at the Minister's colleagues in MHCLG but currently, London's Mayor is the **only** Mayor in England with the power to produce a binding Environment Strategy.

Despite the lack of devolved powers, we've still developed a plan in South Yorkshire to reach Net-Zero by 2040 – at the latest.

My ambition is for woodland creation and tree planting to play a pivotal role in getting us there.

We've strongly supported plans to grow the **Northern Forest**, and we recently recruited a Woodland Creation Officer to work with our Local Nature Partnership and other partners.

The former is a project very close to my heart.

I was part of the team that put the first trees in the ground.

And last year, I co-ordinated a letter – to which more than 120 cross-party Northern leaders added their support – calling on the Prime Minister to back the Northern Forest initiative.

For Honourable Members not familiar, the Northern Forest will see 50 million trees planted over the next 25 years in the North of England by the Woodland Trust and their community forest partners.

I'm proud to say that more than **2.1 million** are already in the ground.

Sadly though, woodland cover in our Northern counties is only **7.6%**, far lower than England's average of **10%**. This initiative seeks to address this disparity.

The forest will span 120 miles, connecting the towns and cities of Liverpool, Manchester and Lancaster to the West and Sheffield, Leeds and Hull to the East, benefiting 13 million residents and generating £2.5 billion in social, economic, and environmental benefits.

I would very much hope the England Tree Strategy commits to delivering the Northern Forest.

Levelling-up shouldn't just be about new trains and skills programmes – crucial though they are.

Regional inequality affects every part of people's lives, including their health and well-being.

Projects such as the Northern Forest should be afforded the status they deserve.

Given the role trees play in flood prevention, it would be remiss of me not to say a few words about the matter – it's a topic the Minister is very familiar with as we've discussed it on a number of occasions. It is now one year on from the devastation that battered our communities.

She will be aware that I wrote to her and the Secretary of State last month following the constructive South Yorkshire flooding roundtable.

I'd be very grateful if the Minister would give an update on a couple of points raised in that letter. Firstly, on where we are with confirming the provisional funds allocated to us through the Medium Term Plan and Grant in Aid proposals.

And secondly, on our innovative proposal to work together to deliver 9 shovel-ready projects that would protect 860 homes and critical elements of our regional infrastructure.

Such a commitment would show the government is serious about working hand in hand with local leaders to level up, tackle the climate emergency and solve the problems faced by our communities.

At the start I said we do not have enough trees but also that we are not adequately looking after the ones we have. The importance of the latter must be recognised in the strategy.

There have been at least 20 serious plant pests and diseases inadvertently imported into the UK in the last 30 years.

We're on course to lose 150 million mature trees and 2 billion saplings and seedlings to ash dieback disease in the next 10 to 20 years. And we've experienced a catastrophic loss of historic trees.

Further to that last point, I hope the Minister can say something about the government's recent planning reforms and how they fit with the 2018 changes to the National Planning Policy Framework because they seem to be at odds.

Ancient woodlands cover less than **3%** of our land but once lost, can never be replaced.

The England Tree Strategy must commit to preventing any further loss and also to the restoration of all Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites.

I appreciate there are plenty of other issues to speak about.

I haven't touched on funding structures, the relationship between agriculture and forestry and much more besides.

I'll conclude by saying the need for an ambitious, fully resourced and long-term plan for trees has never been greater.

The decisions the government makes on the forthcoming strategy will shape the viability of our planet and our relationship with the natural world.

By investing in our trees and woods we are investing in healthier and happier futures and laying the foundation of a legacy we can be proud of.

It's a purpose around which, I hope we can all unite.

Thank you.