

‘Get tree planting done’: delivering on the rhetoric



David Lee asks whether or not the new Conservative Government can live up to its positive rhetoric

Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party won the General Election by promising to Get Brexit Done. With a stonking majority, they can now deliver on that pledge, but they will also come under fierce pressure to deliver on manifesto commitments - and that includes a promise to Get Tree Planting Done.

For the first time in modern politics, trees were an important subject of an election campaign, with all parties promising to ramp up existing woeful planting rates in England.

The Conservative Party pledge was 30,000 hectares of new woodland creation (or, as they seem to prefer, 75,000 acres),

to be delivered “by the end of the next parliament”. Assuming two full five-year terms (a big assumption after three general elections in less than five years, but much more likely with a majority government in place), that would take us to December 2029.

But will the Conservatives turn words on paper into trees in the ground - and are they serious about meeting these planting targets?

The available evidence suggests grounds for optimism. Barely had we shaken off our New Year hangovers that Environment Secretary Theresa Villiers was talking trees at the Oxford Farming Conference (OFC). It’s worth looking carefully at what she said:

“I very much hope we can engage the knowledge and expertise of our farmers as we deliver our big promises on trees.

“This was the first election where there was a bidding war between the parties on tree planting. Our manifesto commits us to stepping up planting across the UK to reach up to 75,000 acres a year by the end of this Parliament.

“Supported by our £640 million Nature

for Climate Fund, we will overhaul our approach to tree-planting and in the spring we’ll launch our consultation on the English Tree Strategy.

“I urge you to take up whichever tree offers - the one which fits your business best ... whether it’s woodland creation grants or the Woodland Carbon Guarantee.”

The language is positive - “big promises”, “stepping up planting”, “overhaul our approach” - and the specific mention of the ‘bidding war’ and different funding pots suggests the commitment is truly there to try to change things for the better.

Mantra

We are in a very different world from 2015/16 when Forestry Minister Thérèse Coffey constantly repeated, without much conviction, the mantra that 11 million trees would be “planted in the lifetime of this parliament” (theoretically five years). This was a mere rollover target from what was planted in 2010-2015, with no clear link to policy objectives and no obvious roadmap to get there.

Four key ingredients for planting

1 Strong political leadership:
Fergus Ewing MSP provided this in Scotland by making a firm personal commitment to tree planting and driving forward the agencies needed to make it happen. Lord Goldsmith’s enthusiasm and energy suggests he might do the same in England.

2 Link tree planting targets to wider policy objectives:
Until the 2019 election, UK tree planting targets existed very much in a vacuum, with no clear policy rationale. This has changed, with climate change mitigation repeatedly highlighted as the main reason for planting trees, following Scotland’s lead. As a result, environmental organisations like Friends of the Earth have focused more on tree planting, starting to create the kind of broad coalition needed to make a real change.

3 Partnership between industry, government and agencies:
political leadership in Scotland has gone hand-in-hand with a pragmatic approach, including listening carefully to what the industry says is achievable. We hope this is replicated in England, with industry playing a central role in new Regional Forestry Partnerships.

4 Simplifying processes for planting applications and approvals:
All the above will have no impact if systems are so complex and timescales so long that those who want to plant trees are put off. The Mackinnon Review has kicked off improvements to the Scottish system and a similar approach is needed in England, plus a change in mindset, where we think how to create an environment where the presumption is to plant, not find reasons not to plant.





Since then, Confor has worked hard with Dr Coffey's successors, first David Rutley MP - who backed our drive for greater planting in Northumberland enthusiastically - and then Zac Goldsmith, who was challenged by our CEO Stuart Goodall to pick up the baton and run with it, which he did. His promise of a new 'Northumberland Forest', and more significantly the creation of a Northumberland Forest Partnership, was the most eye-catching forestry announcement of his pre-election stint, but arguably far more significant was his reassuring call, in early November, to "plant trees now", with funds to be made available.

The language in a Defra news release was as positive as we have heard from a Minister in a very long time: "I want to reassure you that support for tree planting and woodland creation will continue to be part of this government's agenda. There is no need for concern about how woodland created now will be treated under Environmental Land Management (ELM) in the future and certainly no reason to delay tree planting. To respond to the climate emergency, we need you to plant trees now."

It's worth noting the emphasis on responding to the climate emergency and planting trees now - suggesting a sense of urgency which has been notably lack- >>



Five key Confor priorities for 2020

- 1 Work closely with ministers and officials across UK to lay the groundwork for delivering the 30,000 hectare target, including future nursery supply;
- 2 Get the message across that this can't happen without productive planting at scale;
- 3 Create private sector-led partnerships to deliver planting in Northumberland and then elsewhere;
- 4 Continue to play a central role in shaping ELMs;
- 5 Work hard on the other key planks of our election manifesto - urging the Government to support more effective management of existing woods and use more home-grown timber.

>> ing in forestry policy in recent years. The table shows the woeful planting figures in England (and Wales), while Scotland races ahead - planting 84% of the trees in the whole of the UK in 2018/19.

So how optimistic can we be that the positive language can be translated into action, to set us on the road to that annual 30,000 hectare planting target?

The fact that Zac Goldsmith is back as Forestry Minister is not without controversy, as he has been elevated to the House of Lords after losing his London seat. However, the decision to keep him in post looks positive for our industry, as his energy and enthusiasm for trees was notable before the election. Confor chief executive Stuart Goodall met him last autumn and has secured early meetings with Lord Goldsmith and senior officials - with a focus on discussing, in detail, how to push planting rates up.

Northumberland is an important starting-point as there is clear interest - and opportunity - from a wide range of groups to deliver significant new planting there, and to establish a model to be replicated elsewhere in England. The Goldsmith announcement in September 2019 suggested the first stage of planting in the county would consist of a million trees, mainly on public sector land - with planting starting later this year and finishing in 2024.

Engagement

Confor will work hard to get this early stage planting moving quickly, while seeking to create an industry-led Northumberland Forestry Partnership to develop longer-term plans and engage all interested parties - including local residents, farmers, landowners, environmental groups and the forestry and wood-using industry. Explain-

There are some interesting and important questions raised by the Conservative Party manifesto which need answering quickly:

- 1 Why did it equate 30,000 hectares of new planting to only 30 million trees? This implies a density of only 1000 trees per hectare, when 2000 is much more standard for modern, mixed-species forestry. Without including a decent percentage of conifers in large-scale planting schemes, it's hard to see how targets can be met.
- 2 What does the intriguing promise to "work with Devolved Administrations to achieve this goal" mean in the context of planting targets? Could the UK Government pay the other countries to plant trees on its behalf?

ing carefully what is planned to local people and working with them to deliver planting is vital after the lessons learned by the FIZ project in Cumbria.

In that vein, Stuart Goodall organised a very successful visit to Wallshield in Northumberland for the local National Farmers Union committee and staff team in December to see a recent productive planting scheme. There was real positivity and interest, and a desire to work with Confor to learn more and to engage with a local Partnership.

If a successful forestry partnership can be created in Northumberland, the partnership model could be adapted in other parts of England to deliver planting in a structured, collaborative way. Confor will argue industry must be at the heart of this partnership, as it has been in Scotland, where 90 per cent of new planting in 2018/19 was done by the private sector.

It is important to look at what has worked in Scotland and how that might help drive up planting in England. There are arguably four key areas: strong political leadership; linking planting targets to wider policy objectives, especially climate change mitigation; a genuine partnership between the industry, government and agencies;

and simplifying processes for planting applications and approval (see panel 1).

As Confor drives progress in all these areas, the clock is ticking to develop ELMs for a post-Brexit world. Confor's National Manager for England, Caroline Harrison, is leading our efforts to ensure the wide-ranging benefits of forestry and wood are fully considered and rewarded at the heart of ELMs as we shift to a 'public money for public good' funding model. The publication of the Agriculture Bill promises a new system which will treat forestry fairly, as opposed to the Common Agricultural Policy, which discriminated against planting trees.

There is also the delayed Tree Strategy to consider, and we understand the consultation will now begin in the Spring. Confor will engage at every stage to ensure what emerges delivers meaningful outcomes and commitments rather than platitudes.

There is much to be done, but for the first time in decades, it feels the stars might be aligned for forestry and wood. There is a more positive attitude towards planting across the political spectrum and an understanding that the climate change imperative means we must plant far more trees - and quickly. Arguably, this is the best time in the last 30 years to Get Planting Done.



SNP backs Confor planting targets

Confor's long-term planting targets have been backed by the Scottish National Party, with a pledge to plant 36 million trees every year in Scotland by 2030 to tackle the climate emergency.

Fergus Ewing MSP, Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Deidre Brock, MP for Edinburgh North and Leith and party spokesperson on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at Westminster, signed the pledge with Confor CEO Stuart Goodall.

Planting figures across the UK to the end of March 2019 showed 84 per cent of new woodland creation happening in Scotland. The annual planting target in Scotland of 10,000 hectares (ha) - roughly 20 million trees - was surpassed, with 11,200ha of new woodland planted - while other areas of the UK fell well short of their targets.

Confor's targets, set last April, include 18,000ha of new planting annually in Scotland by 2030 - 36 million trees at a planting density of 2000 trees per hectare.

Stuart Goodall said: "I'm delighted the SNP has shown long-term commitment to new planting by signing up to our targets."