Forest Research In Brief

Land managers and woodland creation: Trees on farms

Meeting the ambitious tree cover expansion targets of the UK, Scottish, and Welsh governments will require more integration of trees and woodlands on farms. Understanding how farmers, farms, and woodland creation interact is essential for designing policies, incentives, tools, advice, and communications that encourage farmland tree growing. This In Brief introduces our latest research with farmers on this topic. By highlighting the key messages across four related projects – and pointing to examples from the outputs – it provides a starting point for readers wishing to delve deeper into the evidence.

Most farmers are open to growing trees, provided that they align with personal values and support key farm priorities

Here, we highlight some key points relevant to farming. Our research helps identify where growing trees may fit with farmers' values.

- In our farmer survey of almost 400 farms across England, we found:
  - Nearly two-thirds of farmers were likely to plant trees in the coming five years.
  - Values relating to farm health, food production, and the farm business were those most influential for farmers contemplating tree planting.
- Our case studies of farmers who have substantially increased tree cover offer a rich exploration of how their decisions to do so relate to their values.
- Our journal articles discuss in greater depth how trees relate to farmers' goals and values and to the concept of the 'good farmer'.

In another In Brief, we focus more broadly on land manager objectives and values.

The context of growing trees is important to farmers

Farmers' willingness to grow trees varies by why, where, and how they are grown.

- In our farmer survey, we found:
  - The most common reasons for growing trees were for wildlife benefits and hedgerow expansion. Very few did so as energy crops or food crops.
  - Dairy and lowland grazing livestock farmers were most likely to plant trees, while grazing livestock farmers in Less Favoured Areas were least likely.
  - Across all farmers, hedgerows and field corners/margins were the most frequent locations for planting trees. For growing trees through natural colonisation, the most common sites were hedgerows and woodland.

Key terms

Values: An expression of what people consider to be good or important in life.

Natural colonisation/ regeneration: Woodland creation through natural processes (e.g. from existing seed).

Green finance: Environmentally targeted sustainable finance.

Find out more

- Tenant farming
- Green finance
- Farmer values
- Natural processes to create woodland

- Our work on natural colonisation (including a journal article) reveals that many farmers express a preference for hybrid approaches to tree establishment to reduce uncertainty and variability and maximise ecological control. Blending active planting with natural regeneration means trees can be adapted to fit alongside farmers' existing objectives and planting can be implemented in ways that work best for the farm business. It also allows for greater spatial control; farmers can vary species mix, better determine speed of growth, and exercise some control over stem and canopy density.

Structural barriers may prevent tree planting

Structural factors relate to systems, institutions, and social structures. Our research uncovers ways that these structures limit farmers' willingness or ability to grow trees.

- Our research on the social dimensions of natural colonisation (report, journal article) highlighted that grant uptake for facilitating and promoting natural colonisation is limited by confusing language, lengthy application processes, and complicated and evolving policy contexts. Also, some grants and schemes are incompatible with others, highlighting the need for greater alignment.
- Short farm tenancies can also make long-term woodland creation planning difficult. Planting negotiations often involve significant costs and time commitment, and the prospect of little economic return within available timescales means that some schemes are inaccessible or unprofitable for tenant farmers.

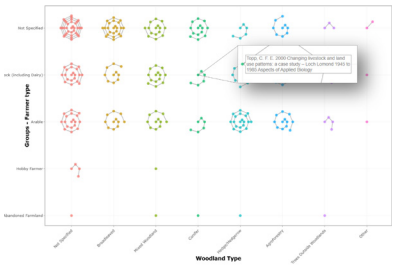
Stakeholder relationships, trust, and social capital shape engagement with woodland creation

Woodland creation involves working with others and navigating and leveraging these relationships.

- Our journal article from our farmer values project focuses on the interaction between growing trees on farms and social capital through an exploration of the concept of the 'good farmer'.
- Our tenant farming research shows that tenants and landlords (or agents) may face issues regarding who is responsible for the long-term management of newly planted woodland.
- Navigating complex funding contexts often requires a high degree of knowledge and resourcing. In our green finance and woodland creation research, a farming case study (Sapperton Wilder) explains the benefits of working with experienced advisors throughout the application process; a resource that many farm businesses may be unable to access. Working with experienced farm advisors can also facilitate better woodland creation planning.
- Our research briefing on woodland creation using natural processes highlights that advice on increasing tree cover can sometimes be misleading, and that some land managers prefer interaction, support, and learning from peers rather than external advisors. Interacting with peers to observe woodland creation in action may help reduce outcome uncertainties and strengthen farmer knowledge networks.

What can the evidence map tell us?

Our systematic evidence map (below) codes woodland creation evidence by farmer type (livestock, arable, general). It allows users to explore the evidence across several dimensions, including land manager objectives, woodland creation drivers, land tenure, geographies, and woodland type.



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To find out more about this and related research, visit our research page.

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