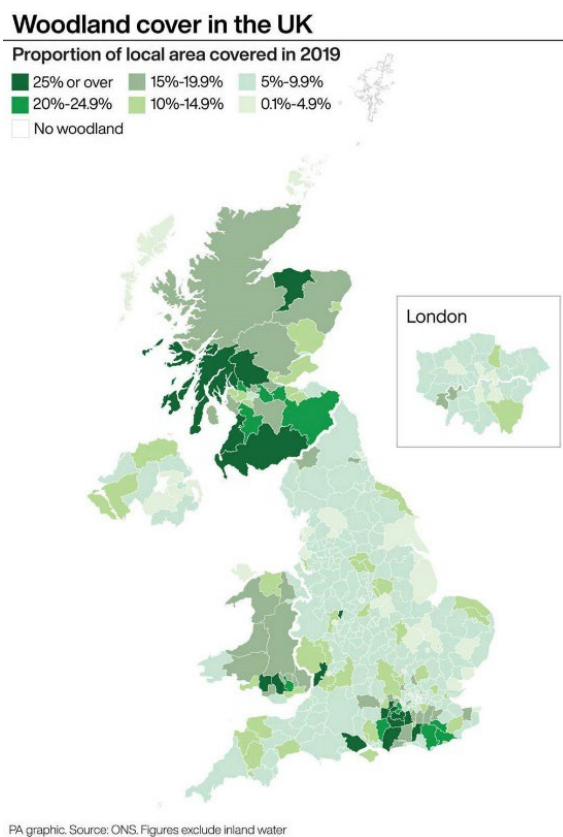


## Executive Summary

In November 2019 Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough Council (RCTCBC) established a Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group to address the climate emergency and subsequently the nature emergency, declared by Welsh Government. In November 2020 the Steering Group received a report on 'Natures' Assets' which set out the Council's natural environment priorities with regard to addressing the climate and nature crises.

Essentially, Rhondda Cynon Taf is putting Climate Change at the centre of what we do. As a Council we are committed to investing in our green spaces and to delivering natural carbon storage solutions such as those provided by trees, peat bogs, marshy grassland and other natural habitats across the County Borough to enhance air quality and reduce the impact of greenhouse gasses.

Rhondda Cynon Taff is one of the very few heavily wooded areas in the UK which also has a large population (see UK map below). The County Borough is about a third wooded and about a third urban, with a population of 241,873 (2020 est) and a population density of 570 persons per square km (2020 mid-year estimates from the ONS). Even within the main urban areas an average of 18.5% is tree covered.



The importance of this resource has been highlighted by the Climate and Nature Emergencies and this strategy will strengthen the Council's commitment to managing this resource and to

maximise the benefits to local residents, to biodiversity, and to climate adaptation and mitigation.

Trees, hedgerows, and woodlands are an integral part of nature, supporting a wide range of insects, animals, birds and plant life. Looking after the trees, hedges and woodlands in our local environment is essential for the future health of nature and of people. Trees can improve the environmental quality of our urban areas, delivering physical, social and economic benefits as well as mitigating climate change, improving storm water management, air quality, biodiversity, visual amenity and more. In considering trees and planning for the future, we need a fundamental shift in attitude and perspective - to recognise trees as public assets, rather than just liabilities.

The focus of this strategy is to actively protect Rhondda Cynon Taf's Urban Forest – the green infrastructure of parks, gardens, woods, trees in streets, footpaths, green spaces, trees and hedges that all benefit our environment so significantly. The strategy looks at the next ten years specifically but with an eye on the longer-term of 50 plus years. To achieve our Climate and Nature ambitions, it must be integrated with wider environmental concerns to protect and manage all the important habitats in our urban areas and in the surrounding countryside. It must also be integrated with other Council policies such as the Revised Local Development Plan (RLDP), the Flood Risk Management Plan, Environmental Health and Community engagement.

The Strategy will be subject to an eight-week period of public consultation.

## Vision Statement

In the ten-year span of this strategy the Council will:

- Undertake the largest tree planting programme in a generation and implement a holistic approach to the RCT landscape which integrates consideration of landscape, culture, biodiversity, natural flood management, green infrastructure and carbon storage.
- We will adopt the principle of “the right tree for the right place” in order to ensure the most resilient tree population possible.
- Promote and value the significant extent of existing woodlands in Rhondda Cynon Taf (about a third of the County Borough), recognising the importance of our semi-natural woodland habitats and especially our ancient woodlands.
- Protect important semi-natural habitats and undisturbed soils from inappropriate tree planting.
- Recognise, quantify and monitor the contribution of natural regeneration to woodland expansion across RCT
- Work with Natural Resources Wales to maximise the benefits of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate to local residents and visitors.
- Commit to the management and maintenance of the existing extent of urban tree coverage.
- Work constructively with individuals and groups to deliver this vision.
- Aim to increase the urban tree canopy cover in those urban areas with less than 10% cover.
- Promote the benefits and value of urban trees within our communities.

## The Purpose of the Strategy

Providing a mechanism to improve the provision and care of trees and woodlands

Ensuring that decisions and activities undertaken in relation to trees are made in a structured and consistent way; and Monitoring the action plan(s) and policies for the care, management and enhancement of Rhondda Cynon Taf 's trees and woodlands.

## Overarching Aims of the Strategy

1. To protect, regenerate and care for Rhondda Cynon Taf's existing trees and woodlands
2. To encourage the natural regeneration and colonisation of trees as the most sustainable way of increasing canopy cover.
3. Encourage new tree and hedgerow planting in appropriate areas to benefit well-being, pollution, climate change and pride in our surroundings
4. Where urban tree cover is below 10% to plant more trees on the principle of the ‘right tree in the right place’
5. To recognise the ancient hedgerow heritage of RCT, to restore and maintain the valuable ecological and historic asset, and where new hedges are planted ensure they do not compromise this heritage

6. To provide a framework for decision making and establishing a prioritised action plan for 2023 - 2033

## Action Plan:

### Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough Council will:

1. Create a cross-disciplinary working group to: monitor the implementation of the strategy; develop an initial tree planting programme; ensure risks and benefits are addressed; operational and regulatory matters; integration with broader land management considerations (flood, biodiversity, carbon storage etc); and integration with policy (Revised Local Development Plan, Flood Risk Management Plan, Action for Nature, Air Quality, sales/leases etc.).
2. Support a condition survey of all the trees for which RCT has management responsibility to form a single data base.
3. Review the extent of woodland across the County Borough, including ancient woodland and naturally regenerating woodland. Establish how Council policy can assist in its protection and management, its relationship to other habitats of biodiversity value and the sustainable management of natural resources.
4. Review and monitor the extent and condition of woodland on Council owned land and in particular, monitor the area of naturally regenerating woodland on the Council's estate, with priority for the sites in excess of 10ha which feature in the Council's carbon calculation submissions to Welsh Government.
5. Ensure that new policies for the protection and enhancement of trees and hedgerows are embedded in the Revised Local Development Plan where appropriate and supported by evidence and integrated into the Green Infrastructure Assessment where appropriate.
6. Support a comprehensive review of Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) and conservation areas to reassess historical orders and potentially implement new orders to protect Rhondda Cynon Taf's trees.
7. Review, strengthen, resource and consistently implement enforcement policies, to ensure protection of existing trees, woodlands and hedgerows.
8. Establish the overall value of Rhondda Cynon Taf's trees, to show what condition and size they are, and how much they benefit the environment and the ecosystem services they provide.
9. Establish a cycle of tree risk assessment and update management and action plans.
10. Deliver a training program for staff within the affected service areas on the value of trees, TPOs, and the tree strategy's vision and operational matters
11. Develop and adopt a Tree Risk Assessment Management tool for making decisions about tree felling, pollarding, pruning and coppicing
12. Develop an effective biosecurity policy to reduce the risk of introduced pests and diseases that may threaten native woodland cover as well as planted and new trees.
13. Develop an effective strategy for ash-dieback, that deals with the risks, allows unaffected trees to be retained and addresses canopy cover.
14. Establish a robust partnership and community engagement programme. Improve communication and understanding between the Council, Community Councils and residents relating to: local issues and concerns; tree strategy and detailed policy; the

value of trees, woodlands and other natural habitats; and operational matters such as essential works.

15. Establish a working partnership with NRW private, community and charitable owners of land, businesses and local developers in the management of trees, hedgerows and woodlands, contributing to maintaining and where appropriate increasing canopy cover across Rhondda Cynon Taf.
16. Set objectives that clearly define what future success looks like and the specific benefits the urban forest is expected to deliver together with milestones for progress during the life of the strategy.
17. Establish monitoring standards that can identify how much of the expected benefits of tree, woodland and hedgerow planting have been achieved.
18. Ensure integration of the tree strategy objectives and outcomes with local biodiversity priorities and objectives to ensure complementary delivery of action.
19. In urban settings develop opportunities to plant long-lived trees and hedgerows to support wildlife, provide Green Infrastructure services and public amenity value, with a focus on urban areas with tree cover below 10%.
20. Outside settlement boundaries protect existing woodlands and rely primarily on natural woodland regeneration for woodland expansion.
21. Create cross council working practices to implement and inform this Strategy, building an informed and expert work force that supports the care and management of trees and woodlands across Rhondda Cynon Taf.
22. Monitor and review the Strategy, in partnership with the cross-disciplinary working group, every 3 years.
23. Produce detailed policy and guidance notes to be followed by RCTCBC, contractors and other partners in following this strategy.
24. Where possible encourage plans for new building or development to make provision for retaining existing trees, space for natural regeneration and, where appropriate, increasing the canopy cover.
25. Support local tree nurseries to provide future tree stock with appropriate biosecurity, that will be climate resilient and offer appropriate planting for Rhondda Cynon Taf's environment and local biodiversity context. This will include schools, community groups and volunteers collecting seeds and cuttings of suitable trees and growing them on.