

4 October 2024

**Management of Durham County
Councils Woodland Estate - update**

**Report of Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods
and Climate Change**

Electoral division(s) affected:

All

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide an update on the management of council-owned woodland and tree planting programmes.
- 2 To highlight the issues and opportunities for woodland management and creation.

Executive summary

- 3 The Council owns approximately 1800ha of woodland across 86 sites throughout the county, which is 10% of the County's total woodland resource. Over 300ha of this woodland is ancient. These woodlands have generally existed since 1600 and have considerable wildlife and historical value, which if lost is irreplaceable (see appendix 2).
- 4 Appropriate management of all these sites offers a major opportunity for improving the carbon performance of woodlands and their role in tackling climate change. It will also increase amenity value, benefit wildlife conservation, and enhance the quality and range of timber products and other ecosystem services that woodlands can provide.
- 5 The Council has an excellent track record in woodland creation, with approximately one million trees planted since 2000 as well as planting over 3000 street trees and planting or restoring over 350km hedgerow. Furthermore, we are one of few local authorities nationally that have approved or pending Forestry Authority approved management plans

for all its woodland estate, along with a Woodland Improvement Grant towards a five-year improvement programme.

- 6 Several programmes and initiatives have continued to build on this work including Durham Woodland Revival (DWR), the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCF), Durham Woodland Creation (DWC), Trees for Children, the North East Community Forest (NECF) and comprehensive management of council-owned woodland through Forestry Commission led initiatives.
- 7 The council has made progress consolidating its woodland approach to woodland management. There is a new Woodlands & Forestry Team based in Neighbourhoods & Climate Change (NCC) and budgets have been approved from the next financial year to cover management operations. The woodland portfolio is currently under review by Corporate Property and Land (CPaL) to ensure that sites are held correctly and assigned to appropriate teams.
- 8 Working closely with CPaL, sites have been identified for tree planting under the DWC scheme. To date, almost 50,000 trees have been established across almost 50 ha of land. A further 15 ha of new planting is planned for this coming winter. This will contribute towards the target of 10,000 trees in each AAP.
- 9 The North East Community Forest (NECF) has grown its team and continues to go from strength to strength in the region. Funding from NECF has enabled the extension of the DWC programme manager post for 12 months. This is currently being appraised with a view to extending it further. This would enable the management of planted sites and their grant programmes and align with the NECF and the next tranche of Trees for Climate funds.

Recommendations

- 10 The Committee is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the content of the report and presentation and comment accordingly.
 - (b) Receive a further update on the management of the council's woodland estate in the next work programme.

Background

Management of existing council-owned woodland

- 11 The council owns and manages over 1800ha of woodland throughout the county, about 10% of the county's total woodland resource. Appropriate management of these woodland sites offers a major opportunity to secure timber production, wildlife conservation and amenity use and lock up carbon from the atmosphere and provide a valuable and sustainable resource for years to come.
- 12 There are 86 woodlands spread across the county with a combined total of just over 1800 ha. Many of these are typically located on, or include in part, reclaimed and restored land resulting from the coal mining industry during the 1960s through to the 1990s. This is reflected in their distribution which occur mainly through central and eastern areas with very few to the west in the North Pennines and south in the Tees Lowlands.
- 13 The council own 308 ha of ancient woodland which accounts for 6% of the county's resource. These woodlands have generally existed since 1600 and have considerable wildlife and historical value, which if lost is irreplaceable. This type of woodland mostly occurs on the denes of the West Durham Coalfield along the Twizel, Deerness, Browney and Causey with isolated pockets along the Rivers Derwent, Tees and Wear.
- 14 There is now a dedicated Woodlands & Forestry Team based in NCC with responsibility for strategic management of the council's woodland resource, including the creation of new woodland. The Senior Forester post moved across from CPaL earlier this year to enable the establishment of the team and to consolidate management and operations across the Council.
- 15 Unfortunately, there was no budget or cost centre associated with the transfer of this post. However, Clean & Green have secured £50k through the growth bid for the next financial year, which will be ring-fenced for woodland works.
- 16 Other teams across the Council with an interest in the woodland estate continue to engage through the internal cross-service Trees and Woodland Workstream chaired by the Head of Environment. This helps to provide direction, coordination and maximise benefits that can be delivered through well-managed woodlands.

- 17 Forestry Commission (FC) approved management plans for 730 ha of woodland have just been revised and submitted. Once these have been approved, Felling Licences will be in place to undertake thinning works. The remaining woodland area has a current plan and Felling Licence in place until 2030.
- 18 Extent plans are required to fulfil the Woodland Improvement Grant Scheme (WIGs), an FC grant which funds a five-year work programme to bring neglected woodlands back into management and improve the condition of ancient woodland. The programme is now at mid-point and will eventually unlock over £775,000 of funding in total and more importantly, secure improved woodland management throughout the estate. A temporary staff member is in post to coordinate this programme.
- 19 Works so far have included veteran tree surveys and management, along with the provision of wildlife boxes. More substantive works such as thinning and invasive species control have been delayed due to two major factors:
 - a. The renewal of management plans needed to be completed as this is a condition of the grant. This was time consuming, given the extent and diversity of the woodland estate.
 - b. The process of registering land with the Rural Land Registry (RLR). This is a database of maps showing the ownership of agricultural land and woodland on which grants or subsidies are to be claimed. The database is used by the Rural Payments Agency for grant schemes such as the WIGS. The way in which land parcels are created and registered is complex and lengthy, made more complicated by the fragmented nature of the woodland estate.
- 20 A contract to thin the woodlands is being progressed. This is the main area of work under the WIGs programme and essential to open-up the canopy and promote ground flora, age structure and longevity of the woodlands. There is anticipated that suitable contractors for this type of work will be difficult to find. There is a recognised skills shortage in the sector, not just the north east but throughout the UK. There are some smaller operators about, but they are often reluctant, or not in a position to respond to a local authority procurement exercise.

- 21 Deer density and distribution have dramatically increased over the last century and current levels in the county pose a significant risk to our woodlands and other animals that rely on them. It is essential that this pressure is reduced to allow woodlands to flourish, in line with Forestry Commission best practice. Following monitoring of populations, a deer management strategy will be developed that considers a range of measures which address the situation that takes account of the sensitivities of public perception and awareness of the issue. This process is about to start with the establishment of deer exclosures in several of the woodlands. These will help to determine the level of browsing in the woodlands and the impact it is having on the trees.
- 22 The UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS) Certification is a recognised means of assuring sustainable woodland management and widely recognised by the processing and retail sectors. It also provides access to timber markets and there is often a favourable price premium for certified timber.
- 23 Part of the council's woodland estate has been UKWAS certified in the past, but resources deployed to administer ongoing certification outweighed the benefits and has been paused since March '22. This is about to change with a renewed programme of thinning and greater volumes of timber to market. The benefit of certification is yet to be reviewed, along with an assessment of resource implications to be able to join and comply with the scheme.

Durham Woodland Creation

- 24 The Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP) supported a four-year countywide Woodland Creation Programme to establish 10,000 trees in each of the 14 AAPs, which has been extended to include this winter. A Woodland Creation officer was appointed in August 2020 to work with CPaL and local communities to identify and plant up suitable sites.
- 25 Around 65 ha of land has been tree planted to date, with a further 15 ha planned for this winter. Most of these sites are council owned, others are owned by parish and town councils or are in school grounds. Trees for Climate Grant and other funding has been secured through the NECF for establishment costs for the first three years and maintenance for the first 15 years, worth almost £750,000 in total.
- 26 Table 1 below shows hectares and tree numbers per AAP. By the end of this winter, the target of 10,000 trees per AAP will have been achieved in 5 out of the 14 AAPs. If planting schemes delivered under

DWR are included, then this takes the total up to 7. See Appendix 3 for a plan of tree planting sites.

Table 1

AAP	Ha	Tree no.	Outcome Achieved	Comments
Bishop Auckland & Shildon	15.59	13314	yes	
Chester le Street and District	6.12	5485	no	
Derwent Valley	13.52	14612	yes	
Durham	4.72	4753	no	15.69 ha/18900 trees established through DWR
East Durham	11.71	11210	yes	32.1 ha/69300 trees proposed through legacy DWR
East Durham Rural Corridor	7.83	5473	no	
Great Aycliffe & Middridge	0.23	500	yes	
Mid Durham	4.55	6834	no	
Spennymoor	9.61	9828	yes	
Stanley	3.93	3660	no	
Teesdale	1.52	1375	no	
Three Towns	5.99	4331	no	
4 Together	0.90	1000	no	10.54 ha/22750 trees established through DWR
Weardale	0.00	0	no	
total	86.21	82375		

- 27 Land availability has been the overwhelming factor preventing target attainment. Demands on council-owned land is complex with a range of pressures and challenges for housing and infrastructure, along with land required to tackle climate change and support nature and biodiversity through Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG).
- 28 Many positives have come out of this process. The Landuse Change Working Group has been established which utilises relevant knowledge and skills across the council to make strategic recommendations for the use of council land assets. Furthermore, the planting of over 86 ha of land is a significant area of new woodland for the county
- 29 There are proposals to further extend the DWC Officer post to manage grants and maintenance on the newly planted sites and to apply for further funding via the NECF when the next tranche of government funding becomes available for tree planting.

Carbon Offsetting

- 30 The opportunity to generate carbon income from the sale of carbon credits has proved difficult. Unfortunately, none of the woodlands to date qualify for this scheme due to the additionality rules. This requires that the planting scheme would only be able to go ahead with the additional income that carbon credits can provide. Due to the generous grant support from Trees for Climate funds, and recent changes in additionality rules, our schemes have not qualified.
- 31 Furthermore, the council are unable to use these credits for offsetting as part of its 2030 net zero target. This is because carbon credits are offered as Pending Insurance Units (PIUs), which is a 'promise to deliver' based on predicted sequestration over 100 years and cannot be used to report against 2030 targets.
- 32 The Low Carbon Economy Team are currently investigating carbon insets as a way in which to capture and report carbon sequestration through tree planting activities. Carbon insets are carbon reduction activities within the Council's operational boundary. Insetting is a relatively new area of work and guidance is still in early development.

Trees for Children

- 33 The 'Trees for Children' programme is the council's commitment to plant a tree for each of the 70,000 school aged children in the county and is running in conjunction with the Durham Woodland Creation Scheme.
- 34 OASES is delivering this element of the programme. OASES is a charity based in Esh Winning, that has been successfully delivering and promoting outdoor learning and global sustainability for over 20 years with excellent links with County Durham schools. It has developed educational resources and programmes for practical tree planting events to enable pupils to appreciate their contribution towards tackling climate change. To date, almost 7000 trees have been planted by 5577 pupils from 64 schools. See appendix 4.

Urban Tree Planting Programme

- 35 The council was successful in Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCFF) rounds 1,2, 3 and 5 with almost £1.4m being awarded. Planting is targeted at towns and villages with low canopy cover. Year 4 planting was funded by the Trees for Climate grant, administered by the North East Community Forest with a grant award of £208,000. See appendix 3 for the distribution of schemes.

36 The Council's Clean & Green team is responsible for planting the trees, along with a maintenance programme for 3 years until they become established. The total number of large standards planted in towns and villages since 2020 is now at 3000.

North East Community Forest (NECF)

37 The NECF is one of England's 15 Community Forests (ECF), collectively forming the largest environmental regeneration initiative in England, delivering urban, economic and social renewal through planting trees and bringing woodlands back into use for people and wildlife. Newcastle City Council is the lead partner, along with Durham, South Tyneside, North Tyneside, Gateshead and Sunderland councils.

38 NECF administers Defra's 'Trees for Climate' fund. This is £640 million in total, from the national Nature for Climate Fund for a five-year programme of planting which currently can secure over £20,000/ha for new woodland within Community Forests. As stated earlier, this fund is already being accessed to create new woodland in County Durham.

39 The planting target for County Durham is 320ha. This includes both public and private sector woodland. Almost 125 ha has been planted and a further 150 ha is planned for this coming winter.

40 This is the final (extended) year of the Trees for Climate funding. ECF is optimistic about securing a second 5-year tranche of funding from DEFRA. Paragraph 29 outlines plans to extend the Woodland Creation Officer post to align with this new round of funding.

Durham Woodland Revival

41 The DWR programme was successfully completed in April of this year, despite the challenges of the Covid pandemic. Independent evaluation of the programme highlighted the following achievements and impacts:

- i. It was forward thinking and well-managed
- ii. Woodland heritage is in better condition and contributes to a wider environmental recovery
- iii. Landowners and local people have more knowledge and skills
- iv. Communities have better access and can look after their woodlands
- v. 40 ha of new woodland and 2 km of hedgerow was created on privately-owned land

vi. 36.5 ha of new woodland was created by the Woodland Trust on Council-owned land.

42 It was difficult to find a standard system for the Council to work with each woodland community group and this was only finalised towards the end of the DWR programme. This new system involves signing up community group members to a Council volunteer system and requires a member of staff to manage and support volunteers on an ongoing basis. A new Woodland Community Coordinator post has been established on an initial 2-year part-time basis.

Conclusion

43 The council has an excellent track record in woodland creation, with around one million trees planted since 2000. Furthermore, we are one of few local authorities nationally that have Forestry Commission management plans for our woodland sites, along with a Woodland Improvement Grant towards a five-year improvement programme.

44 The council continues to be successful in obtaining substantial amounts of funding for a range of schemes including Durham Woodland Revival (with support from National Lottery Heritage Fund), the Urban Tree Challenge Fund and Trees for Climate Fund.

45 Progress has been made to consolidate woodland management with the establishment a dedicated Woodlands and Forestry Team with responsibility for the strategic management of the council's woodland asset, including its expansion. A budget will come on line next financial year. Work is underway by CPaL to review the woodland estate.

46 Following the establishment of deer enclosures, the level of browsing in the woodlands and the impact it is having on the trees will be determined and feed into the development of a deer management strategy. This will consider a range of measures which address the situation that takes account of the sensitivities of public perception and awareness of the issue.

47 Given the renewed programme of thinning with greater volumes of timber to market, the benefits of UKWAS certification needs to be reviewed, along with an assessment of resource implications to be able to join and comply with the scheme.

48 The new Woodland Community Coordinator provides the opportunity to build the role of community woodland volunteers formerly supported by

DWR without leaving them at risk of liability whilst ensuring that the council's liability as a landowner is considered.

- 49 The extension of the DWC Project Officer post to align with the second tranche of Trees for Climate funding will enable the Council to benefit from further grants and managing existing, whilst continuing to be an active partner within the NECF.
- 50 The Council should continue its commitment to making land available for woodland creation and tree planting programmes.

Background papers

None

Other useful documents

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

None

Finance

Establishment and maintenance costs of woodland and tree planting are met through various grant programmes.

Consultation

None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

No impact

Climate Change

Tree planting is an integral part of the Authority's Climate Emergency Response. New planting can absorb carbon dioxide whilst managing existing woodland can improve resilience to climate change and make them more carbon efficient.

Human Rights

The right to life is threatened by Climate Change.

Crime and Disorder

No direct implications.

Staffing

There is one full time permanent forestry post within the council. This will need to be expanded longer term.

Accommodation

None

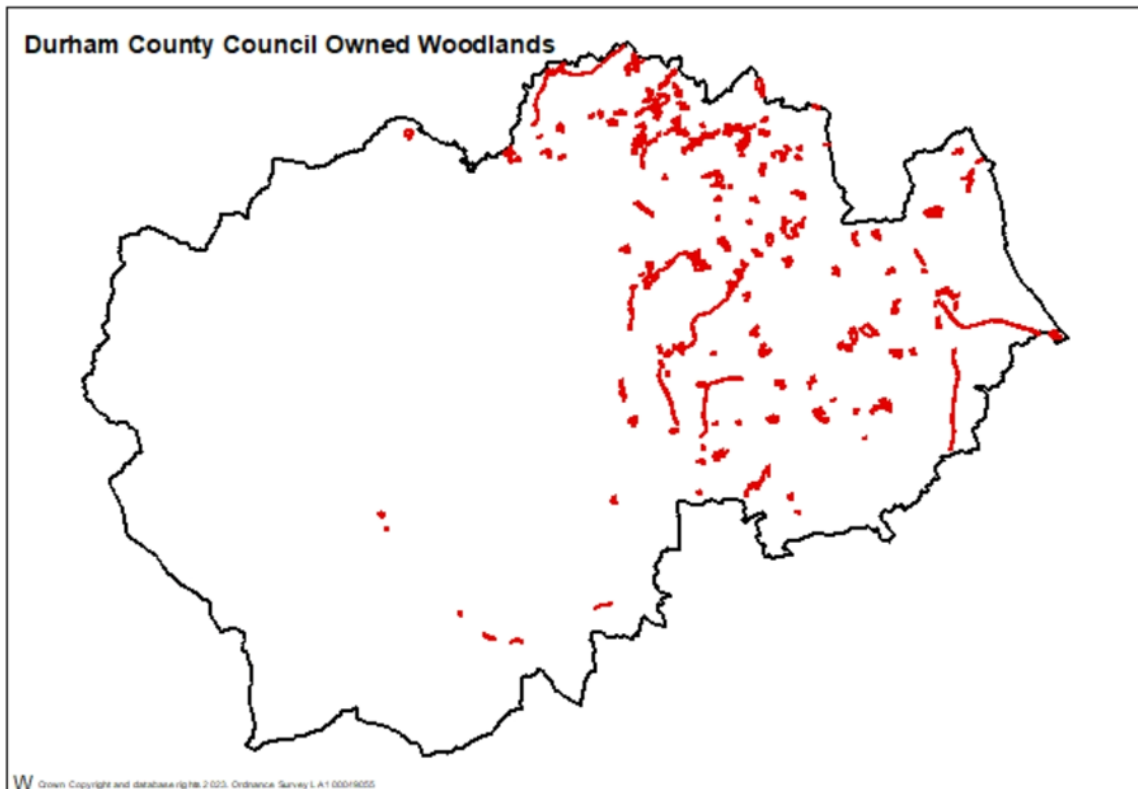
Risk

Adverse effects of not managing the woodland estate.

Procurement

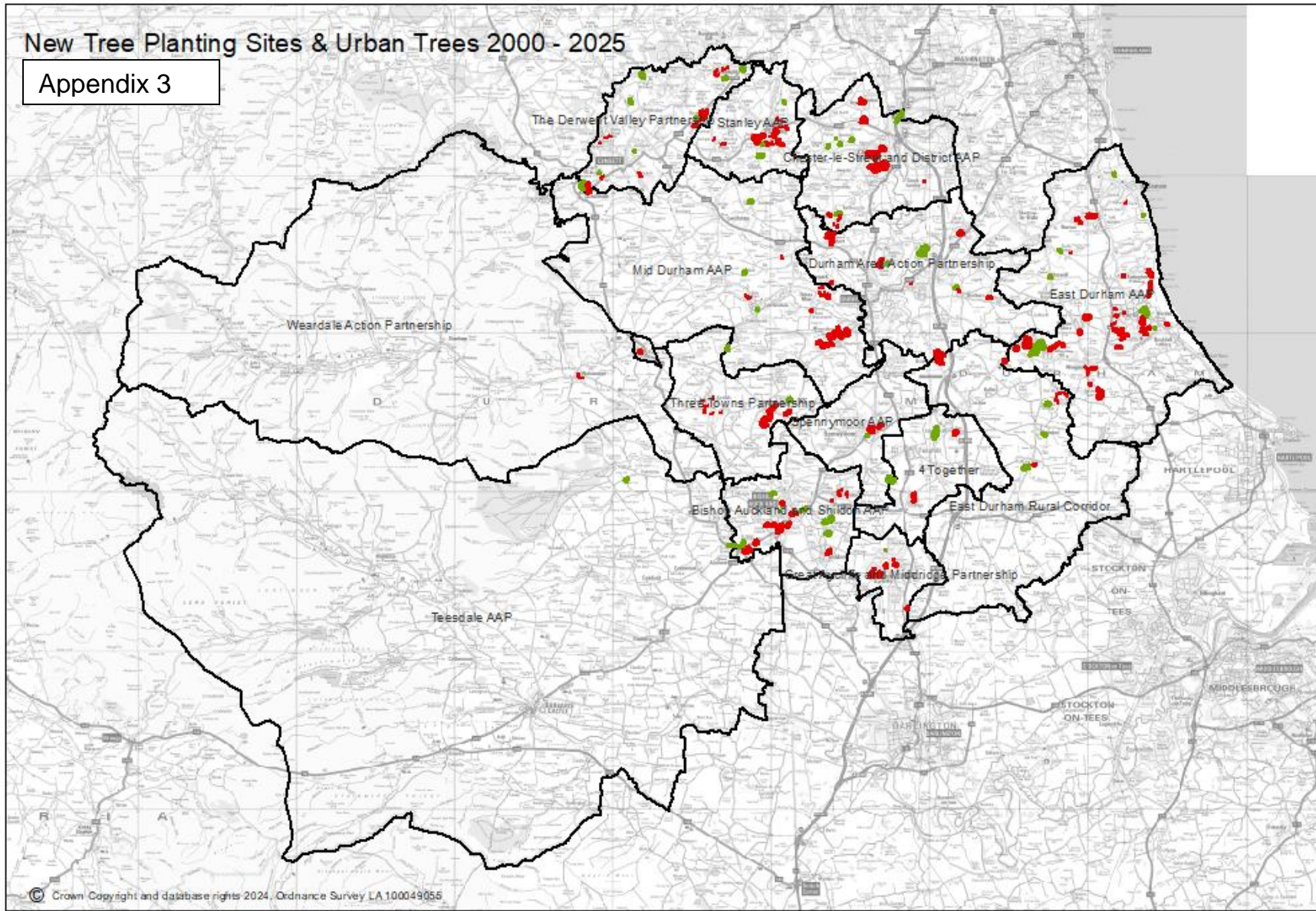
Appointment of contractors for planting and managing woodland creation sites will be ongoing in line with Council's contract procedure rules.

Appendix 2 Plan of woodlands



New Tree Planting Sites & Urban Trees 2000 - 2025

Appendix 3



Trees for Children, School Engagement OASES 2020-2024

Appendix 4

