

Thousands of trees planted as Network Rail's £1 million pledge takes root across the country

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Network Rail has joined forces with national conservation charity The Tree Council to plant more than 80,000 trees and hedgerows across the country this winter, as part of a four-year, £1 million tree planting pledge.

Local planting schemes, funded by Network Rail and managed by The Tree Council, are taking place in communities from the Wirral to Worcester, and in areas from ancient woodlands to city parks. The first 20,000 trees will be in the ground by Christmas, with another 60,000 planted by the end of March 2021, and tens of thousands more to follow over the lifetime of the pledge.

The £1 million pledge was announced at the end of last year to give local people the money, materials and guidance to plant and look after thousands of trees within their communities. Network Rail and The Tree Council worked with community groups, parish councils, schools and others to identify locations and get everything in place for the winter planting season.

For this first year of the project the schemes are all on community land, so not alongside the railway. Network Rail has more than six million trees by the tracks, and a very small percentage need to be managed each year to keep trains and people safe. The community planting schemes are part of the company's wider commitment to biodiversity, as set out in the Biodiversity Action Plan, published yesterday (3 December).

Andrew Haines, chief executive of Network Rail, said: "We're absolutely committed to making a real difference to our environment – decarbonising trains, using greener forms of energy, reducing waste, helping our passengers make greener choices – and planting more trees is a huge part of that.

"Everyone knows that leaves on the line – the railway equivalent of black ice on the roads – can be a real problem, but by working hand-in-hand with experts like The Tree Council and with local communities we can strike the right balance between the safe and reliable running of the railway and the protection and enhancement of the environment.

"More than 80,000 trees in the ground by the end of this planting season is a massive achievement and a reason to celebrate but I'm determined this is only the beginning. We can achieve even more in the future."

Welcoming the scheme, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said: "This is a ground-breaking project to create and improve woodlands around the country.

"Last month the Government presented its 'ten point plan' for a green industrial revolution and Network Rail's tree planting scheme is a major early step towards making a key industry, rail, even greener."

Andrew Haines launched the planting projects in West Sussex during National Tree Week, joined by CEO of The Tree Council Sara Lom and parish council chair Andrew Shaxton. He planted the first of 4,290 trees to restore a South Downs woodland that had been decimated by dieback. The disease had infected almost a third of the trees in the wood, meaning they had to be taken down to remove the danger to walkers and drivers.

Other schemes include more than 6,000 trees to be planted across historic farmland in the Lake District to help shelter livestock and provide flood resilience, and around 1,000 trees in a Cornish coastal pasture in response to devastating weather events, that can also be used for 'social prescribing' for people with mental health needs.

Though Covid-19 has limited community involvement in planting itself, community members were a key part of planning and designing the projects and will be able to pick up a spade and get involved in early 2021, restrictions permitting. Tree nurseries, farmers, land agents, parish councils and contractors have all continued to work, with the appropriate safety measures in place.

Sara Lom, CEO of The Tree Council, said: "This year has brought home to us just how important trees are to our health and wellbeing and that of our planet. Trees look after us and we need to look after them. These wonderful community projects in our cities and towns, on farms, along highways and in heritage churchyards, will benefit wildlife, bring recovery and wellbeing and help tackle the climate crisis – a

welcome bit of good news for nature and communities during this challenging time.”