

19 Progress on delivery of forestry programme objectives

- 19.1** Forestry plays a critical role in meeting climate targets, supporting rural employment and providing a domestic supply of timber products. Well-managed forests contribute to biodiversity, water quality and protection of soil as well as providing a recreational amenity for communities.
- 19.2** There are over 800,000 hectares of forests in Ireland. This represents 11.6% of the total area of the State. This is well below the EU average afforestation rate of 38.3%. Half of the forest land in Ireland is in public ownership — mostly managed by Coillte — with the remaining land held by private landholders.¹
- 19.3** Since 2001, nearly all new planting (afforestation) has been on private lands. Exchequer-funded grants are provided to landholders to encourage afforestation. This funding is provided through a multiannual forestry programme that is managed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (the Department).
- 19.4** In addition to funding for new forests, the forestry programme also funds the sustainable management of existing forests, encouragement of native woodland conservation and biodiversity, the building of forest roads (mainly for extraction of timber), and improvements in technology and training. The programme also supports the wood products sector.
- 19.5** In August 2023, the Department introduced a new five-year forestry programme for 2023 – 2027, with State aid approval from the EU.² The previous forestry programme ran from 2014 to 2022.^{3,4}

¹ Coillte is a commercial State body that manages approximately 440,000 hectares of State-owned land, of which around 90% is forest.

² European Commission State aid approval was required for the Exchequer assistance provided to enterprises via the programme.

³ This programme was examined in the *Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2018*, chapter 10, [Forestry grants](#).

⁴ The forestry programme 2014 – 2022 commenced on 1 January 2015. It was originally intended to end on 31 December 2020 but was extended to 31 December 2022.

Focus of the examination

- 19.6** This examination was undertaken to review
- if the targets set in the forestry programme 2023 – 2027 are being achieved
 - if the previous forestry programme (2014 – 2022) achieved its objectives
 - whether the Department can provide evidence of the effectiveness of the programme.
- 19.7** The examination team interviewed staff from the Department, reviewed a range of documents, visited a number of forestry sites and reviewed a sample of payments to landholders.
- 19.8** The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out a vision and a blueprint to achieve a fairer and more sustainable future for all by 2030. Of the seventeen SDGs, six link directly or indirectly to areas in the Department's forest strategy. These SDGs were considered during the examination.

Strategic overview

- 19.9** Ireland's Forest Strategy 2023 – 2030 has a principal objective to urgently expand the national forest estate on both public and private land, and within that, has five core strategic goals. The strategic goals are: forests for climate; forests for wood; forests for nature; forests for people; and forests for economy and rural development.

Figure 19.1 Forest strategy goals, programme interventions and schemes^{a,b,c}

Interventions	Strategic goals				
	Climate	Nature	Wood	People	Economy and rural development
Forest creation					
Delivered through schemes aimed at expanding tree cover and strengthening carbon sequestration.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
An example includes the afforestation scheme (2025: €61 million).					
Reconstitution					
Delivered through the reconstitution ash dieback scheme (2025: €10.4 million).	✓	✓			
Infrastructure and technology					
Delivered primarily through the forest road scheme. Funding of €4.7 million was paid out in 2025.	✓	✓	✓		✓
Agroforestry					
Delivered primarily through the silvopastoral agroforestry scheme — a scheme where trees are combined with pasture. Premiums totalling €172,000 were paid out in 2025.	✓	✓			
Sustainable forest management					
Delivered through schemes such as the woodland improvement scheme (2025: €246,000) and the native woodland conservation scheme (2025: €397,000).	✓	✓	✓		✓
Skills and empowerment					
Delivered through initiatives such as the knowledge transfer and advisory service. (2025: €1.1 million).	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Climate resilient reforestation					
Delivered through climate resilience reforestation pilot scheme. There was no funding paid out in 2025.	✓	✓			
Open forest					
Delivered through initiatives such as the NeighbourWood scheme and NeighbourWood forest type. There was no new activity in 2025.		✓		✓	

Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

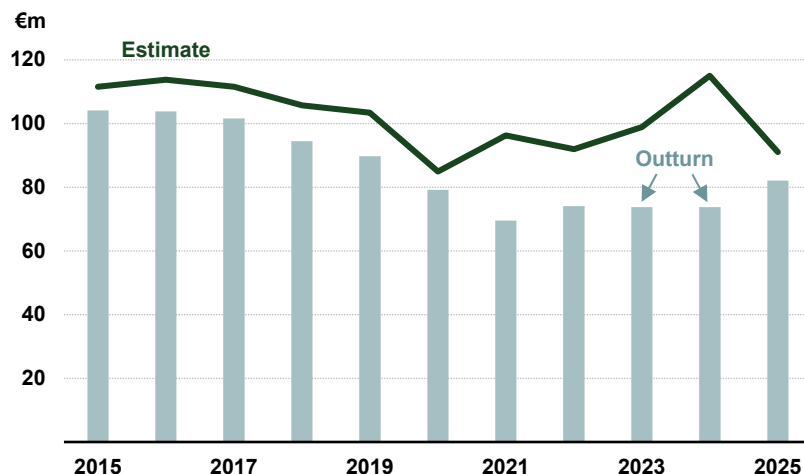
- Notes:
- a Schemes may be associated with more than one intervention. Expenditure disclosed is indicative and is not exhaustive.
 - b A list of programme schemes is set out in Annex 19A.
 - c The grant and premium rates available to landholders are [here](#).

- 19.10** The new forestry programme (the programme) runs from 2023 to 2027 and is considered the primary implementation mechanism for the forest strategy. The programme sets out eight broad objectives (or interventions) to meet the five goals of the strategy (see Figure 19.1).
- 19.11** Each of the interventions is intended to be delivered by one or more of the Department's forestry schemes. The schemes, *inter alia*, provide grants and annual premiums to landholders to establish and maintain forests and help with associated infrastructure and training. As each intervention addresses multiple strategic goals, it is not possible to link expenditure directly to each of the strategy's objectives.

Programme expenditure

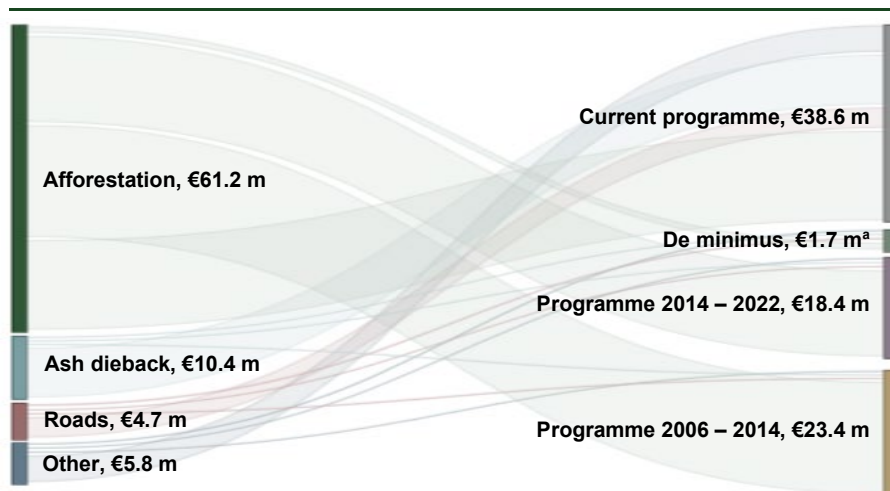
- 19.12** Over the period 2015 to 2025, the Department spent approximately €946 million on forestry schemes, with €82 million spent in 2025. There has been a consistent underspend in the Vote subhead during that period (see Figure 19.2). In the years 2021 – 2024 (inclusive), the underspend was in the range 20% to 36% a year.
- 19.13** In 2025, nearly all funding (93%) concerns schemes linked to afforestation, ash dieback reconstitution, or forest roads (see Figure 19.3). As most goals/interventions are concerned with the planting of new trees, afforestation schemes account for most of the programme expenditure (75%).
- 19.14** Because past programmes continue to pay landholders annual premiums, a significant portion of annual expenditure relates to carryover payments from past programmes. In 2025, expenditure of €41.8 million (approximately 50% of the total spent) related to previous forestry programmes.

Figure 19.2 Expenditure on forestry, estimate vs outturn, 2015 – 2025^a



Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Note: a Original estimate provision includes deferred capital funding.

Figure 19.3 Analysis of expenditure by programme and scheme, 2025

Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Note: a Payments made to new entrants to the afforestation, forest road and reconstitution for ash dieback schemes between the end of the forestry programme 2014 – 2022 and the start of the current programme are called de minimus payments. They are included with the current programme expenditure elsewhere unless otherwise stated.

Programme targets

- 19.15** There are over 40 measures offered through a number of schemes operating within the forestry programme. This report focuses on the target achievement of the three categories with the biggest spend in 2025.

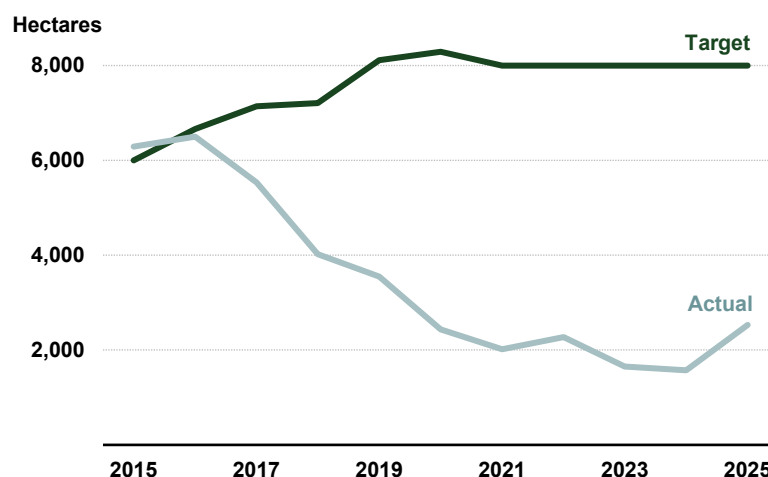
Afforestation schemes

- 19.16** The forestry programme notes that increased afforestation will help Ireland meet its national emission reduction obligations while increasing incomes on most farming systems. Afforestation schemes are designed to incentivise landholders to plant and manage trees in a way that enhances and protects the environment and the production of timber. The schemes do this by assisting landholders with the initial cost of afforestation and providing annual premiums. Once land is forested, the intention is that it remains under forest cover indefinitely.⁵
- 19.17** The current programme encourages farmers to use the schemes by increasing the number of years a premium is payable to 20 (from 15) for qualifying farmers. As a result, farmers receive five extra years of payments compared to non-farmer investors.
- 19.18** The forest strategy implementation plan has a target to increase the amount of land afforested from 11.6% in 2023 to “18% cover in the long term and beyond 2030”. To achieve this level of forest cover by (say) 2050, additional planting of 16,000 hectares a year would have to be achieved. The Department’s current target for net additional planting is 8,000 hectares, at which rate it would take at least 50 years to reach the Department’s 18% ‘long-term’ target.

⁵ Replanting must occur within two years of felling.

- 19.19** In practice, the number of hectares planted annually has fallen significantly short of the target (see Figure 19.4). Although the target was exceeded marginally in 2015, each subsequent year saw a very substantial shortfall. Despite a noticeable up-tick in the level of planting in 2025, a shortfall of 68% of target was recorded (2,527 hectares planted vs 8,000 hectares).

Figure 19.4 Hectares afforested in year, target against actual

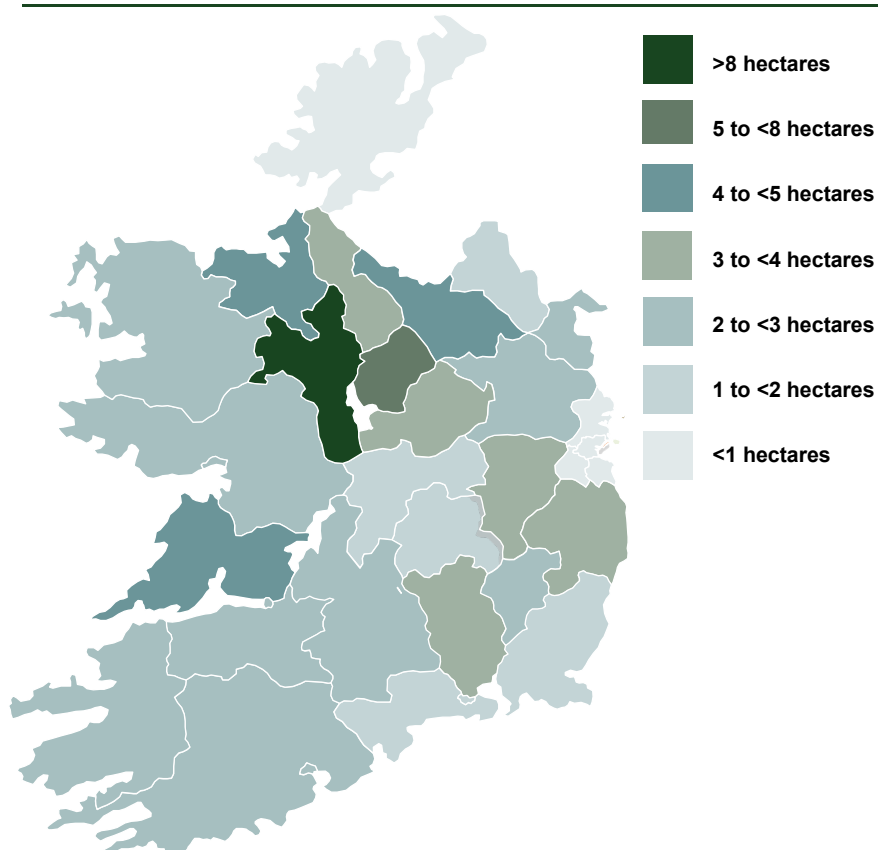


Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

- 19.20** The Department stated that the 8,000 hectares target is an ambitious one linked with targets included in the Climate Action Plan.⁶ The schemes operated by the Department are demand led and afforestation is a voluntary, complex land use choice for landowners with a range of considerations to be addressed before commitment to plant. The Department is working to develop a stronger understanding of landowner motivations, behavioural barriers and stakeholder engagement dynamics, which it considers to be critical to the success of afforestation programmes.
- 19.21** Before the end of each year, the Forestry Division submits spending proposals to the Department's Finance Division as part of the estimates process. For 2026, the Forestry Division submitted spending proposals to the Finance Division based on three demand scenarios. The scenarios were based on afforestation levels of 3,000, 4,000 or 5,000 hectares in 2026. The Finance Division chose to provide funding in line with the expected demand level of 3,000 hectares. This was based on analysis of expected planting year on year as well as the rate of applications received and area approved under the afforestation schemes.
- 19.22** Figure 19.5 analyses the relative intensity of afforestation for each county since the commencement of the programme. The map shows the average number of hectares afforested, from 2023 to 2025, per 10,000 hectares in the county. There was a significant divergence in activity between counties.

⁶ This target is linked with the State's Climate Action Plan which includes the target of 8,000 hectares of forest land annually as part of the country's carbon offset.

Figure 19.5 Average afforestation activity by county 2023 – 2025, hectares planted per 10,000 hectares in county



Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

- 19.23** The average size of a forest plantation has declined over recent years. The average size of a new forest site was 7.5 hectares in 2022, falling to 5.5 hectares in both 2023 and 2024, and 5.2 hectares in 2025. Increasing the average area of forest plantations was a target in the last forestry programme: this was intended to improve economies of scale and management efficiency, particularly for harvesting and timber marketing. The new programme does not include a target for average size of plantation.

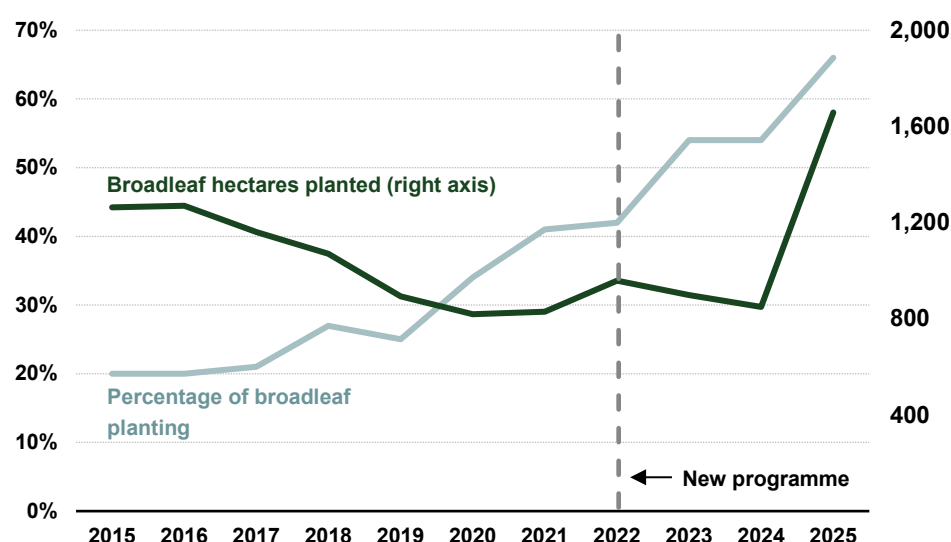
Broadleaves and native trees

- 19.24** Broadleaf and native tree plantations are generally accepted as leading to higher levels of biodiversity than conifer plantations. With a wider mix of tree species, these forest types have a more varied structure that also allows natural ground flora to thrive. However, according to the Department, as broadleaf trees are slower growing, and there is no established substantial market in Ireland for the hardwood logs they potentially yield, they are generally less economically productive.

19.25 The programme provides higher rates of payment for broadleaves to compensate landholders for the lower/late financial returns and higher maintenance costs compared to faster-growing conifers. For example, a farmer planting a native tree forest would receive €28,804 per hectare over their entire payment term (i.e. the total grant and premium payments over 20 years), while the owner of a mainly spruce forest (i.e. 80% conifer, minimum 20% broadleaves) would receive €18,778 per hectare — 35% less. The Department has stated that in most cases, landowners plant a mix of broadleaves and conifers.

19.26 The programme sets a target of 50% for the proportion of trees that are planted that are broadleaves. This is an increase in target from 30% under the previous scheme. During the period of the previous scheme, the proportion of broadleaf planting achieved was 25%. Figure 19.6 shows the number of hectares and proportion of trees planted in the year 2015 to 2025 that were broadleaves. In 2025, broadleaf planting levels increased significantly to over 1,600 hectares, representing 66% of trees planted.

Figure 19.6 Annual planting that is broadleaves, 2015 – 2025



Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

19.27 The new programme introduced restrictions on the afforestation of organic soils, for example prohibiting planting on peat soils with depth greater than 30 cm. The Department noted that by reducing the planting of conifer trees on organic soils, the share of broadleaf plantings has increased.

19.28 The programme also introduced a new scheme — the native tree area scheme — that allows landholders to plant native trees on smaller plots (between 0.1 and 1 hectare of land). This is a change in approach as the previous programme encouraged larger plantations. These small plots are exempt from the standard forestry licensing process and pay landholders the premiums over a shorter period.⁷ This has reduced the time and cost for the landholders to apply to plant trees.

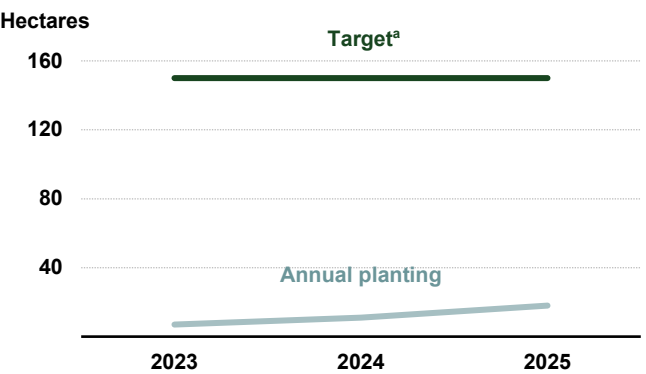
⁷ The native tree scheme pays landowners the same total premiums over 10 years rather than 20 years.

19.29 The Department stated that this scheme is designed to re-engage landowners with afforestation and only land that has been used for agricultural purposes is eligible for consideration. Landholders are actively encouraged to plant at whatever scale is appropriate for their circumstances and land. Requests to plant larger areas may be approved through the afforestation scheme 2023 – 2027.

Forest creation on public lands

19.30 In 2020, the Department launched the woodland creation on public lands scheme.⁸ The goal of the scheme is to encourage public bodies to establish new native forests on land they own and control. The goal of using public lands to increase forest cover was included in the 2020 Programme for Government, which sought to “embark on an ambitious programme of afforestation on State-owned lands”. However, actual planting has fallen far short of the Department’s target of 150 hectares per annum (see Figure 19.7). From 2023 to 2025, the average planting was 12 hectares per annum.

Figure 19.7 Planting on public lands, 2023 – 2025



Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Note: a The target was set out in the cost-benefit analysis published by the Department.

8 The name of the scheme changed to ‘forest creation on public lands’ after the publication of the forestry programme. Due to changes in State aid rules, public bodies are now eligible to receive grants and premiums for planting under all forest types within the afforestation scheme if they can demonstrate that the relevant scheme requirements are met.

9 The first establishment grant for the afforestation scheme covers 75% of the total grant costs, including operational expenses for ground preparation, drainage, fencing and the initial planting of trees.

10 See [PRA State Assets](#) (Land Development Agency, 2023).

11 The forestry opportunities map is a geospatial mapping tool developed by the Department. It provides high-level guidance to help landholders and foresters identify land suitable for planting forests.

19.31 Public bodies are informed of the scheme through direct engagement with the Department, including presentations, webinars and bilateral meetings with local authorities, State agencies and other public bodies. Guidance and information are also provided through the Department’s website and scheme documentation.

19.32 Of the 2025 output, over half (56%, or 10 hectares) of the planting was on land owned by Irish Water, resulting in first establishment grant payments to Irish Water of €76,000.⁹

19.33 In 2025, the Department did not use the scheme for any of the lands under its own control. However, it indicated that, in 2026, it is actively investigating potential sites for new forests.

19.34 In 2025, the Department carried out an analysis of lands in public ownership that could be suitable for afforestation. It identified over 90,000 hectares in public ownership using the PRA State Assets dataset.¹⁰ The Department further analysed the data using its ‘forestry opportunities map’.¹¹ This excluded land that was not suitable for afforestation due to its location, land quality, ecological impact or environmental factors such as being prone to flooding. Ultimately, the Department identified 30,000 hectares with potential suitability for afforestation.

- 19.35** In July 2025, the Department wrote to 82 public bodies (including local authorities, government departments, education and training boards, State agencies and semi-State bodies) to provide them with details of the scheme. The Department stated that 33 entities subsequently engaged with the Department, and many public bodies did not engage on the basis that the land identified was set aside for other purposes (e.g. unused lands planned for housing by local authorities). As at July 2026, 16 public bodies had either submitted applications or confirmed their intention to submit applications under the forestry programme.
- 19.36** Based on the information submitted to the Department, these applications represent a combined area of approximately 338 hectares. The Department expects this figure to increase as additional organisations progress through the various stages of the process.

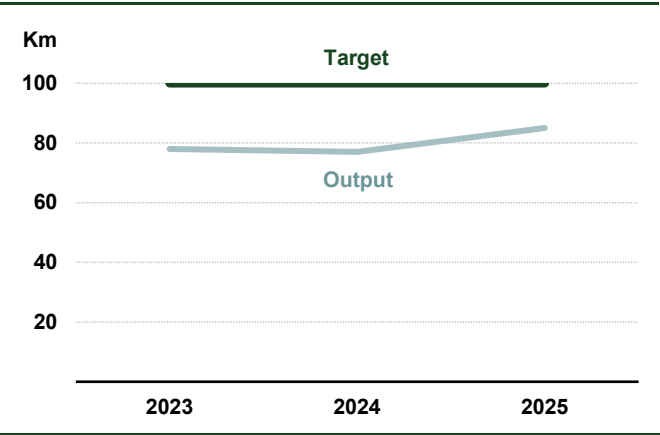
Maintaining forest cover

- 19.37** Under the Forestry Act, landholders must apply for a licence when felling trees and the licence may include a condition requiring the replanting of the trees. When the Department issues a felling licence, it requires landowners to replant the area within two years.
- 19.38** In 2025, 157 instances of alleged illegal felling were reported — 41 of which were identified as a result of the Department's own monitoring processes. There were two prosecutions and three replanting orders made. In 2024, there were 138 investigations, three prosecutions and 14 replanting orders made.

Forest road scheme

- 19.39** To maintain and harvest forests in a sustainable and efficient manner, access to and within the forest is required. For example, the construction of forest roads allows machinery the access required to thin and harvest trees. Significant construction costs are associated with the building of forest roads.
- 19.40** The forest road scheme provides financial support to landholders to help cover the costs of constructing this infrastructure. To qualify, projects must meet environmental standards to protect water quality and local habitats, ensuring that the increase in industrial access does not compromise the forest's ecological integrity.
- 19.41** The scheme aims to increase the density of forest roads to 25 metres per hectare to facilitate sustainable harvesting and management. As of 2025, the grant rate was €66 per linear metre (equivalent to €66,000 per linear km). In 2025, expenditure on forestry roads was €4.7 million.
- 19.42** The programme set a target of 100 km of forest road construction per annum. As shown in Figure 19.8 there was a shortfall in activity annually and the target has not been met.

Figure 19.8 Forest roads target versus output 2023 – 2025



Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Reconstitution schemes

- 19.43** Reconstitution schemes are designed to help landholders restore forests lost to natural causes. These grants typically cover the cost of clearing debris and replanting sites damaged by events like storms/windblow, or pest and disease outbreaks such as *Chalara* ash dieback. The forestry programme has a target of 700 hectares per annum for total area reconstituted.
- 19.44** The Department grant aided approximately 16,000 hectares of ash plantation from 1990 to 2012. Following the discovery of ash dieback in 2012, the planting of ash ceased.¹² In 2013, the Department introduced a reconstitution scheme for ash forest owners. Up until 2023, almost 2,000 hectares were reconstituted under ash dieback schemes.
- 19.45** In May 2024, the Department launched the ash dieback action plan. Although the programme set a target of total reconstitution of 700 hectares per annum, the goal of the plan is to reconstitute all affected ash forests by the end of the current forestry programme in 2027. In 2025, 1,499 hectares (2024: 959 hectares) were reconstituted indicating a significant increase in replanting of ash plantations compared to previous years. However, a further output of around 11,500 hectares reconstituted in 2026 – 2027 is required to meet the goal. This indicates that the annual target is not consistent with achievement of the overall strategic objective.
- 19.46** Landholders who qualify for the scheme receive a clearance grant of €2,000 per hectare and a reconstitution grant for the forest type they choose to replant. In August 2024, the Department launched a new payment for forest owners impacted by ash dieback.
- 19.47** A climate action performance payment (CAPP) of €5,000 per hectare was introduced to be paid to anyone who had replanted their forest and received an ash dieback reconstitution payment. Reconstitution payments cover the costs associated with the process of removal and replanting. CAPP payments incentivise landholders to engage in the reconstitution process. In 2025, €3.4 million was paid in climate action performance payments.

12 Ash dieback is a serious fungal disease of ash trees, leading to leaf loss, branch dieback, and often tree death.

Other schemes and promotion

- 19.48** In 2026, the Department launched a reconstitution scheme for windblown trees. This is a financial support initiative to assist private forest owners in restoring plantations destroyed by Storm Darragh (December 2024) and Storm Éowyn (January 2025). With an estimated 26,050 hectares of forest damaged nationally — approximately 13,000 hectares of which is in private ownership — the scheme provides up to €55 million in funding to replant cleared areas.
- 19.49** The scheme opened for applications on 15 April 2026. The grant is available for sites that were not insured for reconstitution and have suffered at least 20% damage.¹³ Payments are structured in two instalments: 75% following initial replanting and the remaining 25% after four years, with rates varying from approximately €3,858 to €6,744 per hectare. The rates vary depending on the tree species used — the landholders can replant any tree species that is appropriate to the soil and conditions of the site.
- 19.50** The Department operates the climate resilient reforestation scheme and woodland improvement scheme to maintain or replant existing forests with the aim of enhancing soil, water quality and biodiversity. The programme set an annual target of 525 hectares of activity for the climate resilient reforestation scheme. In 2025, applications for almost 400 hectares were submitted.
- 19.51** The programme set a target of €850,000 of expenditure annually on promotion and €300,000 annually on training, with a further €350,000 for continuous professional development. Total expenditure for the three areas was exceeded in 2023 to 2024 with costs averaging €1.9 million a year. In 2025, expenditure on promotion and training (including knowledge transfer) amounted to €2.1 million. As the programme is demand led, the Department stated that making potential forest owners aware of the schemes and providing them with the knowledge and skills to maintain a forest is important to increase land afforested. To assist in doing this the Department has a forestry communications and engagement section. Its purpose is to improve the annual uptake of forestry schemes, and it does this through numerous communications activities. The Department stated that the section does significant work and reviews the outputs of its activities monthly.
- 19.52** The NeighbourWood forest type (part of the afforestation scheme introduced in September 2023) and the NeighbourWood scheme (introduced in March 2025) aim to develop social, cultural and heritage forests near urban areas to improve public access and quality of life. No new planting occurred in 2023, 2024 or 2025.

Progress monitoring

Operational monitoring

- 19.53** In 2023, the Department established a cross-divisional forest strategy implementation group to ensure the actions and objectives of the strategy are met. Meetings were held weekly and attended by heads of divisions, officials from each administration area, as well as technical staff (e.g. inspectorate staff). The actions listed in the forest strategy implementation plan were reviewed and updated as part of the agenda.¹⁴

¹³ While insurance for windblow is generally available to forest owners, it is not mandatory when availing of payments from the Department.

¹⁴ An action list tracker is available on the Department's website.

- 19.54** In April 2026 the implementation group was replaced with seven cross-divisional working groups to focus on specific topics.

Strategic monitoring

- 19.55** In 2023, the Department set up the forest strategy consultative committee. It comprises representatives from, *inter alia*, the Department, An Taisce, Teagasc, Coillte, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Irish Farmers' Association, the Irish Green Building Council and the Irish Timber Growers Association. The consultative committee meets quarterly, and members have also attended workshops to engage on the forestry programme as requested.
- 19.56** The consultative committee's terms of reference state that it is responsible for monitoring the progress of the implementation plan and ensuring a successful outcome and delivery of the objectives of the forest strategy. The consultative committee
- receives updates from the Department on the implementation of the objectives and deliverables of the programme
 - receives feedback from stakeholders to provide to the Department. For example, in December 2024 members raised the issue of the Department developing key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the effectiveness of forestry promotion activities.
- 19.57** The Department may also establish specific programme groups if it considers it necessary. For example, an ash dieback taskforce was set up in May 2024. It meets quarterly and was set up to ensure the 'swift implementation' of the ash dieback action plan.

Key performance indicators

- 19.58** In December 2024, the Department developed 16 KPIs to track and report on the overall progress in implementing the forest strategy.¹⁵ Reports on progress against the KPIs are published across eight different sources at varying intervals. Seven of the KPIs are expressed as quantified measures, while nine are presented as trend-based measures.
- 19.59** Six of the KPIs are reported on in the Forestry Division's annual statistics report. This report also contains more detailed reporting on each of the schemes' targets. It also references other KPIs that are reported on by other bodies (e.g. timber production is reported on by the Central Statistics Office but is referenced in the annual statistics report after the data has been published).
- 19.60** Figure 19.9 details the 16 KPIs and the examination team's assessment of the progress in meeting targets relevant to the KPIs. The Department's KPI document requires the Department to publish an annual report on the KPIs. However, no annual KPI report was published in 2025.

¹⁵ [*Ireland's Forest Strategy \(2023 – 2030\). Key performance indicators.*](#)

Figure 19.9 Key performance indicators — progress as at 31 December 2025

	Key performance indicator	Annual target	Output ^a	Reporting frequency	On target?
1	Total national forest area (target 18% in the long term, beyond 2030)	Not defined	2,527 ha	Every five years	No
2	Annual afforestation area (ha)	8,000 ha	2,527 ha	Annual	No
3	Broadleaf species in new forests	50%	66%	Annual	Yes
4	Forest licences processed in line with the Farmers' Charter of Rights	100% within 9 months	78% ^b	Annual	No
5	Annual uptake of forestry schemes (number) ^c	Increasing	Decrease in approvals between 2024 and 2025	Annual	No
6	Cumulative expenditure of €628.6 million on the forest programme 2023 – 2027	€125.7 million ^d	€76.4 million	Annual	No
7	Area of forests certified under voluntary certification scheme	Positive trend	Increase between 2024 and 2025	Annual	Yes
8	Biotic and abiotic damage to forests by severity of damage (%)	Positive trend	Slightly negative	Every five years	No
9	Forest carbon stocks (MtCO ₂ e)	Positive trend	Increase between 2023 and 2024	Annual	Yes
10	Carbon stored in harvested wood products	Positive trend	Decrease between 2023 and 2024	Annual	No
11	Percentage of Coillte estate managed for nature by 2025	30%	30%	Annual	Yes
12	Woodland habitat status (status change)	Positive trend	Slightly worse	Every six years	No
13	Volume of roundwood and roundwood biomass removed from forests in Ireland (m ³)	Double sustainable timber production by 2035 (2 million tonnes)	Increasing	Annual	Yes
14	The value of the forest sector to gross value added (GVA) and gross domestic product (GDP) (€)	Positive trend	Increase between 2022 and 2023	Annual	Yes
15	Impact of forestry on the labour market (numbers employed)	Positive trend	Decrease between 2010 and 2020	Every five years	No
16	Forests managed for recreation (number of sites)	Positive trend	No change between 2023 and 2024	Annual	No

Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Notes: a The output relates to 2025 unless otherwise stated.

b Percentage of live applications on hand that were 9 months or older as at 6 February 2026.

c The assessment is made on the basis of the number of approvals made.

d An annual target is not set by the Department. The target included is calculated by the examination team on a straight-line basis to inform an assessment of whether progress is on target.

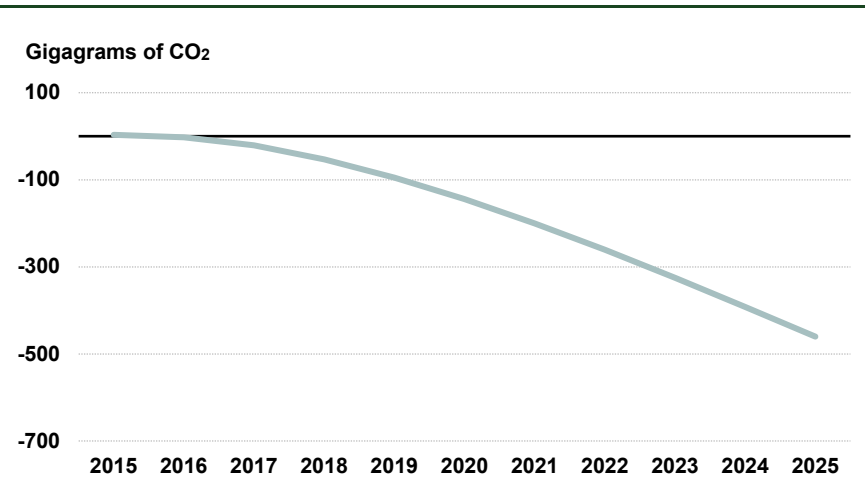
Climate goals

- 19.61** Forests and forest products play an important role in mitigating climate change by sequestering and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide. Sequestration is the net removal of carbon from the atmosphere and its storage in plant biomass, deadwood and harvested wood product pools. Sustainably managed forests are a net absorber of carbon. However, unmanaged and degrading forests eventually become a net emitter of carbon back into the atmosphere.
- 19.62** One of the KPIs of the forest strategy is the amount of carbon stored in the national forest estate.¹⁶ The Department reports and accounts for the carbon sequestered in the total forest estate annually through its submission to the EPA’s national greenhouse gas inventory report. The target for this KPI is a trend-based one i.e. the aim is to increase the rate of sequestration.

Annual carbon sequestered annually

- 19.63** The Department estimates that, in 2025, around 460.3 gigagrams of CO₂ equivalent was removed from the atmosphere as a result of the afforestation since 2015 — 454 gigagrams from the previous forestry programme and 6.3 gigagrams from the current programme (see Figure 19.10). This is the equivalent of the CO₂ generated through burning almost 1.1 million barrels of oil.¹⁷ Using the 2024 shadow price of CO₂ of €322 per tonne, the value of the CO₂ equivalent sequestered was around €148 million.
- 19.64** Comparing the estimated greenhouse gas emissions data over year 1 to year 18 of both programmes, it is unlikely that the current programme will achieve results similar to those of the previous programme (see Figure 19.11). Around four times more carbon is expected to be sequestered in year 18 of the previous programme. Based on the projected data, the current programme will fall significantly short in its achievement of CO₂ sequestered unless there is a substantial increase in the number of hectares afforested for the remaining years of the programme.

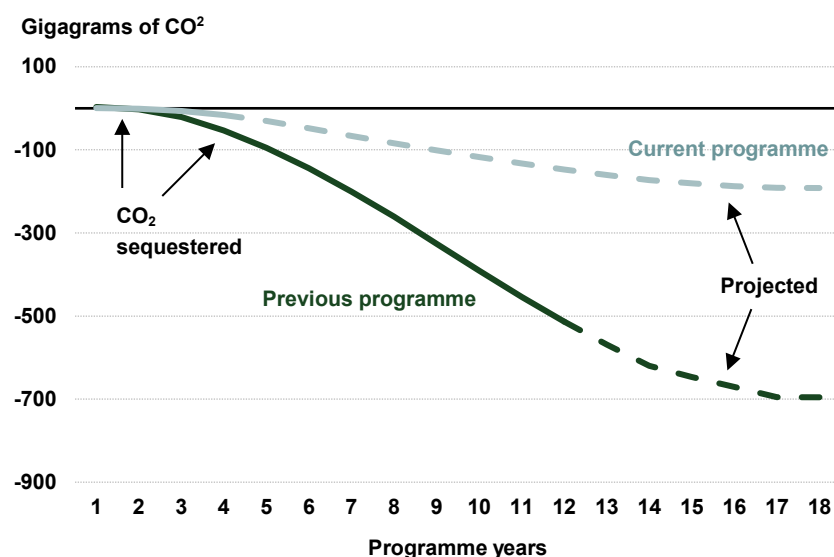
Figure 19.10 Estimated annual carbon dioxide equivalent sequestered, 2015 to 2025



Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

16 See KPI number 9 in Figure 19.9: forest carbon stocks (MtCO₂e).

17 430kg of CO₂ is equal to a barrel of oil. See the EPA’s [greenhouse gas equivalencies calculator](#).

Figure 19.11 Estimated annual carbon dioxide sequestered from start of each programme, and projected (year 1 to year 18)^a

Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Note: a The forecast for the current programme is based on continuing the trend of planting based on the average planting in 2023 to 2025. The forecast for the previous programme is based on the trees actually planted during the programme.

Economic basis for the programme

- 19.65** In November 2022, the Department carried out a cost-benefit appraisal of the afforestation schemes and the forest roads schemes. A cost-benefit appraisal was required by the *Public Spending Code* and for EU State aid approval.

Afforestation

- 19.66** The analysis was carried out on the nine forest types proposed for the afforestation scheme and calculated a benefit-to-cost ratio for each forest type.¹⁸ The analysis included the shadow price of carbon as required under the *Public Spending Code*. The overall result was an estimated benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.87:1. This indicated that the expected benefits — in terms of timber revenues, and the value of carbon sequestration and of reduced carbon emissions from agriculture and recreation — outweighed the costs of grants and premiums.
- 19.67** Similar to the previous programme, the tax treatment of forestry was not included in the analysis. In the forestry programme, revenue and capital gains are exempt from tax. The tax forgone was not included as a factor during the analysis of the cost of the programme.

¹⁸ The analysis referenced the 12 forest types proposed for the afforestation scheme. Three of the smaller schemes did not have a benefit-to-cost ratio calculated due to the lack of appropriate growth models and/or reliable estimates of the benefits accruing from these forest types.

- 19.68** The analysis also stated that it did not attempt to quantify the benefits of biodiversity due to the absence of a framework to translate biodiversity value into monetary terms. The omission of biodiversity as a factor led to schemes with faster-growing, commercial trees (e.g. Sitka spruce) receiving a higher benefit-to-cost rating than the native or broadleaves schemes. As a result of the omission, some native tree and broadleaves schemes were calculated to have a negative benefit-to-cost ratio, for example forest for water 0.65:1, emergent woodland 0.87:1, and broadleaf birch 0.94:1. The Department stated that this did not have a negative impact, as the level of broadleaf afforestation has increased during the current programme.

Forestry roads

- 19.69** The analysis of the forest road scheme calculated a substantial benefit-to-cost ratio of 9.14:1, indicating that benefits, in terms of timber revenues, outweigh the costs of road grants and carbon emissions. Additional benefits accrue in terms of employment from road construction and the harvesting of the 11.08 million m³ of timber accessed.

Assessing effectiveness

Forestry programme 2014 – 2022

- 19.70** The *Public Spending Code* required the Department to complete and publish a post-programme review of the forestry programme 2014 – 2022 after it had ended. The Department completed a review in early 2022, before the programme ended. The review was not published.
- 19.71** The review focused on the programme's four high-level objectives
- to increase the level of forest cover
 - to increase supply of forest-based biomass to bridge an expected supply gap by 2020 and beyond
 - to support private forest holders in actively managing their forests
 - to enhance the environmental and social benefits of new and existing forests.

Increase the level of forest cover

- 19.72** The review reported a shortfall of 41% (21,000 hectares) on the target level of afforestation during the period of the programme. There was also a shortfall of 20% in the level of broadleaves planted when compared to the target.
- 19.73** The review identified several reasons for the shortfall in afforestation activity. These included
- replanting obligations and the permanent change in land use
 - delays in issuing afforestation, forest road and felling licences along with the burdens that the regulatory framework imposes
 - supports for the establishment of non-productive forests offered by the Department were not economically attractive

- the negative public perception of forestry — all licence applications are subject to third-party public consultation and appeal, and the negative perception can discourage landholders from applying
- Coillte did not engage in any new afforestation during the programme.

19.74 The Department stated that the review led to improvements in the licencing process which has reduced the delay in issuing licences.

Increase supply of forest-based biomass

19.75 The forestry for fibre scheme was introduced to allow landholders to plant eucalyptus and other fast-growing species for firewood. There was very little uptake for the scheme. The review indicated that the promotion of the scheme to landholders and the training available for registered foresters may not have been sufficient. This scheme is no longer available.

Support active management of forests

19.76 The report noted that forest roads built in the plan period represented just over two-thirds (68%) of the target — a shortfall of around 259 km of roads. Prior to 2020, forest owners required planning permission from local authorities where the proposed forest road joined a public road. The review noted the requirement to obtain planning permission may have impacted the scheme's take up.

Department's assessment of effectiveness

19.77 The review did not conclude on the effectiveness of the programme. The Department stated that the findings from the review of the 2014 – 2022 forestry programme were reflected in the new programme. These include changes to the agroforestry scheme and reducing administrative overheads by the introduction of the native trees scheme. The Department also noted it improved the processing times for licences (e.g. felling licences). In addition, the Department introduced a new 'qualified farmer' category for applicants.

Mid-term review — current programme

19.78 A mid-term review of the programme was published in March 2026. The purpose of the mid-term review was to review the performance of the programme and make changes to the programme where required. The Department requested submissions from members of the forest strategy consultative committee during the process.

19.79 The mid-term review did not provide an analysis of the programme's outturns versus its targets and did not include all KPIs. It did not conclude on the performance of the scheme or its (prospective) effectiveness. The KPIs set out in the Department's 2024 KPI document were not referenced.

19.80 However, the review noted a number of actions. As a result, the Department introduced several changes including, increased financial incentives in priority areas (such as road, fencing and agroforestry), increased training and support, and the simplification of the farmer definition.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 19.81** Forests have a potential positive impact on restoring nature, the economy and communities as well as helping combat climate change. The Department's forestry strategy contains five strategic goals and eight interventions. These interventions include schemes and other initiatives that deliver on the goals of the strategy.
- 19.82** In 2025, the Department spent €82 million on forestry schemes. However, it is not possible to link the expenditure to each of the strategy's objectives. This limits the Department's capacity to demonstrate cost effectiveness.
- 19.83** In the period 2015 – 2025, spending on the forestry programmes amounted to approximately €946 million. However, the level of spending achieved was consistently under the annual estimate allocation.
- 19.84** As part of the Department's annual budgeting process, it estimates the funding required for the programme. In 2026, the amount approved for the programme included an allocation for afforestation that was based on achieving a target of 3,000 hectares.
- 19.85** Afforestation schemes accounted for approximately 75% of the spend in 2025. The Department has a target of planting 8,000 hectares of new forests each year. The level of planting achieved since the programme launched is significantly less than targeted. The average planting for 2023 – 2025 was 1,917 hectares per year, or just 24% of the target.
- 19.86** In 2020, the Department introduced a new initiative to support and encourage the planting of trees on public lands. The goal was to plant 150 hectares per annum. From 2023 to 2025, the average planting was just 12 hectares per annum, significantly under target. In 2025, as part of its analysis, the Department identified around 30,000 hectares with potential for afforestation. It wrote to 82 public bodies that were identified by the analysis, and, as a result, a combined area of approximately 338 hectares is being considered for afforestation.
- 19.87** In 2025, the Department did not plant trees on any of its own land. However, the Department has stated it is currently investigating potential sites.
- 19.88** Increasing the level of forest cover is a key part of Ireland's strategy for reducing its carbon emissions. The 2019 Climate Action Plan includes the 8,000 hectares afforestation target as part of the country's carbon offset. While 460.3 gigagrams of CO₂ equivalent was sequestered in 2025 from the trees planted since 2015, the current programme is not expected to sequester an equivalent level of CO₂ as the previous programme due to significantly reduced planting activity.
- 19.89** A post-project review of the forestry programme 2014 – 2022 was undertaken in early 2022. The review therefore did not cover all the activity for 2022. The review was not published by the Department as required by the *Public Spending Code*.

- 19.90** An assessment of the 2025 output (or nearest relevant period when trends were the measure) indicated that the Department is not on course to meet its forestry targets and objectives. Overall, the annual targets for afforestation are not being achieved. The shortfall is so significant that it is difficult to see how the gap will be addressed under the current programme.

Recommendation 19.1

The Department should realign its afforestation targets so that its short-, medium- and long-term afforestation targets are consistent and achievable and take account of binding climate and greenhouse gas objectives.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

Afforestation targets are developed and agreed as part of overall government policy decisions associated with climate and land use policy including those provided for in Ireland's Climate Action Plan. The targets are subject to the review and monitoring mechanisms associated with these government policies and the Department actively inputs to these policies as they are reviewed and adapted. The forestry targets, including afforestation targets, and progress on their implementation, will continue to be reviewed in the context of the development of the next forestry programme, to support alignment with the broader government policies to which forestry contributes. The new forestry programme and associated targets will be subject to government approval.

Timeline for implementation

After 2027.

- 19.91** Key performance indicators (KPIs) are used by the Department to assess progress on the achievement of the objectives of the forest strategy. Four of the sixteen KPIs the Department uses to monitor the effectiveness of the forest strategy are only reported on every five to six years. Longer interval reporting makes management and oversight of the strategy less effective. When setting out the KPIs in December 2024, the Department stated that a KPI progress report would be issued annually for the duration of the forest strategy. No progress report has been published to date.
- 19.92** Afforestation schemes are demand led as they require the voluntary participation of landholders. Promotion of and training for the schemes is an important element to the success of the programme. While the Department spent €2.1 million on promotion and training (including knowledge transfer) in 2025, it does not have a KPI to measure its effectiveness. The members of the consultative committee set up to monitor progress of the forestry strategy raised the issue of the creation of a KPI to monitor the promotional activities.

Recommendation 19.2

The Department should consider a meaningful KPI linked to its promotional activity to track the effectiveness of expenditure in this area. Furthermore, the Department should review its existing KPIs to ensure they remain relevant and the frequency of reporting is appropriate.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

Each promotion activity/project sets KPIs aligned with its objectives, target audience and desired outcomes. Performance is monitored and evaluated through agreed evaluation plan and status reports, using relevant metrics such as reach, engagement, participation, media coverage, website activity and stakeholder feedback.

The Department's new Communications and Engagement Strategy 2026 – 2030 launched in July 2026 builds on the significant progress made in recent years to make forestry more attractive and accessible, including enhanced schemes and supports, greater choice for landowners and improvements in operational processes such as licencing timelines. This strategy is grounded in behavioural insights defining barriers to afforestation and levers to overcome them.

A data visualisation dashboard is also in development which will act as a monitoring and evaluation tool supporting the ongoing review of KPIs.

Timeline for implementation

December 2027.

- 19.93** The proportion of trees planted in 2025 that are broadleaves has increased from the last programme (66% versus 25%). The new native trees area scheme and the fall off in conifer planting have contributed to this.
- 19.94** Payments under the programme require State aid approval from the EU. As part of the approval sought, a cost-benefit analysis was conducted relating to the two main categories of schemes — afforestation and forestry roads. Both analyses returned a positive benefit outcome. The afforestation benefit-to-cost ratio was 1.87:1 and a benefit ratio of 9.14:1 was calculated for forest roads.
- 19.95** However, the cost-benefit analysis omitted tax loss considerations and the value of biodiversity. Omitting the tax loss considerations would increase the benefit ratio potentially giving an inflated benefit because all costs were not included. Omitting biodiversity had the effect of calculating a lower benefit-to-cost ratio for planting broadleaves and native trees, while calculating a higher benefit level for conifer trees. A cost-benefit analysis that does not take consideration of all material variables may have distorting effects on the design of schemes.

Recommendation 19.3

The Department should ensure all relevant elements are included in the cost-benefit analysis.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

A cost-benefit analysis will be undertaken prior to the next forestry programme.

In respect of consideration of inclusion of tax benefits/costs as part of this analysis, this will be subject to data availability, specifically in relation to 'cost of tax expenditures' data related to forestry measures.

In respect of consideration of the value of biodiversity, the availability of data and appropriate methodologies for evaluating biodiversity benefits are complex. The Department will consider and assess if it is possible for such values to be included in the future cost-benefit analysis.

Timeline for implementation

December 2027.

Annex 19A

Afforestation schemes

FT1	Native forests
FT2	Forests for water
FT3	Forest creation on public lands
FT4	NeighbourWood
FT5	Emergent forests
FT6	Broadleaf forests with mainly oak species
FT7	Other broadleaf
FT8	Establishment of agroforestry systems
FT9	Seed orchards
FT10	Forests for CCF
FT11	Mixed high forests: conifer and 20% broadleaves
FT12	Mixed high forests: spruce species and 20% broadleaves
FT13	Agroforestry-Silvoarable
FT14	Agroforestry-Forest gardening
	Native tree area scheme offers
NTA1	Creation of small native forests
NTA2	Creation of native forests for water protection

Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Other schemes

Reconstitution schemes

Reconstitution ash dieback scheme 2023 – 2027

Climate action performance payment scheme (ash dieback)

Reconstitution scheme for windblow 2026

Forest road schemes

Forest road scheme 2023 – 2027 including the following measures

Ecologically enhanced forest roads

Special construction works (SCW)

Forest road scheme engineering design support

Climate resilient reforestation

Reforestation for continuous cover forestry

Reforestation for native forests

Reforestation for biodiversity and water protection

Creation of agroforestry systems

FT8 Silvopastoral systems

Open Forests

FT13 Silvoarable systems

FT14 Forest gardening

NeighbourWood scheme

Sustainable forest management

Woodland improvement schemes

Deer tree shelter, hare and deer fencing scheme

iPLAN

Native woodland conservation scheme

Other infrastructure and technology investments

Central tyre inflation systems

Temporary forest access measure

Forest machinery grant

Investment aid for the development of the forest tree nursery sector

Developing skills and empowering the forest sector for sustainable forest management

Forestry knowledge transfer groups (KTGs)

Call for proposals for forestry skills training

Call for proposals for forestry promotion projects

Continuous professional development

Source: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine