

Mill Common Restoration Project – FAQ

Project Overview

What is the Mill Common Restoration Project?

The Mill Common Restoration Project is a Monmouthshire County Council initiative and aims to enhance the ecological health, accessibility, and community value of Mill Common, a woodland in Magor and Undy. Supported by The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) and administered by the National Heritage Lottery Fund, this project will serve as a flagship site for the National Forest for Wales.

Why is the restoration project necessary?

Mill Common faces challenges such as poor woodland health, extensive ash dieback, overcrowded veteran trees, and degraded paths and steps. The woods in Mill Common have grown without significant management intervention which has resulted in a limited diversity and dense tree growth which limits their potential. These issues threaten the woodland's health, safety, and accessibility, making restoration essential to preserve and enhance this valuable green space.

What are the main goals of the project?

The project aims to improve the ecological health of the woodland, enhance accessibility for the local community, and increase community involvement in the restoration process. These goals will ensure the long-term sustainability and enjoyment of Mill Common.

Woodland Management

What specific woodland management interventions will be carried out?

Most of Mill Common is new woodland, it was originally used for grazing animals. When grazing stopped, trees grew quickly and established the woods we see today. However, this has resulted in a dense, overcrowded woodland with very little light being able to reach the ground, which is important for growth of new trees and ground flora. A healthy woodland has a diversity of tree ages and species and has a more open canopy. The project will involve several key interventions to enhance the health and accessibility of Mill Common:

- **Tree thinning and felling** - Monmouthshire County Council will undertake woodland management to remove diseased ash trees and thin dense tree stands that are overcrowding the canopy and preventing sunlight from reaching the understory. Although it may initially appear dramatic, removing the affected ash trees is necessary for safety and will help regenerate the woodland. The woodland will bounce back quickly and will be replanted with a diverse mix of

native broadleaf trees, ensuring its long-term health. Felling some of the trees will help create a better diversity within the woods and help the ground vegetation to regenerate. We can also create and restore rides and glades through the woodland to increase wildflowers areas and provide bee highways.

- **Ash dieback** – unfortunately, the woods are severely affected by ash dieback, a fungal disease which slowly kills ash trees eventually causing the dead or dying branches to become brittle and fall. This poses a safety risk for residents using the site. Due to the lack of tree diversity on Mill Common, large areas of affected and will need to be felled. This will result in a significant change in the woodland and may look destructive at first, however, it will open canopy to sunlight and saplings waiting below will have chance to grow. We will also be replanting these areas with a more diverse mix of tree species. Before long the areas affected by ash dieback will be healthier and full of new trees.
- **Veteran tree care** – some of the trees in Mill Common, including some oaks, are very old, having grown on the hill for many years before the surrounding area was developed for housing. These old veteran trees will have grown in the open and therefore have grown wider rather than taller. As the trees have sprung up around them, they have been overcrowded. We will reduce competing trees and dead hedge around the base of the trees to protect them from compaction and interference.
- **Dead hedging** – compaction and high footfall is having a significant negative impact on the woods, due to its proximity to residential areas. While we want people to explore and enjoy Mill Common, by creating small barriers around sensitive areas with dead hedges, we can help protect regeneration and tree planting.
- **Grassland and Rides** – wildflower seed, pugs and bulbs will be plated in the areas of exiting grassland and alongside the top path that will be mown annually to create a wildflower rich corridor through the woodland

Why is it unhealthy to have dense, overcrowded woodlands?

Dense woodlands lead to intense competition for resources, resulting in weaker trees more susceptible to disease and pests. Overcrowding also reduces light penetration, inhibiting the growth of understory plants and decreasing biodiversity.

How does thinning trees help biodiversity?

Thinning reduces competition for resources, increases light penetration, and enhances habitat diversity. This promotes the growth of a variety of plants and supports a broader range of wildlife, improving the overall biodiversity and health of the woodland.

How does ash dieback work?

Ash dieback, caused by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, infects ash trees through their leaves, spreading to branches and the trunk. It leads to leaf loss, crown dieback,

and bark lesions, ultimately killing the trees. As the disease progresses, the trees become brittle increasing risk of falling branches or whole tree failure posing a risk to people using the woodland.

What about wildlife in the woods?

Woodland management practices are designed to benefit the overall ecosystem, including wildlife such as small animals like hedgehogs and woodland birds. Steps are taken by our contractor to minimise disturbance for wildlife in the woods and work will be taking place outside of birds nesting season. By improving habitat quality and increasing biodiversity, the project will create a healthier environment for all species in the woods. However, some temporary disturbances may occur during the initial phases of the project

How long until the trees grow back?

The woodland will begin to show signs of regrowth relatively quickly and we will be replanting three which are lost with a diverse array of native broadleaf trees. New saplings and ground flora will start to establish within a few months. Full recovery and the development of a mature, diverse woodland structure will take several years, but the benefits to biodiversity and ecosystem health will be evident much sooner.

Why can't the woods be left alone?

Leaving the woodland unmanaged would lead to further degradation as ash dieback affected more trees, leading to safety issues. Over many decades and years, the dense areas of woodland would begin to thin naturally as some trees die from competition, leaving more safety issues. During this time, the woods will continue to suffer from poor tree health, reduced biodiversity, and increased vulnerability to diseases and pests. Active management mimics and speeds up these natural processes allowing us to create a healthy woodland through targeted actions, ensuring the woodland remains healthy and resilient and reduces risk to visitors over the longer term

Ecological and Community Benefits

What are the expected ecological benefits of the project?

The ecological benefits of the project include:

- Increased biodiversity - thinning overcrowded tree stands and creating new glades will increase light penetration, promoting the growth of ground flora and supporting a diverse range of habitats.
- Enhanced habitat quality - improved habitat quality will support a wider range of species, from ground-dwelling insects to canopy-nesting birds.
- Long-term health - the woodland will spring back quickly, with new growth and increased resilience to environmental stressors. Managed woodlands are better

equipped to adapt to changing conditions and continue providing ecosystem services.

What about the paths and steps?

Much of the older infrastructure on the site has degraded over time or has been lost. We will resurface the main path at the top section of the woods, which has become overgrown and muddy during the winter months. Steps through the site will be resurfaced as well, and handrails installed where they are missing. Benches and signs will be replaced and improved throughout Mill Common.

When will the paths and steps be restored?

The paths and steps will be restored in the summer, after the woodland management work has been completed to avoid damaging any new structures.

Who will maintain the new paths in the future?

Monmouthshire County Council will be responsible for maintaining the new paths and ensuring they remain in good condition for the enjoyment of all visitors.

What are the other benefits of the project?

- **Historic Viewpoint:** With its unique vantage point in Magor and Undy, it was once possible to look out from Mill Common over the landscape of the Gwent Levels and Severn Estuary. As the woods have grown, the viewpoint has been blocked. Woodland management will restore these views.
- **Benches:** New benches will be installed throughout Mill Common, providing comfortable resting spots for visitors to enjoy the natural surroundings and enjoy the viewpoint.
- **New Signs:** Updated signage will be placed around the woodland to provide information about the local flora and fauna, as well as directions and safety information, enhancing the educational experience for visitors.
- **New Sculptures:** A sculpture trail will be created, featuring artworks designed by the local community. This will add an artistic element to the woodland, making it a more engaging and enjoyable place to visit.
- **Volunteering Opportunities:** The project will offer numerous volunteering opportunities for local residents and schools. Volunteers can participate in activities such as tree planting, habitat restoration, and path maintenance, gaining valuable skills and contributing to the conservation of Mill Common.

How will the project benefit the local community?

The project will enhance safety by removing diseased trees, improve accessibility with better infrastructure, and foster community involvement through volunteering opportunities. It will also offer educational programmes in green skills and woodland management.

How can the community get involved in the project?

Local residents and schools can participate in volunteering activities, training in green skills, and woodland management. The project aims to empower the community to become actively involved in the stewardship of Mill Common, ensuring its long-term conservation and sustainability.

Visitor Information

Will dogs still be allowed to walk off-lead?

Yes, dogs will still be allowed to walk off-lead. However, certain areas may have temporary restrictions during active management phases to ensure safety for both people and dogs. Clear signage will be provided to inform all visitors of any changes.

When will it look better?

While the initial phases of tree thinning and felling may appear dramatic, the woodland will start to look better within a few months as new growth begins. Improved paths, benches, and signage will enhance the visitor experience, and the woodland will continue to recover and thrive over the following years.

What about safety for the children who play in the woods?

Safety is a top priority. During active management phases, certain areas will be temporarily closed and clearly marked to ensure the safety of all visitors, including children. Once the work is completed, the improved infrastructure and healthier woodland will provide a safer and more enjoyable environment for children to explore and play.

Schedule and Disruptions

When will the tree works start and how long will they last?

The tree works at Mill Common are scheduled to start on 3rd February and will last approximately four weeks, with some follow-up work to tidy up and address any missed areas. The contractors will work hard to minimise disruption and schedule work around school drop-off and pick-up times to ensure the safety and convenience of residents.

What disruptions can residents expect during the tree works?

During the work period, certain areas will be closed and marshalled during active felling and taped or fenced off when not. Increased noise levels and the presence of heavy machinery are expected during working hours. Temporary parking restrictions may also be in place near the work areas. Residents are advised to follow posted signs and use alternative routes.

Will there be any disruption to Undy Primary School?

The tree works are scheduled to avoid drop-off and pick-up times to minimise disruption to Undy Primary School. Parents need to ensure that children do not play in the woods during the works to ensure their safety.

How will the project ensure the safety of residents during the tree works?

The contractors are experienced in working in urban woodlands and will implement measures to ensure safety, including closing and marshalling certain areas during active felling. Parents and carers are requested to ensure that children are not in the woods during the active working period without adult supervision.

What will happen after the tree works are completed?

After the tree works, the area will continue to be enjoyed as before. The next phase will involve restoring paths and steps to further enhance accessibility and enjoyment for all visitors. New tree planting will follow in the autumn and winter with a diverse mix of native trees, and there will be opportunities for volunteers to get involved.