

From grounds maintenance to nature recovery: Ground Control's journey to large scale woodland creation

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Ground Control's Wildfell project in Essex combines woodland creation and habitat banking across 116 hectares, testing funding routes for nature recovery.

Ground Control, established in 1973, offer services including grounds maintenance, landscape construction, arboriculture, vegetation management, winter maintenance and electric vehicle charging point installation. They now manage over 50,000 sites across the UK.

The 116-hectare site, Wildfell, owned and managed by Ground Control, operates as two interconnected initiatives.

The primary woodland creation scheme covers 50 hectares funded through the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO) and registered under the Woodland Carbon Code.

A separate habitat bank encompasses 22ha of existing ancient woodland being enhanced through biodiversity net gain (BNG), alongside additional habitat creation including wildflower meadows, ponds, hedgerows and a traditional orchard.

This dual approach allows Ground Control to consider the financial viability of different funding routes while creating a cohesive nature recovery project across the site.

Drone image of open space and mature parkland oak within native broadleaf woodland creation compartment. Copyright: Ground Control

Key facts

- site: Wildfell Centre for Environmental Recovery, Braintree, North Essex
- size: 116-hectare site with 50ha of new woodland, 22ha of existing ancient woodland and 44ha of habitat creation and enhancement
- type: predominantly native broadleaf with a small proportion of non-native broadleaf and Scots pine for the new woodland. With the planted ancient woodland site's dominant species being hybrid poplar
- species: 25 species including pedunculate oak, hornbeam, common walnut, field maple, Scots pine, small leaved lime, wild cherry and wild service
- date planted: winter 2022 to 2024
- grants: EWCO
- key objectives: carbon sequestration to offset residual business emissions, enhance biodiversity, compare woodland funding initiatives and demonstrate corporate social responsibility through large-scale nature recovery

From small beginnings to strategic scale

Ground Control's journey into large-scale woodland creation began 6 years ago when Chris Bawtree, Nature Recovery Director, led the company to explore their first woodland creation project. This 9-hectare woodland on another site in Billericay, was successful in securing HS2 grant funding.

Ground Control allocated £100,000 a year to tree planting across their client network through their Evergreen Fund, which dedicates 5% of annual net profits to environmental initiatives. Despite having access to thousands of commercial properties, sourcing suitable land for large-scale projects proved difficult.

This led Ground Control to make the strategic decision to purchase a site in North Essex for a large-scale nature recovery project. The Wildfell Centre for Environmental Recovery was created from a mix of arable land, woodland and grassland. The River Pant flows nearby, fed by ditches and several ponds on the estate.

Drone image of predominantly native broadleaf woodland creation compartments expanding area of ancient woodland. Includes open space and public right of way. Copyright: Ground Control

Building partnerships not barriers

Ground Control recognises the sensitivity around converting productive farmland to woodland. Through engagement with the North Essex Farm Cluster – a group of 50 local landowners around the villages of Pant and Blackwater – they emphasise the need for balance rather than wholesale conversion.

Chris Bawtree, Nature Recovery Director, Ground Control, said:

We're not advocating converting whole farms to nature recovery. We're trying to demonstrate the revenues those changes can make, so we can then advise people to do various elements of what we've done.

The consultation process resulted in careful design considerations, ensuring the project enhanced the local landscape and included creating transitional areas of grassland and scrub habitats between the woodland and neighbouring properties in Wethersfield village. It also highlighted the opportunity for increased public access across the site.

Planning, planting and problem-solving

Ground Control's approach evolved through careful planning, consultation and expert guidance. Species selection reflects both the site's ancient woodland heritage and its future resilience needs. Native broadleaf species including hornbeam and hazel will create managed coppice blocks in 15-20 years. In response to the soil types on the site, they have included a small proportion of near-native species like sycamore, red oak and Norway maple to provide resilience against future climate, pest and disease pressures.

Silver birch establishing well within sheet mulching row of mixed broadleaf woodland creation compartment. Copyright: Ground Control

Planting began in September 2022, with the first 20ha planted that year, followed by creation of other habitats and the building of a barn and yard area. The project faced wildlife pressure, particularly from deer, hares, rabbits, voles and badgers. Ground Control developed solutions incorporating rabbit mesh into deer fencing to eliminate the need for individual guards.

The team also trialled coir mulch mats and compost/sheet mulching techniques as sustainable alternatives to plastic mulch mats, demonstrating their commitment to reducing environmental impact throughout the establishment process.

The planting was completed by Christmas 2024, marking the largest nature recovery project in Ground Control's 50-year history.

1.8 metre deer and rabbit mesh fencing using sweet chestnut posts and galvanised steel vehicular gates. Copyright: Ground Control

Building market confidence through demonstration

For Ground Control, Wildfell represents more than an environmental commitment – it demonstrates industry leadership, testing markets and funding mechanisms to share insight with other landowners and managers.

Chris Bawtree, Nature Recovery Director, said:

This project is a physical demonstration of the company's core values. We are not just talking about the environment – we have gone out there, bought the land and committed to the project.

Wildfell was designed as a way to experiment and compare funding. The 50-hectare, EWCO-funded site is registered with the Woodland Carbon Code and is forecasting 14,000 Pending Issuance Units. Meanwhile, their separate BNG-focused areas are testing the biodiversity market as an alternative revenue stream.

Chris Bawtree, Nature Recovery Director, said:

With Wildfell, we were looking at a holistic approach to the project – trying to find as many sustainable revenue sources as we could. One of the reasons for using different funding approaches was to gain an understanding of EWCO and carbon in comparison to BNG, so we could share our learnings with landowners.

Drone image of ancient woodland in the foreground with woodland creation compartments and Wethersfield village beyond. Open space, public right of way and permissive footpaths visible. Copyright: Ground Control

From monitoring to market leadership

The project established a comprehensive baseline of habitat, species and carbon metrics to track improvements over time. So far, it is delivering quantifiable environmental and commercial benefits. Early results demonstrate the viability of multi-stream funding approaches, with EWCO providing an income to establish and manage the new woodlands and initial BNG unit sales confirming market demand, despite lower-than-expected levels of development in the local area.

Wildfell serves as a living classroom and demonstration site. The project hosted 100 volunteers at a tree planting day during National Tree Week in 2024, creating genuine connections between Ground Control employees, the local community and the project. The site includes facilities for educational visits, accommodating up to 20 people for guided tours and learning sessions.

Ground Control volunteers enjoying a productive day tree planting into mulch strips within one of the woodland creation compartments. Copyright: Ground Control

As a Forestry Commission Woodland Ambassador, Chris uses Wildfell to share practical insights with other landowners considering woodland creation and management. The project's experimental approach to combining different funding mechanisms provides valuable insight for those considering planting trees.

Beyond current carbon and biodiversity markets, Wildfell positions Ground Control to capture emerging payments for natural flood prevention, water quality improvements and other ecosystem services as these markets evolve.

Through their focus on nature-based solutions at Wildfell, they are making a long-term commitment with sector-wide impact. Sharing their experiences to provide valuable insights for the woodland sector as markets for ecosystem services continue to develop.

Chris Bawtree, Nature Recovery Director, said:

This project demonstrates that privately funded nature recovery is viable. We're not just talking about the environment - we're taking concrete action by purchasing land and committing to long-term ecosystem restoration.

Further information

For more information on this case study, visit Project Wildfell.

For guidance on woodland creation and information on grants and available support, visit Tree planting and woodland creation: overview.

To find out how other farmers and landowners are benefitting from woodland creation, visit Tree planting and woodland creation case studies.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/from-grounds-maintenance-to-nature-recovery-ground-controls-journey-to-large-scale-woodland-creation>