

Merlin Woods Restoration Project



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

Why are the Council doing storm clearance & a replanting plan?

- To bring the woodland back into safe use by the public as an urban woodland
- To replant it as a native woodland under the NeighbourWood Scheme
- To put in amenity features funded by the NeighbourWood Scheme

A key objective of the plan to minimise the impact on wildlife and habitats in the area, with a view to restoring biodiversity in the medium to long term.



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

Why were large sections of Merlin Woods effected by the storm?

Commercial plantation 1960 – State Forestry Department

The conifer trees in Merlin Woods are Norway Spruce species. This evergreen species is **not native** and has a shallow root system. In addition, Merlin Woods has thin soils over limestone.

Following a boundary rectification in 1985, Merlin Woods came into Galway City Council ownership in January 1986.

Merlin Woods was managed as a public woodland park and not as a commercial forest from that point on.

Since then the conifer trees have become overcrowded, with tall, thin, wispy stems and have developed top heavy canopies. This has resulted in the trees being more susceptible to damage from high winds.

The majority of the conifer trees came down in Storm Eowyn and the woodland canopy is now left permanently fragmented, causing further risk of tree failure within the forest.



Trees in Merlin Woods today

Merlin Woods Restoration Timeline

January 2025 – Storm Eowyn

January 2026 – Cost estimates for GCC managing the clearance works

March 2026 – Public Procurement on cost neutral basis

March 2026 – Friends of Merlin Woods

March 2026 – University of Galway, Zoology Dept

April 2026 – Independent Arborist Assessment

April 2026 – Contract finalisation

May 2026 – Appointment of contractor

June to August 2026 – Project planning, reports and stakeholder engagement

September 2026– Feeding programme for squirrels

September 2026 – on site

September 2026– submit NeighbourWood Scheme application to the Department

December 2026 – complete work on site

Spring 2027 – Mitigation planting for squirrels

Autumn/ Winter 2027 – Planting of native woodland funded through the NeighbourWood grant scheme

Merlin Woods Restoration Project

What is the plan?

The plan is in two stages

Stage 1

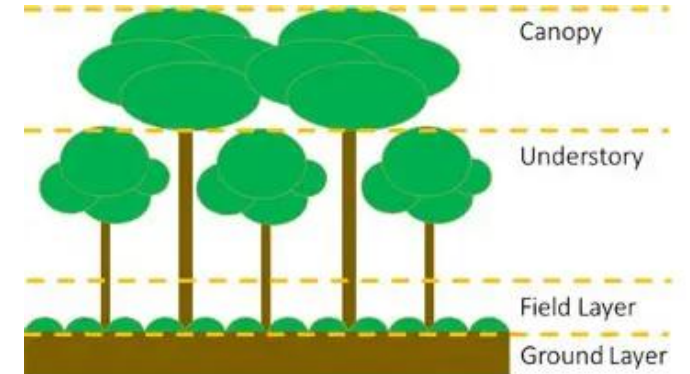
Clearance of storm damages trees

- Clear trees that have been damaged and weakened by Storm Eowyn

Stage 2

Replanting with native species & restoration of the woods as public amenity

- Immediate planting post clearance to create corridors for wildlife
- NeighbourWood Scheme application to the Department for funding for restoration works
- Planting the woodland with native species post award of funding



Merlin Woods Restoration

Who did we talk to?

Stakeholder consultation - GCC	Operations	Completed
Stakeholder consultation - NPWS	Ecology	Completed
Stakeholder consultation #1 - Locals	Operations	Completed
Stakeholder consultation - Friends Merlin Woods	Ecology	Completed
Stakeholder consultation - GCC	Operations	Ongoing
Stakeholder consultation Round - NPWS	Ecology	Completed
Stakeholder consultation Round #2 - Locals	Operations	Completed
Stakeholder consultation - Arborist	H&S	Completed
Stakeholder consultation, project ecologist, Friends of Merlin, University of Galway	Operations	Completed
Stakeholder consultation Round #2 - Councillors	Operations	Completed
Stakeholder consultation Round #2 - Friends Merlin Woods	Ecology	Completed
Stakeholder consultation - HSE Merlin Park	H&S	Completed
Stakeholder consultation - Merlin Lane Residents	H&S	Completed

Merlin Woods Restoration Project

What trees will be retained?

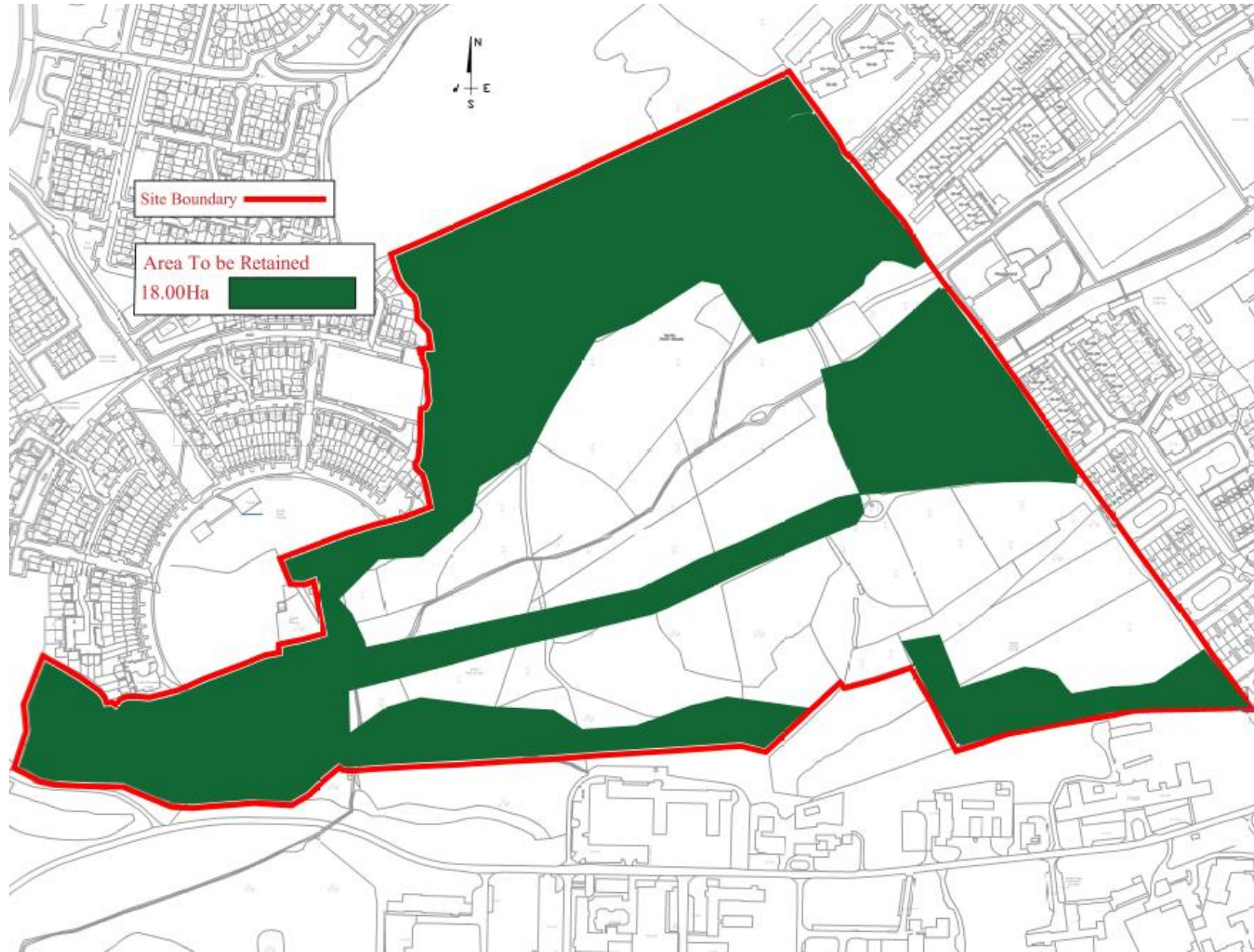
33.41 hectares is the overall area of Merlin Woods

18 hectares (54%) will be retained

4.34 hectares of the retained woodland is conifer trees Norway spruce

GCC is not removing all standing conifer trees

15.41 hectares to be cleared – fallen or damaged trees.



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

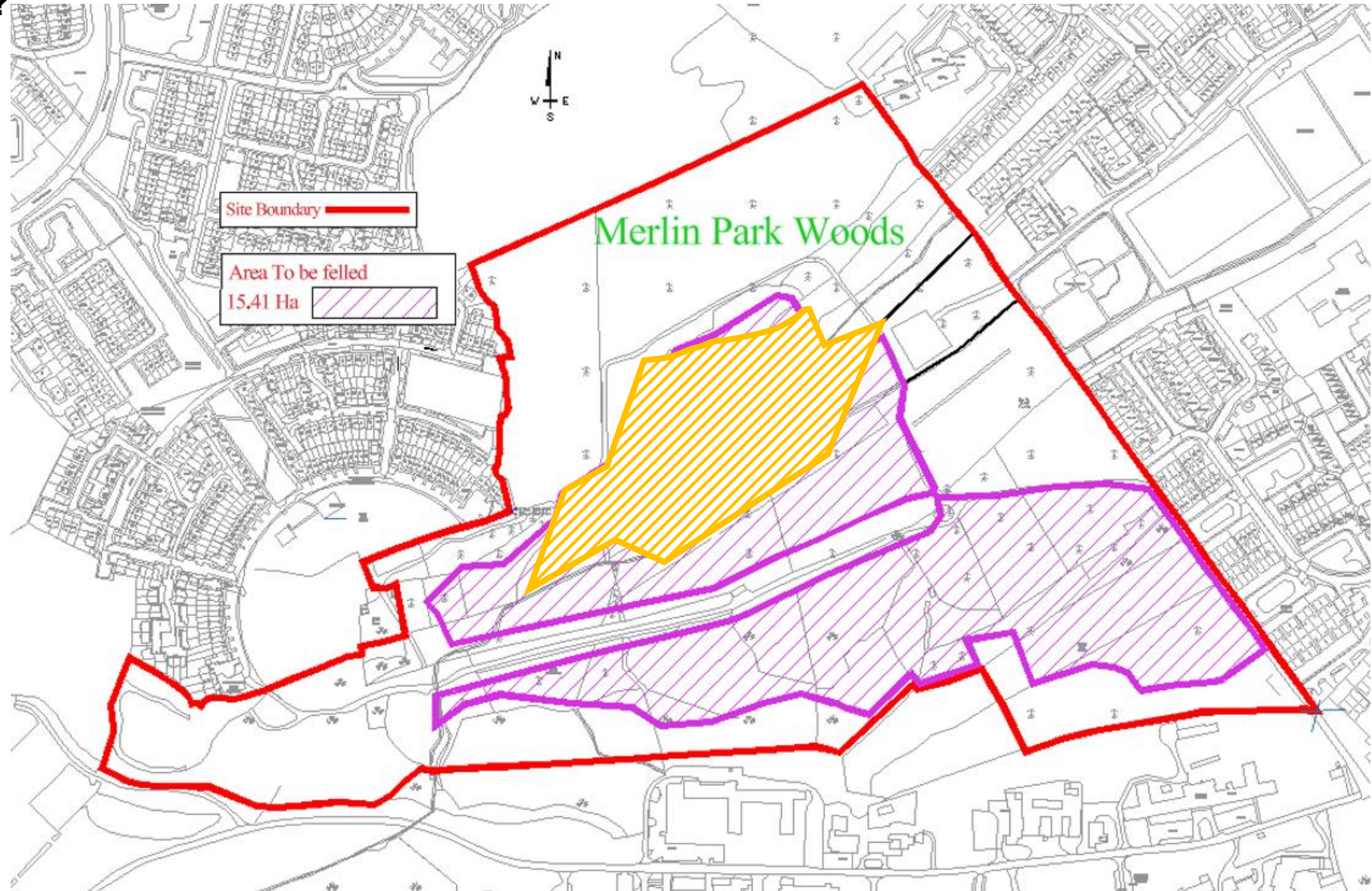
What trees will be cleared?

15.41 hectares of fallen/
damaged trees to be cleared

Ecological protection
measures will be in place
and monitored by a qualified
ecologist during the
clearance works

**80% of this area has full
agreement for removal
from all stakeholders**

23% of this (3.5 hectares) is
the area in question by
Friends of Merlin Woods.



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

The area in question

23% (3.5 hectares) is all Norway Spruce

Independently assessed by a qualified arborist with over 25 years experience.

The Arborist was requested to look at the viability of retaining the area minimising risk to the public.



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

The area in question

Expert advice regarding the impact on the red squirrel population was sought from University of Galway, Zoology Department.

This advice informed the

- areas of trees to be protected during clearance
- feeding measures GCC can put in place immediately
- post clearance planting to support squirrel movement in the forest



OLLSCOIL NA GAILLIMHE
UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

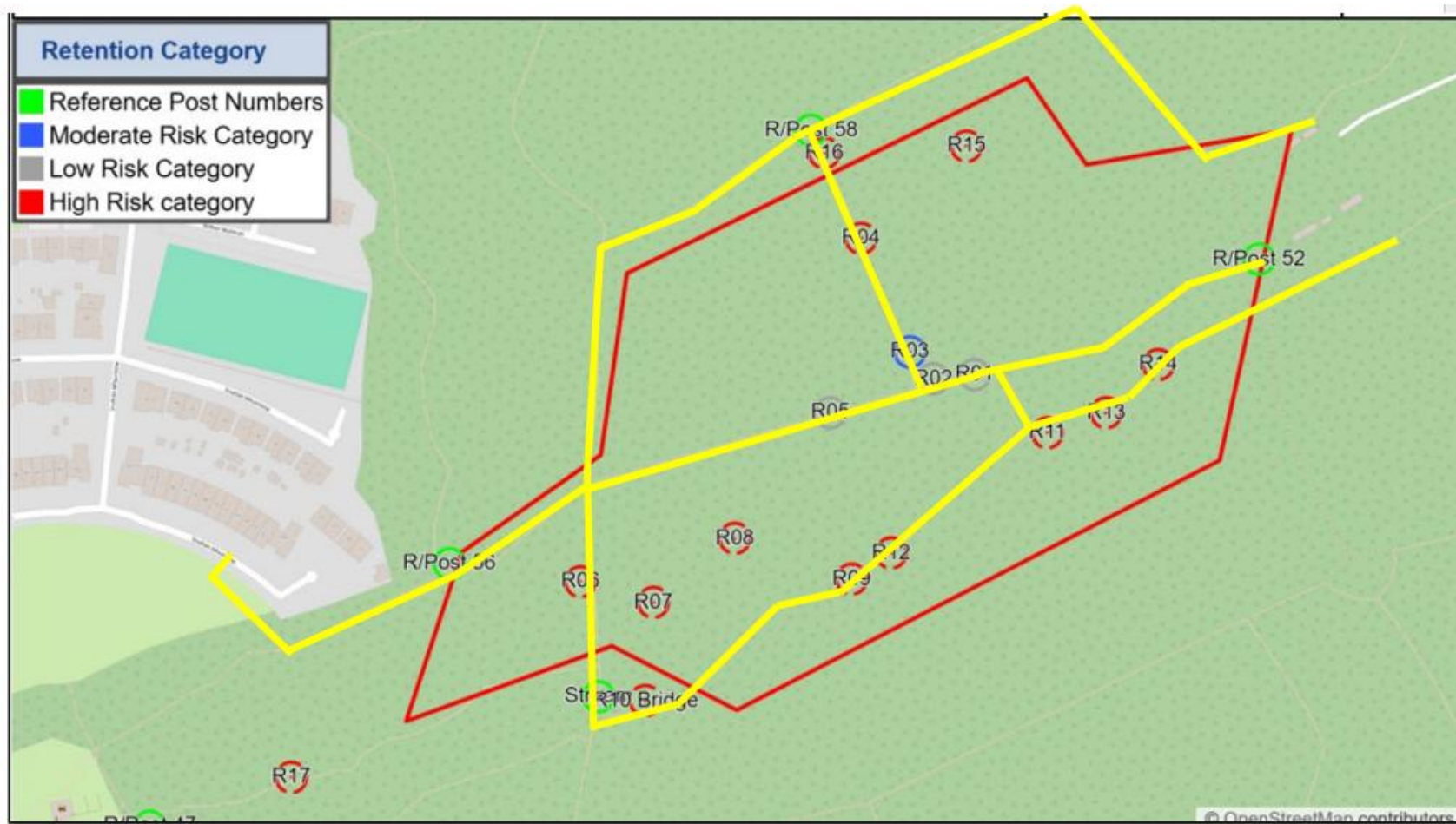
The Arborist's report. Why did we use a risk based approach to assessing the 3.5 hectares?

There is a network of footpaths around and through the area with multiple access points

The Council have responsibility to the public to maintain access to the public park and to manage the public safety risk.

The high risk status of the trees in the arborist report means a risk of fatality.

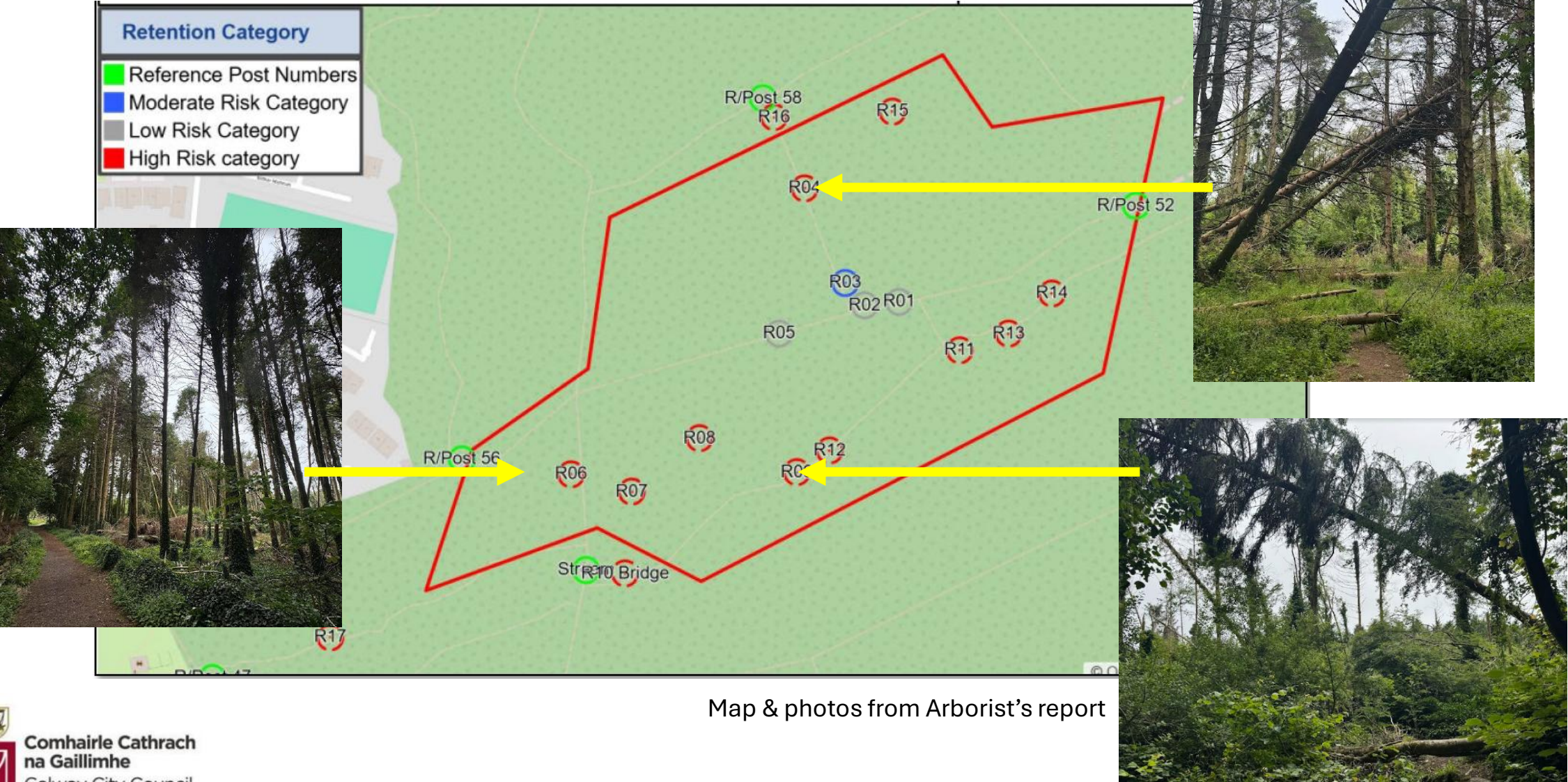
Once the fallen trees are removed, the potential for the standing trees to fail increases significantly, and this risk compounds over time.



Map from Arborist's report. Yellow footpaths added by GCC to show their location

Merlin Woods Restoration Project

Arborist report



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

The Arborists report – an evidence based approach

The Arborist provided an initial report in July. This was followed by supplementary information and clarifications in August in response to the Friends of Merlin Woods request to retain a section of standing conifer trees within overall 3.5 hectare area.

The July report recommendation:

‘I am recommending that the 3.5-hectares is harvested and replanted with native broadleaf tree species along with the 17.5-hectare area.’

The August report clarification:

‘Keeping the remaining Norway spruce trees poses too high a safety risk for the public. Recent damage in the north wood leaves these newly exposed trees prone to failure, at much lower wind speeds. ‘

‘The survey will not detail individual trees but the 3.5-hectare ... as a whole.’

This means the small section of standing trees the Friends of Merlin Woods are looking to retain cannot be retained due to the High Risk the trees will then pose to the public.

Merlin Woods Restoration Project

Q. How are the stages of work being funded?

Stage 1 - Zero cost basis

Stage 1 is the clearance of storm damages trees which is being carried out on a cost-neutral basis to the Council. This means that there will be no payment to the contractor for the work for clearing the trees. This service was procure through a public procurement procedure.

Stage 2 – funded by the Department

Stage 2 is the replanting of the conifer areas with native species and restoration of the woods as public amenity. Funding will be sought from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through the NeighbourWood Scheme.

This could include up to 85% of the costs for the restoration works, which would be given to Galway City Council. The reminder will need to be covered by other funding streams, and/or from the Council's budgets.



Merlin Woods Restoration Project

Q. What is the NeighbourWood Scheme?

The [NeighbourWood Scheme](#) aims to

- increase woodlands for recreational use
- supporting the silvicultural enhancements
- install appropriate recreational facilities

The scheme supports forest owners to

- Develop forests into attractive amenities
- Make them easily-accessible for the recreational use
- deliver significant social and environmental benefits
- promote physical and mental health and wellbeing

For more information go to [NeighbourWood Scheme](#)



Merlin Woods Restoration Project Recap:

- Storm Eowyn emergency response
 - GCC look at managing the clearance works in house
 - Public procurement process & appointed a contractor on cost neutral basis
 - Vast majority of clearance works are agreed by all stakeholders
 - Smaller area in question was carefully looked at
 - GCC sought independent expert advice
 - The expert advice was to remove the trees in question and implement mitigation measures to support red squirrels
 - GCC must follow the expert advice and remove the remaining trees for public H&S reasons
 - GCC has implemented the squirrel feeding programme
 - GCC will submit NeighbourWood Scheme application to the Department
 - GCC will implement mitigation planting in spring 2027 to support red squirrels
-
- Autumn/ Winter 2027 – Planting of native woodland funded through the NeighbourWood grant scheme



Merlin Woods Restoration Project



Thank you