
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 10th September 2026

NEW INDEPENDENT REPORTS OFFER CONSTRUCTIVE PATHWAY TO RESOLVE MERLIN WOODS DISPUTE

* Friends of Merlin Woods presents a practical, science-based solution to Galway City Council aimed at resolving the current impasse over the management of 3.5 hectares within the larger clear-felling section of 15 plus acres of mature Norway spruce at Merlin Park Woods.

* By combining forestry data from consultant Dermot Houlihan (Timberland Forestry) and ecological insights from Dr Emma Roberts (Doctor of Science in Zoology/Animal Biology), the community group outlines a solution that balances public safety with wildlife conservation.

* The group is also sharing expert-backed feedback from Dr Frances Giaquinto, Ecologist CEnv MCIEEM to constructively address technical concerns about the larger-scale clearance project proposed for the conifer areas and informed knowledge of Continuous Conifer forestry.

The council's primary aim has been addressing health and safety concerns following storm damage. The newly issued independent reports by Timberland Forestry for Friends of Merlin Woods show that these safety goals can be achieved without wide-scale clearance of the 3.5 hectares, offering a collaborative way forward for both the local authority and the community, giving the red squirrels a fighting chance.

However, to ensure a management plan that accounts for the whole wood as an ecosystem working in unison, the community is also highlighting remaining concerns about the proposed large-scale clearance of the other conifer areas—both standing, fallen, and damaged. By addressing technical data gaps and incorporating independent forestry models, the council and community can work together to prevent wider ecological and environmental risks.

A Balanced Forestry Framework for the 3.5 Hectares

Following a site inspection on Monday, 7th September alongside Caroline Stanley, Mr Houlihan noted that the woodland is in a much more stable condition than previously feared.

In his assessment, Mr Houlihan saw:

"I was very surprised to see that there is so little damage overall, with over 80% of the areas untouched by the storm and certainly not presenting any danger, the damage is confined to a relatively small area."

The Timberland Forestry report offers a cost-effective, alternative management roadmap to resolve safety concerns:

- * Targeted Safety Interventions: At least 80% of the trees remain structurally sound and standing, meaning safety works can be confined to the specific patches of windblow that genuinely need attention.
- * Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF): The report recommends transitioning the area into a permanent native woodland using CCF. Because the forest floor is already naturally regenerating with young Oak, Hazel, and Ash, the council can safely transition the woodland over time without the excessive costs and visual impact of clear-felling.
- * Maximising State Funding: This approach keeps the forest in condition to qualify for the Forest Service Neighbour Wood Scheme. This funding can be used to develop safe, accessible recreational spaces for the community while staying within tight budgetary limits.

Protecting the Red Squirrel Habitat Innovation

Data from Dr Emma Roberts, a specialist holding a Doctor of Science in Zoology/Animal Biology, highlights how retaining sections of the conifer canopy serves as a critical bridge for local biodiversity. Dr Roberts' research emphasises the unique role these specific conifers play by contrasting usage across woodland types:

- * Core Habitat Connectivity: Red squirrels in eastern Galway City rely heavily on this conifer-dominated zone. Dr Roberts' study detected their presence in 57.5% of conifer hair tubes, compared with just 34.45% in broadleaf and the remaining percentage in mixed woodland. This highlights the vital importance of the conifer in providing food, shelter, and canopy connectivity.
- * A Safe Transition Zone: Keeping viable sections of the existing canopy ensures the squirrels keep their historical food and shelter while newly planted native trees mature.
- * Safe Feeding Stations: Keeping these mature trees standing provides a secure environment to find necessary winter supplementary feeders, giving the squirrels essential high canopy escape routes to protect them from ground and aerial predators.

Constructive Pathway to Resolve Concerns in the Wider Clear-fell Project

To ensure the wider project achieves its goals without unintended negative impacts, the community is highlighting key areas within the Ecological Assessment and Constraints Report (August 2026, North-West Ecology Ltd.) that require updating and resolution.

Dr Frances Giaquinto formally reviewed this ecological report. Her review notes that the document successfully covers the desk study review, two field walkovers (11 & 22 July 2026), limestone pavement, heritage walls, watercourse and invasive-species mapping, and a set of Ecological Protection Method Statements (EPMS-01 to -08) covering invasive species, limestone pavement, stone walls, broadleaf retention, watercourses, red squirrel, badger, and bats.

However, the review highlights specific issues within the report that are underdeveloped.

- * **Completing Protected Species Surveys:** The report explicitly states it is not a full ecological assessment and not designed as a comprehensive protected species survey. Currently, no systematic, species-specific field surveys have been conducted for bats, badgers, otters, pine martens, or invertebrates. Presence/absence conclusions rest heavily on stakeholder anecdote (e.g., one opinion) rather than systematic surveys.

- * **Finalising Missing Appendices:** Pine marten and otter currently receive only a "Subject to confirmation, if required" status in the constraints table. Crucially, EPMS-11 (Pine Marten) and EPMS-10 (Otter) are referenced in the text but never actually written; only EPMS-01 to -08 exist as full method statements in the appendices. Completing these missing protocols will provide an implementable field framework.

- * **Field-Verifying Expanded Operational Footprints:** The harvesting footprint outgrew the initial survey. On 18th August 2026, the operational layout was revised to include new areas that were never walked or field-verified, relying instead on 2025 desk mapping. The report commits to verifying them "as a precautionary measure" before works start but lacks detail on how or by whom.

- * **Addressing Inaccessible Survey Gaps:** Windblown, inaccessible areas—where deadwood, cavities, and denning/roosting features concentrate—are only assessed from "accessible vantage points," and invasive species mapping in these zones is flagged as incomplete.

- * **Preventing the Windblow Domino Effect:** An overall arborist report from the city council or the forester has not yet been seen by the group. Mr Houlihan, who reviewed the 3.5-hectare arborist report and walked the woodland area, noted that many of these trees are likely to pose no danger and clear-felling could cause more harm to the

existing woodland from windblow, defeating the health and safety aspect it was meant to address and possible negative impacts to the broadleaf areas.

* Securing Budgets and Managing Operational Risks: There is currently no funding in place for replanting, which is dependent on the Neighbour wood grant . Furthermore, the proposed supplementary feeding programme for red squirrels will need careful professional expert management to deal with hygiene, territorial aggression, disease, anti-social behaviour, and predation. We acknowledge the input of Dr Colin Lawton in advising on the feeding programme, Friends of Merlin Woods had contacted him with concerns for the Red Squirrel population when they heard of the clear-felling plan in February . This successful long-term implementation plan involves staff, and the community is aware of existing workload and staff availability constraints across the city. Timberland Forestry gives the average value of the timber here as €25,000 per hectare; using these resources would go a long way toward regeneration features within the woodlands if managed in a separate way. An archaeology report is unavailable ,an issue raised by Councillor Alan Cheevers which is also an area of concern with the historic woodland settings.

An Invitation to Rebuild Trust and Community Collaboration

Friends of Merlin Woods believes these independent findings provide vital information : the council can successfully help to manage its public safety liabilities, budget constraints, and environmental obligations while the community preserves its treasured urban canopy and wildlife. An email sent to Friends of Merlin Woods on the 28th of May confirmed that a contract was signed for fallen and storm damage trees and if this is the case then surely any healthy standing trees needs to be assessed further to ensure a continuous cover canopy for healthy trees and remove only those trees that are risky and near pathways in light of the impact clear-felling could have on the stability of other trees. Again, we cannot draw any conclusions as we have not seen the full arborist report and can only work on the knowledge given and best practice for a place like Merlin Woods. Perhaps an independent review is needed on the whole woodland.

"We now have a clear, expert-backed roadmap that looks after safety, fits within council budgets, and keeps our local wildlife safe," said Caroline Stanley. "We are warmly inviting Galway City Council to engage with us on these independent reviews so we can work together to safeguard these 3.5 hectares, address the wider ecological gaps constructively the reviews highlight , and look after the future of Galway's environment and community."

All reviews sent to Galway City Council and a letter from Dr Emma Roberts .

We will also make them available for the public to access and read with permission from the authors,

ENDS

* Name: Caroline Stanley

* Organisation/Group: Friends of Merlin Woods

* Phone: 0852484380

* Email: friendsoferlinwoods@gmail.com

1. Merlin Woods is the largest urban woodland in Galway City and serves as a critical biodiversity oasis and public amenity.

2. Dermot Houlihan is a highly credentialed forester, founder of Timberland Forestry, and current Chairman of the Association of Irish Forestry Consultants.

3. Dr Emma Roberts is a zoologist and animal biology specialist who has led extensive research and field surveys tracking red squirrel populations and habitat connectivity across Galway City.

4. Dr Frances Giaquinto is an independent ecologist who provided the formal structural review of the August 2026 North-West Ecology Ltd. report.