



OLLSCOIL NA GAILLIMHE
UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY

TO: Galway City Council / Recreation and Amenity Department

FROM: Dr. Colin Lawton, School of Natural Sciences, University of Galway

DATE: 8 October 2026

SUBJECT: Statement of Ecological Consultation and Context – Merlin Park Woods Harvest and Replanting Operations

Overview and Purpose

This document outlines the scope, context, and key outcomes of my advisory involvement regarding the proposed woodland management operations at Merlin Park Woods. Having thirty years of experience researching squirrels in Ireland, and recently researched the local red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) population extensively, I was invited to provide technical expertise on avoiding, minimising, and mitigating potential impacts on the species resulting from planned tree management and public safety measures following the impacts of Storm Eowyn.

The background details, appraisal of management options, and agreed mitigation framework set out below reflect my input to the project team to date.

Habitat Management & Options Appraisal

Following the arborists review by Beith Tree Consultancy, the remaining standing conifers were identified as a public safety hazard requiring removal. In response, Galway City Council convened me to evaluate the ecological impacts of safety-driven felling on the red squirrel population:

- **Habitat Retention & Fencing Option:** Consideration was given to enclosing the standing conifers within a protective perimeter fence. However, this required felling a substantial safety buffer zone to prevent tree-fall damage to the fencing structure. I considered this option to be unviable, as the required buffer would significantly reduce the potential area of habitat that could be saved, reducing the remaining canopy, and the remaining habitat would be isolated.
- **Reforestation Strategy:** As the advice from the arborists was that the standing conifers had to be removed, I advised the Council to reforest the felled area with native tree species, noting that native broadleaved woodland offers superior long-term

ecological value for red squirrels. The red squirrel population in Merlin Woods is isolated due to the urban nature of the surrounding landscape, and already has restricted habitat and limited opportunities to disperse naturally. The loss of habitat as caused by the storm further threatens the viability of the population. Ensuring optimum habitat in the long-term, and carrying out mitigation exercises to protect the red squirrels in the meantime, offers the best opportunity for the red squirrel population to continue in Merlin Park.

Connectivity Enhancement & Mitigation Measures

Alongside the replanting of the damaged and felled woodland with native broadleaved trees, the following mitigation measures were recommended:

- **Linear Wildlife Corridors:** New linear strips of mature native trees, dominated by hazel (*Corylus avellana*), should be planted to ensure canopy connectivity between woodland compartments and provide an additional food resource.
- **Supplementary Feeding & Monitoring Programme:** I agreed that a proposal for Galway City Council to implement a supplementary feeding programme, to support the red squirrels while new plantings mature, would benefit the population locally. Similar supplementary feeding programmes have been very successful in other woodlands in Ireland. I advised on the protocols necessary to conduct a successful supplementary feeding programme. This initiative also presents an opportunity to establish a collaborative academic research project and continue monitoring the red squirrel population in Merlin Park.



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