

TITLE	Tree Strategy
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 11 th January 2022
WARD	None Specific
DIRECTOR	Steve Moore, Place and Growth

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Tree Strategy will provide improved direction for tree management and guide the authority's approach to trees across the Borough. It will outline the wide range of benefits that trees and woods can deliver for health, amenity, climate change and water management and provide guidance on how Wokingham Borough Council will seek to maximise these. The strategy will help the Borough understand the value of WBC's current tree assets and provide guidance on how new planting schemes can be implemented to achieve maximum benefits for carbon sequestration, biodiversity and society.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) note results from the Tree Strategy early engagement survey;
- 2) consider the timeline and milestones for the emerging Tree Strategy.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The development and adoption of a Tree Strategy will guide WBC's approach in the management and maintenance of trees across the Borough. A comprehensive Tree Strategy will set out how the Borough will manage its responsibilities to trees and woodlands under the Town and Country Planning Act, National Planning Policy Framework, Miscellaneous Act and Environment Act. Officers expect the strategy will cover management of council owned trees, replanting policy, new planting schemes; including the 250k tree planting project, and woodland management.

An early engagement survey took place in November 2021 to gather views from stakeholders and residents to ascertain some of the key areas that should be covered within the strategy. The report highlights the key points that were raised following review of the survey results. The key points will be used to develop the aims and heads of terms for the strategy and will be shared with the selected consultant to ensure that these views are covered within the strategy.

The report sets out an approach for engagement, recognising that active involvement from a Cross-Party Working Group and Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association (WDVTA) will play a critical role in the delivery of the strategy over the next year.

Background

Wokingham Borough Council currently have a policy in place for the Ongoing Maintenance of Council Owned Trees and a Tree Inspection Framework for Council Trees. In July 2021 officers were given Executive approval to develop a Strategy that will guide the Borough's approach to trees as a whole. A comprehensive Tree Strategy will set out in detail how these policies and our responsibilities to trees and woodlands under the Town and Country Planning Act, National Planning Policy Framework, Miscellaneous Act and Environment Act, will be delivered. The strategy will address tree management and maintenance in rural and urban environments and outline WBC's approach to trees on private and Council owned sites.

To provide opportunity for involvement in the early development of the strategy, an early engagement exercise was run for 22 days (3rd Nov-25th Nov 2021). The exercise took form of an online survey that was published on the Wokingham Engage platform following advice and guidance from Community Engagement Officers. Access to the survey was communicated directly to Councillors, Town and Parish Councils and Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association. In addition, articles were posted on the Council's social media and newsletters to publicise to residents. The purpose of the survey was to gather views from stakeholders and residents to ascertain some of the key areas that should be covered within the strategy.

Key considerations raised through the survey

The results of the survey were, on the whole, positive and provided for valuable suggestions for areas to be considered in the development of the strategy. Below is a summary of the key areas that were raised within the majority of responses. Along with guidance from the Woodland Trust exemplar Tree Strategies, these suggestions will be used to guide WBC in developing the key aims and heads of terms of the strategy:

- The use of TPO's to protect our current stock of trees to prevent felling of trees. To include advice on how to apply for TPO's, how reports of mature tree felling are investigated by WBC and what measures will be taken if TPO's are breached.
- Developer responsibility to ensure new planting schemes are maintained and cared for appropriately. Prevention measures to reduce felling of mature trees for development and outline how the Tree Strategy and Local Plan will work together, considering ratio of trees felled, trees planted and how this will be measured. Clarification on who takes on management of mature trees on sites that are developed.
- WBC canopy cover
- Woodland management
- Responsibility of utility suppliers carrying out work around trees
- Maintenance policy for current stock of Council-owned trees as well as newly planted trees
- Replanting policy
- Street tree policy outlining how these are managed and maintained
- Species recommendation and advice for planting new trees – right tree, right place including permission requirements and process for residents seeking to plant on WBC-owned land
- Income potential from coppiced wood, biodiversity gains, etc
- Promotion of undergrowth cover within woodlands
- Community involvement opportunities

Whilst the bullet points above list the general points raised by respondents, below are the statistics that were gathered from the targeted questions of the survey. These have been categorised into relevant sub-headings outlining how officers intend to ensure these are covered within the strategy.

Species Diversity and Native or Non-Native Species

90.6% felt that species diversity is important
83.1% felt it is important to select native species when planting new trees

It was felt that species diversity will reduce the risk of losing high numbers of trees to pests and disease that may affect particular species. Promoting species diversity in new planting schemes will thereby increase biosecurity while also building greater resilience against the effects of climate change. Recommendation from Woodland Trust encourages planting UK and Ireland Sourced and grown trees to further limit the risk of importing pests and pathogens.

While the majority of responders had a preference to planting native species, it was raised that consideration should be made to the future effects that climate change will have on environmental conditions. Seeking guidance on how different trees; including non-native species, cope with hotter/dryer or wetter periods and understanding where it would be appropriate to incorporate climate tolerant non-native species into new planting schemes could help build the Borough's tree resilience and future-proof WBC woodlands. Woodland Trust, the Royal Horticultural Society and Forestry Commission could provide additional advice on appropriate non-native species that would not be invasive, and officers will consider their advice during the development of the strategy.

To assist with the Tree Strategy development the Council's Trees & Landscape and Ecology Officer has been collating a Tree Palette which, once published will provide advice on which native trees would be suitable for the various landscape characteristics of the Borough. Following feedback from the survey, this can be developed further to provide advice on planting considerations, size guidance and young tree aftercare requirements. These documents can be provided either within the strategy appendix or as supporting documents.

Community Involvement

76.4% would like to be involved in planting trees
69.1% would like to be involved in early maintenance tasks for newly planted trees

Opportunities for community involvement was a key point raised throughout the survey responses. Many applicants expressed the importance of ensuring that opportunities for involvement are provided and community groups and residents have access to advice and knowledge on planting and maintaining trees. Taking this into consideration of the 250k tree planting project, once planting sites are confirmed, we will be engaging with community groups and Town & Parish Councils to explore cross-organisation working to support with community planting days. Community involvement will be invaluable to new planting schemes across the Borough over the next 5 years and into the future by providing support in early maintenance tasks as well the wider behaviour changes this could inspire in caring for and valuing trees across the Borough.

Preference to Various Planting Schemes Across the Borough

81-89% would like to see woodland creation and more hedgerows
79.7% also indicating that they would like to see street planting in urban areas
68.8% would like to see community orchards planted

While over the next five years the 250k tree project will be focussing on the conversion of land to maximise carbon sequestration, these results highlight the important role street trees play within our communities. As part of the strategy development, it would be beneficial to understand the carbon sequestration, biodiversity and wider environmental benefits that are associated to street trees. A street tree policy within the strategy will help guide the Borough's approach in managing these assets.

While community orchards are invaluable to biodiversity, it is recognised that specialist knowledge is required to ensure they are pruned and properly maintained in order to successfully bear fruit and maximise the biodiversity benefits. This will need to be considered when community orchards sites are proposed for planting to ensure these additional maintenance requirements are considered and achievable. Officers will explore opportunities to work with organisations/community groups with specialist knowledge around community orchards to support, educate and empower residents to assist with the maintenance of these sites.

Maintenance of Newly Planted Trees

40% highlighted concerns around the maintenance for newly planted trees

This is a key element of the planning process for the tree planting project over the next five years and will be agreed on a site by site basis before planting commences. Each planting scheme will have a three year young tree maintenance programme to ensure they are given every chance of becoming well established within the environment. This early maintenance plan will take into consideration the watering, weed management, tree guard, stake and tie checks and mulch requirements. It is suggested that the Tree Strategy will include a maintenance policy for the current Council stock of trees and the management of newly planted trees. It was suggested that the creation of or support for tree warden roles may be able to assist with the early maintenance tasks for new tree planting schemes. Officers will explore if this could be supported by working with Town and Parish Councils and community/voluntary groups.

Creation and Management of Woodlands

It was suggested that new woodland creation sites should take into consideration the undergrowth area between trees to encourage woodland flora and fauna which will create valuable habitats and increase biodiversity. A woodland management policy within the Tree Strategy will outline how the authority manages woodlands in the borough and seek ways to maximise the benefits they offer.

Next Steps

- 1) Officers will use the responses within this survey report and take guidance from exemplar tree strategies (as promoted by the Woodland Trust) to suggest the aims and heads of terms to be included within the Wokingham Borough Council Tree Strategy.

- 2) Officers will proceed with the tender process to engage a consultant in assisting with writing the strategy and carrying out the necessary mapping exercises such as canopy cover and tree inventory survey. It is anticipated that the tender process will begin w/c 20th December 2021 and run for 4 weeks.
- 3) A cross-party working group will be arranged for early February 2022 to help steer the content of the strategy, with plans to meet in early July 2022 to review progress before the draft strategy is produced.
- 4) Officers anticipate a draft strategy will be ready by July 2022, to be approved by Executive for public consultation in September 2022.
- 5) It is proposed that a four week public consultation for the draft strategy takes place from October – November 2022 with the aim to have a final strategy approved and adopted by Executive in January 2023.

Timeline

We anticipate the draft strategy will be ready for review in July 2022 with the aim to publish the approved strategy in January 2023.

Consultation Plan

2021-2023	
Nov	Early engagement – 3-week early engagement survey open on Wokingham Engage. Survey to understand priorities and thoughts on items to be included in the strategy
Nov-Dec	Review survey results and produce report for O&S
Dec	Outline aims, heads of terms and mapping exercises for inclusion in the strategy i.e. canopy cover and council owned trees survey. Tender for consultant to assist with writing the strategy and carrying out necessary mapping exercises. 4-week tender process.
Jan	O&S meeting with objective of sharing early engagement results and timescale: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where we are now • Where we want to get to • Process to get there (including elected Member involvement and creation of a cross-party working group)
Jan	Appoint consultant end of Jan 2022
Feb	Cross-party working group initial meeting to take place beginning Feb
Feb	Town & Parish Clerk's Forum to share early engagement results and timescale for tree strategy development
July	2 nd Cross-Party Working Group to discuss progress and final input
July	Draft strategy and mapping exercise complete
Aug	Draft strategy report submitted to Executive for approval to consult
Sept	Executive decision on approval to consult (30 th Sept Executive meeting)
Oct	4-week draft strategy public consultation
Dec	Final strategy report submitted to Executive for approval to adopt
Jan	Executive adoption of Tree Strategy (27 th Jan Executive meeting)

Inputs for the strategy

In order to develop the strategy officers will need to work with a variety of different stakeholders and advisors. It is expected that advice would be sought from the following:

- Consultant – Canopy cover and Council owned trees mapping survey
- WBC officers – Trees & Landscapes, Ecology, Tree Maintenance, Highways, Countryside Services
- Resident engagement – early engagement, draft strategy public consultation
- T&P Council engagement – early engagement, draft strategy public consultation
- Cross-party working group – early engagement, meeting once consultant has been selected, 6-month progress meeting, draft strategy public consultation
- Woodland Trust exemplar Tree Strategy guidance
- Native Tree Palette and planting advice – Trees & Landscape team, Ecology officer
- Wokingham Borough Council Biodiversity Action Plan
- Wokingham Borough Council Climate Emergency Action Plan
- Forestry Commission ‘Responding to the climate emergency with new trees and woodlands’ June 2020 report
- Natural England ‘Carbon Storage and Sequestration by Habitat’ April 2021 report

Conclusion

The survey has provided guidance in understanding some of the key areas that residents, Town and Parish Councils and Councillors feel should be covered within the strategy and allows officers to progress to the next steps. While a strategy will not be able accommodate all views, it is important that the development of the Tree Strategy takes into account the majority responses received as outlined in this report and considers input from the Cross-Party Working Group over the next year.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the Covid-19 crisis. It is, therefore, imperative that Council resources are focussed on the vulnerable and its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

£26k was incorporated into the 250k tree planting project budget and formed part of the Invest To Save capital funding which was approved by Executive in July 2021 to engage a specialist consultant to assist with the development of the strategy.

Cross-Council Implications

There are many tree planting and protection initiatives taking place across the Borough through Town and Parish Councils, WDVTA, through various voluntary/community groups and the commitment to produce a Tree Strategy has been well received. The strategy will provide clarity and guidance on WBC's responsibilities to trees and woodlands.

Public Sector Equality Duty

The Council's duties under the Equality Act have been considered in the drafting of the report.

Climate Emergency – The Council has declared a Climate Emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham borough by 2030

A key area of the strategy will be to outline how trees and woodlands across the Borough will contribute to the 2030 carbon neutral target. Engaging a consultant and seeking advice from specialist organisations such as Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, Natural England and Royal Horticultural Society will help provide guidance on how the Borough can maximise the carbon sequestration benefits they can provide.

List of Background Papers

None

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