

TITLE	Draft Tree Strategy Public Consultation
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 24 November 2022
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Steve Moore
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure - Ian Shenton

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

To seek Executive approval to publish the Draft Tree Strategy on Wokingham Engage to undertake an 8-week public consultation.

The key benefit to residents of the Borough of this decision is an opportunity to contribute to the development of the strategy and the actions the Council intends to take to improve tree management and maintenance and guide the authority's approach to trees and woodlands across the borough.

The strategy links with the Core Strategy, Climate Emergency Action Plan, Wokingham Biodiversity Action Plan, Borough Design Guide, Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) (2019) and Wokingham Landscape Character Assessment (2004).

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive approve the undertaking of an 8-week public consultation on the Draft Tree Strategy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2021, officers were given Executive approval to develop a Tree Strategy. The purpose of the strategy is to provide improved direction to the management and maintenance of trees across the Borough as a whole, taking into consideration the Council's legal obligations as a tree owner. The strategy will provide Wokingham Borough Council with standards and goals to ensure it continues to care for its tree assets. It takes the risks and benefits into account, sets out the Council's aspirations for increasing tree planting, whilst continuing to protect existing trees for the benefit of future generations.

This report seeks approval to undertake an 8-week public consultation on the Draft Wokingham Borough Council Tree Strategy. This will provide opportunity for internal and external stakeholders to have input into WBC's approach to Borough wide tree management prior to formal adoption.

The financial implications of undertaking a public consultation on the Draft Tree Strategy are minimal and include only the costs of publishing and publicising the draft strategy. These costs have already been factored into the overall Tree Project budget which was approved by Executive in July 2021.

The Draft Tree Strategy includes a proposed Action Plan with short, medium- and long-term goals however, any actions within the final strategy will only be undertaken when the opportunity, funds and resources become available. The strategy goals are aspirational, and proposals will be accommodated within existing funding sources/budgets or will only be undertaken when additional funds and resources become available. Officers will continue to identify and apply to appropriate grant funding opportunities to support the implementation of the strategy Action Plan.

BACKGROUND

In Jul 2021, in response to Target 18 'Carbon sequestration by design' of the Climate Emergency Action Plan, officers were given Executive approval to begin Phase 1 of the Tree Project which included the production of a Tree Strategy.

In November 2021, an early engagement survey was published on Wokingham Engage to provide opportunity for internal and external stakeholders including Members, Town and Parish Councils, community groups and residents to have early input into the strategy development.

In January 2022, the results of the early engagement survey were collated into a report for Overview & Scrutiny review. Following selection of an external consultant to write the strategy, a cross-party working group meeting took place in March 2022 to steer the criteria of the strategy.

In February 2022, Officers attended the Tree Protection and Biodiversity Task and Finish Group meeting to provide an update on the Tree Strategy and Tree Project. Subsequently, in March 2022 a report was submitted to Overview and Scrutiny by the Tree Protection and Biodiversity Task and Finish Group. The report and recommendations have been reviewed by Officers and considered throughout the development of the Draft Tree Strategy.

In May 2022, consultation workshops were held at Shute End with the following internal and external stakeholders: Wokingham Borough Operational Tree Officers, Wokingham Borough Trees and Landscape Team, Planning Policy Team, Planning Regulation Team, Development Management Team, Estates, Green and Blue Infrastructure, Countryside Services, Cleaner and Greener, Highways, Flood & Drainage, Climate Emergency Officers, Woodland Trust and Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association. Feedback from the consultation workshops have been taken into consideration and internal officer engagement has been sought throughout the strategy development.

BUSINESS CASE

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 Tree Strategy to guide WBC's approach in the management and maintenance of trees across the borough as a whole.

The Draft Tree Strategy that has been developed assesses how the borough will manage its responsibilities to trees and woodlands under statutory legislation and Council policies.

The Canopy Cover and Tree Survey which are being developed as appendices to the Tree Strategy will help Officers progress with the Tree Planting Project and provide the Council with the necessary data to understand the value and condition of Council owned trees. Any maps that highlight areas for potential tree planting are indicative only and will be subject to discussions and negotiation with internal and external stakeholders as part of the continued Tree Project plan.

The continued development of the Draft Tree Strategy, through a public consultation, will provide opportunity for internal and external stakeholders to have input in Wokingham Borough Council's approach in the management and maintenance of trees across the borough.

An accessible version of the strategy will be available during the public consultation period.

The decision to undertake an 8-week consultation does not bind the Council to adopting any of the proposals within the strategy.

Timescales for next steps

The next steps will be to undertake an 8-week consultation from 28th November 2022 to 22nd January 2023 as detailed below.

2022-2023	
Oct	Draft strategy report submitted to CLT for approval to take to the Executive
Nov	Executive decision on approval to consult (24 th November Executive meeting)
Nov-Jan	8-week draft strategy public consultation (28 th Nov – 22 nd January 2023)
Jan - Feb	Public consultation feedback reviewed and considered
Mar	Consultant to provide a revised strategy
Apr	Revised strategy report submitted to CLT for approval to take to the Executive
May	Executive decision on approval to adopt (25 th May Executive meeting)
May	Executive adoption of Tree Strategy

Notification of the consultation will be communicated via press releases, newsletters, online surveys, direct email contact and social media. Following this consultation, the feedback will be fed into a revised draft which will be submitted for approval as the final Tree Strategy in May 2023.

The public consultation will be in the form of an online survey through Wokingham Engage where participants will be able to make comments on the contents and action plan of the Draft Tree Strategy. Comments will be reviewed by officers and the strategy consultant and fed into a revised draft which will be submitted for approval as the final Tree Strategy in May 2023.

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 focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
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Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Approximately £1000	Yes	Capital. The cost for carrying out the public consultation on the Draft Tree Strategy have already been included within the previously approved Tree Project budget.
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil	N/A	
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil	N/A	

Other Financial Information

Implementation of the Tree Strategy Action Plan (which is not binding) will be accommodated within existing funding sources/budgets or will only be undertaken when additional funds and resources become available. Officers will utilise grant funding opportunities where appropriate and as and when they become available.

The strategy assumes income will be generated through the sale of biodiversity net gains, with the income refunding the initial investment and funding ongoing annual maintenance of the trees. The risk exists around the level of income that can be generated and possibly timing. Although based on initial estimates income levels would have to be significantly different to those estimated before the project was not viable.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

If approved, the public consultation will take place between 28th November 2022 – 22nd January 2023.

Public Sector Equality Duty

An initial equality impact assessment has been carried out and has not identified any negative impact to the proposal.

Climate Emergency – *This 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*

The Draft Tree Strategy takes into consideration the benefits that suitable management and maintenance of existing trees and planting of additional trees will have on the carbon sequestration targets set out within the Climate Emergency Action Plan. Supporting surveys including the Canopy Cover and Tree Surveys will support officers in making recommendations for sites suitable for future tree planting in order to maximise carbon sequestration, biodiversity and canopy cover benefits. Publicly sharing the assessments will support future collaborative working with Town and Parish Councils, community groups and residents. The decision to approve an 8-week public consultation will allow officers to continue the development of the strategy and provide opportunity for public input into the final strategy.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

N/A

List of Background Papers	
Draft Tree Strategy Draft Tree Strategy Appendix A: Tree Survey Draft Tree Strategy Appendix C: Wokingham Borough Council Tree Preservation Order Process Flow Chart Draft Tree Strategy Appendix D: Hedgerows for Screening and Wildlife Appendix B will contain the canopy cover survey maps and will be ready for inclusion within the final revised Tree Strategy.	

Contact Laura Buck	Service Delivery and Infrastructure
Telephone	Email laura.buck@wokingham.gov.uk