

TITLE	Wokingham Borough Council Tree Strategy
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 29 June 2023
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framaliccio
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure - Ian Shenton

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

To seek Executive approval to adopt the Wokingham Borough Council Tree Strategy.

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 approves the adoption of the Wokingham Borough Council Tree Strategy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2021, officers were given Executive approval to develop a Tree Strategy. Between November 2021-September 2022 cross-party member working groups, internal and external stakeholders consultation workshops and mapping surveys were carried out to support the development of the Draft Tree Strategy which, in October 2022, was approved for an 8-week public consultation. Feedback from the consultation has been collated and reviewed by Officers and fed into a revised Tree Strategy. Officers are now seeking Executive approval to adopt the revised 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 supports Wokingham Borough Council with standards and goals to ensure it continues to care for its tree assets and complies with its legal duty of care and statutory responsibilities. 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 adopt the Tree Strategy which has gone through stakeholder engagement and an 8-week public consultation.

The financial implications of adopting the strategy are minimal and include only the costs for Digital Solutions to convert the revised document into an accessible format before publishing on Wokingham.gov.uk.

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.

In October 2022, the Executive approved an 8-week public consultation for the Draft Tree Strategy which was published on Wokingham Engage. The standard consultation period was extended from 6 weeks to 8 weeks to allow additional time over the festive period for residents, Members and other stakeholders to respond.

Notification of the consultation was communicated via press releases, newsletters, online surveys, direct email contact and social media.

The public consultation, which was held in the form of an online survey through Wokingham Engage provided opportunity for Members, residents, internal and external stakeholders to share their views on the contents of the Draft Tree Strategy. Paper copies were available on request through Customer Service and Library teams. Residents requiring support in completing the survey were also able to request this through WBC Customer Service. Feedback from the consultation was collated and reviewed by Officers and an external consultant before being worked into a revised strategy.

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 was developed has been subject to stakeholder engagement and an 8-week public consultation.

During the consultation, a total of 131 responses were received from Wokingham Residents, Borough Councillors, Town and Parish Councils and volunteer/ community groups.

The consultation was formatted into two sections:

- Section 1 included questions relating to the general principles of adopting a Tree Strategy; the timeframe the strategy covers and the aims and objectives of the Tree Strategy.
- Section 2 included more detailed questions around the contents of the draft strategy; surveys that have been completed, legislation and the strategy Action Plan.

In addition to selecting answer choices between Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree or Strongly disagree, each question provided the opportunity for additional comments to be made. Additional comments received have been reviewed and collated into appropriate amendments within the revised Tree Strategy. Below are some of the key statistics received from the consultation:

- 75% Strongly agreed or Agreed that 10 years is an appropriate period for the strategy to cover.
- 72% Strongly agreed or Agreed that the environmental and socio-economic benefits of trees have been taken into consideration.
- 71% Strongly agreed or Agreed that the Tree Strategy is clear on the purpose of a tree preservation order (TPO), the process of applying for one and the procedure following a breach.
- 68% Strongly agreed or agreed that relevant existing and emerging WBC plans and policies have been considered.
- 68% Strongly agreed or Agreed the Tree Strategy sets clear expectations and guidance around appropriate hedgerow planting.
- 66% Strongly agreed or Agreed that the relevant national legislation on trees and woodlands have been considered. A further 30% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement however on review of the individual comments for this question, those who were neutral in their response advised that they were not aware of the relevant legislation. Further detail has been added to the Legal Framework section.
- 61% Strongly agreed or Agreed that the Strategy recognises the risks of pests and diseases to council-owned trees and outlines sufficient measures to reduce this risk.
- 61% Strongly agreed or Agreed that the Strategy respects and places enough importance on selecting the right species when planting trees.

- 60% Strongly agreed or Agreed that the Tree Strategy is clear on the evidence required for issues relating to council-owned trees and subsidence. A further 32% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.
- 46% agreed that appropriate survey work had been completed. A further 36% neither agreed or disagreed with this statement. To account for this, further detail on the Canopy Cover Survey and Tree Report's that were completed as part of the strategy development has since been added to the strategy.

The revised strategy has assessed how the borough will manage its responsibilities to trees and woodlands under statutory legislation and Council policies and taken into account the feedback and comments made as part of the public consultation.

Key areas within the strategy that have had amendments following the public consultation are:

- Strategy Objectives
- Legal Framework
- Tree Report & Canopy Cover Survey
- Value of Trees
- Management and maintenance of trees on Council owned land
- Tree Planting
- Risks and Biosecurity
- Action Plan

Considerations and amendments that have been built into the revised Strategy are summarised in the accompanying document: Tree Strategy Consultation Revisions.

The continued stakeholder engagement through the development of the Draft Tree Strategy and the 8-week public consultation, has provided 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 Action Plan, which includes short, medium- and long-term goals has been included within the Strategy and adapted based on the consultation feedback. However, any actions within the strategy will only be undertaken when the opportunity, funds and resources become available.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and 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?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Approximately £1000 (approximate costs associated with converting the final document and appendices into an accessible format ready for publication on wokingham.gov.uk)	Yes	Capital. The financial implications raised in this report can be contained within existing budgets. The cost for publishing the Tree Strategy have already been included within the previously approved Tree Project budget. As part of the previously agreed Tree Project budget, £26,000 of Capital Invest to Save funds were approved to support the development and publication of the Tree Strategy.
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil	N/A	
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil	N/A	

Other Financial Information

The financial implications raised in this report can be contained within existing budgets as part of the previously agreed Tree Project budget of £26k to develop and publish a Tree Strategy. Implementation of the Tree Strategy Action Plan 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.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

8-week public consultation already carried out on Draft Tree Strategy and amendments have been included in the revised Tree Strategy.

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 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. Climate Emergency Officers have been involved in the development of the Strategy.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

N/A

List of Background Papers

Tree Strategy
Tree Strategy Appendix A: Tree Report
Tree Strategy Appendix B: Canopy Cover Survey
Tree Strategy Appendix C: TPO Process
Tree Strategy Appendix D: Hedgerows for Screening and Wildlife in Wokingham
Exec Report: Tree Strategy Consultation Revisions

Contact Laura Buck

Service Place

Telephone

Email laura.buck@wokingham.gov.uk