

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

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| TO: | HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE | | |
| DATE: | 11TH MARCH 2020 | AGENDA ITEM: | |
| TITLE: | TREE STRATEGY | | |
| LEAD COUNCILLOR: | COUNCILLOR ROWLAND | PORTFOLIO: | CULTURE, HERITAGE AND RECREATION |
| SERVICE: | PLANNING | WARDS: | ALL |
| LEAD OFFICER: | MARK WORRINGHAM | TEL: | 0118 9373337 |
| JOB TITLE: | PLANNING POLICY TEAM LEADER | E-MAIL: | <u>mark.worringham@reading.gov.uk</u> |

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report concerns a draft Tree Strategy 2020, which is proposed for public consultation. The preparation of a new strategy, to replace the 2010 version, is an important part of the Council's response to the Climate Emergency. The strategy includes ambitious aims and objectives for tree planting to 2030 and 2050, and includes details of how the existing tree stock will be protected and maintained. Views on the strategy from key environmental groups have already been sought and fed into the draft. Public consultation on the strategy is proposed to take place in March and April.
- 1.2 Appendices
Appendix 1 - Equality Impact Assessment Scoping
Appendix 2 - Draft Tree Strategy 2020

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Tree Strategy (Appendix 2) be agreed for public consultation.
- 2.2 That the Deputy Director of Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services be authorised to make any changes necessary as a result of consultation and approve the final Tree Strategy, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Reading Borough Council declared a Climate Emergency at Council on 26th February 2019, and set out its commitment to work towards becoming carbon neutral by 2030. Trees can make an important contribution to both mitigating effects on climate change and on adapting to the climate change that is already inevitable. Ensuring that there is a robust strategy for trees is therefore a key part of the Council's response to the climate emergency.
- 3.2 At the same time, there are existing policy documents which make clear the importance of trees in Reading. The Reading 2050 Vision sees Reading as a 'City of Rivers and Parks' and includes potential measures of which trees are a key part, including connectivity of green spaces and introducing vegetation within the built environment. The Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2021 includes a priority of 'Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe'. The new Local Plan adopted in November 2019 includes policies to secure tree planting within development sites. In addition, the Council and community organisations are reviewing the range of conservation area appraisals across the Borough, and trees are usually a vital part of the historic significance of those areas.

4. THE PROPOSAL

(a) Current Position

- 4.1 The Council's existing Tree Strategy dates from 2010. Whilst there has been considerable success since that time, including planting of around 2,000 trees on Council land, it is now time that the Strategy is reviewed to meet the new challenges, particularly climate change.
- 4.2 The Council itself owns and manages approximately 12,500 specimen trees in addition to woodlands and groups of trees. Overall, the tree canopy cover of Reading is 18% of the Borough's area, although this differs substantially in different parts of the Borough, from 6.7% in Battle ward to 32.2% in Mapledurham.

(b) Option Proposed

- 4.3 This report recommends that a Draft Tree Strategy 2020 is approved for public consultation. The Draft Tree Strategy is included as Appendix 2. The Strategy, including any amendments made at this meeting, will also be considered at Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 16th March.
- 4.4 The Tree Strategy is built around a number of objectives, with actions against each objective. The Strategy looks at tree management and planting on the Council's own land, as well as measures dealing with trees on private land.
- 4.5 The objectives of the Strategy are set out below:

1. RBC Tree Stock - protect, retain, manage and plant trees to ensure an increased canopy cover of healthy trees resistant to pest & diseases and climate change and to reduce air pollution.
2. Climate adaptation - increase the diversity of the tree stock (family, genus and species) to provide resistance to climate change; plant large canopy species wherever feasible; maintain and keep trees healthy in order that they can achieve their full potential thus ensuring that Reading's Urban Forest is resilient to the impacts of climate change and provides the maximum role in mitigating its effects.
3. Tree planting - plant at least 3,000 'standard' trees¹ by 2030 on Council land.
4. Canopy cover - increase overall canopy cover to 25% by 2050; ensure that all wards have at least 12% canopy cover by 2050; and target priority areas for tree planting based on canopy cover, air pollution, treed corridors, green links, areas of high landscape value and ensure RBC and planting on development sites considers these.
5. Protection of private trees - the Local Planning Authority will continue to use its powers under the Town & Country Planning Act 1990 to make Tree Preservation Orders and to retain & protect trees on development sites in line with good arboricultural practice
6. RBC will engage with partners, public and landowners and work with key partner volunteer groups to raise awareness of the Tree Strategy aims and good arboricultural management practices
7. Improve biodiversity across the Borough by; selecting trees that are either native or of wildlife value, particularly in semi-natural areas; by ensuring that tree planting does not compromise or adversely affect other habitats; and by protecting ancient woodlands and ancient/veteran trees.
8. Identify all areas suitable for street tree and other planting on Council land - initial study to be completed by 2021, with continued updates.
9. Funding - continue to secure funding for tree planting and maintenance through government and other funding streams and partners.
10. Biosecurity - continually review RBC purchasing and working practices to ensure RBC are working to good arboricultural practice to minimise the chance of introducing and/or spreading pests, diseases or invasive species within the Borough
11. Trees & Development - tree retention, protection and planting within development sites in will be in accordance with the aims of the Tree Strategy and Local Plan policies.
12. Monitor progress - record and report net tree gain on an annual basis and reassess canopy cover in 2030.

¹ A 'standard' tree will be of a minimum 8-10cm girth and 2.5m in height at the time of planting.
N.B. the majority of the 3,000 trees are expected to be above this minimum

- 4.6 In terms of quantitative targets, the strategy includes shorter-term targets for tree planting by 2030 and longer-term targets for canopy cover by 2050. The proposed tree planting on Council land would represent a 50% increase over current rates. However, as trees take some time to mature, it would be a number of years before increased tree planting in line with this strategy is reflected in increased canopy cover, and this is why no canopy cover target by 2030 is proposed. There are four wards which fall below the ward-specific canopy cover target (Abbey, Battle, Katesgrove and Whitley), and these, along with the treed corridors, would need to see much of the tree planting.
- 4.7 There is an important relationship between the Tree Strategy and the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), which is also to be considered at this meeting. Production of the BAP has been co-ordinated with the Tree Strategy. Council officers who have inputted into the BAP have also fed into the Tree Strategy, as have many of the other organisations. The potential for the two documents to be combined has been considered, but this was not considered appropriate. Trees have many important roles in addition to biodiversity, whilst biodiversity has many facets beyond trees. The Tree Strategy is also a more detailed document. However, there is considerable cross-referencing between the documents, and the documents have been reviewed to ensure that there is no inconsistency or unnecessary duplication.
- 4.8 It is proposed that public consultation take place over a five-week period, between 20th March and 24th April 2020. The Tree Strategy and BAP will be consulted upon together. Once consultation is completed, responses will be considered in drawing up a final version.
- 4.9 This report recommends that, for reasons of putting the Strategy in place swiftly, a final version taking account of consultation responses be approved by the Deputy Director of Planning, Transport and Regulatory Services, in consultation with the Lead Councillor for Culture, Heritage and Recreation. It is expected that this would take place in May 2020.

(c) Other Options Considered

- 4.10 There are two alternative options to progressing with the Tree Strategy as drafted:
- (a) continue to rely on the 2010 Tree Strategy; and
 - (b) preparing a strategy that aims for a higher level of canopy cover.
- 4.11 Not progressing with a new strategy would mean reliance on a strategy which is now ten years old and which was not drafted to reflect the Climate Emergency. This would not result in increased levels of tree planting, and miss out on all of the associated environmental benefits.
- 4.12 A strategy which aims for a higher level of canopy cover, for instance 30-40% would not be achievable, given the primarily urban nature of the Borough. Even without the constraint of being an urban area, most of the Borough is not in Council ownership, and the Council would not therefore be able to effectively influence whether this is achieved. There would also be possible

issues in that some of the areas where trees might be possible to plant to achieve these targets are already important habitats in their own right (e.g. flood meadows) and this approach might therefore have a detrimental impact on biodiversity.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 Approval of the Tree Strategy will contain proposals for continuing to expand the tree stock and canopy cover of Reading, and to protect and manage the existing stock. This will play a major part in achieving the Council's priorities of 'Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe' and 'Promoting health, education, culture and wellbeing' as set out in the Corporate Plan (2018-2021).

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 A new Tree Strategy which increases the tree stock and canopy cover of the Borough would have significant positive environmental implications.
- 6.2 Trees can have a mitigating effect on climate change, by absorbing carbon dioxide and therefore offer a role in the decarbonisation of the Borough. Similarly, tree planting is a way of mitigating the adverse effects of poor air quality.
- 6.3 Trees can also make a particular contribution to adapting to the effects of the climate change that is already occurring. Trees can cool the town through transpiration and shading, prevent surface water run off by absorbing water through their leaves, branches and roots, and their fallen leaves feed the soil allowing for further carbon absorption.
- 6.4 The Tree Strategy considers how the approach to trees can best maximise these positive effects, through, for instance, inclusion of trees with a large canopy, ensuring the right balance between native and non-native species, and making sure that wildlife-friendly species are planted.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 The Tree Strategy has been subject to a stakeholder consultation with key groups over a period of three weeks between 3rd and 24th February 2020. The groups involved were as follows:
- Globe groups (Caversham, Tilehurst);
 - Residents associations;
 - Reading Tree Warden Network;
 - Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT);
 - The Conservation Volunteers;
 - Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC);
 - Environment Agency;
 - Thames Water;
 - Network Rail;

- Reading UK CIC;
- Local Nature Partnership;
- Reading Climate Action Network;
- Econet (Reading) (includes the Friends of groups and CROW);
- The Woodland Trust;
- Trees for Reading;
- Natural England; and
- University of Reading

7.2 A total of seven responses from these groups to this initial consultation were received. Many of these related to matters of detail, and these comments have been considered in preparing the draft of the Tree Strategy. Some of the groups considered that the Tree Strategy should be more ambitious in terms of new planting and/or canopy cover. However, these targets have been carefully considered to be achievable within the timescales, subject to resources being available.

7.3 Subject to approval, the Tree Strategy would be subject to a five week period of public consultation during March and April. This will include publication on the Council's website and sending to organisations and groups on the planning consultation lists. Consultation will take place in conjunction with the Biodiversity Action Plan. Responses received will be taken into account in preparing a final version of the document.

8. EQUALITY ASSESSMENT

8.1 The Scoping Assessment, included at Appendix 1 identifies that an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) is not relevant to this decision. A full EqIA is not therefore required.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 A Tree Strategy is not a statutory requirement in itself, but it does state how the Council will undertake some of its statutory functions.

9.2 Under Part VIII (Special Controls), Chapter I Trees, Section 197 of The Town and Country Act 1990 states (no change since 2010):

“Planning permission to include appropriate provision for preservation and planting of trees.

It shall be the duty of the local planning authority—

- (a) to ensure, whenever it is appropriate, that in granting planning permission for any development adequate provision is made, by the imposition of conditions, for the preservation or planting of trees; and*
- (b) to make such orders under section 198 as appear to the authority to be necessary in connection with the grant of such permission, whether for giving effect to such conditions or otherwise.”*

- 9.3 Section 198 relates to the serving of Tree Preservation Orders, which the Council continues to do when appropriate.
- 9.4 The Environment Bill 2019/2020 had its first reading on 15th October and second reading on 28th October 2019. The Bill was reintroduced to parliament, following the general election, on 30th January and had its second reading on 26th February 2020. If brought into law, it will have implications for trees. Included within the Bill are measures to ‘improve the air we breathe’ and ‘restore and enhance nature and green spaces’, both of which tree planting can contribute to. Within this latter measure, The Environment Bill introduces a ‘Duty to Consult’ which will give the public the opportunity to understand why a street tree is being felled and express any concerns regarding this. If the Bill becomes law, the Council will implement required procedures.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The Tree Strategy has been prepared within existing budgets.
- 10.2 Many of the actions set out in the Tree Strategy can be achieved using existing resources and within existing budgets.
- 10.3 The ambitions in terms of tree planting, which are to plant 3,000 trees on Council land by 2030, and will result in enhanced canopy cover, will require funding. Tree planting on current average levels of around 200 each year reflects the size of the tree planting budget, and the Tree Strategy makes clear that if an increase is to be achieved, this will have budgetary implications. This level of tree planting would require the purchase of an additional bowser (quotes currently being sought), additional vehicle costs to tow (around £12K p.a.) and an additional half post (£17K p.a.), as well as an approximate 50% increase in the tree planting budget from £50K to around £75K). There is also likely to need to be a 5% increase in the annual maintenance budget to cover items such as recording, inspection and formative pruning. Capital funding of £50k per annum for 20/21, 21/22 and 22/23 has been agreed as part of the Council’s annual budget setting, the revenue implications of this will not be realised until 21/22. The service will seek to manage within existing resource, with a growth bid considered as part of next years budget setting if required.

Value for Money (VFM)

- 10.4 Trees are a cost-effective way of having a significant positive effect on the Borough’s environment, in terms of mitigating and adapting to climate change, enhancing the appearance and character of the area, improving air quality, providing for biodiversity and complementing the town’s heritage.

Risk Assessment

- 10.5 There are no direct financial risks associated with the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Tree Strategy 2010

APPENDIX 1: EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT SCOPING

Provide basic details

Name of proposal/activity/policy to be assessed:

Tree Strategy

Directorate: DEGNS - Directorate of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services

Service: Planning

Name: Mark Worringham

Job Title: Planning Policy Team Leader

Date of assessment: 29/01/2020

Scope your proposal

What is the aim of your policy or new service?

To set out the strategy, objectives and actions for protecting, managing and expanding the tree stock of Reading

Who will benefit from this proposal and how?

The whole community will benefit from the continued protection and maintenance of existing trees and the increase in number of trees and canopy cover.

What outcomes will the change achieve and for whom?

An increase in tree planting on Council land, and increased canopy cover, which will be beneficial to all residents in the Borough.

A particular focus on tree planting on treed corridors and in the wards where tree cover is lowest, which will benefit residents of Abbey, Battle, Katesgrove and Whitley in particular.

Continued protection of important trees, which will benefit all residents.

Who are the main stakeholders and what do they want?

Local residents and environmental groups - protection of important trees, additional tree planting to contribute to climate change reduction/adaption, improved air quality, biodiversity, local character.

Council departments - clear targets and approaches to new tree planting and management of existing trees, supported by sufficient resources.

Landowners - a clear approach to protection of trees on their land.

Developers - a reasonable approach to new tree planting requirements which does not affect development viability and achievability.

Assess whether an EIA is Relevant

How does your proposal relate to eliminating discrimination; promoting equality of opportunity; promoting good community relations?

Do you have evidence or reason to believe that some (racial, disability, gender, sexuality, age and religious belief) groups may be affected differently than others? (Think about your monitoring information, research, national data/reports etc)

Yes No

Is there already public concern about potentially discriminatory practices/impact or could there be? Think about your complaints, consultation, feedback.

Yes No

If the answer is **Yes** to any of the above you need to do an Equality Impact Assessment.

If No you **MUST** complete this statement

An Equality Impact Assessment is not relevant because: protecting, managing and expanding Reading's tree stock does not have a differential effect on racial groups, gender/transgender, disability, sexual orientation, age or religious belief.

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| Signed (completing officer) | Mark Worringham | Date: 29 th January 2020 |
| Signed (Lead Officer) | Mark Worringham | Date: 29 th January 2020 |