

England Trees Action Plan Update

Final Decision-Maker	Communities, Housing and Environment Committee
Lead Head of Service	Mark Green, Director of Finance & Business Improvement
Lead Officer and Report Author	Kathryn Moore, Transformation Team Leader and James Wilderspin, Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

An urgent item was raised at the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee on the 1 June 2021 regarding the England Trees Action Plan and the positive impact tree planting can have towards tackling the climate emergency and air quality issues for Maidstone.

This report is to provide an update on the England Trees Action Plan, other strategies, initiatives, relevant policies and the initiation of the action plan at Maidstone Borough Council for tree planting activities across the borough.

Purpose of Report

Noting

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee notes the report.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Communities, Housing and Environment Committee	31 August 2021

England Trees Action Plan Update

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <p>We do not expect the actions within the report will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities. However, they will support the Council's ability to achieve the outcomes within Safe, Clean and Green.</p>	Transformation Team Leader
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>The report supports the achievement of the Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected cross cutting objectives.</p>	Transformation Team Leader
Risk Management	Please refer to paragraph 5.1 in the report.	Transformation Team Leader
Financial	Funding has already been allocated to actions via the Biodiversity and Climate Change Funding and this report does not request further funding for implementation. We will continue to bid for external funding to help achieve our aims.	Finance Team
Staffing	We will deliver the actions within the report with our current staffing. However, it is recognised that external expertise will be	Transformation Team Leader

	required, and these costs are considered within the funding.	
Legal	There are no legal implications associated with the actions set out in the report which is to note the update on the trees action plan and not for decision.	Legal Team
Privacy and Data Protection	No impacts on Privacy and Data Protection identified as a result of the report.	Policy and Information Team
Equalities	A high-level Equality Impact Assessment was carried out on the Biodiversity and Climate Change action plan and further assessments will be made for relevant projects.	Policy & Information Manager
Public Health	We recognise the actions in the report will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals.	Transformation Team Leader
Crime and Disorder	There are no Crime and Disorder issues to note.	Transformation Team Leader
Procurement	There is likely to be significant ongoing procurement implications arising from implementation of the actions and the procurement team will be involved throughout.	Transformation Team Leader
Biodiversity and Climate Change	The implications of this report on biodiversity and climate change have been considered and are noted in section 2.2.	Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Planting trees and increasing woodland cover is a powerful solution to combating climate change and mitigating increasing global temperatures and keeping them below the 1.5C global target. Tree planting comes with numerous side benefits including, increasing biodiversity, reducing soil degradation and increasing water retention, reducing temperature rise and providing natural flood management if planted in the right places. Trees also have a significant positive impact on our wellbeing and health. Maidstone Borough Council and our members recognise the need and benefits that tree planting in the borough will bring, and this report is to update and inform on our long-term strategy to begin widescale tree planting across the borough and with our partners.

2.1 The England Trees Action Plan

The England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024 was released in May 2021 and sets out the government's long-term vision for the treescape it wants to see

in England by 2050 and beyond. The plan provides a strategic framework for implementing the Nature for Climate Fund of which £500 million is allocated. With this funding the intention is to treble tree planting by the end of the current Parliament as part of the UK's ambition to plant 30,000 hectares of woodland per year by then.

The report highlights that public access to trees and woodlands will be improved in a responsible way, by encouraging community-led tree planting and investing in partnerships with communities and local government. An action is to publish guidance for local authorities to develop their own local tree and woodland strategies.

The report also covers multiple aspects of trees including encouraging support to private landowners for example the Woodland Carbon Guarantee, this will encourage an increase to woodland planting rates and the domestic market for woodlands by giving landowners the option to sell their captured carbon in the form of verified carbon credits, and opening the Local Authorities Treescapes Fund, to work in partnership with Non-Governmental Organisations, local landowners, and community groups to deliver strategic planting and natural regeneration of trees outside of woodlands for the benefit of local communities and nature.

Whilst the England Trees Action Plan provides some guidance it does put tree planting in the context of the government's Nature Recovery Network, which has not yet been published and will not be available until the end of 2021. The Government's new Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery Schemes are due to provide the main mechanism for publicly funded woodland creation after 2024.

2.2 Our Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan

The Policy and Resources Committee adopted the Biodiversity and Climate Change Action plan on the 21st of October 2020. Within the action plan there are four key actions which relate to trees. Action 6.1 encourages tree planting in new developments, namely as part of the Local Plan 'to increase tree coverage and other wildlife habitats to allow biodiversity in new developments'. This will also be supported by the national policy indicated in the England Trees Action Plan which states

'We are committed to seeing all new streets lined with trees. Developers should work with local authorities to plan, plant, and manage these trees, and agree how they will be funded - including through developer contributions such as Biodiversity Net Gain. Obtaining the expert services of local tree officers is recommended to help ensure trees and woodlands are planted and managed effectively.'

The England Trees Action Plan proposes changes to the National Planning Policy Framework, to make clear the expectation that trees, such as community orchards, should be incorporated in new developments and that streets should be tree lined. Which will not only help ensure trees are included in new development but that these are the correct species of trees to ensure maximum benefits and longevity.

Action 6.3 of our plan, *to support and signpost community groups on tree planting and after care,* is ongoing and currently compliments the Queens Green Canopy (QGC) project. The QGC is to mark the Queens Platinum Jubilee and will see a unique tree planting campaign being rolled out across the UK. Amongst other initiatives the QGC will encourage schools, communities, and groups to engage and apply for free saplings through The Woodland Trust and raise awareness to protect our ancient woodlands. We will support this project through promotions and signposting to ensure we link our own MBC tree planting initiatives with the QGC campaign.

As set out in the Action Plan a large contributor to increasing tree coverage in the borough falls under action 6.9 – *'where feasible increase tree cover to 2/3 on our estate and contribute to the Kent aim to plant 1.5 million trees and aim towards national average tree cover of 16%.'* For this action please note that while we may be able to advance with tree planting on our estate where possible in the short term, larger scale tree planting activities is contingent on partnerships with larger landowners in the borough and will be rolled out over a longer timeframe. Therefore, tree planting activities will be incremental, and subject to expert advice on what time of year is best to plant different native species, as well as soil and maintenance needs. For these reasons, a feasibility study will be commissioned to ensure that best practices are followed and a realistic timescale is established to plant the trees and ensure their longevity.

The Kent and Medway Energy and Low Emission strategy is to develop and implement a strategy to establish 1.5 million new trees (or their carbon sequestration equivalent) in Kent and Medway. Kent County Council are currently recruiting a Kent Tree Strategy Officer who will be responsible for working with partners across the county to commence delivery on this targeted 1.5 million new trees, turning the high-level aspirations of the (currently draft) Kent Tree Establishment Strategy into action. An emphasis on expansion and reconnection of existing woodland (including urban woods) will define the action within our plan and the Kent Nature Partnership Biodiversity Strategy which envisages a landscape-scale approach and implies looking at the borough as a whole. This is why the development of the Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery Schemes will be integral to influencing this action and ensuring woodlands are connected and biodiversity is able to thrive.

The final action within our Biodiversity and Climate Change action plan which supports increasing tree coverage is action 6.12 *'audit trees on council land and create a maintenance plan.'* Tim Moya Associates have carried out tree audits with support from the MBC Parks department over the past few years covering our entire estate and have built up a thorough database that can be used to assess how the stock can be maintained and enhanced as part of the tree planting plans.

2.3 Tree Planting in Maidstone

The aim of the trees project is to increase tree cover across the borough whilst ensuring the right trees are planted, in the right place for the right reasons. Preliminary discussions have taken place with the Kent Wildlife Trust about the need for a baseline for tree planting such as sites that

would be suitable, which species would be appropriate, and whether it is possible to create woodland corridors. We have now scoped this piece of work and the Terms Of Reference (TOR) can be found in Appendix 1. Next steps will be to commission an appropriate provider and then use the TOR to inform our future tree planting throughout the borough.

As indicated in the TOR, encouraging natural regeneration of our existing woodlands will be central to the tree planting plan. MBC estate and areas for trees is limited, so where possible larger swathes of land will be sought as larger scale planting areas will maximise the benefits and will be far more cost effective. We also recognise that the cost of purchasing land for tree planting is substantial and therefore conclude the most beneficial way to increase tree coverage in the borough is to work in partnership with landowners to seek appropriate areas for large scale tree planting (see section 2.5).

In areas such as parks and open spaces, tree planting will ensure maximum open spaces are still available for the public, and that appropriate sized trees are planted to reduce the risk of vandalism and damage to the trees in areas with more public access. A maintenance plan will also be developed to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to protect new trees from damage and vandalism, as well as how to care for trees in an urban area to ensure there is not risk to the public or infrastructure.

Tree planting also has numerous side benefits in combating some of the impacts of climate change. As part of the MBC tree planting plan where possible trees will be planted to reduce the impacts of flooding. Studies have shown that planting more trees allows for increased evaporation from broad leaves, increases the soil and roots retention and absorption of rainwater and reduces the impacts of flooding if planted in the right places. Tree planting along riverbanks can also reduce the impacts of bank erosion and more canopy cover in urban areas can increase the coverage of shade and reduce temperatures. The feasibility study will highlight areas of Maidstone Borough where tree planting will have these side benefits and close collaboration with the Planning department will ensure that natural solutions are also used to reduce the impacts of climate change in our borough.

Close collaboration with Kent County Council will also be sought on tree planting permission along streets throughout Maidstone. Tree planting activities on public streets will also be developed closely with the Planning Department and experts to ensure that roots and the growth of trees in the longer term do not damage the pavements, roads, phone/electric cables, and other infrastructure.

2.4 The Woodland Trust

We have engaged with the Woodland Trust and they are happy to work in partnership with MBC to further the joint aims of sustainably increasing tree cover. However from initial discussions the Trust do not envisage further extensive planting opportunities on open land that they own on the Hucking Estate, as such land is an important habitat in its own right. The

Trusts' approach to providing *Woodland Advisors* to support landowners to create woodland could be replicated and focussed within the borough or used as a shared resource with neighbouring boroughs as a County based resource. There are perceived benefits for landowners working with independent charitable organisations with a strong and easily understood 'Woodland' brand and image compared to a local authority and a partnership with the Woodland Trust would be a valuable asset as part of our tree planting plan.

2.5 Large landowners and call for sites

As mentioned, due to limited areas for wide scale tree planting on the MBC estate, we will seek out partnerships a collaboration with major landowners across the borough and to utilise land for larger scale tree planting and to maximise the positive impacts. We will look to carry out calls for sites, create a strategy for discussion with landowners and stakeholder engagement, host further events, such as wilding events, to develop strong relationships with landowners.

For example, MBC will seek partnership opportunities with the Kent County Agricultural Society to engage with local farmers to find synergies between tree planting and encouraging biodiversity on their lands – such as wild corridors, soil and water management, improved animal welfare, and added revenue. MBC will also seek to work with parish councils for added benefits to parish land.

2.6 Development of partnerships with local business and scoping the engagement of third-party carbon offsetting schemes

Additional funding for tree planting activities will be sought with external sponsorship through application to Lotteries grants and trusts, as well as potential funds derived from the public purchasing a tree (e.g. for commemorative purposes). MBC will also scope synergies with local private sector on their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and to potentially secure funding from local private sector to purchase trees/allocate land and spaces for tree planting.

Additionally, opportunities will be scoped for 'carbon offsetting' schemes and potential of collaboration with third-party organisations that calculate carbon emissions and offer tree planting carbon offsetting projects. Woodland carbon offers exciting opportunities for the private sector and other investors and there is a need to develop these markets further in the UK with support from councils who may have land availability and can facilitate partnerships that would create a win-win opportunity for all parties.

2.7 The Pleasant Forest Project

The Forestry Commission are creating a new multi-purpose woodland in the borough – Pleasant Forest which will be a 127-hectare site at Platts Heath. Public consultation on Pleasant Forest closed in February 2021 and design plans have been finalised and can be found in Appendix 2. The forestry commission have placed an order with the tree nursery for

180,000 trees and 35,000 shrubs and will begin planting in November 2021.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 That the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee notes the report.
-

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That the Communities, Housing and Environment Committee notes the report.
-

5. RISKS

- 5.1 Due to the high demands for tree planting which has been impacted by government funding and COVID-19 we may struggle to buy quantities of trees required from a bio-secure nursery. This may also increase the price of trees which has an impact on budget. This risk can be mitigated by working with other organisations and partners to increase the buying power of the authority. Appropriate procurement processes will be followed to ensure value for money.
- 5.2 If species selection is inappropriate and saplings are planted poorly, not maintained and watered sufficiently in the first 3 years, are destroyed by animals, or suffer from pests or disease this will reduce the survival rate of saplings. A management plan will need to be put in place to reduce this risk.
- 5.3 Tree planting will need to be conducted with the planning department to ensure areas/land allocated for tree planting will not be jeopardised by further development. Equally, tree planting proximity to infrastructure such as roads, paths and buildings will also need to be closely coordinated with the planning department to ensure, potential trees falling in high winds or the growth of roots do not cause potential dangers and impacts to the public.
- 5.4 With additional tree coverage comes additional risk of forest fires, particularly in light of future hotter drier summers projected. Risk mitigation strategies will be developed in coordination with the Kent Fire and Rescue Service and emergency planning and reliance officer.
- 5.5 Risk of vandalism and damage to the trees in areas with more public access. A maintenance plan will be developed to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to protect new trees from damage and vandalism, as well as how to care for trees in an urban area to ensure there is not risk to the public or infrastructure.

6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

6.1 None

7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

7.1 Initiate General Public Communication and Engagement Campaign

Next steps include the development of an appropriate inclusive Public Communication and Engagement Campaign to inform and engage with the general public on tree planting plans and activities. This campaign will seek local community support and develop action groups to take part in planning and tree planting activities.

As part of this communication strategy an inclusive/equality assessment will be conducted to ensure gender equality, the inclusion of minority groups, appropriate measures are taken for persons with disabilities and ensuring access. The outcome of the assessment will also help with the involvement of inter-generational schemes and a multi-faith approach.

7.2 Partnership development with landowners and private sector

As indicated in section 2.5, and in parallel with the development and implantation of the communications campaign, engagement with landowners and private sector will be sought to align local benefits and plans for tree planting throughout the borough.

7.3 Commissioning of the feasibility study

A major initial step is the commissioning of the feasibility study (See Appendix 1 TOR). Following the commencement of the communications campaign, initial scoping activities conducted by MBC, and initial discussions and negotiations with landowners, the feasibility study will be commissioned to shed light on a realistic timeframe for tree planting based on season, species, and location of potential wide scale tree planting over the coming years. The feasibility study will also establish a baseline of the number of trees in the borough, and benchmarks for tree planting over the coming years to track the increased numbers of trees, Carbon sequestered, and log a record of improvements to soil, water retention, canopy cover, temperature and increase in biodiversity.

8. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix 1: Terms of Reference
 - Appendix 2: Pleasant Farm Design Plans
-