

CABINET

27 JULY 2020

WIRRAL TREE, WOODLAND AND HEDGEROW STRATEGY

Councillor Elizabeth Grey, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, said:

“I am delighted to unveil Wirral’s very first Tree Strategy, a comprehensive plan developed in consultation with residents and a range of stakeholders.

“Almost everyone agrees that planting more and more trees can only be a good thing for the environment and for people’s health and wellbeing. Our commitment to planting is a big part of what we’re doing as a council and as a borough in response to the climate emergency, but this strategy is about much more than just planting trees.

“It’s about investing in expertise, planting the right trees, in the right place; having specialists who will help us to monitor and inspect all our trees and advise on the best course of action, should any risk be identified.

“This is the blueprint for an initial 10 years up to 2030, but it is also an ongoing framework for thinking about trees, woodlands and hedgerows across Wirral in the longer term. It is designed to be a living document, which will grow, change and develop to meet future challenges in implementing the strategy, and, as such, will be regularly revised and extended.”

REPORT SUMMARY

Wirral Council has developed the Wirral Tree Strategy (WTS) in partnership with Wirral Initiative for Trees (WiT) and a range of other key stakeholders. The ambitious strategy focuses on tree protection, maintenance and planting and seeks to dramatically increase Wirral’s Urban Forest (including the green infrastructure of parks, gardens, woods, trees in streets, footpaths, green spaces, trees and hedges) as a means of carbon capture. It is anticipated that WTS will also support the development of a National Tree Strategy.

The Wirral Tree Strategy (WTS), including an Executive Summary, is attached as **Appendix 1**.

Over the next ten years, Wirral Council and its partners will:

- (i) establish a clear picture of Wirral’s tree stock and its benefits.
- (ii) plant over 200,000 trees (at least 21,000 per year, net of loss incurred through Ash Dieback) such that Wirral’s tree canopy cover will be doubled once those trees are fully grown.

- (iii) replace every felled tree with multiple new trees.
- (iv) ensure that all new and replacement trees are planted under the principle of 'right tree for the right place;'
- (v) ensure that all decisions and activities undertaken in relation to trees are made in a structured and consistent way; and,
- (vi) work constructively with individuals and groups across Wirral to deliver this ambitious vision and action.

In pursuit of this vision, the WTS will provide a mechanism for:

- (i) improving the provision and care of trees, woodlands and hedgerows.
- (ii) formulating a focused action plan for the 2020-2030 period and beyond; and,
- (iii) monitoring the action plan(s) and policies for the care, management and enhancement of Wirral's trees, woodlands and hedgerows.

Whilst the WTS is a ten-year strategy which covers the period of 2020-2030, it is also an ongoing framework for thinking about trees, woodlands and hedgerows across the Borough of Wirral. The WTS is intended to be a living document, which will grow, change and develop to meet future challenges in implementing the strategy, and, as such, will be regularly revised and extended over the next 50 years.

This report is a key decision and affects all wards of the borough.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Cabinet is recommended to:

1. Note and endorse the recommendations of the scrutiny panel's review of the Wirral Tree Strategy.
2. Approve and endorse the Wirral Tree Strategy.
3. Approve the creation of an advisory board made up of Council representatives and partners to monitor progress against the Strategy's objectives and action plan.
4. Authorise the Director of Neighbourhood Services to develop the action plan to fully implement the Strategy.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 Following a tragic accident on Arrowe Park Road in 2016 and its aftermath, an investigation was carried out which found that Wirral Borough Council's (WBC) lack of a 'proactive, robust tree management system in place for Parks and Countryside' was a contributing factor in the accident. The Council's subsequently established Tree Action Plan Group identified the need for a Tree Strategy, which would reduce and manage the risk of such incidents happening in the future. Alongside this directly identified need, the Tree Strategy also provides a solid foundation upon which to plan for the management and expansion of tree stocks across the borough, and, as such, positions Wirral Council as one of the leaders in meeting the UK Committee on Climate Change's (CCC) target to plant 1.5 billion trees across the UK and increase forested land cover (*a.k.a.*, woodland) from 13% to 19% by 2050. Moreover, the vision and objectives of the WTS are in direct alignment with Wirral Council's Local Plan and Climate Emergency Action Plan, and, as such, the WTS lays down the foundations for implementing the Council's wider objectives in a considered and co-ordinated manner.
- 1.2 Trees, hedgerows and woodlands offer substantial benefits both in terms of mitigating against and adapting to climate change, and, as such, managing and expanding Wirral's tree stocks will be vital in the Council's response to the climate emergency.

Mitigation: trees, hedgerows and woodlands possess natural and potent carbon capture and storage (CCS). In the absence of effective man-made CCS technologies, expanding tree stocks represents our only currently viable option for capturing and storing carbon.

Adaptation: regardless of how intensely we pursue mitigation, it is clear that many effects of climate change are unavoidable and already reality. Over the coming years, we will experience an increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events. As a peninsula, Wirral is particularly susceptible to rising sea levels and flooding – especially in areas such as Hoylake, Leasowe, Meols, Moreton, Wallasey, and West Kirby. Trees, hedgerows, and especially woodlands help to contain heavy rains and slow down flooding. This helps manage river and coastal flooding and enables urban drainage systems to continue to function effectively in the event of a flood surge. Conversely, trees, hedgerows and woodlands reflect sunlight, provide shade and reduce the urban heat island effect, and this will play a vital role in improving Wirral's resilience to heatwaves and a higher average temperature. Alongside mitigation, it is also vital that we adapt to our new climate and improve our resilience to extreme weather events.

- 1.3 Adaptation is best served through the expansion of woodland, whereas mitigation is best served through wider tree planting, such as in urban areas. In order to simultaneously mitigate against, and adapt to, climate change, it is important that the strategy targets both the expansion of woodland across the borough, as well as in urban areas.
- 1.4 As trees, hedgerows and woodlands provide a safe, effective and efficient means of mitigating and adapting to, climate change, the WTS's vision for increasing canopy cover will be crucial to the implementation and success of the Climate Emergency

Action Plan. Alongside the other measures contained within the Climate Emergency Action Plan, laying the foundations for a doubling of canopy cover (once the trees we will plant over the next ten years have reached maturity) will be central to both our mitigation and adaptation strategies.

- 1.5 The Council's Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee spent some time scrutinising the draft Tree Strategy and over the course of two meetings set out a number of recommendations. The Committee's recommendations have been acknowledged and included within the final version of the WTS.
- 1.6 Establishment of an advisory board - a cross-disciplinary working group should be established to oversee the delivery of action plans related to the Tree Strategy and to monitor progress made against the strategy's objectives. Membership should include key officers involved in the establishment of the tree strategy and delivery of action plans, members of Wirral initiative on Trees (WiT), and the Cabinet Member for Environment & Climate Change. As part of its oversight duties this board will be responsible for producing a public evaluative report on progress towards achieving the strategy every three years. It will also support on the interpretation of national tree policy and the identification of potential funding sources for tree planting in the future.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The Council could continue operations without adopting a tree strategy. However, this course of action would be problematic in several respects. Firstly, Wirral Council would have no strategy in place to guide the process of replacing the trees which have been recently felled across the borough as part of the tree management regime. Not only would this course of action allow Wirral's tree stocks to be depleted at a time when their benefits are vital in response to the climate emergency, it would contrast sharply with the commitments to replace such trees that we have made to residents, partners and stakeholders. In other words, if we are to fulfil our commitments to residents, partners and stakeholders, as well as respond adequately to the practical reality of the climate emergency, we need the WTS to provide strategic direction in our management and expansion of tree stock. Secondly, the Council is committed to significantly increasing tree stocks across Wirral and the WTS presents a coherent vision for how this can be achieved. Without such a strategy, we risk investing valuable resources into a project in an inefficient, uncoordinated and *ad hoc* manner. Thirdly, the WTS pulls together, co-ordinates and supplements many aspects of the Council's central objectives, as laid out in the Local Plan and Climate Emergency Action Plan. Not only does the WTS provide added value to these existing objectives, it provides an additional mechanism for ensuring we are maximising the outcomes for our residents, partners and stakeholders.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 In 2016, a large horse chestnut tree on the perimeter of Arrowe Park Road fell onto a busy carriageway, tragically killing a baby girl. A full investigation was carried out, which concluded that the Council's lack of a 'proactive, robust tree management system in place for Parks and Countryside' was a contributing factor in the accident. In response to this incident, the Council's subsequently established Tree Action Plan identified the need for a Tree Strategy, which could comprehensively plan for the management and expansion of tree stocks across the Borough.

- 3.2 Alongside Wirral Council's obligations following the Arrowe Park Road accident, increasing Wirral's tree stocks will also provide additional benefits to residents, partners, and stakeholders. Trees, hedgerows and woodlands are an integral part of our natural environment and provide sustainable, cost-effective and wide-ranging social and environmental benefits, such as: acting as a foundation for biodiversity; providing habitat for a wide variety of wildlife; improving air quality; dampening noise pollution; providing shade and flood risk management; strengthening the health and wellbeing of local communities and urban areas; enhancing the beauty of our surroundings; as well as adding economic value to our neighbourhoods. Maintaining and improving our current provision for trees, hedgerows and woodlands is therefore essential for the future health and prosperity of our local environment and local communities. As such, the Council has a duty to protect and manage Wirral's tree stock on behalf of residents and future generations, to ensure a safe and pleasant environment for all.
- 3.3 Following the declaration of an Environment and Climate Emergency on the 15th July 2019, Wirral Council is even more committed to protecting Wirral's natural environment and intensifying efforts to achieve net zero emissions across all Council functions and operation by 2030 and across the Borough as a whole by or before 2041. As detailed in section 1.2, trees, hedgerows and woodlands provide both mitigation and adaptation benefits in our fight against climate change: trees capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store it in wood and other growth, and boost resilience to a wide variety of extreme weather events. Now more than ever, maintaining and expanding Wirral's tree stocks is a vital means for ensuring a sustainable environment for Wirral residents.
- 3.4 Following cross-party consensus on the need to expand national tree stocks during the 2019 General Election, the emergence of a National Tree Strategy is widely anticipated during the elected Government's term of office. In the process of formulating the WTS, the Council and Wirral Initiative for Trees (WiT) have worked closely with The Tree Council and Forestry Research, to ensure that the new strategy, vision and objectives will play a leading role in implementing the national expansion of tree stocks commensurate with the CCC's target to increase national woodland by 45%, and, as such, can be used by the Tree Council as an exemplar for other local authorities to develop their own tree strategies.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are significant financial implications and capital costs arising from the WTS. In the first instance, there will be the initial cost of purchasing, planting and nurturing 210,000 trees over the 10 years of the strategy, including nursery provision and implementing a maintenance budget. This will require multiyear bid to the Council's capital programme, which will be reviewed on a yearly basis. The Council will also pursue other financial sources and any funding opportunity brought forward by the Government, throughout the 2020-2030 period. In the longer term, management, risk assessment and inspection costs will be met through existing and already allocated resources.
- 4.2 It should be noted that taking no action is not cost neutral and the lack of a local response is likely to be more costly in the long run and expose the Council to the risk of more accidents: trees, hedgerows and woodlands are a cost effective means of

mitigating against climate change and bolstering local resilience to extreme weather events.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Following the accident on Arrow Park Road in 2016, the coroner found that 'Wirral Council did not have a proactive, robust tree management system in place for parks and countryside up to November 2016.' More precisely, 'the classification of trees into "Highways" and "Parks and Countryside" trees by the Council failed to identify and manage the risk of all trees within falling distance of the highway.' Moreover, 'there was a complete failure to have a policy in place for tree management in Parks and Countryside, and a complete lack of risk management for trees at risk of falling onto highways. There had been no formal inspection of trees in Arrow Park for 13 years previously.' Consequently, the coroner issued a 'Regulation 28 Report' to Prevent Future Deaths to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and to the Local Government Association. He explained that 'expert evidence was given that there needs to be a strategic management of tree policy, with a written policy system to ensure all trees are checked. There also needs to be effective staff training. The purpose of the Policy is to detect trees before they fail, to keep the public safe having regard to the location and occupancy of each tree.' Wirral Council is therefore obligated to: (i) formulate and enact a proactive strategy for tree management; (ii) invest in a written (*i.e.*, digital) inventory of tree stocks which will enable to proactive management of risk emerging from those tree stocks; and, (iii) provide effective staff training on how to effectively implement the strategic tree policy. Failure to fulfil these obligations could result in Wirral Council facing further prosecution under Health & Safety legislation. The 'Tree Action Plan' was the first step in fulfilling these obligations. It is vital that we continue to follow and progress the Tree Action Plan and develop policies with a view to identifying trees before they fail and in the hope of avoiding a future loss of life and or injury. The WTS provides strategic direction for future management of tree stocks across the borough and, as such, provides vital support for the Council in fulfilling its legal obligations.
- 5.2 Whilst the Council does not currently have any legal obligations to expand tree stocks, the CCC has recommended a national 45% increase in woodland. During the 2019 General Election, there was cross-party consensus in meeting, or exceeding, this target, and, as such, it is reasonable to expect legislation that will obligate local governments to expand tree stocks within the current government's 2019-2024 term of office. It should be noted that the adequacy of national and local government action on climate change is under scrutiny by environmental interests, with the threat of potential legal challenge in some areas. Subject to such legislation, failure to meet our local contribution to such national targets could expose the Council to legal challenges.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

- 6.1 The resource implications are as follows:
ICT – The Council may need to invest in technologies which can provide an accurate understanding of existing urban tree stocks and help effectively manage those stocks as we expand them over the next ten years. We currently have a good understanding of total woodland across the borough (less than 5%) but lack an adequate understanding of the tree cover in urban areas (*e.g.*, street trees, private garden trees etc.). We will, therefore, need to invest in the use of 'i-Tree Eco,' in order to conduct

an adequate, sample-based survey of urban tree stocks and a scientifically-valid, peer-assessed measure of the CCS capacity of both woodland and urban tree stocks. This will also provide a baseline figure of other benefits from trees, including health, well-being, particulates, flood risk reduction or average temperature reduction etc. The estimated cost of conducting the survey through such a platform is approximately £40,000. The Council's partners WiT placed a partial bid of £30,000 to meet these costs. The i-Tree Eco data will provide us with a baseline for setting tree-planting targets each year for the next 10 years, which will then be monitored through the cheaper i-Tree Canopy software package each year. In order to ensure a reliable baseline, it will be necessary to re-survey the borough i-Tree Eco once every ten years. The Council has already invested £500,000 into the tree inventory and audit package 'Insight', which is currently undergoing proof-of-concept testing and is expected to go live in early June this year. Through the use of this technology, we will be able to establish an accurate and comprehensive understanding of existing tree stocks across the borough and to manage those stocks more effectively, through the ability to interrogate the data via an interactive mapper which updates in real time.

Staffing- The Council has invested in employing experienced tree management officers who are carrying out tasks such as maintenance management, risk assessment and inspection of our tree stocks. However, the Council will require additional officers to oversee the co-ordination of tree planting and growth, in line with the scale of tree growth projected. Additional resources will also need to be allocated to the Forward Planning, Planning Control and Tree Preservation Enforcement functions, so that a comprehensive review of all historical Tree Preservation Orders can be undertaken, and the need for any new Tree Preservation Orders can be addressed and enforced.

Assets – over the next decade the Council will require space(s) to grow and nurture plants. Therefore, Wirral Council may need to invest in nursery facilities in order to facilitate this – even if only on a temporary basis. Should it be possible to invest in such assets on a sufficient scale, it may be possible to utilise those assets as a commercial opportunity and generate revenue for the Council.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The most significant threat to the Council is not having a tree strategy which will allow us to mitigate against, and adapt to, climate change. Unnatural climate change presents an existential threat and there are many direct risks associated with existing and unavoidable change locally, including disruption and damage from more frequent extreme weather events, including storms, heat waves and flooding. These results of climate change present significant risks to Wirral's natural habitats, and assets of private individuals and businesses. The actions needed to prevent more dangerous change demand a response from all parties, from global to local both locally and globally. Having a robust, up-to-date local strategy in place is an important mechanism to mitigate risk and play a part in wider efforts to address the problem, and the WTS makes a significant and leading contribution in terms of both mitigation and adaptation.
- 7.2 The WTS faces several risks, which could lead to the strategy being ineffective and not able to meet the full extent of its vision and objectives. These include the failure to: (i) engage early enough with financial colleagues to ensure officers know what is required financially to implement the strategy effectively; (ii) secure appropriate and

adequate funding to deliver the programme; (iii) grow, plant and nurture enough trees; (iv) formulate and implement an adequate inspection and management regime that provides enough control; (v) invest in and test the Insight inventory package sufficiently, to support the inspection and management regime. Alongside these operational risks, the Council also faces reputational risks should we fail to adequately communicate the rationale for tree felling under our inspection and management regime. If the Council fails to communicate this rationale sufficiently to residents and partners, there is a risk of a lack of public confidence and engagement in the implementation of the strategy.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Council has developed an ambitious Tree Strategy in partnership with WiT and other stakeholders to set out tree maintenance and planting regimes as a means of carbon capture for the period 2020-2030 and encompasses the results of significant engagement with the stakeholders and public consultation, including but not limited to: Wirral Tree Wardens, The Friends of Wirral Parks Forum, Wirral Environmental Network, The Wirral Society (CPRE), Wirral Wildlife (part of Cheshire Wildlife Trust), Wirral Countryside Volunteers, Urban Beekeepers Association, Conservation Area Groups Wirral, Urban Trees, Merseyside & West Lancashire Bat Group, and Natural England.
- 8.2 A full public consultation and stakeholder engagement exercise was carried out to gather comments and gauge levels of support from residents, visitors, local organisations, and key partners, as well as to inform and improve the Strategy in line with any concerns raised. The consultation exercise summary report is attached as **Appendix 2**.
- 8.3 The consultation exercise took place over 6 weeks from the 8th November to the 20th December 2019. The exercise consisted of: (i) an online survey for residents and local organisations; and, (ii) sustained engagement with interested stakeholders and partners across a variety of formats.
The consultation exercise was conducted in line with the following principles: -
- It was delivered at a time when proposals were at a formative stage.
 - The consultation provided enough reasons for the particular proposals to allow those consulted to give intelligent consideration and an intelligent response.
 - Those consulted were made aware of the factors that were of decisive relevance to the decision.
 - Adequate time was given for consideration and response to the consultation.
 - The outcome of the consultation was fully considered when proposals were prepared for recommendation to the decision maker.
- 8.4 The online consultation contained 11 questions to gather information regarding respondent demographics, gauge levels of agreement with proposed tree maintenance and planting proposals, as well as provide opportunity for comment on how to ensure a biodiverse and resilient tree stock, where to plant new trees, and how to improve communications. The consultation was made available online via an external platform accessible from the Council website and a link to the draft strategy was provided upon which these questions were based. The online survey produced 244 individual responses to a series of open- and closed- questions, relating to measures outlined in the Tree Strategy. Across a series of emails, face-to-face

meetings and telephone consultations, the stakeholder and partner engagement collected valuable input from various groups listed above.

- 8.5 Whilst many stakeholders and partners engaged with the online survey directly, additional correspondence was invited and incorporated into the consultation results in the 'Stakeholder and Partner Engagement' section of the Full Public Consultation Responses which is available online at the Council website at: <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/treestrategy>
- 8.6 The consultation exercise revealed that, although some residents felt the Tree Strategy could be more ambitious and had concerns about the rate of felling, most respondents were supportive of the overall tree planting agenda and intentions of the strategy.
- 8.7 The quantitative results show strong support for the strategy's proposals. In total 94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the objective to increase tree cover by a minimum of 10% by 2030; 76% agreed or strongly agreed with the objective to replace felled trees with two or three trees; and 63% agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed governance and review process, with a further 22% indicating no objection. There was also majority support for the legacy and species selection elements of the strategy, as well as confidence in the ability of the strategy to ensure a safe, sustainable, resilient, and diverse tree stock for Wirral.
- 8.8 The overall nature of the comments reflected respondents' support for the strategy's 'right tree for the right place' planting approach with an emphasis on native and locally sourced trees but indicated appetite for an even more ambitious tree strategy. Accordingly, prominent themes in the open-ended responses were concerns over the rate of felling, the importance of tree maintenance and preservation to ensure a healthy tree stock (particularly in the context of ash dieback), desire for blanket TPOs to protect mature trees, and dissatisfaction with a 'two-for-one'/'three-for-one' replacement policy as insufficient in the case of mature trees. The importance of planting a wide range of pest and climate-change-resistant species to ensure a biodiverse and resilient tree stock as highlighted, and emphasis was placed on the need for experts to be involved in decision making, for example by working with the Tree Council. Lastly, the need for a more comprehensive communications strategy across multiple platforms was raised, to ensure that residents are made aware of planned works in advance and to engage them in planting efforts. Suggestions regarding planting locations for new trees across Wirral have been noted and will be crucial in actualising the strategy's planting commitments.
- 8.9 Comments raised by residents, stakeholders, partners, Council staff with relevant expertise in response to the public consultation, as well as the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee's from 12 March 2020 recommendations (Minute 42 refers) have been taken into account in the final version of the strategy.
- 8.10 A full account of the consultation process is available in the Full Consultation.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The Equality Impact Review is attached via link below:
<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/sites/default/files/all/communities%20and%20neighbourhoods/Equality%20Impact%20Assessments/EIA%20since%202017/Delivery/Wirral%20>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The Environment and Climate Emergency Declaration was resolved with all party support at Council on the 15th July 2019 due to 'extreme concern' about the impact of climate change and the urgent need for action. The Council has been developing a Climate Emergency Action Plan, which responds to the declaration and the transformation the Council and its provision will undertake. The WTS represents a significant pillar of 'Wirral Council's response to the climate emergency and will have significant positive benefits in our mitigation and adaptation strategies. If implemented effectively, the WTS will: (i) significantly increase Wirral's capacity to capture and store carbon; (ii) otherwise improve air quality by capturing particulates; (iii) protect and enhance Wirral's natural beauty and public spaces; (iv) mitigate against trees lost due to felling; and, (v) boost Wirral's resilience against extreme weather events such as flooding and heatwaves.

REPORT AUTHOR: **Mike Cockburn**
Lead Commissioner – Environment
telephone: (0151) 606 2453
email: mikecockburn@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Wirral Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy

Appendix 2 – Consultation Summary Report

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Wirral Climate Change Group (2014) Cool: Wirral Climate Change Strategy 2014-2019

UN (2015) Paris Agreement

IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty

CCC (2018) Managing the Coast in a Changing Climate (including various appendices and accompanying reports)

CCC (2019) Net Zero: The UK's contribution to stopping global warming

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee	12/03/2020