

A strategy for trees and woodland owned by Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

November 2014

1. Summary

1.1 Trees are an important part of the landscape within our towns, villages and countryside. Their benefits are far-reaching - improving our health, wellbeing and the environment in which we live. They help to protect us from flooding, regulate the quality of our air by absorbing pollutants and greenhouse gases and provide a vital wildlife resource. Trees also have an economic role, providing a renewable natural resource and improving the value of commercial and residential land.

1.2 It is estimated that the borough of Basingstoke and Deane has over 10,000 hectares of trees representing 16% of the total land. It is estimated that there are over 85,000 trees in our streets and council owned green spaces, with many more in residential gardens and woodlands. This highlights the importance of the tree resource and how it shapes our landscape, towns and villages.

1.3 Our trees and woodlands need to be managed to maximise ecological, landscape and social gain whilst being resilient to future pressures including climate change and disease. In rural areas, this means promoting the value of our trees, woodlands and hedgerows and the value they bring for wildlife and recreation. In urban areas it means providing a robust and diverse tree resource that successfully integrates into the places where we live and work.

1.4 This strategy focusses on the management of trees and woodlands on council owned land. The document sets out a vision to secure a long-term viable tree resource capable of adapting to climate change and the pressures of an expanding urban environment. Whilst many of the actions will be implemented over the next five years, some principles such as woodland management, management of subsidence and dealing with nuisance trees will be ongoing.

2. Vision

2.1 To develop a council-owned tree resource that is:

- Resilient to climate change and disease by being diverse in terms of both species and age
- Accessible to residents with sufficient tree planting in streets and parks and with easy access to well managed woodlands
- Maximising ecological, recreational and landscape opportunities
- Respectful of surroundings, including neighbouring residents and is maintained in a safe and healthy condition
- Managed with community engagement

3. Background

3.1 In previous resident surveys undertaken by the council, the environment has consistently been placed in the top three priorities. The Basingstoke and Deane Council Plan 2013-2017 reflects this with a priority to protect the environment by:-

‘Protecting, restoring, reconnecting and expanding biodiversity and the rural nature of our borough through better management of our woodlands, parks and open spaces’.

3.2 The Shared Vision for the Basingstoke Area Strategic Partnership sets out a clear priority for a borough that is environmentally responsible and distinctive, where the local built and natural environments are in tune and continue to provide opportunities for the economy and people’s enjoyment and that they are well managed to provide for the future.

3.3 This is further emphasised in the Environment and Climate Change Portfolio Plan for 2013-2017 to:-

‘Manage our land and resources to deliver a more bio-diverse borough through proactive management of the council’s tree stock to gradually widen species diversity and age structure to ensure attractive, appropriate and sustainable tree cover in the long term’

3.4 The council has published a Green Infrastructure Strategy to protect and enhance the network of outdoor spaces of ecological, recreational and landscape value and to provide residents with adequate access to high quality green spaces. Our trees and woodlands play a critical part in the delivery of green infrastructure and the Tree Strategy aims to maximise the benefits that trees have as part of the green infrastructure network.

3.5 The council has also published a Living Landscapes document, setting out the need to protect and enhance the quality of wildlife habitats and the landscape and highlighting the role that trees have in achieving this. Finally, there is the Tree Policy which outlines our current approach to maintaining our own trees and protecting trees of particular landscape importance.

3.6 This strategy pulls together the various aims relating to council owned trees in the documents above into a single vision. Five key themes have been identified forming the backbone of the strategy, ensuring that the action points are appropriate and achievable.

1. Assessing the tree resource
2. Making the most of our trees
3. Developing future tree cover
4. Woodland management
5. Engaging the community

4 Assessing the tree resource

4.1 Understanding our existing tree resource is essential to developing a sustainable urban and rural tree population. This will provide us with a robust evidence base to inform and monitor the effectiveness of future tree management decisions, allowing us to act appropriately to future events, including climate change.

4.2 The council is responsible for over 85,000 individual trees and 100 hectares of woodlands. These are managed with a view to ensuring public safety and preventing damage to property. To achieve this, trained arboriculturists routinely inspect the trees, specifying and supervising tree surgery work wherever necessary which is carried out by our tree work contractors. Tree condition is evaluated together with the surrounding environment to inform tree management decisions.

4.3 By reviewing the data collection process, we will be able to ensure that we are capturing data relevant to wider green infrastructure issues, monitoring relevant pests and disease as well as recording any identified tree defects. We will maximise tree survey coverage across council-owned land and carry out identified work in a timely manner to ensure that the council is meeting its duty of care.

4.4 We will analyse the species composition to identify potential threats such as high risk areas where there are concentrations of trees vulnerable to pest and disease problems. A recent notable example is the outbreak of *Chalara fraxinea* (ash dieback) fungus and the potential impact that this may have on our ash trees, totalling almost 10% of individual council owned trees. This will help us to plan to provide long-term resilience to future outbreaks. It will also help ensure that the tree resource is resistant to the effects of climate change, including extreme climatic events and drought.

4.5 Age diversity is necessary to ensure that we are planting enough trees to maintain tree cover for the future. By monitoring the age of our trees it will help to identify gaps, allowing us to provide a continual cover approach and helping with the protection of our important veteran trees.

Action 1: Tree resource analysis

To undertake database analysis used to provide a comprehensive audit of council trees across the borough including species and age class diversity.

Action 2: Tree inspections

To review the council's tree survey programme ensuring data capture is relevant to the delivery of green infrastructure and to maximise survey coverage. Continue to inspect and record the condition of all council owned trees.

Measuring success:

We will maintain an integrated database of trees growing on land managed by the council with detailed routine inspection records. Tree diversity and distribution will be monitored to inform future tree management decisions.

5. Making the most of our trees

5.1 In the town, much of our tree planting took place in the 1960s and 1970s as Basingstoke rapidly expanded. We are now finding that has led to a number of issues that if left, will have considerable environmental and financial implications in the future. As some of the trees have matured, they have started to conflict with nearby properties causing nuisance issues and occasionally structural damage caused by subsidence. Common complaints include shade to gardens and houses, trees dropping debris and root damage to structures.

5.2 In some situations where the environmental impact is acceptable, it may be appropriate to remove trees prematurely and plant replacements in a position less likely to cause conflict in the future. This will be achieved through the identification of potential problem trees by the council, although residents may also apply for work. In the case of a resident's request to remove a tree that is not considered to be causing a significant nuisance, the tree may still be removed by the council where the environmental impact is acceptable and the work is funded by the applicant. To ensure that this is undertaken fairly, a panel of councillors will review individual cases raised by residents.

5.3 Occasionally, landscape features such as overgrown hedgerows and thickets which have been integrated into the town can contain over mature or unsuitable trees which will need maintenance before they grow too large or fall apart. By investing in these areas now, we will be able to reduce future maintenance liabilities whilst strengthening the tree resource for the long-term.

5.4 We will also review our procedures for efficiently handling claims where damage has already occurred and for tree and woodland management in extreme weather conditions.

5.5 Any tree work we instruct will be carried out by qualified tree surgeons and in accordance with industry best practice and safe working guidance. We will ensure that operations do not harm species protected under the wildlife legislation. This includes ensuring operations do not kill or injure wild birds, damage or destroy their nests or their eggs or harm other protected species such as bats and their roosts.

Action 3: Manage conflict and nuisance

Where appropriate, and subject to budgetary constraints, the council will prune or remove trees causing undue nuisance issues for residents. This will be achieved by strategically identifying problem trees across the borough and also by permitting residents to apply individually.

Action 4: Manage subsidence and impacts of severe weather

The council will develop and implement a subsidence limitation strategy to reduce occurrences of damage to buildings caused by council owned trees and prepare a procedure for efficiently dealing with claims once they have been received. This will be supported by a procedure for tree management during extreme weather conditions.

Measuring success:

Through proactive management, we will see a reduction in the number of unresolved complaints to the council about nuisance trees and a reduction in the cost of claims against the council for tree related damage.

6. Developing future tree cover

6.1 As our urban areas continue to expand, and with the regeneration of existing urban sites, it is important that steps are made to integrate existing trees into development and to provide new trees for the future. Not only will this help ensure that we are safeguarding the natural environment, but it will also mean that we are building sustainable and desirable places to live and work. Trees can also help to reduce the risk of flooding in urban areas through rain and ground water interception by the canopy, trunk and roots.

6.2 In existing urban environments, the baseline data collected under action points 1-3 will be used to identify areas with low tree cover, less able to adapt to future climate change. This will inform a coordinated tree planting programme, tying in with other council initiatives and targeted to improve flood protection, landscape and wildlife. Opportunities for external funding and partnership working will also be sought. This will ensure that we are planting new trees where they are most needed and where they will have most impact.

6.3 A key principle of the council's Green Infrastructure Strategy is to manage, protect, restore and expand the existing network of open space. We will invest in increased tree planting to ensure that our parks and open spaces are attractive, bio-diverse and well designed, providing community benefit and promoting health and well-being.

6.4 As part of the planning process, tree planting will be used to provide high quality sustainable development and to mitigate for pollution and climate change effects, in accordance with the Green Infrastructure Strategy. Where new development is proposed, new planting shall be designed to integrate the development into the landscape, providing links to green spaces without causing future conflict issues for residents.

Action 5: Tree planting

The council will develop a programme of coordinated planting initiatives with a view to increasing the number of trees in areas of low tree cover. We will review opportunities to use trees to promote biodiversity, amenity, recreation and local food production, for example by providing community orchards.

Action 6: Providing sustainable development

The council will review the use of trees on development sites, ensuring existing trees are retained wherever it is appropriate to do so and providing new tree planting designed to maximise green infrastructure opportunities without causing future conflict issues for residents.

Measuring success:

There will be an improvement in the quantity, quality and diversity of young trees in our streets, parks and open spaces, monitored through the tree inspection process.

7. Woodland management

7.1 Woodlands are an important amenity, providing space for recreation as well as being intrinsic to the landscape quality of the borough. In Basingstoke and Deane, we are fortunate to have a large area of ancient semi natural woodlands which are particularly rich habitats for wildlife. These woodlands also provide a link to our past, as woodlands provided various timber products used to sustain a community.

7.2 We will gradually prepare and implement management plans for our woodlands to ensure that we are maximising their ecological, recreational and landscape value whilst also looking for opportunities to use any harvested timber to create sustainable wood products. All woodlands will be managed using continual cover silvicultural systems. Some examples of management include felling trees to increase light into the woodland understorey and to allow the development of better quality trees, putting areas of understorey back on a working coppice cycle and promoting a deadwood habitat where appropriate. We will also actively promote access into woodlands by maintaining footpaths, providing signage and installing play equipment.

7.3 Management plans will be informed by ecological surveys and will be subject to consultation with residents and relevant stakeholders. We will also look for opportunities to involve community and volunteer groups in the practical work involved in woodland management. This may include tree planting and aftercare, invasive species control, coppicing and monitoring work. Some of our woodlands are already well managed by volunteers and we will continue to support existing groups in their activities wherever possible.

7.4 In terms of climate change, woodlands capture carbon and store it in the wood structure before releasing it back into the atmosphere through decomposition. By converting trees to wood products, it helps maintain a net carbon sink, reducing greenhouse gases. We will look at our current waste wood handling processes to ensure that we are making the most of product and wood fuel opportunities.

Action 7: To prepare and implement woodland management plans

The council will prepare woodland management plans for council owned woodlands, prioritising those of particular value to wildlife such the local nature reserves (LNRs). This shall include applying for felling licences and seeking funding opportunities to help implement the plans.

Action 8: Wood product management

The council will review the use of any waste wood product ensuring it is handled in a manner to limit expenditure on disposal and promoting recycling activities.

Measuring success:

This strategy will see a net increase in the area of council-owned woodland under management targeted to improve access and recreation, biodiversity and community involvement.

8. Engaging the community

8.1 There are numerous volunteer groups working across the borough helping to protect and enhance the borough's natural environment. We will work proactively with these groups during the development of any management plans in their particular area. Wherever possible, we will encourage volunteers groups to use our woodlands for nature conservation projects and will help to identify funding opportunities to help support groups in their work.

8.2 We will engage with residents when undertaking non-safety related tree work to explain the rationale behind the proposal and to invite questions and comments. We will also look to increase online opportunities for informing about tree work in the borough and the use of corporate media to create a positive connection between trees and people.

8.3 Working with local communities, we will provide advice during the development of community plans. Where community plans are identifying particular tree issues, we will also help implement improvements, including both felling work and new tree planting where this meets the vision of this strategy.

8.4 The Tree Warden Scheme is a national initiative of local volunteers dedicated to the trees growing in their towns, villages and countryside. We are lucky to have 39 wardens working in the borough helping to shape their local landscape. We will coordinate this group of volunteers in order to help manage trees and woodlands within their communities.

Action 9: Engaging and informing

The council will use corporate media to increase the connection between residents and trees and to provide an online information resource for tree work in the borough.

Action 10: Community planning and volunteers

The council will implement tree management aspirations identified in community plans where they are meeting the vision of this strategy. In addition to this, the council will provide support for volunteer groups and encourage groups to use our woodlands for nature conservation and recreational activity.

Measuring success:

There will be an increased level of promotion of tree management online and through community magazines.

Tree Strategy Action Plan

Action point	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6+
1. Tree resource analysis	Review the tree inspection process to ensure data being captured is relevant to the strategy	Extract and analyse statistics of the existing tree resource and benchmark against set density, diversity and distribution targets. Continue to inspect all the councils trees taking action where necessary to ensure that they are in a safe condition.				Review the impact of years 1-5 and revise if necessary
2. Tree inspections	Review the council's tree survey programme ensuring data capture is relevant to the delivery of green infrastructure whilst minimising public liability	Ensure all land owned by BDBC is incorporated into the survey	Continue to inspect and record the condition of all council owned trees in the borough and trees owned by Hampshire County Council on highways land in Basingstoke and Chineham.			
3. Manage conflict and nuisance	Continue to process council tree work applications. Analyse the councils tree resource to identify potential conflicts	Continue to process council tree work applications and implement identified tree removals. Review the management of previous years' work and prepare and implement management plans for remaining high priority landscape features.				Review the impact of tree removal
4. Manage subsidence and severe weather	Prepare a subsidence limitation policy	Draft procedure for extreme weather conditions.	Identify subsidence hotspots in the borough and take action accordingly			Review the impact of tree removal
5. Tree planting		Prepare a list of priority planting initiatives and guidance for tree planting	Implement tree planting initiatives and provide after care for existing planting			Review planting initiatives and continue to identify future projects

Action point	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6+
6. Providing sustainable development	Prepare guidance on new tree planting on development sites and ensure this is integrated into development control processes		Continue to ensure that development is undertaken in accordance with published guidance			Review and amend if necessary
7. Prepare and implement woodland management plans	Implement a pilot management plan for Little Penwood.	Identify, prepare and implement management plans for other council-owned woodlands.				Review management plans and amend if necessary
8. Wood product management			Review existing waste wood product management and identify opportunities to promote recycling of material			Review and amend if necessary
9. Engaging and informing	Embed a procedure for consultation with community groups	Options appraisal for new methods of engagement	Develop and maintain an online resource for engagement.			Review the effectiveness of engagement
10. Community planning and volunteers	Review findings from existing community plans to identify areas with tree or woodland priority action points		Work with community development officers to develop a formal volunteer work programme			Continue to assist with the preparation and implementation of community plans