

Report to Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee

18 November 2020

West Sussex Tree Plan

Report by Matt Davey, Director of Highways, Transport and Planning

Electoral division(s): All

Summary

The County Council is legally responsible for a significant number of trees that face unprecedented challenges with potentially significant impacts on the delivery of our services. The draft West Sussex Tree Plan (see Appendix A) addresses how the County Council will undertake its statutory duties and responsibilities with regard to trees and how it will operate as a landowner.

The draft Plan seeks to ensure that the trees within the County Council's ownership are maintained, protected, and improved for current and future generations. The draft Plan recognises the need to improve the way that we operate and the need to build the capabilities, processes and resources within the Authority that are necessary to support the delivery of a data-led, responsive, adaptable and sustainable approach to the stewardship of our trees. It also seeks to influence how the wider tree resource within the county is managed and improved.

Focus for Scrutiny

Taking account of the spatial, legislative and policy context set out in Sections 3 and 4 of the draft Plan:

- have the key issues been correctly identified in Section 5;
- have the right short-term objectives to deliver the longer-term strategic aims of the Plan been identified in Section 6;
- have the most appropriate key actions to be undertaken by the County Council over the next five years been identified in Section 6.

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 The trees of West Sussex are a valuable and essential element of the urban and rural landscape, contributing significantly to the character of the County, as well as providing other economic, social, and environmental benefits, all of which contribute to quality of life.

- 1.2 The County Council is responsible for established woodland and individual trees on its landholdings, including highway land, school sites, country parks, tenanted land, residential homes, and other properties such as offices.
- 1.3 Against a backdrop of changing national policy and legislation, the pressure for new housing and other development, emerging new pests and diseases, and the effects of climate change, the draft West Sussex Tree Plan addresses how the County Council will undertake its statutory duties and responsibilities with regard to trees and how it will operate as a landowner. The draft Tree Plan seeks to ensure that we enable decision-making to be effective for short term operations whilst building resilience for the future.
- 1.4 The development of the draft Plan has been subject to critical review by key internal and external partners and is informed by their contributions.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 The draft Plan (see Appendix A) seeks to ensure that the trees within the County Council's ownership are maintained, protected, and improved for current and future generations. It also seeks to influence how the wider tree resource within the County is managed and improved.
- 2.2 Accordingly, it has three strategic aims:
 - to maintain the trees and woodlands in the County Council's ownership;
 - to protect trees and woodlands from new development and other threats; and
 - to improve woodland cover in West Sussex through natural regeneration, the planting of new trees, and the creation of new woodlands.
- 2.3 Although the focus of the draft Plan is on delivery over the next five years, the strategic aims provide a framework for the County Council over the medium and longer-term.
- 2.4 It is important to recognise the need to improve the way that the County Council operates and the need to build the capabilities, processes and resources within the Authority that are necessary to support the delivery of a data-led, responsive, adaptable and sustainable approach to the stewardship of Council trees.
- 2.5 In addition, the Council recognises the need to enable and inspire others to be progressive in the management of the trees in their ownership and, where appropriate, to use their landholdings to increase woodland cover in the county.
- 2.6 To deliver the longer-term strategic aims, five shorter-term strategic objectives have been identified:
 - Objective 1: Better data management and evidence-based decision-making
 - Objective 2: Establishing and embedding policies and processes
 - Objective 3: Managing the impacts of Ash Dieback and other tree pests and diseases

Objective 4: Identifying opportunities for investment and income generation

Objective 5: Working with partners and supporting communities and individuals

- 2.7 Each of the five objectives is supported by key actions to be undertaken by the County Council over the next five years. Given the constraints on the County Council's resources, it may be that some actions cannot be progressed or that they need to be delivered in a different way. However, they demonstrate the ambition of the Authority to effect positive change with regard to the trees in its ownership and more widely within the County.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 3.1 The only other option available is the 'do nothing' approach. This approach would be characterised as continuing to manage trees reactively and without a planned approach. Being able to realise the opportunities available by operating in a proactive manner, increasing capacity and increasing our potential to deliver on more ambitious objectives will be lost. Therefore, no other options are being considered.

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 4.1 Relevant internal consultees including subject matter experts and end-users have influenced the document's content.
- 4.2 External consultees included WSP (Highway Services framework provider), district & borough councils, South Downs National Park Authority, Sussex Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, Sussex Nature Partnership, Tree Council, and large estates in West Sussex. A summary of responses is attached as Appendix B.

5 Finance

- 5.1 The cost of implementing the draft Tree Plan would ordinarily be met from within existing budgets. However, the extraordinary financial pressure associated with managing the impact of the Ash Dieback disease will require additional resource to be allocated. This is being addressed as part of the 2021/22 budget planning process.
- 5.2 Where possible, the opportunity will be taken to secure external sources of funding and to generate additional income to deliver this draft Plan. The opportunity will also be taken to continue working in partnership with other councils, agencies, statutory bodies, landowners, and other key stakeholders to share and make the best use of staff and other resources.

6 Risk implications and mitigations

- 6.1 WSCC must be able to demonstrate compliance with legislation and policy. Adopting and implementing this draft West Sussex Tree Plan will ensure compliance and provide a planned approach that will minimise risks going forward.

| Risk | Mitigating Action (in place or planned) |
|---|---|
| Out of date or incomplete data and intelligence compromises our ability to meet our statutory responsibilities and increases our legal risks. | Driven by the planned approach detailed within the draft West Sussex Tree Plan and incoming pests and diseases, extensive surveys are now underway using remote survey techniques to ensure speed, accuracy, best value and informing an appropriate response. The results provide WSCC with the ability adopt a targeted, risk based approach to the management of its estate. |
| Pests and diseases weaken trees that then threaten people and property. | The draft West Sussex Tree Plan develops the high level response to pests and diseases. Ash Dieback (ADB) management is now underway in accordance with the ADB Action Plan . An Oak Processionary Moth action plan is now being drafted. |

7 Policy alignment and compliance

- 7.1 Legal Implications – the County Council is subject to a wide range of legislation relating to trees, both as a landowner and as a service provider, covering highways (including Public Rights of Way), environmental issues, planning, heritage, and safety. This matter is addressed in paragraphs 4.4-4.11 of the draft Plan. The key objectives and actions identified in the Plan seek to ensure that the Authority meets its statutory duties and delivers its responsibilities.
- 7.2 Equalities – an Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken. No negative impacts have been identified or are anticipated for customers or residents with protected characteristics.
- 7.3 Climate Change - the adoption of a West Sussex Tree Plan is one of the targets in the County Council’s [Climate Change Strategy](#), which is aligned with the Authority’s our ambitious target to be carbon neutral by 2030. The Tree Plan has an important role to play in helping to meet this commitment, including the sequestration of carbon in the natural environment and increasing resilience to climate change.
- 7.4 Crime and Disorder - not applicable.
- 7.5 Public Health - trees have a number of health benefits, including improving air quality and providing a positive effect on public health by addressing stress, anxiety and other mental health conditions. Higher levels of exposure to green spaces can also improve cognitive development in primary school children, including improvements in working memory and attentiveness. The key objectives and actions identified in the Plan seek to ensure that the health benefits of trees in the County Council’s ownership, and more widely, are maximised.
- 7.6 Social Value – Not applicable.

Matt Davey

Director of Highways, Transport and Planning

Contact Officer: Don Baker, Environment & Heritage Team Manager, 033 022 36439, don.baker@westsussex.gov.uk

Appendices

A - Draft West Sussex Tree Plan

B - Summary of external consultee responses

Background papers

None