



**ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE: 2 NOVEMBER 2023**

TREE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY ANNUAL UPDATE

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an annual update to the Committee on work taking place under the framework of the Tree Management Strategy which sets out the approach for the management of the County Council's trees and woodlands.
2. The Committee is asked to note this report and make any comment on the issues covered.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

3. The County Council's Strategic Plan recognises the importance of the natural environment and the countryside which makes Leicestershire an attractive place to live and work in. The Tree Management Strategy establishes a clear vision for ensuring that Leicestershire's trees and woodlands can provide multiple benefits that improve the quality of life for citizens and communities.
4. The Tree Management Strategy accords with the Council's Environment Strategy and complements the Energy Strategy and Carbon Reduction Plan. The County Council has declared a Climate Emergency and is committed to achieving carbon neutrality in its own operations by 2030.
5. Set within this context, the underlying principle of the Tree Management Strategy is to use the Authority's tree assets to improve the quality of life for the citizens and communities and support the Council in delivering its wider ecological and environmental strategic objectives.
6. In March 2020, the Cabinet approved the Tree Management Strategy and Tree Management and Planting Action Plan. In November 2021, the Cabinet received an update on progress with work taking place under the framework of the Tree Management Strategy, in particular the updated Tree Management and Planting Plan and the Tree Charter.

Background

7. The County Council is responsible for managing approximately 321,000 trees comprising of individual specimens, tree groups and woodlands. This includes over 400 hectares of woodland on its land holdings with approximately 37% of trees on country parks, 35% of trees on highways, 12% of trees on county farms, 10% of trees on schools and 6% of trees located across other properties. The Council has a legal duty to manage and maintain all trees on council-owned land and on the public highway.
8. The County Council has a statutory responsibility to ensure tree safety under the Occupiers' Liability Acts, Health and Safety at Work Act and Highways Act. The responsibility requires Leicestershire County Council to carry out an inspection programme undertaking works as appropriate to control the risk of injury to Council staff, visitors to Council premises, or users of the Council's adopted public highway.
9. The County Council also has a duty under the Highways Act to ensure that an estimated population of 420,000 privately owned trees adjacent to the highway, do not pose a danger to its users
10. The County Council receives an average of 1,200 enquiries each year regarding tree management. Many of these relate to safety and nuisance issues (e.g. branches overhanging the highway) but also include requests for specialist advice and guidance from residents and landowners.
11. Additionally, the County Council has a wider responsibility to provide leadership in tackling climate change and to mitigate against the social, economic and environmental problems that are exacerbated by it. It also has a broader strategic role to provide leadership as an exemplar and to influence the behaviours of private landowners, schools, communities, and individuals to create a sustainable place, so that future generations enjoy a great quality of life.
12. The Tree Management Strategy provides a framework within which the County Council can discharge its obligations to safeguard the trees under its stewardship. Adhering to the guidance contained within the Strategy will enable officers and Members to meet the Council's legal obligations and to provide leadership in tackling climate change. The Strategy covers the period from 2020 - 2025 and is reviewed annually by the Director of Corporate Resources.
13. The strategic aims of the Tree Management Strategy are to:
 - i. Conserve and enhance the tree resource in terms of quality and numbers;
 - ii. Promote public safety through appropriately resourced tree inspection and maintenance programmes;
 - iii. Fulfil the council's legal obligations as a tree owner by addressing safety and major nuisance issues effectively;
 - iv. Inform customers of our legal obligations relating to trees and manage enquiries and expectations appropriately;

- v. Establish sustainable management programmes for council woodland utilising external funding from central government agencies;
- vi. Promote and increase the current level of tree planting on public and private land to address the recent decline of individual trees and mitigate the potential effects of ash dieback and other potentially harmful diseases.

Operational Arrangements

14. The strategic management of the Council's tree assets is the responsibility of the Forestry Team within the Corporate Resources Department. The Forestry team employs a number of specialist arboriculturists to ensure trees across the Council's estate are inspected and managed appropriately.
15. All tree assets are logged on the Council's specialist tree management software Ezytreev which provides efficient data collection, inventory analysis and maintenance of trees and physical assets.
16. Tree maintenance in open spaces and country parks is undertaken by an external contractor; this contract was procured in 2021 and provides access to the required levels of expertise to ensure appropriate works are commissioned. Tree maintenance work on the highway network is undertaken by Operational Highways within the Environment and Transport Department.
17. The Forestry Team also deliver a traded service to district councils, parish and town Councils, Schools and Academy Trusts providing expert tree advice and tree inspections.
18. Trees within the highway are currently inspected on a three-year cycle with an average target of 16,588 trees and tree groups to be visited each year. For the full financial year of 2023/24, the Forestry Team exceeded this target and inspected 17,644 trees and tree groups as part of its day-to-day inspection of highway tree assets.
19. Any works identified from the highway inspections are prioritised according to risk and passed digitally to Operational Highways in the Environment and Transport Department To ensure that current resources are utilised most effectively and work programmes are effectively targeted, the different types of tree enquiry are prioritised in accordance with the following criteria:
 - i. Category 1 - Matters of safety where there is an imminent, significant danger to the public and property – i.e. urgent works
 - ii. Category 2 - Remedial and preventative work which removes potential hazards – i.e. high priority works
 - iii. Category 3 - Works which conserve and enhance the ecological and aesthetic value of veteran and locally prominent trees
 - iv. Category 4 - Works which promote the effective establishment of newly planted trees or which address minor nuisance issues

Tree Planting Pledge

20. In 2021 the Council made a pledge to plant 700,000 trees', which is the equivalent of one for every resident of Leicestershire. The Forestry Team has led on delivery of the pledge, in particular partnership working with a range of different organisations such as the Woodland Trust and National Forest to facilitate and deliver the planting of new trees in Leicestershire.
21. The 'Trees' microsite (<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/trees>), which was created to highlight the pledge and provide an interactive map of tree planting to encourage residents to log tree planting in their communities, has been very successful. The site enables tree planting across the County to be more effectively captured and monitored and a clear view on progress towards the pledge provided. To date 248,342 trees have been logged on the interactive map.
22. The original target was based on an average of 70,000 trees planted per annum over 10 years, however if the current trajectory is maintained the Council may achieve this target in the next 6-8 years.
23. The trees microsite brings together guidance on tree care, information on tree wardens and news channels.
24. Despite the current success with tree planting, it is recognised that more emphasis on planting outside of the National Forest will increase the wider benefits of trees to residents across the County.
25. A key delivery function of the pledge will be the development of a new tree nursery by the Council, in partnership with the National Forest, to secure suitable native tree stock and ensure a continued supply of trees for planting schemes delivered both by the County Council and partners throughout the County.
26. Funding has been secured for the next four years with £100,000 per annum to deliver the creation of the tree nursery within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Contractors will be appointed to undertake the work in line with the Councils contract processes with a target date for set up and operation from March 2024.
27. The Council has been successful in attracting external funding to deliver key projects throughout the County in partnership with other public sector bodies:
 - i. Forestry Commission Local Authority Treescape Fund (£355k) between 2021/22 and 2026/27;
 - ii. Forestry Commission Urban Tree Challenge Fund (£38K);
 - iii. Forestry Commission Tree Production Capital Grant (£34k);
 - iv. DEFRA Coronation Living Heritage Fund (£30k) application pending for orchard projects;
 - v. Forestry Commission Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund (£150k);
28. Applications to the Forestry Commission Local Authority Treescape Fund, Urban Tree Challenge Fund and DEFRA Coronation Living Heritage Fund have been made by the County Council on behalf of a wider partnership involving district and parish councils which will provide capital and revenue funding over four years to plant and maintain new trees.

29. Funding received through the Forestry Commission Tree Production Capital Grant will support the development of the new tree nursery.
30. The Forestry Commission grant to the Council through the Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund in particular enables us to support a temporary project officer and consultant support to kickstart projects and coordinate and encourage new tree planting throughout the County over the next two years. It is hoped that further funding from the Forestry Commission will be made available to continue this revenue support for project work.

Partnership Working

31. The Leicestershire Tree Charter was launched by the County Council during National Tree Week in November 2021 in conjunction with the National Forest. The Charter calls for a collective vision and partnership working across Leicestershire to enhance the treescape and identifies three key drivers for action: to support a secure and safe future, to enhance the wellbeing of communities and to facilitate sustainable enterprise.
32. Through the Tree Charter and to enable delivery of a 'tree for every person', the Council is working with partners such as district and parish councils to deliver projects which will engage residents and other partners by raising awareness about the benefits of trees and encouraging tree planting.
33. Funding for County Council-led tree planting projects has continued to be provided through the Council's Ash Dieback Board, in particular, for the supply of free tree packs, hedge packs and the MOREwoods project in partnership with the Woodland Trust. A new Orchard scheme has been launched for 2023 to enable the creation of new orchards with community groups, schools and other publicly accessible sites.
34. The Council meets with local and national organisations to promote and encourage community participation in tree planting and tree management. One such success is the County Council Tree Warden Scheme which is supported nationally by The Tree Council. This has been running for 40 years and has 124 members of the Leicestershire Network involved. The Tree Warden Network involves 78 parish councils, who manage the volunteer Tree Wardens directly and one independent organisation who also manage Tree Warden volunteers-Harborough Woodland.
35. The Forestry team is also working with partners at a district level to increase tree planting in main town centres and are discussing potential new schemes in both Harborough and Melton to increase trees and enhance key market towns.

Ash Dieback

36. The challenges posed by the Ash Dieback disease present within Leicestershire are being addressed through the Council's Ash Dieback Action Plan. Ash Dieback, sometimes known as "Chalara" is caused by a fungal pathogen and affects Fraxinus Excelsior (Ash) and other Fraxinus species and was first detected in Leicestershire in 2012. Once infected, a high proportion of trees will die (the rate of decline varies according to the age, health and condition of the tree).

37. There are over 500,000 Ash trees in Leicestershire, many of which are on adopted highway verges or adjacent to areas of public use. As the Highway Authority, the Council is responsible for maintaining the safety of all road users.
38. The effects of Ash Dieback will have a significant effect on the biodiversity and landscape of the County and the proposed tree planting initiatives outlined in the Tree Management and Planting Action Plan will assist with mitigating this loss.
39. In response to the challenges of Ash Dieback the Council produced an Ash Dieback Action Plan in 2019 to outline how it manages the anticipated risks and issues associated with the spread of ash dieback across the county. The Action plan is monitored by the Ash Dieback Board which is comprised of key officers from the Council's Corporate Resources and Environment Teams. Through the Ash Dieback Action Plan the Council is undertaking a programme of ongoing inspections of its highway trees prioritised by the road classification to monitor progress of the disease and identify works as required.
40. A specialist Ash Dieback Works contract has recently been tendered. The winning tender from a specialist arboricultural and forestry company will enable the Council to plan and undertake large scale mechanised tree works on the highway network over the next five years.
41. Monitoring of Ash Dieback is undertaken throughout the summer by the Forestry Team to identify trends and provide a specific work programme for highway trees. Work to measure tree decline and the success of new tree planting will be undertaken between measured time frames with the use of GIS mapping tools and the National Tree Map (created from high resolution national aerial photography, accurate terrain and surface data, and colour infrared imagery). These tools will enable the Team to provide a snapshot over time of changes in the overall canopy cover across the County. It will also enable the Council to set broader tree planting targets by ward and assist targeting tree planting to wards with low canopy coverage and other factors such as indices of deprivation.
42. The Council has produced a protocol for dealing with Ash Dieback within private land adjacent to the Highway. A specific Ash Dieback liaison officer is leading on identifying ash trees which may pose a concern and identifying land ownership information to inform them of their legal duties. To aid this work a new leaflet for landowners and ash dieback has been developed.

Resource Implications

43. There are no resource implications arising from this report. Tree planting initiatives are fully funded through external grants which have been sourced and also finances have been allocated through the MTFs to support the Ash Dieback and the forestry programme.
44. Any future funding requirements that might emerge from the implementation of the Tree Management Strategy or measures to respond to the spread of Ash Dieback will require individual business cases to be developed and approved by the Director of Corporate Resources or by Members as appropriate.

Conclusions

45. Our trees make a valuable contribution to what makes Leicestershire a great place to live, and the Council continues to lead in all matters concerning relating to the proactive management of our trees and woodland.
46. The Tree Management Strategy enables the County Council to preserve, develop and increase its tree stock and maximise the associated natural capital benefits. Work is continuing by the Forestry Team to ensure that the Council meet the pledge for the planting of 700,000 trees across the County. In particular success in securing external grants will ensure that tree planting is supported by a range of partner organisations.
47. The cyclic inspection of Council-owned trees on the highway is being effectively monitored and any work required is undertaken in accordance with the Tree Management Strategy. Overall, the Council is managing trees within its custodianship in an appropriate and effective way to balance the risk to the public whilst maintaining a sustainable tree population capable of withstanding predicted climatic changes and the impact of diseases such as Ash Dieback.

Background papers

Tree Management Strategy 2020-2025

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2021/2/16/Tree-Management-Strategy-2020-2025.pdf>

Environment Strategy 2018 – 2030

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2018/7/19/LCC-Environment-Strategy-2018-2030-June-18.pdf>

Ash Dieback Action Plan

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2019/6/4/Ash-Dieback-Action-Plan.pdf>

Leicestershire Tree Charter

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/field/pdf/2021/11/30/Leicestershire-tree-charter.pdf>

Report to Environment and Climate Change Overview and Scrutiny Committee
November 2022

<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/documents/s172042/Tree%20Management%20Strategy.pdf>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

48. None.

Equality Implications

49. There are no equality implications arising from this report. Although any future change to the Council's policies, procedures, functions and services because of the Strategy or associated action plans will be the subject of an Equality Impact Assessment as appropriate.

Human Rights Implications

50. There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

Officers to Contact

Declan Keegan, Director of Corporate Resources
Telephone: 0116 56199
Email: declan.keegan@leics.gov.uk

Adam Goodall, Principal Tree and Woodlands Manager
Corporate Resources
Telephone:0116 3051102
Email: adam.goodall@leics.gov.uk