

From: Susan Carey, Cabinet Member for Environment
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To: Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee, 3rd November 2021

Subject: Plan Tree – Kent County Council’s Tree Establishment Strategy 2021-2031 (draft)

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: n/a

Future Pathway of report: n/a

Electoral Division: Kent wide

Summary: Plan Tree is Kent County Council's strategy for the establishment of 1.5 million new trees for Kent. The Strategy sets out how we will work in partnership across the county to not only increase our tree canopy cover but protect and restore existing trees, hedgerow, and woodland and, in turn, support the recovery of wildlife, provide natural climate solutions (including carbon sequestration) and enrich people's lives. This report provides an overview of the draft Plan Tree, ahead of the public consultation due to commence January 2022.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the draft Plan Tree – Kent County Council’s Tree Establishment Strategy 2021-2031 – for public consultation.

1. Introduction

1.1 Tree establishment is just one of a number of nature-based solutions that can be employed to help tackle some of today's societal challenges, such as climate change, water security, air quality and human health. Nature based solutions are actions that work with and enhance nature, through appropriate management and interventions, to produce a diverse range of services and benefits. A recent Kent County Council commissioned study¹ into nature-based solutions in Kent identified that woodland and trees presented a broad range of opportunities. And these opportunities are all the more applicable given the extent of woodland habitat across the county, meaning the majority of these solutions can be applied largely throughout.

1.2 Establishing more trees in Kent will help the county address the dual challenges of climate change and the ecological crisis. Trees, especially large ones, can store significant amounts of carbon; Kent and Medway's forests are estimated to store some 367,374 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year². In addition, they help to manage some of the impacts of our changing climate – their shade

¹ Natural Solutions to Climate Change in Kent Report, March 2021

² Kent and Medway Emissions Analysis and Pathways to Net Zero report (December 2020)

reduces summer air temperatures and the urban heat island effect and, by intercepting rainfall, they reduce runoff and alleviate flood impacts.

- 1.3 Trees also tackle some of our other environmental challenges, including air quality and soil health. Plus, trees and woodlands are valuable habitats for our county's wildlife – an oak tree supports more life than any other native tree, providing shelter and food for an incredible 2,300 wildlife species³.
- 1.4 Trees are popular with people too – 84% of the UK public agree that more trees should be planted in response to climate change, and 95% of the UK public value woodlands for their wildlife value⁴. It's not surprising that trees are valued by the public – in Kent, they are a fundamental part of our cultural landscape, providing character and local distinctiveness to many areas. There is a strong and growing evidence linking exposure to trees with benefits to both physical and mental health and wellbeing; and evidence suggests that in urban areas, the presence of trees not only enhances the visual attractiveness but can be used to deter crime and anti-social behaviour⁵.
- 1.5 In 2019, off the back of County Council recognising a climate and ecological emergency, the then Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste stated a commitment for 1.5 million trees to be established, a tree for every person in Kent.
- 1.6 Plan Tree, Kent County Council's Tree Establishment Strategy, sets out how we will turn this ambition into a reality and see tree cover across the county extended.
- 1.7 This report provides an overview of the draft Plan Tree prior to public consultation and action to date.

2. Tree establishment to date

- 2.1 Since stating its ambitions in 2019 for 1.5 million new trees to be established in the county, Kent County Council has delivered the following:
 - 36,895 trees planted by the Old Chalk New Downs project, with KCC and Heritage Lottery Funding (2019-21/22). All trees are a native-species mix, with local stock sourced from Kent nurseries and the majority have been planted with biodegradable cardboard tree guards, rather than plastic.
 - 13,615 trees planted by the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership project, with KCC and Heritage Lottery Funding (2020-21).
 - Over 16,000 trees and hedges planted by the county's Countryside Management Partnerships (2019-20).
 - £275,129 of funding from the Local Authority Treescape Fund, delivering 250 standard trees and 41,000 whips in Ashford and Swale.
 - £500,000 from the Shared Outcomes Fund, to deliver 3,588 trees and 6,408m² of natural regeneration through the Trees Outside Woodland project (2020-23).

³ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/oak-tree-wildlife/>

⁴ Public opinion of forestry – climate change, Forest Research

⁵ <https://cieem.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/INPRACTICE73web.pdf>

- An average of 900 street trees planted per annum by Kent Highways (2019-21).
- Appointment of a dedicated officer to oversee the delivery of the Kent Tree Establishment Strategy (November 2021).

2.2 The Kent Tree Establishment Strategy builds on this action to provide a more robust framework for tree establishment in Kent and the collaborative action needed to deliver on the 1.5 million trees ambition.

3. Plan Tree's ambitions and targets

3.1 Kent County Council has an ambition that the county's tree cover will be extended by 1.5 million by 2030, establishing one new tree for every resident living in the county. And that by 2050, Kent will have an average tree canopy cover of 19% (an increase from the current 17%), the target recommended by the Committee on Climate Change if the UK is to be carbon neutral by 2050. The delivery of these new trees, alongside the protection and restoration of existing trees, hedgerow, and woodland, will support the recovery of wildlife, provide natural climate solutions, and enrich people's lives.

3.2 These new trees will be delivered by working in partnership with (but not limited to) district and borough and town and parish councils, the Kent Downs and High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Units, the county's Countryside Management Partnerships, Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, and environmental charities. We will also look to bring together local communities, schools, businesses, and landowners to collaborate on tree establishment projects.

3.3 In addition to this collaborative action, Kent County Council aims to contribute directly to this county target by establishing new trees across its own estate. Although our ambitions will be greater, at a very minimum we will establish 28,600 trees per annum on land we own, manage or influence, representing a tree for every person in our own workforce. Further, Kent County Council members will have the opportunity to contribute by establishing trees within their own divisions across the four-year term; based on a target of 350 trees per division, this will account for another 28,350 trees within the county.

3.4 Before final adoption, the Tree Strategy Officer will be responsible for determining whether 1.5 million trees is a feasible target and whether the 19% tree canopy cover target is an appropriate target for the county. This will be done in consultation with the principles for tree establishment in Kent.

4. Principles for tree establishment in Kent

4.1 All trees established under our Strategy will follow four principles for tree establishment.

4.2 The first step is to protect and restore the county's existing trees and native woodland and therefore the founding principle is one of **better management and protection of existing stock**. This not only aims to avoid loss but ensure our existing stock is secure from pests and disease; and, where loss is unavoidable, replacement is at a greater ratio to that lost. It also recognises the

important role that natural regeneration has to play, where, through appropriate management, we allow nature to take its course and provide additional tree cover; an approach already employed throughout our country parks but with possible application elsewhere on our estate.

- 4.3 Natural regeneration will need to be complemented by considered and well-planned establishment of new tree stock. Where we look to establish new trees, this must adhere to the principle of **the right tree, in the right place, for the right reason, with the right management** to ensure appropriate, successful, and sustainable tree establishment across the county.
- 4.4 Applying the four elements of the right tree in the right place principle will result in constraints on how and where we deliver tree establishment; the specifics of these constraints will be defined as part of the Strategy's implementation. Because of these constraints, we will need to review the targets to ensure we can deliver on 1.5 million new trees and 19% canopy cover without compromising on this important principle for tree establishment.
- 4.5 Investment of public money needs to demonstrate value, and opportunities to **deliver multiple benefits** from tree establishment must be realised; such benefits include:
 - Delivery of nature-based solutions, such as air quality and water management in addition to carbon sequestration.
 - Provision of amenity benefits.
 - Restoration and enhancement of biodiversity and connectivity of habitats.
 - Delivery of economic benefits, through expansion of existing, and development of new, markets.
- 4.6 And finally, we must **ensure the biosecurity of new tree stock through application of strict standards** on the trees we plant and the places we source stock from.

5. Realising the value of trees in Kent – our objectives for tree establishment

- 5.1 Establishing the right trees, in the right places will help deliver benefits for Kent's wildlife, people and economy. Through extending tree cover in Kent, and delivering Plan Tree, we aim to deliver the following objectives:
 - Contribute to Kent County Council's, and the county's, net zero targets.
 - Reduce and reverse the trend of decline in nature and loss of trees.
 - Tackle the multiple threats to our trees.
 - Deliver nature-based solutions to some of the county's challenges.
 - Provide enhanced and improved recreation and amenity.
 - Address the decline in trees outside woodland and decline in urban trees.
 - Realise the economic benefits.
 - Increase our knowledge and provide better protection.

6. Delivering on Plan Tree

- 6.1 The Strategy sets out some specific actions that will be taken to progress delivery of the ambitions and objectives of Plan Tree. These actions focus on:

1. Delivering against the tree establishment target.
 2. Exemplar provision for trees on our own estate.
 3. Improving protection to trees in Kent.
 4. Improving our understanding of Kent's trees.
 5. Developing the Kent carbon offset market for unavoidable emissions.
- 6.2 Key to this will be the development of a ten-year strategic tree planting plan, including a tree planting project pipeline that will enable us to readily respond to government calls for bids. In association, we will develop a more detailed three-year delivery plan, which will be published to provide a visibility of intended schemes, with an investment plan to underpin this work.
- 6.3 Whilst Plan Tree undergoes a public consultation and the subsequent work to finalise and adopt, work won't (and can't) wait. Initial work priorities for the newly appointed Tree Strategy Officer include:
- Establish a detailed definition of the "right tree in the right place".
 - Review the feasibility and appropriateness of Strategy targets.
 - Develop a monitoring and measuring mechanism for the Strategy targets.
 - Review existing and future funding opportunities and map out a programme of application; and develop bids as required.
 - Establish a network of delivery partners.
 - Use relevant data sets, and work with partners and stakeholders, to identify areas of priority and opportunity for tree establishment in Kent.
 - Work with KCC and district council colleagues to identify opportunities across the county for tree establishment on the public estate and commence the development of a pipeline of projects.
 - Deliver the authority's contribution to the jubilee initiative of the Queen's Green Canopy.
- 6.4 The public consultation is planned to commence in January 2022 and will run for 6 weeks. ETCC will receive a report on the consultation and the final Strategy at the June 2022 meeting.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 The Tree Strategy Officer post is funded by the climate change fund reserve.
- 7.2 Tree establishment will, in the main, be funded through central government grants. In September, we successfully secured £275k from the Local Authority Treescapes Fund. In addition, the delivery partners we work with may have access to other funding that we as a public body do not.
- 7.3 There are currently a number of tree grants and financing options available, which may be applicable and include (but are not limited to):
- Woodland Creation Planning Grant
 - HS2 Woodland Fund
 - Urban Tree Challenge Fund
 - Local Authority Treescapes Fund
 - Woodland Carbon Fund

- Woodland Carbon Code
- Woodland Carbon Guarantee
- Woodland Management Planning; Creation and Maintenance; Tree Health; and Improvement schemes (all part of Countryside Stewardship)
- The Tree Council Community Hedge Fund
- National Highways Environment and Wellbeing Designated Fund Plan
- National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiative
- NGO and charity tree funding schemes
- Corporate investment
- High net wealth individual investment interests
- Local nature-based carbon offset markets
- (in time) Environmental Land Management scheme
- (in time) Biodiversity Net Gain

7.4 Where match funding is needed, or funds are required to support tree establishment that falls outside the criteria of available funding, application may be made to the climate change fund reserve. Further, the climate change fund reserve will also be used to deliver the committed 28,600 trees on land we own, manage or influence and the committed 28,350 trees for member to establish within their divisions.

8. Legal implications

8.1 There are no legal implications in relation to the draft Kent Tree Establishment Strategy.

9. Equalities implications

9.1 Increased tree cover within the county is expected to deliver more positive equality impacts than negative.

9.2 Trees improve air quality and tackle other climate change effects, such as extreme heat and flooding. Children and young people, the elderly and disabled people, who tend to suffer more from respiratory illnesses and the extremes of climate change, will therefore likely see a positive impact from increasing tree cover in the county. Studies have also shown poor air pollution levels are often found in areas of highest ethnic diversity and therefore improved air quality, as a result of increased trees, may also benefit this protected characteristic group. By applying the right trees in the right place principles, and through careful and considered design and planning, we can ensure that we maximise the potential positive impacts of increased tree cover for these protected characteristic groups.

9.3 Inappropriate planting could restrict access or cause obstacles, impacting those with a disability. The Strategy applies a clear principle of the right tree in the right place and this will ensure that any tree planting does not have unintended consequences, including impacting access or causing obstacles.

9.4 Where new woodlands are being created, or extensive planting is extending existing woodlands, there is a risk that access could be restrictive for those with a disability. We will ensure that any new woodlands that are created with

visitors in mind account for a broad range of access issues within their design.

10. Other corporate implications

- 10.1 The Kent Tree Establishment Strategy supports the ambitions of the Kent Biodiversity Strategy, the Kent Environment Strategy, the Kent and Medway Energy and Low Emissions Strategy and the management plans of the Kent Downs and High Weald Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In time the Kent Tree Establishment Strategy will also be linked to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, required under the Environment Bill.
- 10.2 It has been prepared in reference to the Government's England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024 (May 2021) and the Woodland Trust's Emergency Tree Plan for the UK (January 2020).

11. Governance

- 11.1 There are no governance issues in relation to the draft Kent Tree Establishment Strategy.

12. Conclusions

- 12.1 Plan Tree provides a strong framework for tree establishment in the county and the collaborative delivery of the ambitions of 1.5 million new trees and 19% tree canopy cover.
- 12.2 Realising these ambitions will not only make a notable contribution to carbon sequestration and therefore our own, and the county's, net zero targets but will also serve to provide a number of other beneficial services, including air quality improvements, water management and temperature regulation.
- 12.3 In addition, increasing our tree cover will provide new habitat and food sources for our wildlife and enable us to tackle some of the county's habitat losses and fragmentation. It will also provide additional and enhanced amenity and the opportunity to connect with nature and the health and well-being benefits this brings. And finally, with further development, new markets and economic opportunities could be provided.
- 12.4 Importantly by further developing, and then following, strong principles concerning the right tree in the right place, we will ensure that we not only realise such benefits but realise them where they're most needed in terms of addressing some of our county's societal, ecological, and economical challenges.
- 12.5 Plan Tree clearly sets out the county council's intention to deliver against ambitious targets and realise the full benefits of increased tree cover and improved protection in Kent.

13. Recommendation(s)

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The Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse the draft Plan Tree – Kent County Council’s Tree Establishment Strategy 2021-2031 – for public consultation.

10. Background Documents

10.1 The draft Plan Tree - Kent County Council’s Tree Establishment Strategy 2021-2031 is provided as an appendix to this report.

10.2 Relevant background documents include:

Natural Solutions to Climate Change in Kent Report, March 2021
(Not currently online; available from report author)

The England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/987432/england-trees-action-plan.pdf

Woodland Trust Emergency Tree Plan for the UK

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/47692/emergency-tree-plan.pdf>

Kent and Medway Energy and Low Emissions Strategy

<https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/strategies-and-policies/environment-waste-and-planning-policies/environmental-policies/kent-and-medway-energy-and-low-emissions-strategy>

Kent Biodiversity Strategy

<http://www.kentnature.org.uk/uploads/files/Nat-Env/Kent%20Biodiversity%20Strategy%202020.pdf>

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