

B From: Susan Carey, Cabinet Member for Environment
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To: Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee – 23 January 2020

Subject: Terms of reference for Cross-Party Member Group to Develop a Natural Capital Policy

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Paper: N/A

Future Pathway of Paper: N/A

Summary: This report describes the context for a Natural Capital Policy which will encompass the commitment to plant a tree for every head of population in Kent but as part of a wider framework to protect, enhance and use Kent's natural capital to manage and adapt to climate change and support biodiversity. This member working group will work with officers to set the outcomes, objectives and scope of the proposed policy, which itself will sit within a broader context of the relevant strategies such as the Kent Environment Strategy, the Energy and Low Emissions Strategy, and the Kent Biodiversity Strategy.

Recommendation(s): The Cabinet Committee is asked to comment on and agree the terms of reference for the proposed Cross-Party Member Group (CPMG).

1. Background

- 1.1 At the October meeting of the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee, the then-Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste committed KCC to facilitating the planting of a tree for every head of population.
- 1.2 This commitment was made in the context of growing concerns about the impacts of Ash Dieback, as well as a number of emerging policy developments for the county and Council, including the consultation on an Energy and Low Emissions Strategy and the publication of a Kent Biodiversity Strategy.
- 1.3 Indeed, the ambition to accelerate tree planting across the county offers the opportunity to contribute to a number of different but linked outcomes – from biodiversity to carbon sequestration.
- 1.4 This report sets out briefly the context of and potential scope for the policy and proposes a terms of reference for the Cross-Party Member Group (CPMG) to which the Cabinet Committee has committed.

2. Context

- 2.1 The impetus to create a Natural Capital Policy comes from multiple directions.
- 2.2 The Climate Change agenda has been recognised as requiring an urgent response. Many local authorities have declared or recognised climate emergencies and set net zero carbon targets for their local areas and organisations. KCC has also recognised a climate emergency and the work that is being undertaken to develop an Energy and Low Emissions Strategy is timely in providing a framework for the reduction of air pollution and carbon emissions.
- 2.3 In addition, Kent Nature Partnership is developing the Kent Biodiversity Strategy, which provides a countywide approach to the restoration and creation of habitats that are thriving with wildlife and plants, ensuring the county's terrestrial, freshwater, intertidal and marine environments regain and retain good health.
- 2.4 Supporting these broad climate change and biodiversity ambitions are specific plans and policies like Kent's Plan Bee, the Pollinator Action Plan, which has been developed in the last year and seeks to deliver, promote and enthuse others to participate in work that will benefit pollinators.
- 2.5 There has also been significant progress in the development of initiatives to use the natural environment to better manage flood risk. KCC and other partners are piloting initiatives to deploy natural flood risk management, which involves the use of natural processes are used to reduce the risk of flooding and coastal erosion – for example, changing the way that land is managed so that soil can absorb more water, or planting trees and hedgerows to help manage the flow of water in extreme rainfall events.
- 2.6 Against these opportunities, there are very real threats to the natural environment in Kent which have been highlighted to the Cabinet Committee previously, including most notably, Ash Dieback. As reported to Cabinet Committee in November of this year, the problem of Ash Dieback has become increasingly apparent, and the disease will fundamentally alter the character of the wooded landscapes of Kent.
- 2.7 There is also a challenge in finding suitable sites for urban trees with so many underground services competing for roadside space.
- 2.8 With these contexts in mind, there are a number of local authorities across the country that have committed to a programme of tree planting as an action that can address a number of the opportunities and threats emerging. These include Surrey County Council, which has recently committed to planting a tree for every head of population and raising them to maturity. In addition, Cornwall Council have set out an intention to undertake a "mass woodland tree planting programme, once fully developed a Forest for Cornwall covering approximately 8,000

hectares (to be confirmed by further calculations), or about 2% of Cornwall's land mass."¹

- 2.9 It is within this wider context that KCC has committed to looking at options for accelerating tree planting across the county.

3. Potential scope of the policy

- 3.1 The scope of the policy will be developed in collaboration with the CPMG, as this scope will be fundamental to ensuring the ultimate success of achieving the outcomes agreed. Whilst the importance of the commitment to tree planting is recognised, it is recommended that the Council not restrict its focus with this piece of work to trees in the development of the proposed policy.
- 3.2 One of the principal challenges with the planting of trees as a strategy for achieving environmental outcomes on the scale of KCC's ambition is that it takes time for the impact of such an approach to be realised – simply by nature of the fact of the time it takes for a new tree to mature. For instance, it is understood that it will be a good 20 to 30 years before any significant carbon sequestration will be achieved from a newly planted tree.
- 3.3 In fact, grassland, wetland and saltmarsh restoration may well provide quicker gains as may other intertidal areas. With the longest county coastline, we have a great potential but the Council will need to be considering this opportunity strategically now with our partners to ensure we harness this potential. The same applies for other habitats.
- 3.4 A broader strategy which looks at all-natural solutions to climate change – both mitigation and adaptation – including trees and other natural solutions and promotes a multiple benefits approach (i.e. not just carbon sequestration but also tackles biodiversity loss, water management, amenity etc) would provide a more rounded approach. It would also help ensure that any action taken, including tree planting, is considered holistically to ensure it is the right action in the right place and doesn't have perverse negative impacts.
- 3.5 Creating a policy of this scope and scale will only be effective if it is done on a county-wide basis as opposed to just a KCC policy. As such, the scope will need to consider engagement with other key partners such as the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Countryside Management Partnerships, Kent Wildlife Trust and organisations like Natural England and the Forestry Commission.
- 3.6 With the right scope, this work would also be valuable in directing investment expected from biodiversity net gain and would be part of a suite of strategies informing the framework for the Local Nature Recovery Strategies which LPAs are expected to be required to develop over the coming year. We are currently looking to build on our work on natural capital asset mapping and planning to

¹ Cornwall Council (2019). *Climate Change Plan: creating the conditions for change through direct action and a new form of place-based leadership for Cornwall to become net carbon neutral*
<https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/40176082/climate-change-action-plan.pdf>

look at opportunities and risk to our natural capital assets and the services/benefits they provide – part of this will consider natural climate solutions and can be integrated within this work to form a spatial evidence base for this strategy.

4. Enabling action in the short term

- 4.1 Bearing in mind that the above scope would entail a period of time to get right, it is proposed that in the short term, KCC works with partners to develop a high level set of guidance for anyone wishing to plant trees to support the ambitions set out in section 2.
- 4.2 This guidance would help those wishing to plant trees to do so in a way that supports these ambitions of mitigating climate change impacts and supporting biodiversity, whilst not introducing new threats to the current tree populations of Kent. Importantly, such guidance would ensure that Council services and partners and residents do not feel the need to “hold back” whilst the policy is being developed.

5. Proposed terms of reference

- 5.1 With this potential scope in mind, the proposed terms of reference for the Natural Capital Policy Member Group are set out below:
- 5.2 **Purpose:** The purpose of the CPMG will be to work with officers and the Cabinet Member for Environment to shape a policy for the development of the natural environment across the county to effectively address a wide range of the Council’s ambitions for the environment.
- 5.3 **Objectives:** The CPMG will seek to specifically shape the analyse and plan phases of this piece of work, including to:
 - Agree the outcomes and objectives for the proposed policy;
 - Agree the scope of the proposed policy; and
 - Provide steer to officers in the plan for the development of the policy, providing check and challenge at key points
- 5.4 **Membership of the CPMG:** The membership of the group will be composed of a cross-party group of members from the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee.
- 5.5 **Governance:** The CPMG would report into the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee, which will make recommendations to the Cabinet Member and/or Cabinet as appropriate to progress the development of the policy.
- 5.6 **Meetings:** The meetings of the group will be scheduled at a frequency as necessary to support the work of the group.

6. Next steps

- 6.1 Once the terms of reference are agreed, the CPMG will be established and will be brought together as soon as possible for an inaugural meeting to agree the outcomes and scope of the potential policy. Further meetings will be agreed as necessary with the group then, with the expectation that the CPMG will report on progress to the March Cabinet Committee meeting.

7. Recommendation(s)

The Cabinet Committee is asked to comment on and agree the terms of reference for the proposed Cross-Party Member Group (CPMG).

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