Part 1 – Release to Press

Stevenage BOROUGH COUNCIL

Agenda item: 4

Meeting	Environment & Economy Scrutiny Committee
Portfolio Area	Environment & Regeneration
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TREE CANOPY COVER

Author: Julia Hill, Environmental Policy & Development Manager

Contributors: Zayd Al-Jawad, Assistant Director - Planning & Regulatory Services
David Thorogood, HCCSP Env. Strategy & Development Manager

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To inform Members of how we intend to increase tree canopy cover in Stevenage by 2% to provide a minimum of 19%.

1.2 To consider an even more ambitious plan to expand the number of trees in Stevenage and / or offsetting in other locations.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 To note that officers will develop a Tree & Woodland Strategy during 2022/23, to support the delivery of the Amenity Tree Management Policy, incorporating additional tree planting to deliver a tree canopy cover of at least 19% by 2050.

2.2 Officers to consider the availability of suitable land to plant sufficient trees to help achieve net zero by 2030, and the potential impact on other uses of that land.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 Trees and woodlands make a significant contribution to every community, providing a wide range of benefits including:

- Environmental: air quality, moderating local climate, reducing rainstorm impact, increasing biodiversity
- Health: filtering polluted air, promoting well-being, reducing stress
- Social: creating a sense of place, slowing traffic, creating an attractive environment that people want to visit and spend time in
- Economic: can increase property values by 7-15%, create an environment conducive to economic growth and encouraging investment
- Climate Change: Trees help the response to the climate crises by capturing unavoidable emissions, improving air quality, absorbing pollutants, and helping to mitigate surface water flooding.

3.2 In 2000 it was estimated that there were around 40,000 amenity trees in Stevenage. Today there are around 32,500 amenity trees in the town. The tree canopy cover in Stevenage, including woodlands, (in 2016) was 17%.

3.3 In September 2020 the Climate Change Strategy set out objectives which included:

- development of a tree protection and planting strategy
- planting over 2,000 trees by 2030

3.4 One of the key recommendations from the Emergency Tree Plan for the UK (Woodland Trust, 2020) is to provide a minimum of 19% tree cover to support the UK being carbon neutral by 2050.

3.5 In January 2021 the Council approved an Amenity Tree Management Policy that seeks to:

- retain a high quality extensive amenity tree stock throughout the Town
- aspires to maintain the Town's tree cover at present levels, as a minimum
- encourage community involvement in new tree planting and subsequent maintenance
- require all new developments to support new tree planting, either directly or through planning contributions, equivalent to a minimum 20% tree canopy cover at maturity
- ensure all trees planted on Council land are UK sourced and grown.

3.6 The total working budget for the tree's service for 2022/23 is £107K. This budget is used to provide tools, personal protective equipment (PPE) and vehicles for the Council's tree team. Within this budget there is also an allowance of £3k per annum - sufficient to supply, plant and establish around 100 trees.

3.7 To achieve the planting, and successful establishment, of an additional 2,000 trees by 2030 will cost around £55,500 per annum. On reaching maturity this number of trees would increase the Town's tree canopy cover by 1%.

3.8 To achieve 19% tree canopy cover by 2050 would require the planting of an estimated additional 4,000 trees by 2030 to enable the target of 19% tree canopy cover to be reached by 2050. The cost to plant and successfully establish 4,000 trees is around £1m.

3.9 The Council, as part of its scrutiny review into climate change, has engaged with Prof Lubo Jankovic, Director of Zero Carbon Lab, University of Hertfordshire, to assess options to achieve an effective climate emergency response for the Borough.

Prof Jankovic's report looked at a range of options to determine the feasibility of achieving net zero. It is clear from the report that the mass planting of trees to capture carbon as they grow could have a very significant impact on assisting the Borough achieve its net zero ambitions.

If trees were adopted as the main carbon offsetting measure then the report estimates some 300,000 would be required to be planted to help achieve net zero by 2030 (at a cost estimate of circa £75m). There would be challenges identifying suitable land opportunities for this number of trees.

4. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

4.1 The planting of an additional 4,000 trees over the next nine years will require significant consideration and planning to ensure that sufficient and suitable, tree stock is available along with the resources to plant and maintain them.

4.2 Identification of suitable land space required to facilitate the trees will also need to be considered. Tree planting should also be balanced with the development of other habitats that also help tackle the climate / biodiversity emergency. In addition, trees may be most effective in tackling the effects of climate change when planted close to sources of high pollution levels, such as major roads, or within built up areas to reduce temperature fluctuations etc.

4.3 During 2022/23 officers will develop a Tree and Woodland Strategy that will set out more detail about how the tree planting targets for Stevenage can realistically be achieved. In the meantime solutions might include some / all of the following:

4.3.1 Planning contributions, in the form of S106, CIL or Biodiversity Net Gain, can all contribute to additional tree planting.

4.3.2 Developers planting sufficient tree numbers in accordance with Policy 21: *All new developments will support new tree planting, either directly or through planning contributions, equivalent to a minimum 20% tree canopy cover at maturity*, of the Amenity Tree Management Policy.

Developers delivering the North of Stevenage scheme are required to plant around 2,250 trees within the site, for example.

4.3.3 External funding applications have already helped to deliver six new community orchards, a total of 72 new trees, during 2021/22 – 2022/23. Further funding streams could support additional planting.

4.3.4 We know from previous engagement activities that our local community support efforts to tackle climate change. Opportunities to actively engage with the community might include:

- Sponsorship: providing opportunities for individuals, community groups and local business to provide funding to support tree planting. A sound and auditable process must be developed to facilitate this option, but

could potentially link with the existing Advertising and Sponsorship contract.

- Adopt a Tree: around half of the cost of successful tree planting and establishment is associated with the maintenance during the first three years following planting, i.e. watering, checking tree ties etc. Particularly where trees are planted within residential areas it may be possible to develop a scheme where local residents can adopt a tree, keeping it watered during the spring/summer and reporting issues to the Council as necessary.
- Tree Giveaway: not all tree planting has to take place on public open space. Tree planting in private gardens and school grounds for example can contribute to the tree canopy cover for the Town. With suitable funding it may be possible to deliver a scheme to provide small trees to local residents and schools to plant on their land.
  As part of HCC's Tree & Woodland Strategy they plan to give away 100,000 trees to local residents, businesses and community groups over the next four years. The scheme will be launched during September/October 2022, and this Council will be supporting the distribution of trees to Stevenage based participants.
- Community Woodland: During the winter of 2022/23 officers plan to invite the local community to plant tree seeds and saplings to create a new area of woodland in Fairlands Valley Park South Field. This will be a pilot project that, if successful, could be rolled out to further sites in future. It is anticipated that around 4,000 saplings will be planted.

4.4 All options will be considered and detailed further in the Tree & Woodland Strategy.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial Implications

5.1.1 To achieve the planting and establishment of 2,000 trees by 2030, in support of the Climate Change Strategy, would cost around £63,000 per year for the next 8 years - £504,000 total. However, this can be achieved through developer planting in the North of Stevenage scheme and at no cost to the Council.

5.1.2 To achieve 19% tree canopy cover by 2050, an aspiration of the Amenity Tree Management Policy and key recommendations from the Emergency Tree Plan for the UK (Woodland Trust, 2020), would require the planting of an estimated additional 4,000 trees. The cost to plant and successfully establish 4,000 trees is around £1m, although at least half of this commitment will be achieved through developer planting in north Stevenage.

5.1.3 To plant 300,000 trees to help achieve net zero by 2030 would cost around £75m over the next nine years.

5.1.4 Some of the costs may be achieved through developer contributions, but further work is required to establish the shortfall.

5.2 Legal Implications

5.2.1 There are no legal obligations to providing additional tree planting.

5.2.2 Officers would need to determine if Stevenage has sufficient suitable land to plant 300,000 trees to help achieve net zero by 2030.

If there is not sufficient suitable land, the Council may wish to consider the purchase of nearby agricultural land to support the additional tree planting.

5.3 Policy Implications

5.3.1 The Climate Change Strategy states that the Council will plant over 2,000 trees by 2030 – around 250 trees per year for the next 8 years.

5.4 Staffing & Accommodation Implications

5.4.1 Stevenage Direct Services (SDS) does not have sufficient capacity within its current workforce to plant 2,000 trees by 2030, therefore consideration would need to be given to the use of contractors as well as volunteering support.

5.6 Risk Implications

5.6.1 There is a risk of reputational damage if Stevenage is unable to meet its Climate Change Strategy targets, and its objective to achieve net zero by 2030.

5.7 Climate Change Implications

5.7.1 The Council declared a climate change emergency at the June 2019 Council meeting, with a resolution to work towards a target of achieving net zero emissions by 2030.