



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

22 JUNE 2022

DRAFT RCT TREE, WOODLANDS AND HEDGEROW STRATEGY

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PROSPERITY & DEVELOPMENT IN DISCUSSION WITH CLLR CHRISTINA LEYSHON THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CLIMATE CHANGE & CORPORATE SERVICES

Author: Simon Gale

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is:

- 1.1 For Cabinet to consider the contents of a new, draft RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy and agree that the draft is used as the basis on which to engage the public and other relevant stakeholders in an eight week consultation to ascertain a wider range of views.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1 Agree the draft RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy for consultation with the public and other relevant stakeholders

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Trees have featured prominently in climate change considerations in global, UK and Welsh Government policy. We are also recognising that trees, vegetation and soils have an important carbon storing role in the 'carbon cycle'.
- 3.2 A tree strategy is necessary to ensure that we value, promote and protect the significant extent of existing woodlands in Rhondda Cynon Taf (about a third of the County Borough), recognising the importance

of our semi-natural woodland habitats and especially our ancient woodlands. It is also important that a strategy is in place that recognises the importance of protecting semi-natural habitats and undisturbed soils from inappropriate tree planting.

- 3.3 A tree strategy will also provide the foundation of the Council's ambition to deliver RCT's largest tree planting programme in a generation and will promote the principles of 'right tree – right place'.
- 3.4 Finally a tree strategy will provide a robust framework for all tree related decisions and activity in RCT over the next 10 years.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 In November 2019 Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough Council (RCTCBC) established a Climate Change Cabinet Steering Group to address the climate emergency and subsequently the nature emergency, declared by Welsh Government. As a Council we are committed to investing in our green spaces and to delivering natural carbon storage solutions such as those provided by trees, peat bogs, marshy grassland and other natural habitats across the County Borough to enhance air quality and reduce the impact of greenhouse gasses.
- 4.2 Rhondda Cynon Taf is one of the very few heavily wooded areas in the UK and probably the only Local Authority area with such a large population of both people and trees. The County Borough is about a third wooded and about a third urban, with a population of 241,873 (2020 est). Even within our main urban areas an average of 18.5% of the area is tree covered.
- 4.3 Our trees, hedgerows, and woodlands are an integral part of nature, supporting a wide range of insects, animals, birds and plant life. Looking after the trees, hedges and woodlands in our local environment is essential for the future health of nature and of people. Trees can improve the environmental quality of our urban areas, delivering physical, social and economic benefits as well as mitigating climate change, improving storm water management, air quality, biodiversity, visual amenity and more. In considering trees and planning for the future.
- 4.4 Our climate is changing which has implications on how our trees, woodlands and wildlife react to it and the levels of management required. Globalisation increases the threat from pests and diseases and although not new, these are a growing concern. Currently, Ash dieback is a major challenge, but others have significant impact on our native tree stock (Dutch elm, *Phytophthora*, *Chalara*, processionary oak moth etc.).

- 4.5 The value of trees to the Council and the residents of RCT is significant, from the well-established aesthetic and landscape benefits, to local air quality, water cycling and shade etc. Other habitats are also important and conserving these has benefits for residents, climate and nature. The Nature's Assets report previously considered by Cabinet, identified the importance of our semi-natural biodiversity rich habitats and of conserving existing soil carbon sequestration. It also identified the on-going natural processes of native woodland regeneration and colonisation taking place across the County Borough.
- 4.6 Trees fall within the remit of numerous departments of the Council, from Planning, Legal and Environmental Health to Corporate Estates, Education, Cemeteries, Parks and Countryside, Streetcare, Drainage and Highways. Trees cannot be considered in isolation. They form a major part of our Green Infrastructure and how we manage them should complement other works carried out by the Council in terms of climate change measures. A Tree Strategy will provide a unified direction for all Council services in respect of our tree activity and provide a framework to consider the organisational and resource requirements needed to address the current challenges and the opportunities highlighted by the broader scope of the climate change and biodiversity emergencies

5. DRAFT RCT TREE, WOODLAND AND HEDGEROW STRATEGY

- 5.1 The focus of this strategy is to actively protect Rhondda Cynon Taf's trees, woodlands and hedgerows that all benefit our environment so significantly. The strategy looks at the next ten years specifically but with an eye on the longer-term.
- 5.2 To achieve our Climate and Nature ambitions, how we manage trees must be integrated with wider environmental concerns to protect and manage all the important habitats in our urban areas and in the surrounding countryside. It must also be integrated with other Council policies such as the Review Local Development Plan, the Flood Risk Management Plan, Environmental Health and Community engagement.
- 5.3 The strategy will provide a mechanism to enhance the provision and care of woodlands in RCT; ensure that decisions and activities undertaken in relation to trees are made in a structured and consistent way; and, establish a series of policies, action plans and monitoring for the management and enhancement of RCT's trees, woodlands and hedgerows.
- 5.4 The strategy sets out a robust framework with the over-arching aims of:
- Protect, regenerate and care for RCT's existing trees and woodlands

- Encouraging new tree and hedgerow planting in appropriate areas to benefit well-being, pollution, climate change and local pride in our surroundings
- Maintaining the extent of urban tree cover and to extend the canopy cover in urban areas where there is less than 10%
- Encouraging appropriate natural regeneration of woodland to increase canopy cover, whilst protecting open habitats of biodiversity value
- To provide a framework for decision making and establishing a prioritised action plan for 2022 -2032

5.5 The strategy is ambitious in its aims of valuing, protecting and enhancing our extensive portfolio of existing trees, woodlands and hedgerows whilst at the same time seeking to undertake an accelerated tree planting programme that will be the largest seen in RCT in decades.

5.6 Resources will clearly be needed to meet this ambition both in terms of staff, capital for new tree planting and revenue for ongoing maintenance, management and enhancement of new and existing trees. There is already a strong commitment in the Council's 2022/23 revenue budget strategy to resourcing this type of activity and it is proposed to recruit additional tree officers (one strategic and two operational) from the current £500K allocated to Climate Change and Carbon Reduction activity.

5.7 At an operational level, the strategy will guide how we risk assess and manage trees on the Council's land and also how we respond to dangerous trees in private ownership. It seeks to strengthen our enforcement and Tree Preservation Order processes and how we respond to development and planning related consultations. The strategy will also provide a framework for ensuring all relevant staff across the Council have access to training and awareness opportunities around the subject of trees and hedgerows.

5.8 Alongside the strategy, officers are developing a tree planting programme that will seek to maximise the opportunities to plant new trees in our parks, schools and public spaces. The programme will also explore opportunities to plant new trees in town centres and on highways, balancing the benefits of new planting in these built up areas against the potential disruption and impact on infrastructure.

5.9 It is recognised that there are community groups and individuals that are keen to undertake their own tree planting projects and officers are currently working on a toolkit to support organisations in RCT to identify the right land, right form of planting and funding opportunities to ensure a successful outcome. A communications plan for this activity is being developed to ensure that local members and their residents are informed and engaged with, new tree planting activity in their

community and to maximise the number of community projects and private landowners that come forward with appropriate proposals.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

6.1 None as a direct result of this strategy.

7. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no Welsh language implications as a result of the recommendations set out in the report.

8. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

8.1 Full public and stakeholder consultation will be undertaken if this report is approved

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

9.1 None directly related to this strategy but there will be additional staff, capital and revenue impacts as plans under the strategy area develop.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

10.1 The enhancement of trees, woodlands and hedgerows in the County Borough is directly related to the goals of the Well Being of Future Generations Act. The Council also has specific responsibilities in terms of tree/public safety and Tree Preservation Orders.

11. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

11.1 The proposed Tree Strategy contributes to the Council's priorities as set out in the Council's Corporate Plan. Specifically, it contributes to 'People' by creating more natural communities that promote and maintain mental wellbeing and to 'Places' by Getting the best out of our environment by looking after and investing in our greenspaces and specifically delivering natural carbon storage solutions across the County Borough to enhance air quality and reduce the impact of greenhouse gasses. It also reflects the five ways of working in the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Sustainable management is based on

long-term considerations and is focused on preventative and precautionary action. The strategy aims to involve all the relevant stakeholders and to integrate tree activity into the wider operations of the Council. It will contribute specifically to the Resilience and Global Responsibility goals of the Act, but in the longer term it could have implications for all the goals

12. STRATEGIC OR RELEVANT TO ELECTORAL WARDS

- 12.1 Successful implementation of the draft RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy are of strategic significance to Rhondda Cynon Taf.

13. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

- 13.1 If implemented the new draft RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy will be used to engage the public and other relevant stakeholders in an eight week consultation to ascertain a wider range of views.
- 13.2 The results of the consultation and engagement exercise are not only fundamental in determining a wider range of views it will provide a robust framework for all tree related decisions and activity in RCT over the next 10 years.

Other Information:-

Relevant Scrutiny Committee

Climate Change, Frontline Services and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Contact Officer: Simon Gale 01443 281114

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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DISCUSSIONS WITH THE RELEVANT PORTFOLIO HOLDER
(COUNCILLOR CHRISTINA LEYSHON)**

Item:

Background Papers

None.

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