

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

**CLIMATE CHANGE, FRONTLINE SERVICES & PROSPERITY SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

THE RCT TREE, WOODLANDS AND HEDGEROW STRATEGY

18 OCTOBER 2023

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

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 For the Committee to consider the progress on delivering against the objectives as set out in the RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Note and consider the progress on delivering the RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy; and,
2.2 Consider whether Members wish to scrutinise any matters contained within this report in greater detail in line with the Committee's Terms of Reference.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 In December 2022, the Climate Change Cabinet Sub-Committee approved a new RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy to ensure that we value, promote and protect the significant extent of existing woodlands in Rhondda Cynon Taf, recognising the importance of our semi-natural woodland habitats and especially our ancient woodlands.
- 3.2 The tree strategy also provides 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 - right reason'.
- 3.3 A planting season has passed since the adoption of the strategy and plans are in place for the next planting season. This report allows Members to consider the actions taken under the strategy so far and the activity being undertaken over the next 12 months.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 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 promote biodiversity, enhance air quality and reduce the impact of greenhouse gasses.
- 4.2 Rhondda Cynon Taf is one of the few heavily wooded areas in the UK and probably the only Local Authority area with such a large population of both people and trees.
- 4.3 Our trees, hedgerows, and woodlands are an integral part of nature, supporting a wide range of insects, animals, birds and plant life. 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.
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 This value is recognised by the Council and in December 2022, the Climate Change Cabinet Sub-Committee approved a new RCT Tree, Woodlands and Hedgerow Strategy. The focus of the Strategy is to actively protect Rhondda Cynon Taf's trees, woodlands and hedgerows that all benefit our environment so significantly. 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
- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 The strategy also provides a unified direction for all Council services in respect of our tree activity and provides 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 – ACTIVITY TO DATE

5.1 In its first year, the new Strategy has provided the framework for starting to implement our stated ambition of undertaking the largest tree planting programme in a generation, the details of which are set out in sections 5.2 – 5.10. Furthermore, the focus the strategy places on protecting our existing woodlands has set the context for research into the extent of natural regeneration across the County Borough. The findings of that research are set out in sections 5.14 – 5.16.

Tree Planting

5.2 Our tree planting activity has been coordinated through a cross-council group of officers as part of the Council's ongoing Nature's Assets agenda. The tree planting itself was delivered 'in-house' through our Parks/Streetcare teams and in this first year, focused mainly on schools and parks.

5.3 In terms of schools and led by the 21st Century Schools team, an ambitious multi-year tree planting programme has been developed for school sites across RCT. It is considered that tree planting in schools is a great way for pupils to connect with nature while helping the environment. It links to many areas of the curriculum, and it is a fun, hands-on opportunity as a project for gardening and eco clubs.

5.4 In total 10,050 trees/hedgerows were planted, over 9 schools in this first phase and by planting a larger number of smaller trees this will help longer term establishment of the hedgerows. Some examples are shown below.



This hedgerow in Gwauncelyn School will eventually provide screening and greening of the school fence line.

In a few years these hedgerow plants will completely screen the playing field at Pontypridd School and provide added security.

These hedgerows at Tonyrefail school will provide screening and cut down wind speed.

- 5.5 An 'After Care' sheet, has been developed to be distributed to the school sites who have newly planted trees/hedgerows with a view to enabling staff and pupils to remain involved in the ongoing maintenance of the trees and cut down on maintenance costs.
- 5.6 In terms of planting in parks and open spaces, this was undertaken at locations across the county borough and in consultation with the local members. The majority of trees planted were larger, ornamental trees when compared to the smaller hedgerow trees that made up the bulk of the school planting. The detail of the number of trees planted is shown in the table below.

	Trees	Hedging	Shrubs
Rhondda	83	80	21
Cynon	109	0	23
Taff	105	0	0
Totals	297	80	44

Protecting Our Existing Woodlands

- 5.7 One of the key aims of the new Tree Strategy is to protect our existing natural woodlands. One of the best examples of our natural woodlands is Glyncornel Woods. Its quality and importance was recognised when it was named as part of the Queen's Green Canopy, a nationwide network of 70 Ancient Woodlands dedicated to Her Majesty in celebration of her Platinum Jubilee in 2022.
- 5.8 The woodland is managed by the Council and was nominated because it is an excellent example of an Ancient Semi Natural oak woodland that survived the industrial revolution and because it is a relatively pristine example of an upland oak woodland in Wales. Glyncornel was one of only 9 woodlands chosen in Wales (and 70 in total in the whole of the UK) and earlier this year its nomination was marked by the planting of one of the Platinum Jubilee 'Tree of Trees' (see photo below left with Councillors Webber and Leyshon, our Mayor and the Lord-Lieutenant Pete and Suzanne Vaughan).



- 5.9 This tree was one of the 350 trees which were arranged into the shape of a single large tree named the 'Tree of Trees' and was placed in front of Buckingham Palace as part of the Jubilee celebrations (see photo above right).

Natural Regeneration

- 5.10 One of the key actions falling out of the strategy was to gain a better understanding of the level of tree cover across the county borough and what role natural regeneration plays in how our woodlands are evolving.
- 5.11 Earlier this year, a study was commissioned to establish the extent of woodland cover change within the Council's own land ownership portfolio between 2003 and 2020 and specifically as a result of natural regeneration. This is also required to inform the Carbon accounting process the Council is undertaking as part of our Climate Change commitments.
- 5.12 The mapping and analysis of the 56 larger land holdings show that woodland cover within the Council land holding was calculated as 424.82 ha in 2003, whilst woodland cover in the same area was calculated as 720.34 ha in 2020. In percentage terms, this is an increase from around 24% of the Council land holding area to 40%. Essentially, it identifies a near 300 hectare increase in woody (woodland/scrub) cover on the RCT sites assessed between 2003 and 2020. This change provides clear evidence that natural tree colonisation and regeneration is delivering increased woodland cover at a significant rate in the county borough and should be welcomed.

6 DRAFT RCT TREE, WOODLAND AND HEDGEROW STRATEGY – NEXT STEPS

- 6.1 It is proposed that we continue the programme of planting in schools and public spaces in the way outlined in section 5 of this report. The planning of this year's planting is at an advanced stage with a view to again planting hedgerows in schools and also ornamental plants and native trees within public open spaces.
- 6.2 The specific species and locations have been chosen not only for the environmental benefits but to ensure the trees are not of a large nature to impact on complaints relating to light, view, TV signal etc. Planting locations have been reviewed for underground utilities, overhead wires and proximity to properties.

Furthermore, the locations have been carefully assessed to ensure no conflict with any other land uses or designations such as wildflower biodiversity sites, SINC's, other department uses, etc.

6.3 The planting in open spaces seeks to concentrate on increasing the area of tree canopy cover within the five urban areas with the lowest cover in the county borough, which are:

- Brynna/Llanharan - 9.8%
- Beddau/Church Village - 11.7%
- Glifach Goch - 12.2%
- Glyncoch - 12.4%
- Tonyrefail - 15.8%

as at baseline year 2013

6.4 The schools planting initiative for year 2 of our programme includes 17 schools and 41,660 hedgerow plants. The detail is outlined in the table below.

School name and location	#plants
Maerdy Community Primary School, Graig Wen, Maerdy Ferndale, CF43 4TW	2220
Williamstown Primary School, Dinas Isaf Ind Est, Penrhiwfer, Tonypandy, CF40 1AG	632
Penrhys Primary School, Heol Pendyrus, Penrhys, Ferndale, CF43 3PL	752
Treorchy Comprehensive School, Station Road, Treorchy, CF42 6UL	6740
Porth Community School, Cemetery Road, Porth, CF39 0BS	2048
Aberdare Park Primary School, Hirwaun Road, Trecynon Aberdare, CF44 8LU	208
Abercynon Community Primary, Ynysmeurig Road, Abercynon, CF45 4SU	920
Capcoch Primary School, School Street, Abercwmboi, CF44 6AD	1328
Cwmaman Primary, Glanaman Road, Cwmaman CF44 6LA	600
Cwmbach Church in Wales Primary School, Tirfounder Road, Cwmbach, CF44 0AT	664
Pengeulan Primary School, Penrhiwceiber Road, Mountain Ash, CF45 3UW	120
Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Castellau, Castellau Road, Beddau, CF38 2AA	1504
Llwynocrwn Primary School, Llwynocrwn Road, Beddau, CF38 2BE	3000

Brynnau Primary School, Williams Street, Brynna, CF72 9QJ	464
Llanharan Primary School, Llwynbrain Terrace, Llanharan CF72 9PW	3080
Y Pant Comprehensive School, Cowbridge Road, Talbot Green, CF72 8YQ	11564
Mountain Ash Comprehensive School, New Road, CF45 4DG	5816

6.5 The next stage is for officers to engage with local members for each of the planting locations proposed (both open spaces and schools) to ensure that there are no local conflicts with what is being proposed.

Future Years

6.6 Further opportunities have been identified to continue the schools planting programme for another 2 years after this one and if continued, by year 4 we will have filled all viable land within schools and involved all but the fully hard landscaped school sites.

6.7 Work is also underway to understand how we can obtain even greater value out of the choices we make when deciding where to plant trees in our urban areas. Using the principle of ‘right tree – right place - right reason’, officers are currently overlaying mapping data of areas in Council ownership; the areas with low canopy cover; areas that are liable to surface water flooding; and areas with air quality issues.

6.8 In analysing this data, we will be able to create a heat map of areas where we can get multiple benefits from our tree planting activity and prioritise planting accordingly. It is anticipated that in adopting this approach we can reduce the potential for surface water flooding through adopting a SUDS approach, improve air quality where it is needed the most and generally improve the appearance of the local area.

6.9 It is anticipated that this work will be completed in time to inform activity in the next tree planting season (2024/25).

7 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS/ SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

7.1 None as a direct result of this strategy.

8 WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

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

9 CONSULTATION/ INVOLVEMENT

- 9.1 None necessary as a direct result of this report but engagement will be undertaken with the relevant local members ahead of the proposed planting programme.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 None directly related to this strategy but there will be additional staff, capital and revenue impacts as plans under the strategy area develop. The tree planting activity is funded through the Council's Climate Change/Carbon Reduction budget.

11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 11.1 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.

12. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN/OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

- 12.1 The 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.

13. CONCLUSION

- 13.1 The Strategy sets out ambitious targets and objectives for tree planting in the county borough alongside a clear intention to protect and enhance our existing trees, woodlands and hedgerows. This report demonstrates a strong start to implementation of the Council's commitments in respect of trees and the wider Climate Change agenda.

