

REPORT TITLE Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council Urban Forest Strategy

Submitted by: Head of Operations – Roger Tait

Portfolio: Environment and Recycling

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Purpose of the Report

To seek the approval of the Cabinet for the adoption of the Urban Forest Strategy for Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Recommendations

1. That the report is received
2. That the Urban Forest Strategy for Newcastle-under-Lyme is adopted
3. That officers are authorised to develop and progress the action plan within current budgetary and staff resource provision.
4. That officers are authorised to work with partners to develop and progress the action plan.

Reasons

To manage and improve the tree stock within the Borough and to provide a framework for it's future development and rationalisation.

1. **Background**

1.1 Our tree cover is crucial to the wellbeing of the borough in terms of landscape, local air quality and microclimates, nature conservation, biodiversity, economic development and human health.

We recognise that all trees are constituents of the forest and that the forest needs managing as a holistic entity. We aim to gain a wider recognition of the quality of our urban forest, and create an environment to encourage further investment in the borough.

By working to improve and increase the forest area of the borough, essentially our whole environment, we will reap the rewards in terms of a richer and more valuable living space. By managing the forest in a more commercial fashion we will create an environment for future generations of which we can all be proud.

The proposed Urban Forest Strategy recognises the long-term nature of tree management, with targets up to the year 2050, with a programme of short and long-term actions to achieve our goals. The strategy will be subject to constant review and renewal. Ultimately, following a long timescale,

reflecting the life-span of the tree population, we will achieve a larger, intensively-managed urban forest of which we can all be proud.

The strategy is a bold and progressive initiative that will lead the way in urban tree management in these times of increasing environmental pressures and predicted climate change. This is one of the borough's suite of strategies aimed at meeting these pressures for the benefit of the population as a whole.

1.2 Trees are living plants. They grow, they mature, they become sick and they die. When trees start to decline they can start to become a risk. The urban and suburban environments, and indeed the farmed landscape, are not natural environments. The countryside has been shaped by thousands of years of tree clearance for agriculture. The built environment has developed over a small number of years. Trees left within the built environment have many pressures to cope with including reduced rooting space, vandalism, changed local climates, greater susceptibility to disease, and generally shorter life expectancies.

Complacency is a big challenge to tree survival. Planting schemes from Victorian times have left us with leafy lanes and glorious parks and gardens. Trees have now matured and there is resistance to making significant changes to these environments as they are so pleasant at the moment. However, in many of these locations trees are all of a similar age and in order to ensure their continuance some will need to be removed to make way for younger trees and to ensure that future generations continue to enjoy the rich environment of many parts of the borough.

Whilst trees are essential for human survival, they can also create their own problems. The pressures suffered by trees such as those described above can render them hazardous in several ways and management of the tree resource ensures that trees remain in a safe condition. Management is targeted to areas of greater risk, for example where trees are next to houses, roads, play areas etc. Management also helps to keep natural sunlight filtering into homes, minimising discomfort, minimising nuisance, improving sight lines at road junctions and even improving the chances of better TV reception! Structured and planned tree management ensures the survival of trees for maximum benefit, whilst at the same time minimising the less favourable effects of nuisance and annoyance to people.

1.3 The Newcastle under Lyme Urban Forest is a new concept. The Urban Forest has always existed but it has not been viewed as such before. The urban forest is defined as all of the woodlands, trees and open spaces within the borough, viewed as a single entity rather than as separate collections of trees and woodlands. To satisfy the needs for good environmental management Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council is moving away from the concept that each individual tree is to be protected in its own right, and now recognises the importance of the holistic view of the forest as a whole. This strategy is concerned with the improvement and management of the urban forest as a whole.

We are fortunate in Newcastle in having a higher than average covering of trees. Woodland cover for Staffordshire in general is between 6 and 8% and within Newcastle the percentage appears a little higher than this. Formal surveys over the next few years will give us a more reliable figure. Our borough is essentially a collection of small urban areas with an extensive rural fringe. The agricultural landscape is well endowed with trees and there are numerous small woodlands across the borough. Previous clearance of wooded areas for industry is being reversed with the planting of many former mining sites and the creation of country parks such as Birchenwood and Apedale. Within the last thirty years Dutch Elm Disease has had a profound influence on the landscape of

Newcastle under Lyme. Few elm trees remain and where the English elm is regenerating in the hedgerows it is succumbing to disease again when it reaches around 8 cms stem diameter. As such these once prominent trees have become little more than a hedgerow component. Other diseases, including the newly-arrived Ash Dieback (*Chalara fraxinea*) have had, and will continue to have an impact on tree cover within the borough and this confirms the need for a strong and robust woodland strategy.

Traditional response to disease and decline of tree populations has been largely ad hoc with the planting of standard trees with stakes in parks and open spaces. More recently woodland style planting with forestry “whips” and transplant trees has taken precedence, utilising native broadleaf species wherever possible. This style of planting is easier to establish, less prone to vandalism and is, on the whole, a more cost-effective form of planting. However, this places a greater need on thinning plantation areas following vigorous growth in order to maintain healthy woodland.

In general tree management has been reactive and whilst this deals with problems as a whole, a vision and sense of direction is currently lacking. Structured, planned, proactive management by all land owners in the urban forest will ensure an end to decline, an improvement to the urban forest, greater numbers of trees and a reduction in complaints.

2. Issues

2.1 Tree cover across the borough is divided into a complex matrix of ownerships and responsibilities. Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council owns and directly manages a significant volume of tree stock in its 1800 acres of parks and open spaces and other land holdings. The council has a Tree Management System (TMS) which has plotted all of its tree stock and has set up a programme of survey, inspection and physical work based on a risk management system. The council employs a qualified Arboricultural Officer to manage its tree stock in recognition of the high risk which this function contains and has trained tree operatives within the multi-skilled Streetscene workforce who carry out programmed and reactive tree maintenance work identified via the TMS.

The council also has a number of powers, duties and management responsibilities for tree stock in other ownership through its planning, development control and enforcement functions and this is managed by officers in relevant departments as a part of their wider duties and responsibilities. The council has a number of existing policies and procedures in relation to tree management but the proposed Urban Forest Strategy is the first time that these have been reviewed and co-ordinated into one, over-arching policy document. A copy of the proposed Urban Forest Strategy is attached to this report at Appendix 1.

2.2 The proposed strategy recognises that in addition to the council's own tree stock, there are key partners who own significant volumes of tree stock in the borough and that the management practices of these partners have a high impact on how the urban forest is managed, and how it is perceived by the community. The key partners are Staffordshire County Council who own and manage the highway tree stock which gives many of our streets and roads their landscape character, and Aspire Housing who own and manage the tree stock on the amenity land surrounding much of the borough's social housing. These partners, as well as a number of other stakeholders, have been consulted on the proposed strategy and a summary of the comments received your officers' responses, is attached to this report at Appendix 2. Both Staffordshire County Council and Aspire Housing support the aims of the strategy and the intention is to work with both organisations to develop good arboricultural working practices and deliver the action plan to ensure that the aims of the strategy are achieved.

2.3 In terms of privately owned tree stock, the main controls available to the council are contained within planning policy. The council has the powers to make and administer Tree Preservation Orders to protect privately owned trees of amenity value from the threat of unnecessary removal or inappropriate management or development. There are currently over 150 Tree Preservation Orders in Newcastle Under Lyme, which provide protection for thousands of trees on an individual, group, area or woodland basis. Trees within Conservation Areas are also afforded protection and the local planning authority can impose conditions on planning permissions to retain trees of value and enter into management and maintenance agreements.

Other organisations also have control and enforcement powers in relation to privately owned tree stock, including the Forestry Commission from whom a felling licence must be obtained for permission to remove trees over a specified volume.

2.4 The Urban Forest Strategy pulls together all of the above factors into one over-arching policy document for the management of tree stock in the borough. It represents a shift away from considering each individual tree in its own right and seeking to secure replacement planting in sites where perhaps tree cover had become inappropriate, to a holistic approach where the overall aim is to increase tree cover, but to do so in appropriate locations and using appropriate species. The strategy proposes the following guiding principles:

- **Protect**

Objective 1: Retain and protect existing woodland

Objective 2: Retain and protect existing hedgerows

Objective 3: Protect and enhance existing trees and groups including street trees

- **Care**

Objective 4: Care for woodlands areas to promote structured, uneven-aged and sustainable environments for multiple uses, with an emphasis on recreation, amenity and nature conservation.

Objective 5: Care for trees, and hedgerows to promote healthy growth and development

- **Plant**

Objective 6: Plant more woodlands and hedgerows

Objective 7: Plant more trees, tree groups and street trees

- **People**

Objective 8: Consultation with public and interest groups over major schemes and initiatives.

Objective 9: Listen to public opinion and manage Newcastle Borough Council-owned trees in the interests of good neighbourliness and human comfort

2.5 The strategy then proposes an Action Plan, deliverable over the period up to 2050, to seek to carry out detailed projects and initiatives to achieve these aims.

The Action Plan has been designed to take into account current resource availability in terms of staffing levels and budgets and is considered to be achievable within these limitations.

The action plan also seeks to develop tree management as a potential income generating activity to offset the cost of the service by trading with other organisations who may be interested in procuring work of this type from the council.

Should current resource levels change, there will be a need to review the action plan and amend it accordingly.

It is therefore proposed to prepare an annual monitoring report to review progress with the strategy and to agree any amendments which may be necessary.

2.6 The strategy also proposes that we continue to develop our volunteering and partnership initiatives to assist in delivering the action plan and that we continue to seek external funding opportunities where appropriate.

3. **Options Considered**

Options have been considered as part of the strategy development process

4. **Proposal**

4.1 That the report is received.

4.2 That the Urban Forest Strategy for Newcastle-under-Lyme is adopted.

4.3 That officers are authorised to develop and progress the action plan within current budgetary and staff resource provision.

4.4 That officers are authorised to work with partners to develop and progress the action plan.

5. **Reasons for Preferred Solution**

To manage and improve the tree stock within the Borough and to provide a framework for its future development and rationalisation.

6. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

6.1 Creating a cleaner, safer and sustainable Borough.

6.2 Creating a healthy and active community.

7. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

There are a number of legal and statutory implications relating to the management of tree stock in the borough. Current legislation and planning guidance covered within the strategy includes the following:

- Town and Country Planning Act 1990
- Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990
- Planning and Compensation Act 1991
- Environment Act 1995
- Town and Country Planning (Trees) Regulations 1999
- Highways Act 1980
- Hedgerow Regulations 1997
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)
- “Tree Preservation Orders . A Guide to the Law and Good Practice.”
DETR 2000
- Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976
(sections 23 & 24)
- Forestry Act 1967 (as amended). Felling Licences
- Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

The council is also directly responsible for the safe management of the tree stock within it's ownership and operates the Tree Management System to manage and mitigate liabilities in this regard.

8. **Equality Impact Assessment**

There are no negative impacts identified as part of this report

9. **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 9.1 The cost to the council of managing it's own tree stock is met from within existing budgets in the general fund revenue programme for the Streetscene service, which include salary costs for the Arboricultural Officer and Streetscene Operatives (tree operatives), equipment and training costs and annual licence costs for the Tree Management System (TMS).
- 9.2 There are also staff costs relating to other tree management and enforcement functions in a number of departments across the authority which are similarly included in the general fund revenue programme for those respective service areas.
- 9.3 There are no additional staff or financial resources required directly relating to the proposed adoption of the Urban Forestry Strategy at present.

10. **Major Risks**

There are major risks associated with the management of tree stock and the council has a Tree Management System (TMS) in place to ensure that it's responsibilities and liabilities are managed and mitigated wherever possible.

11. **Key Decision Information**

The strategy proposes a new policy, affects all wards in the borough and has been included on the Forward Plan. It does not result in significant expenditure or savings at this time.

13. **List of Appendices**

- 1 – Urban Forest Strategy for Newcastle-under-Lyme
- 2 – Summary of consultation responses

14. **Background Papers** None