

# Accelerated Tree Planting in the Great Western Community Forest

**Cabinet**

**Date: 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2020**

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Author: Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport & Planning,  
and the Cabinet Member for Climate Change  
Director of Strategic Development & Head of Property Assets

Wards: All Wards

Parishes Affected: All Parishes

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## **1. Purpose and Reasons**

- 1.1 This report seeks authority for the Council to participate in a national 'Trees for Climate' initiative, as part of the developing Great Western Community Forest (GWCF).
- 1.2 The report also seeks to approve the principle of using Council owned land parcels for woodland planting.
- 1.3 This project supports Council priority three: Ensure clean and safe streets and improve our public spaces and local culture. It also links to emerging priorities for climate change adaptation and mitigation, and the approved Council resolution of 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020 (Council Minute 67), which is detailed in full at paragraph 3.12 of this report.

## **2. Recommendations**

### Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Authorise the Director of Strategic Development, in consultation with the Chief Legal Officer, to enter into agreement with Cheshire West and Chester Council to progress the Council's involvement in England's Trees for Climate Initiative on such terms and conditions that are necessary in order to protect the Council's interests.
- 2.2 Authorise the Head of Property Assets, in consultation with the Director of Strategic Development, the Chief Legal Officer and the Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning:
  - 2.2.1 To identify Council-owned land, which is assessed as suitable woodland planting and unsuitable for any alternative development.
  - 2.2.2 To agree that such land where appropriate be used to deliver woodland planting, in accordance with the terms of the Trees for Climate Grant Funding Agreement, and that the sites identified from that exercise are taken forward in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport & Planning, and the Cabinet Member for Climate Change.

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- 2.3 Subject to Recommendation 2.2.2, authorise the Director of Strategic Development to commission tree planting on the land identified and approved for woodland planting in accordance with the Trees for Climate Grant Funding Agreement on such further terms and conditions that are necessary in order to protect the Council's interests.
- 2.4 Authorise the Director of Strategic Development to allocate the Trees for Climate funding that is being made available by Cheshire West and Chester Council to deliver woodland planting in accordance with the Grant Funding Agreement.

## 3. Detail

### National Trees for Climate Initiative

- 3.1 The UK government recognises the importance of increased tree planting to sequester and store carbon from the atmosphere and thereby support climate mitigation programmes. By creating new woodlands, a wide range of additional benefits can be achieved. Some of these relate to adaptation to the climate change. Others include health and well-being and air quality benefits, an increase in biodiversity and the improvement of ecological networks to improve resilience of our biodiversity.
- 3.2 [England's Community Forests \('ECF'\)](#) are in a unique position to deliver carbon and wider environmental, social and economic benefits associated with community forestry in and around England's towns and cities. Work is underway to develop a Community Forest led programme to increase the rate of tree planting in England's Community Forests, including the Great Western Community Forest.
- 3.3 The title of the England's Community Forests initiative is 'Trees for Climate', an ambitious programme to plant over 6000ha of woodlands in England's Community Forests from 2020 to 2025. This is an unprecedented opportunity for the sector.
- 3.4 [The Mersey Forest Partnership](#) along with the [Community Forest Trust](#), a charity that supports the work of the Community Forests, have been leading discussions to develop a fully funded programme of tree planting on behalf of England's Community Forests. Cheshire West and Chester Council (CW&C) as the accountable body for the Mersey Forest Partnership have agreed to act as the accountable body for the England's Community Forests Trees for Climate programme and to allocate funds to partner Local Authorities and Community Forest Trusts nationally as part of an agreed programme delivery plan.
- 3.5 The Trees for Climate programme will not fully proceed until grant funding agreements are in place for both revenue and capital funding. It is anticipated that revenue and

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capital grant funding agreements will be in place by the end of December 2020 at both national and local levels.

## Trees for Climate in the Great Western Community Forest

- 3.6 Work is ongoing with the Community Forest Trust and with other Community Forests to further develop the Trees for Climate programme and a pipeline of potential projects to ensure that significant resources are secured for our area covering the Great Western Community Forest centred in Swindon.
- 3.7 The target is to support the planting of a total of approximately 350ha of woodland across the Great Western Community Forest over the 5 year the programme. This is an ambitious target and delivery at this scale will not be straightforward. Having significant resources which can be applied for through the Trees for Climate initiative will be a major step forward.
- 3.8 The Great Western Community Forest target is based on planting within extensive woodland blocks and as individual trees; in urban and rural settings; on both public and private land; largely within Swindon Borough but including the wider extent of the Great Western Community Forest; and incentivised by increased grant availability and potential additional funding for land acquisition.
- 3.9 A number of assumptions underpin the target planting figure which broadly represents an ongoing commitment to objectives of the Great Western Community Forest, as agreed in a motion approved by Council on Thursday 23rd January 2020 (Council Minute 68, 2019/20 refers):

*'The benefits that trees can have on a local area in air quality, and their role in helping mitigate climate change;*

- That the Great Western Community Forest (GWCF) was founded in 1994 with a target of 30% tree cover across the GWCF area which includes the whole Swindon borough area, when Swindon's average baseline tree cover was 3%*
- That, since the start of GWCF, tree cover has tripled to the national average of 10% for England.*
- That Policy DM29 of the draft Local Plan states that "Development shall contribute towards the aims and objectives of the Great Western Community Forest."*

*This Council requests that:*

- The Chief Executive formalises as a Pledge, the GWCF headline aspiration to achieve 30% tree cover by 2030*
- The Climate Change Working Group to report on how the Council could work with the Borough's Parish Councils, schools, businesses and residents, and to continue working*

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*with organisations such as the Woodland Trust and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust to realise the commitment to achieve the 30% target.'*

- 3.10 Additional staff capacity funded through the Trees for Climate programme will enable other opportunities for woodland planting to be identified to meet the 5 year target in accordance with the authorisation secured in this report.

## Next Steps

- 3.11 The target of delivering 350 hectares of woodland across the Great Western Community Forest over the next 5 years is ambitious. To assist the Council in meeting this target, this report is seeking delegated powers to identify suitable Council-owned land for woodland planting, which would then be taken forward in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport & Planning, and the Cabinet Member for Climate Change.
- 3.12 In the first planting season of the Trees for Climate Council programme (commencing January 2021) Council owned land would be the primary source of sites to deliver tree planting. In subsequent planting seasons, officers would also seek to deliver woodland planting on non-Council owned land. This would be achieved by securing tree planting on new developments through the Planning process and by providing grants (funded through the programme) to land owners to set aside land for tree planting. This report seeks delegated authority for the Director of Strategic Development to deliver tree planting on non-Council owned land, subject to the planting being delivered in accordance with the Trees for Climate Grant Funding Agreement.

## **4. Alternative Options**

- 4.1 The Council could decide not to participate in the Trees for Climate initiative. However, the opportunity for funding and local investment and to participate in a substantial national programme, to help address the Council's climate change priorities and to meet commitments of the Great Western Community Forest would then be lost. Not participating would also risk undermining the impact of the national programme, the strength of which is seen as working across a national network of Community Forests.
- 4.2 The Council could reduce its commitment to woodland planting targets. Whilst challenging, the Great Western Community Forest target for woodland creation within the Trees for Climate programme is modest in relation to the overall national target and is in-line with similar sized Community Forests. A consequence of reducing targets would be a reduction in grant availability for local investment and a reduction in the local impact of the scheme.

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## 5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

### Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 Receipt of grants from Cheshire West and Chester Council will be governed by conditions set out in grant agreements with each of the Community Forest's Trusts or Local Authorities.
- 5.2 Further staff resource will be required, expected to be 2 FTE posts to be fully funded through the Trees for Climate revenue grants.
- 5.3 Individual woodland planting schemes will be funded through the Trees for Climate capital grants alongside other external sources of funding as appropriate, for example from developer contributions.

### Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.4 The Chief Legal Officer will complete all legal documentation in order to protect the Council's interest.

### Climate Change Impact

- 5.5 The recommendations would bring about a reduction in the Council's carbon footprint through a substantial uplift in woodland and tree planting.

### All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.6 The creation of new woodland and increase in tree canopy cover would have far-reaching environmental, social and economic benefits in addition to those associated with climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- 5.7 It is anticipated that this programme will help to reduce the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, buying time for a transition to a low carbon economy and so has a community wide benefit.
- 5.8 Targeting new woodlands at areas that are prone to flooding or urban heat could mitigate the effects of these risks for some of the more vulnerable communities. Creating new woodland close to where people live, provides opportunities for all to enjoy the natural environment and connect to nature for wellbeing as well as climate change benefits.

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- 5.9 Community Forests have for 25 years targeted delivery to areas of greatest need. They are located across England in areas with a range of social and economic challenges as well as environmental issues.

## Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.10 A Diversity Impact Assessment has previously been completed for the Great Western Community Forest and will apply to this initiative and is available from the report author.

## Risk Management

- 5.11 The proposed planting targets over the 5-year period 2020- 2025 are ambitious. This is a project of significant scale and is the largest programme to be delivered nationally. The Community Forests, (and their host Local Authorities and subsequently the delivery contractors) will have responsibility to deliver the targets set within the Grant Funding Agreements. Community Forests and the supporting Local Authorities do however have a track record of targeted delivery.
- 5.12 The first step has been to assess the potential pipeline of projects that could be reasonably delivered. In some cases, these are known opportunities, for others they are informed estimates of what could be achieved over a 5-year period. This pipeline approach is still in development but is showing over 8,000 hectares of potential opportunities nationally.
- 5.13 There is a risk of reputational damage to the Council if local targets are not achieved. This will be mitigated by ensuring there is adequate management and monitoring resource for the programme, good communication within the Council and across the England's Community Forests programme.
- 5.14 The, ability to mobilise and develop an approved programme will be dependent on prevailing Covid 19 restrictions and approval of the main national Business Case – approval of the Business Case is needed in early autumn 2020 to enable year 1 capital delivery. There is a risk that the initial proposal for year 1 revenue and capital costs are delayed.
- 5.15 There is a risk to the Council that if targets are not achieved that there could be clawback of funds by Cheshire West and Chester Council. To manage this risk nationally, the provision for clawback will be included with each of the Community Forest Accountable Bodies. Cheshire West and Chester Council will also be kept informed of progress, monitoring progress against milestones and identifying any risk of non-

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performance at an early stage. Governance structures will be put in place nationally and locally to manage and monitor the programme.

## **6. Consultees**

- 6.1 The Corporate Director of Finance and Assets (s151 officer) and Chief Legal Officer (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

## **7. Background Papers**

- 7.1 Not applicable.

## **8. Appendices**

- 8.1 Not applicable

## **9. Key Decision/Decision in Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan**

- 9.1 This is not a key Decision and is not included in the Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan.