



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL



Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 19 March 2024

Report of Councillor Patsy Ellis and
Councillor Rhys Baker, Cabinet
Members for Environment and Waste

Tree and Woodlands Strategy 2024 - 2034

Report Author

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Purpose of Report

To seek the support of Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the South Kesteven District Council Trees and Woodlands Strategy 2024 - 2034, and to recommend to Cabinet for approval.

Recommendations

That the Committee:

- 1. Recommends the new South Kesteven District Council Trees and Woodlands Strategy 2024 - 2034 to Cabinet for approval.**

Decision Information

Does the report contain any exempt or confidential information not for publication?	No
What are the relevant corporate priorities?	Sustainable South Kesteven
Which wards are impacted?	All wards

1 Implications

Taking into consideration implications relating to finance and procurement, legal and governance, risk and mitigation, health and safety, diversity and inclusion, safeguarding, staffing, community safety, mental health and wellbeing and the impact on the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency, the following implications have been identified:

Finance and Procurement

- 1.1 A newly established post for a Tree Officer has been established from the 2024/25 financial year onwards, in order to deliver on the Council's work on trees on land within the ownership of South Kesteven District Council as well as to deliver on the actions of the draft Tree and Woodland Strategy. In order to facilitate the delivery of specific actions there may a requirement to consider budgetary support as part of the Council's budget setting process.

Completed by: Richard Wyles, Deputy Chief Executive and s151 Officer

Legal and Governance

- 1.2 South Kesteven District Council have several legal obligations regarding trees, particularly regarding those found in land within the ownership of the Council that could present a risk to members of the public. The introduction of the new draft Tree and Woodlands Strategy documents do not seek to override these obligations, but to set out a more proactive approach to management of trees for the whole district.

Completed by: Graham Watts, Assistant Director (Governance and Public Protection) and Monitoring Officer

Climate Change

- 1.3 The primary aims of the Trees and Woodlands Strategy are to protect, enhance and increase the district's tree canopy cover, therefore there are clear benefits for

the environment. The planting of trees of any kind provides valuable ecosystem services such as climate change regulation, carbon sequestration, filtering of pollution and in some cases flood prevention.

Completed by: Serena Brown, Sustainability and Climate Change Officer

2 Background to the Report

- 2.1 Trees play an important role in helping us adapt to a warmer world: trees near rivers help to improve water quality and flood risk, and in our towns help to provide shade. The benefits of trees and greenspace for wellbeing and mental health is also becoming better understood.
- 2.2 As a county, Lincolnshire has one of the lowest levels of tree cover in England, at 5.67% compared to an average for England of around 10%. The lower than national average tree cover is driven by land use in the county, in particular the high proportion of agricultural land with low tree canopy cover. Lincolnshire, including the southern and eastern edges of South Kesteven, include areas of fenland where larger scale tree planting may not be advantageous. Features such as hedges and shrubby plants may be more appropriate to provide an effective ecosystem in some areas.
- 2.3 The UK Government published the new [England Trees Action Plan](#) in May 2021, which sets out the target for tree cover in England to be at least 12% by mid-century. This document includes a call to action for stakeholders to help deliver on the long-term vision for trees and woods in England:
 - Apply for grants for establishing and managing trees and woodlands;
 - Access more and better advice and guidance on establishing and managing trees and woodlands;
 - Work with the UK government to unlock more private finance to invest in trees and woodlands;
 - Plant trees particularly where they make the most difference – for water, biodiversity, climate resilience and close to where people work, live and play;
 - Responsibly enjoy wooded landscapes.
- 2.4 The Environment Act 2021 sets out new environmental duties for public authorities in England. Under the Environment Act public authorities must, as of 2024, consider and report on what action the Council intends to take for biodiversity across the authority. The Council recognises that a carefully planned and managed tree canopy offers a wide range of benefits to the district's biodiversity. Trees can support health and well-being, improve air quality, offer shade for crops and livestock, prevent nutrient loss and soil erosion, improve water quality, and reduce the risk of flooding.

2.5 The Environment Act 2021 also includes expectations for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), to deliver a minimum of 10% BNG for qualifying development sites. This new policy is expected to have a significant effect on on-site biodiversity improvements, and interact with considerations for tree, woodland and hedge retention for sites.

2.6 Local authorities are looking to make progress on the ground to improve tree planting and deliver improvements for biodiversity on a landscape scale. To enable this and target informed selection of sites for wider scale planting, local authorities are starting to produce tree strategies, and some have commenced mass planting programmes.

A Trees and Woodland Strategy for South Kesteven

2.7 South Kesteven District Council is itself responsible for the management of around 6,000 trees of varying age and maturity on land within the ownership or remit of the Council. The Council's Tree Guidelines for the Management of Trees in South Kesteven were approved on 17 September 2019. This guidance sets out the Council's approach as an authority to tree management and protection within the district, noting the need to balance safety with amenity concerns and continuity of care for all the Council's tree stock. South Kesteven District Council further recognised the value of trees through working with the Woodland Trust to develop and adopt the Local Government Charter for Trees, Woods and People at Cabinet on 12 November 2019. This endorses ten key principles to endorse the Council's community leadership role, while recognising the need to balance positive commitments to trees with wider responsibilities including safety, value for money, public amenity and development and growth.

2.8 The need was identified for the Council to take further action with regards to enhancing and protecting the trees of the whole district, as well as those directly managed by the Council. A district-wide Trees and Woodland Strategy would provide the Council with a strategic approach to the management of its tree assets. In order to provide the adequate technical knowledge to develop a high quality and informed strategy which is responsive to the context of South Kesteven, Treconomics were appointed as an external organisation to assist with development of a new district wide strategy.

2.9 The aims of the Trees and Woodlands Strategy were:

- a) To set out the current level of tree canopy cover in the district
- b) To highlight main areas of opportunity to enhance trees and woodlands
- c) To set out what role the Council as local authority can play in facilitating that alongside key partners.

The strategy considers key national, regional as well as local influences and provides clarity on the intricacies of managing trees as assets. By understanding these key requirements, the Council can prioritise service needs, improvements and investment.

- 2.10 Following the development of a draft strategy document, the Council launched a period of research and consultation to inform the new Strategy in early 2024, which included workshop events for internal and external stakeholders on proposed priorities and actions. The event was also open to Councillors and internal Council staff involved in the drafting process.
- 2.11 A public consultation exercise followed, which was completed in February 2024, consisting of a survey which was open to residents for 3 weeks. The purpose of the survey was to assess both public attitudes around trees and woodlands for to increase tree canopy cover within the district, as well as to gauge views on the Council supporting wider tree planting within the district. This consultation saw a response from over 900 respondents with a very strong consensus in support of increased tree planting, maintenance and protection. Detailed results from the consultation can be seen at Appendix 5, which have been used to inform the Trees and Woodland Strategy and clarified the importance of particular actions.
- 2.12 The Trees and Woodlands Strategy is comprised of four separate documents:
 - Trees and Woodlands Strategy Introduction and Vision (Appendix 1)
 - Trees and Woodlands Strategy Targets and Priorities (Appendix 2)
 - Trees and Woodlands Strategy Action Plan (Appendix 3)
 - Trees and Woodlands Strategy Appendices (Appendix 4)
- 2.13 Members are asked to provide comment on the suite of documents comprising the South Kesteven District Council Tree and Woodlands Strategy 2024 and are asked to recommend their approval and adoption to Cabinet.

3 Key Considerations

- 3.1 While the Council has in place Tree Guidelines to set out a number of duties around trees, there is an absence of formal strategic direction for the trees within the district as a whole.
- 3.2 This new strategy provides a stronger approach, which confirms the Council's commitment to enhanced tree management and increased tree canopy cover. The strategy comes following a period of research and consultation, which included a public consultation exercise which received a significant volume of supportive comments, as well as a detailed workshop for internal and external stakeholders on proposed priorities.

4 Other Options Considered

- 4.1 The Council could decide not to have a Trees and Woodlands Strategy. However, this decision would not align with the Council's commitment to delivering on its ambitions as set out in its adopted Climate Action Strategy and

on new duties for biodiversity improvements. The results of the public consultation (Appendix 5) also demonstrate a clear desire from residents for the Council to develop a strategic approach to the management of its tree assets.

5 Reasons for the Recommendations

- 5.1 The Trees and Woodlands Strategy will inform how the Council will protect and enhance the district's tree population, with specific reference to tree preservation orders, development control and tree canopy cover increase through public and partnership engagement. In doing so, the Strategy will play a key role in the Council's ambitions to increase biodiversity.

6 Consultation

- 6.1 All Members were invited to attend a workshop on the proposed Trees and Woodlands Strategy on 18 January 2024. The workshop was led by Treeconomics, who were appointed to lead on the development of a new strategy. This offered Members the opportunity to feed into the draft strategy and agree and amend the priorities and action plan.
- 6.2 A separate workshop was held for parish councillors and environmental stakeholders as identified by officers that same day. The workshop was led by Treeconomics and offered attendees the opportunity to feed into the draft strategy and agree and amend the priorities and action plan.
- 6.3 A three-week public consultation subsequently followed on the outcomes from the stakeholder workshops. The consultation received 919 responses which is one of the highest responses of any consultation undertaken by the Council in the last eighteen months. The consultation report is available in Appendix 5.
- 6.4 99% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that trees and woodlands are a valuable natural asset.
- 6.5 96.5% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that planting, maintaining, and protecting trees in South Kesteven is a worthwhile investment, and something the Council should be involved in/contribute towards.
- 6.6 Overall, the consultation found a very strong consensus for increased tree planting, maintenance and protection from respondents.

7 Background Papers

- 7.1 Environment Act 2021 – Government legislation, available online at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents/enacted>
- 7.2 South Kesteven District Council Climate Action Strategy, available online at:

[https://www.southkesteven.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Climate Action Strategy.pdf](https://www.southkesteven.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Climate%20Action%20Strategy.pdf)

7.3 *Update on Local Authority Biodiversity Duties* - Report to Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee, published 4 December 2023 and available online at:
<https://moderngov.southkesteven.gov.uk/documents/s39873/Update%20on%20Local%20Authority%20Biodiversity%20duties%20Report.pdf>

8 Appendices

- 8.1 Appendix 1 – Trees and Woodlands Strategy Summary and Vision
- 8.2 Appendix 2 – Trees and Woodlands Strategy Targets and Priorities
- 8.3 Appendix 3 – Trees and Woodlands Strategy Action Plan
- 8.4 Appendix 4 – Trees and Woodlands Strategy Appendices
- 8.5 Appendix 5 – Trees and Woodlands Strategy Public Consultation 2024 Report