

To: Cabinet
Date: 15 September 2021
Report of: Head of Corporate Strategy
Title of Report: Oxford Urban Forest Strategy – A Master Plan to 2050

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To seek approval for the Urban Forest Strategy
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Tom Hayes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Green Transport and Zero Carbon Oxford
Corporate Priority:	Zero Carbon Oxford
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendations: That Cabinet resolves to:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Approve the Oxford Urban Forest Strategy – A Master Plan to 2050, which sets out the strategic direction for how we, as a city, protect, manage and expand our urban forest to help tackle the climate and ecological emergencies. Officers will take opportunities to seek external funding opportunities to facilitate the implementation of the strategy; and Authorise the Head of Corporate Strategy to make minor editorial amendments to the strategy document. 	

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Draft Oxford Urban Forest Strategy – A Master Plan to 2050
Appendix 2	Risk Register
Appendix 3	Equalities Impact Assessment
Appendix 4	Public consultation – summary of results

Background

- In response to rising concern about the urgent need for action, on 28 January 2019 Oxford City Council unanimously declared a climate emergency and provided for a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change. Oxford became the first UK city to hold a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in September and October 2019.

2. 90% of the randomly selected representative sample of 50 Oxford residents that made up the Citizens' Assembly responded to the key question asked of them and felt that Oxford should aim to achieve 'net zero' sooner than 2050. There was also widespread belief that Oxford should be a leader in tackling the climate crisis. Assembly members recognised that action is required to stop climate change and habitat loss in order to avoid significant and irreversible environmental damage. The Assembly opted for the most ambitious biodiversity vision which represented the greatest change to the way people live now.
3. In response to the Citizens' Assembly the City Council committed to a number of actions including the development of an Urban Forest Strategy.
4. Oxford has similar canopy cover to London, which is relatively high compared to other cities, such as Glasgow or Bristol. The majority of our urban forest, and where there is potential for expanding it, is on private land and out of the council's direct control. For example, 19% of the city's land use is private gardens. This presents a great opportunity for planting. We need residents, private land owners and our communities, businesses and institutions to work together, as a city, to deliver the aims of the strategy if it is to have the greatest impact.
5. This is a good moment to celebrate our urban forest and take action to expand, enhance and protect it. Not only do we face climate and ecological emergencies, but the COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of our natural environment particularly for our mental health and wellbeing. A survey by Natural England showed that around 9 out of 10 people agreed that natural spaces are good for mental health and wellbeing. More than 40% noticed that nature, wildlife, and visiting local green and natural spaces have been even more important to their wellbeing since the coronavirus restrictions began.
6. Oxford's urban forest comprises all the trees and woody vegetation in our city that provide us with numerous benefits, also known as ecosystem services, such as clean air, spaces for recreation and carbon storage. Not only does our urban forest provide essential environmental benefits but importantly investing in our urban forest can help us to raise living standards and tackle inequalities in our city. The data used to develop the strategy shows a correlation between low canopy cover and areas of deprivation in Oxford.
7. The strategy sets a strategic framework for managing our urban forest and seeks to maximise the benefits for both nature and all Oxford's residents and visitors.

Public Consultation

8. An online public consultation was carried out from 28th June to the 26th July. 134 responses were received to the consultation. The consultation was publicised using social media, press releases and direct contact with key stakeholders and community groups. The full draft strategy was made available and it was accompanied by a short questionnaire consisting of 5 questions.
9. Over 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that deprived areas with low canopy cover should be prioritised in the strategy. Over 90% of respondents agreed that biodiversity and opportunities for planting in the Nature Recovery Network should be prioritised in this strategy. The Nature Recovery Network identifies areas where conservation efforts will have the most benefits

for wildlife and the ecosystem services that they provide. Respondents were asked if there are other areas or issues that they would like to see prioritised in the strategy. Responses were varied. The most frequently mentioned issue related to prioritising street trees. The strategy identifies street trees as a key treescape within our urban forest. Principles for street tree management and opportunities to increase them are set out in the strategy. The next steps will specifically identify opportunities for planting and for community engagement through initiatives such as the Trees for Streets project.

10. The consultation questionnaire also asked respondents for their ideas on how we can engage with our communities. The responses are full of creative and practical ideas for events and collaborative working. We also asked what would encourage respondents to plant a tree in their own garden.
11. The full list of responses to all questions asked and how comments have been addressed is included in Appendix 4.
12. The strategy is available to view in Appendix 1 and has been updated following the public consultation to incorporate comments wherever relevant.

The Strategy

13. This strategy is for the whole city, not just council land. It's a long term master plan to 2050 which sets a framework for action. Objectives are set out into 3 parts:
 - Protect, Improve and Manage
 - Expand, Enhance and Develop
 - Engage, Promote and Employ
14. The vision for our urban forest is for it to support the city to address and adapt to climate change and habitat loss whilst conserving and enhancing its distinctive character. We want all communities, regardless of postcode or income, to thrive in nature where they live, and feel pride in Oxford as a liveable city that is healthy, biodiverse, resilient and beautiful.
15. This strategy follows the principle of “right tree, right place” and seeks to ensure high quality planting in order to maximise benefits for nature and for people. In order to support wider biodiversity objectives the strategy makes clear what habitats may or may not be suitable for planting trees and what kind of species we seek to encourage.
16. The strategy establishes important principles that we want to promote in the management of our urban forest and for benefits to be maximised. Data from the Oxfordshire Treescape Opportunity Mapping Project, which has informed this strategy, has shown that there are opportunities to increase canopy cover in deprived areas of the city where cover tends to be lower and where we also have higher levels of physical and mental health problems.
17. Another key area of focus is on biodiversity and increasing canopy cover within the Nature Recovery Network (where appropriate). A network map is in development led by a partnership of local nature conservation organisations and

local authorities¹. Our urban forest provides a space for our communities to come together as well as a reason for them to come together. Engagement and creating a sense of ownership in communities is essential to successful management of our urban forest.

Next Steps and Delivery

18. The strategy sets out the initial next steps and actions required to deliver the strategy.
19. Seek out external funding opportunities to develop a comprehensive engagement strategy that will better coordinate projects across the city and engage more stakeholders by using and developing existing forums to include encouraging residents to plant trees in their own gardens where appropriate
20. Ensure that the opportunities are taken to input into the review of the Oxford Local Plan 2040 to ensure emerging policies optimise opportunities to implement the strategy
21. Address funding constraints for street tree planting and maintenance by exploring innovative funding mechanisms.

Monitoring and Review

22. It is proposed to review the strategy every 10 years. The long review period is necessary in order to give us a chance to see more change as trees have had more time to grow. The review will include undertaking a canopy cover assessment to assess our canopy cover and enable us to compare it against our existing baseline. The health and composition of our urban forest can be revisited at this time too. The review will also assess levels of engagement in tree planting and management initiatives.

Financial implications

23. As a council we already have policies in the Oxford Local Plan that support the protection of trees (Policy G7) and we are involved in some street tree initiatives. However, to deliver the additional objectives of this strategy, officers will need to work with external partners to raise funds.
24. Roles and responsibilities across the council relating to trees and biodiversity are spread between tree officers in planning, the ecology and biodiversity officer in Environmental Sustainability and officers in the parks service and ODS. Parks and ODS work relates only to trees on land that is owned or managed by Oxford City Council. The Council does not have an officer responsible for our urban forest at a strategic level.
25. The City Council has an important leadership role to play in the city. The majority of our urban forest is on land that is outside of the direct control of the City Council. The City Council is uniquely positioned to effectively coordinate action through our existing partnerships, engagement activities and the central role that we play in place making through the planning system. Taking a leadership role

¹ The partnership includes: Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC), Wild Oxfordshire, the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and overseen by Oxfordshire's Biodiversity Advisory Group (BAG), of which Oxford City Council is a member. It has been adopted by the Oxfordshire Environment Board (OxEB).

and strategic approach in this area would enable us to maximise the benefits of the urban forest for the city as a whole.

26. The City Council is under resourced for providing the coordination and leadership role that would make delivery of the strategy as effective as possible. Exploring the possibility of joint funding from a range of partners. Existing projects such as the Oxfordshire Treescapes Opportunity Mapping Project can help to deliver some of the aims of the strategy.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

27. This proposed strategy complies with Oxford City Council's policies and commitments relating to carbon reduction and safeguarding the environment. The strategy brings us closer to our commitment to becoming a Zero Carbon Council by 2030 or earlier and Zero Carbon Oxford by 2040 or earlier. The Urban Forest Strategy provides a strategic direction for the city to maximise the benefits from our urban forest. These benefits include helping us to adapt to climate change by reducing the urban heat island effect, improving air quality, reducing flooding, storing carbon and protecting our biodiversity.
28. The Urban Forest Strategy will support the delivery of the following plans and strategies:
- a. The Council Strategy 2020 – 2024: Includes the priority to pursue a zero carbon Oxford
 - b. Oxford Local Plan 2036: Includes commitments to biodiversity and increasing canopy cover within new developments.
 - c. The Biodiversity Action Plan
 - d. The Green Space Strategy 2013 - 2027

Legal issues

29. There are no legal implications.

Level of risk

30. Please refer to Appendix 2.

Equalities impact

31. The data supporting the strategy shows that there is a correlation between low canopy cover and areas of deprivation in Oxford. The strategy sets out that we will prioritise these areas in order to ensure that the benefits of our urban forest are provided for all our residents. The improved environmental quality that our urban forest brings can lead to better physical and mental health amongst all our citizens, thus helping to tackle some of the inequalities in the city. The strategy may help to attract more investment towards tree planting for areas of deprivation in the city. It is expected that this Urban Forest Strategy will have a positive impact on reducing inequality in Oxford. Please refer to Appendix 3.

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Background Papers: None