To:	**Cabinet**
Date:	**15 September 2021**
Report of:	**Scrutiny Committee**
Title of Report:	**Urban Forest Strategy**

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Urban Forest Strategy
Key decision:	Yes
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Liz Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
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
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendation in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 08 September 2021, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report to Cabinet concerning the Council's proposed Urban Forest Strategy.

2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Lubna Arshad, Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction for presenting the report and answering questions, and Amanda Ford, Environmental Quality Team Manager, for authoring the report and supporting the meeting.

Summary and recommendation

3. Councillor Lubna Arshad, Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction, introduced the report which represented another workstream flowing from the Council's declaration of a climate emergency. The long-term strategy sought to look at the City as a whole and respond to the fact that there was a correlation between areas of deprivation and lower levels of canopy cover. At its heart was the desirability of having "the right tree in the right place". Amanda Ford, Environmental Quality Team Manager, added that the Council was committed to increasing opportunities for biodiversity wherever they arose, something to which tree planting would contribute although it was important to note that it was not the only means. In addressing the position of the City as a whole and, therefore land which was not owned by the Council, it would be necessary to encourage other land owners to participate. An important source of funding for this work would be via developers' contributions. Developers were required to ensure that schemes, when complete, resulted in a net biodiversity gain of 5% over the position prior to development. The gain was not limited to the area covered by a development but could include improvements made anywhere within the City boundary.

4. Issues that were considered in detail by the Committee included:

   - The relationship between the Urban Forest Strategy and other climate-related policies

   - The relationship between the Strategy and wider pro-biodiversity possibilities, such as rewilding arable farm land

   - The capacity of ODS to support the additional work generated by a successful implementation of the policy

   - Community engagement

5. The Committee makes three recommendations relating to i) interactions with other Council strategies relating to climate change, ii) the importance of community engagement, and iii) clarifying responsibilities within the activity of the strategy.

Interaction with other Climate Change Strategies

6. An issue which was raised by the Committee as a challenge to the Council's tree-planting ambitions has also recently been reported in the press, the conversion of front gardens into driveways, with a recent study showing a growth in the number of applications for dropped kerbs – a proxy for conversions to driveways.[1] The Committee took on board the advice of the Environmental Quality Team Manager in recognising the loss of trees (or potential space for trees) inherent in such conversions must be judged within a framework where the application's overall costs benefits can be assessed. The Committee was concerned however, that this might enable a perverse situation in which the desire to roll out electric vehicle charging points might actively encourage the removal of trees and loss of spaces for trees to be planted in the future.

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[1] https://www.independent.co.uk/money/decline-of-the-front-garden-as-homeowners-install-driveways-b1916768.html

7. Oxford suffers from a lack of off-street parking, with 40% of households not having a driveway. The Council is also making policy decisions to encourage the take up of electric vehicles. For people without driveways, access to on-street electric charging suffers from a number of drawbacks relative to private off-street charging: principally, being unable to guarantee access to a charging point when needed, and the price premium of a public charger. Consequently, removing those drawbacks by enabling access to new, private off-street charging is beneficial. However, the cost of creating the space to allow off-street charging is the potential loss of trees, and the definite loss of space that might otherwise be used for tree planting, and with the high proportion of homes without off street parking this issue is particularly acute for Oxford. The fact that such decisions are weighed on their overall benefits and disbenefits means that in seeing off-street electric charging as being of general benefit, the equilibrium point will move away from the protection of trees or tree-plantable areas.

8. Scrutiny does not have an answer to this issue, but it feels that there is clearly an unexpected tension between the working of two policies with shared aims. One partial suggestion was to consider whether the Council would create designated parking areas within its Controlled Parking Zones for specific houses. This would enable residents in these areas at least to ensure access to private charging points, whilst not having to remove gardens. However, this is only an idea put forward for further consideration and not a recommendation. It is the Committee's wish that these interactions be looked at more closely, with possible mitigations explored, and a conscious decision arrived at over which strategy outcome ought to take priority over the other.

Recommendation 1: That the Council reviews the policy tensions between garden space and electric charging and develops a considered position on their interaction, and that it reviews its other climate-related strategies for similar unanticipated tensions.

Community Engagement

9. A strong element of feedback from multiple members of the Committee concerned the importance of community engagement with regards to tree planting. The proposed approach of 'right tree, right place' is absolutely the correct one to take, but to ascertain that the multiple (and sometimes conflicting) views of local residents must be heard and digested because they are often nuanced. Overall, there is support for greater tree planting, but on a more granular level they can cause upset through the blocking of light, damage to pathways or by dropping fruits, seeds or leaves. This point holds true for whether the Council plants a tree on its own land, or for proposals for biodiversity net gain arising from developments, both important elements of the strategy.

10. Reports from members indicated that tree planting attracts significant local interest and engagement by local residents, which is to be welcomed. If engaged local residents are unable to make their voices heard, however, it can lead to significant frustration and disappointment. The Urban Forest Strategy seeks to deliver an increase in an area where Committee members felt the Council had not historically engaged with residents as fully as it might. It seeks, therefore, that the Council recognises the need for and builds in at the outset greater community engagement over tree-planting proposals.

Recommendation 2: That the Council takes steps to ensure that with greater number of trees being planted, community engagement over proposals is treated as a matter of priority and local residents are given an opportunity to voice their views.

Understanding Roles and Responsibilities

11. A further point made by the Committee builds on the previous one. With tree planting being an issue that the public cares deeply about being done right, it is important for councillors and staff members to know who to contact when things are not done correctly. As paragraph 24 of the Cabinet report shows, overall responsibility is diffused across multiple areas of the Council, with no single point of access: "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 the urban forest at a strategic level." The Committee is concerned that this will make it difficult to respond to and address any resident issues promptly or effectively. It is requested, therefore, that a breakdown of who is responsible for what is made available to steer both councillors and the public to the right place when wanting to raise issues about tree planting.

    Recommendation 3: That the Council makes available to councillors and members of the public information on who is responsible for what within the Urban Forest Strategy, and help with understanding who to contact in different scenarios.

Further Consideration

12. By its nature this strategy is very long-term, with proposed reviews to take place every ten years. This makes regular consideration by Scrutiny unnecessary. However, the Committee has referred the question of the capacity of ODS to support this strategy to the Companies Scrutiny Panel for further scrutiny.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 08/09/2021 concerning the Urban Forest Strategy

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction, Lubna Arshad

Recommendation	Agree?	Comment
1) *That the Council reviews the policy tensions between garden space and electric charging and develops a considered position on their interaction, and that it reviews its other climate-related strategies for similar unanticipated tensions.*	In part	There are many trade-offs associated with decarbonisation, at a household, city, national and international level. However, Oxford City Council is seeking to manage these through, *inter alia*, enabling on street EV charging through the GUL-e cable-gulley project, being developed jointly with ODS and Oxfordshire County Council. It is also seeking to increase tree cover across Oxford by encouraging planting where there is available land – most typically in residents *back* gardens, the grounds of colleges, businesses and other institutions, and where possible on streets and public land. The council will continue to monitor tree cover and biodiversity to see that the removal of front garden space by householders choosing to charge their vehicles, hasn't impacted these objectives.
2) *That the Council takes steps to ensure that with greater number of trees being planted, community engagement over proposals is treated as a matter of priority and local residents are given an opportunity to voice their views.*	Yes	
3) *That the Council makes available to councillors and members of the public information on who is responsible for what within the Urban Forest Strategy, and help with understanding who to contact in different scenarios.*	Yes	