

**COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY
18 APRIL 2024**

TREE AND WOODLAND STRATEGY 2021-2031

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide members with an update on delivery of the actions within the strategy, the proposed 2024/25 action plan and the revised approach to risk management and climate declaration.

Summary

2. Darlington has had a Tree and Woodland Strategy in place since 2000. The latest revision covers the period 2021-2031, which was adopted by Cabinet in December 2020 and is attached at **Appendix 1**.
3. The Strategy is in place to set out how the Council manage and enlarge the tree population across the Borough.

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that Members note the content of the report and the proposed action plan for 2024/25.

**Dave Winstanley
Group Director of Services**

Background Papers

Tree and Woodland Strategy 2021-2031

Ian Thompson: Extension 6628

S17 Crime and Disorder	There is no impact as a result of this report.
Health and Wellbeing	Trees have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	Trees can have a significant impact on mitigating or reducing carbon in the atmosphere.
Diversity	Trees benefit all individuals.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected.
Groups Affected	All groups benefit from trees.

Budget and Policy Framework	There is no impact as a result of this report.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Council Plan	The tree cover in Darlington contributes to the quality of the environment.
Efficiency	There is no impact on the Council's efficiency agenda.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

5. It is thanks to our Victorian forebears that Darlington has a living legacy of urban street trees, historic parks and wooded cemeteries that is the envy of many other towns. Darlington Borough Council has had in place a Tree Strategy for the past 20 years, which was initially developed with due regard to protecting the tree heritage in Darlington. The updated and revised versions of the strategy have continued with that theme at the core.
6. Since the initial strategy in 2000, the understanding and awareness of the impact humans are having on the environment has resulted in central and local government starting to address the balance, recognising the role trees play in carbon capture and carbon offset. The Woodland Trust estimates that a young mixed woodland can store 400+ tonnes of carbon per hectare, approximately 1,000 trees.
7. The aim of the Tree and Woodland Strategy is:
 - (a) To proactively manage and enlarge the tree population of the Borough of Darlington in order to protect our historical heritage of trees and provide a valued environmental amenity for future generations.
8. The strategy covers the following aspects:
 - (a) how the Council manage trees that they own;
 - (b) how the Council protect trees on private land;
 - (c) an action plan setting out what needs to be done over the next five years.
9. The policies within the strategy cover:
 - (a) **Street Trees** - these are trees planted in pavements and road verges;
 - (b) **Woodlands** - approximately 3% of the Borough is woodland;
 - (c) **Trees in Parks and Open Spaces** - generally these trees are the most significant and have a positive impact on use of these spaces;

- (d) **Trees in Cemeteries and Disused Churchyards** - some of cemeteries and disused churchyards have significant tree cover, particularly West Cemetery;
 - (e) **Housing Area Trees** - generally found in communal areas or residents' gardens;
 - (f) **Privately Owned Trees** - there are a significant number of trees on private land and in private gardens.
10. Since the adoption of the strategy by Cabinet, work has been ongoing in delivering the action plan.
11. The key highlights of work completed to date are as follows.
- (a) Number of trees planted:
 - (i) 2022 11,614
 - (ii) 2023 9,610
 - (iii) 2024 (to date) 16,347
 - (iv) Total: 37,571
 - (b) Attached at **Appendix 2**, tree canopy cover was assessed as 8.28 % in Darlington Borough overall, of which within settlements is 23.67%, outside settlements 76.33%. The average canopy cover for England is 16% and the target is 17.5%. However, there is significant variability in tree canopy cover across England's towns and cities, ranging from 3% to 45% and significant variability in tree canopy cover within towns.
 - (c) Successful with eight funding applications (ranging from £300.00 to £232,813.88) from 2021 to date, totalling £533,975.94.
 - (i) Urban Tree Challenge Fund Round 2: £1,900 (includes three years' establishment) secured for 1000 feathers (saplings) on Wylam Avenue in 2021/22.
 - (ii) Urban Tree Challenge Fund Round 4: £232,813.88 (includes three years' establishment) secured for 556 standard trees for various locations across Darlington in 2023/24 and 2024/25.
 - (iii) Urban Tree Challenge Fund Round 5: £198,978.12 (includes three years' establishment) secured for 297 standard trees in various locations across Darlington in 2023/24 and 2024/25.
 - (iv) Local Authority Treescape Fund: £90,784.00 secured for 200 standard trees and 200 feathers across Darlington (100 of each per planting season) in 2023/24 and 2024/25.
 - (v) Trees for Cities Woodland Creation Fund: £4,702.50 secured for 2500 whips in 2022/23.
 - (vi) Trees for Cities Woodland Creation Fund: £4,009 secured for 2500 whips in 2023/24.
 - (vii) Trees on Tees: £300 received from a business via the Trees on Tees fund, which was used to purchase eight fruit trees, including wooden stakes and ties. The trees were planted in November 2023 in partnership with Friends of the Denes and EE.

(viii) Tree Council: in December 2023 the Friends of Fryers Field submitted a bid to the Tree Council and were successful in securing a grant of £488.44 to plant 12 fruit trees in Fryers Field. Trees planted in March 2024, in partnership with Council officers and ward members.

(d) The Council has worked with a wide range of residents, volunteers, students, Elected Members, Friends Groups and businesses to achieve our tree planting goals, including: Department for Education, Darlington Economic Campus, Learning and Skills, Education Village, Darlington College, EE, Cummins, Capita, ISG Construction, Handels Bank, Darlington Building Society, Redde Northgate, Street Champions, Darlington Forest Project, Darlington Cares, Darlington Scouts and Cubs, Ranger Team Volunteers, Signet House, Probation Service and Durham Constabulary.

12. Attached at **Appendix 3** is the proposed action plan for 2024/25.

Risk Management

13. Following a number of incidents at other Local Authorities in recent years, officers alongside the Council's insurance provider, Zurich, have reviewed and updated the Council's approach to risk management for Council owned trees.

14. Zurich Risk Assessment and Risk Improvement Team, in their review stated:

"The current risk management strategy has been graded overall as being 'Good'. However, if the risk improvement recommendations are acted upon, I am confident that DBC would be able to achieve an 'Excellent' score."

Risk Management Tree Inspections New Approach

15. Inspection of all trees on Council land will be undertaken by a competent arboriculturist, at defined intervals according to consistent methodology, incorporating a systematic and replicable risk assessment. Trees that do not meet the defined standard of safety will be identified, and remedial measures will be specified to mitigate unacceptable risks within the defined timeframe. These will be implemented as specified, which will be verified by a competent person. A record of all activity will be kept.

16. The Council will maintain an inventory of trees that contain records of tree condition, location, works recommendations and works completion. The inventory will be reviewed to ensure that it remains comprehensive and reliable.

17. The timescale for the completion of each works item following an inspection will be set in proportion to the level of risk presented by the tree.

18. The successful completion of risk management works will be confirmed by a competent person and recorded along with the date. Where a tree remains following works, an inspection will be made to update the record for that tree.

What are tree inspections

19. Tree inspections are the means of gathering reliable information about the current condition, and the context of the Council's trees. This strategy defines three kinds of inspection. Proactive tree inspections are planned inspections, undertaken by a competent arboriculturist, to a defined standard, at defined intervals. They are fundamental to tree risk management. Where this strategy refers to tree inspections, it means proactive tree inspections unless otherwise specified. The Council will undertake them as defined by this strategy.
20. Reactive tree inspections are the same as planned tree inspections, except that they are done in response to an event that gives reasonable grounds to doubt the reliability of the existing tree inspection record. For example, an enquiry or report relating to tree safety, a tree failure event, a change in the context of a tree, a completion of certain tree works, or a significant weather event could all indicate a change in the safety of a tree. The Council will undertake these as required.
21. Additional tree inspections are all other types of non-specialist observation of trees made by the Council. For example, these could include highway inspections, observations by park staff and development related surveys. They may be beneficial, but they are not required by this strategy.

Who will inspect the trees

22. Tree inspections will only be undertaken by individuals that are competent to do so. Competence will be defined in accordance with industry standards and will comprise a combination of training, qualifications and experience.

What will be recorded during a tree inspection

23. Tree inspections will include sufficient information to locate and identify the feature described by the inspection record i.e. the type of feature, the risk assessment, and the means to determine whether the risk associated with that feature is acceptable. For any feature does not meet the Council's tolerable level of the risk, the inspection will include a specification for the works and the timescale for completion. Every inspection record will include a date for the next inspection.

How often will trees be inspected

24. All trees in high-risk areas, for example, adjacent to highways and play areas, will be inspected to a minimum frequency of every 24 months. Trees in other locations, with the exception of woodlands/forests, will be inspected to a minimum of every 24 to 36 months. Trees in woodlands/forests will be inspected as required.
25. Reactive and additional tree inspections and their frequency cannot be defined.

Tree Works

26. Tree works that are specified for the purpose of risk management (i.e. where the risk assessment has identified that a tree exceeds the tolerable level of risk) will be completed within a defined period from the date of inspection.

Climate Declaration

27. In July 2023 the Council updated its commitment to the climate, bringing forward the target to be carbon neutral by 2040 from 2050. In addition, the tree planting target has been revised to plant 100,000 trees over the lifetime of the strategy. The following will be included in the revised strategy to replace the existing commitment.

“Darlington Borough Council in July 2019 declared a climate emergency with the aim of becoming carbon neutral by 2050. In July 2023, a motion was passed by members bringing the carbon neutral target forward to 2040.

We are also monitoring and tracking emissions across the Borough, doing everything we can to reduce the Council’s carbon emissions, however, there will inevitably be a residual amount that needs to be offset.

The Woodland Trust estimates a young mixed woodland can store 400 plus tonnes of carbon per hectare. Our Tree and Woodland Strategy forms one part of a solution to reach our carbon neutral target, with the planting of 100,000 trees over the lifetime of this strategy.

Alongside our carbon reduction ambitions, we also need to deal with the inevitable impacts that climate change brings. Trees can provide shade and cooling, and in an urban setting they could cool the air by several degrees. They also help prevent flooding by reducing surface water run-off, improving air and water quality, and keeping our soils full of nutrients.”

Monitoring

28. A report will be brought to Scrutiny each year, updating members on the progress of delivering the agreed actions and the number of trees planted against the target of 100,000 over the lifetime of the Strategy.