

**COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY
12 JUNE 2025**

TREE AND WOODLAND STRATEGY 2021-2031

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide members with the annual update on delivery of the actions within the strategy.

Summary

2. Darlington has had a Tree and Woodland Strategy in place since 2000. The latest Strategy covers the period 2021-2031, and this 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 2025/26.

Ben Grabham
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Background Papers

Tree and Woodland Strategy 2021-2031

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Council Plan	
Addressing inequalities	Trees benefit all individuals.
Tackling Climate Change	Trees can have a significant impact on mitigating or reducing carbon in the atmosphere by sequestering carbon.
Efficient and effective use of resources	There is no impact on the Council's efficiency agenda.
Health and Wellbeing	Trees have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.
S17 Crime and Disorder	There is no impact as a result of this report.
Wards Affected	All Wards

Groups Affected	Trees play an important role in the environment by improving air quality, reducing pollution, and providing essential habitats for wildlife.
Budget and Policy Framework	There is no impact as a result of this report.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
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 protects 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 work has been ongoing in delivering the action plan. The key highlights of work completed to date are as follows.

(a) Number of trees planted:

(i)	2021	2,379
(ii)	2022	12,151
(iii)	2023	12,244
(iv)	2024	16,402
(v)	2025 (to date)	4,566
(vi)	Total:	47,742

- (b) In 2024, tree canopy cover was assessed as 8.28 % in Darlington 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. Over time, the number of trees planted will increase the canopy cover throughout the period of the strategy.
- (c) 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.

Risk Management

11. 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.
12. The review by Zurich Risk Assessment and Improvement Team classified the service as 'good' and provided recommendations on how to move to excellent. All of these have now been acted upon which should see a move to excellent at the next inspection.

Risk Management Tree Inspections New Approach

13. The Tree and Woodland Strategy 2021-31 was updated to incorporate the following approach following the advice. 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.

14. The Council will maintain an inventory of trees on the Treewise system, which contains records of tree condition, location, works recommendations and works completion. The inventory will be reviewed to ensure that it remains comprehensive and reliable.
15. 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.
16. 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.

Tree Inspections

17. 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.
18. 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.
19. 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 parks staff and development related surveys. They may be beneficial, but they are not required by this strategy.

How often will trees be inspected

20. 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.
21. Reactive and additional tree inspections and their frequency cannot be defined.
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.

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.

Tree Works

24. 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.
25. The Council has a team of fully qualified arborists that undertake tree works as and when required.

Climate Declaration

26. 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 strategy was updated to reflect this amendment (please see Appendix 1).

Monitoring

27. 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. Since 2021, the Council has planted over 47,700 trees broken down as follows: -

(i)	2021	2,379
(ii)	2022	12,151
(iii)	2023	12,244
(iv)	2024	16,402
(v)	2025 (to date)	4,566

Update on Key Performance Indicators

Percentage of inspections undertaken in Zone 1 (High Risk) over a two-year period

28. An inspection programme is currently ongoing. It is envisaged that all trees in Zone 1 will be completed in 12-15 months, well within the two-year target time.

Number of Trees Planted

29. 16,402 trees were planted in the 2024 calendar year, across the borough meaning we are above target at this moment in time.

Number of trees felled compared to no. of replacement trees planted

30. The number of trees felled is 98 and the number of trees planted 100, with a further 100 to be planted at the earliest opportunity.

Measure, review and report on Darlington's Tree Canopy (five yearly measurement)

31. As per the previous Scrutiny report, the next planned tree canopy survey will be undertaken in 2029.

Number of enquiries received, and percentage responded to within target time

32. From April 2024 to March 2025, 772 requests were recorded on Lagan for the tree service. 152 of these were closed within the Service Level Agreement target, showing a compliance of 32.41%.
33. Further investigation was undertaken to understand the reasons behind this and from the lessons learned we have updated the scripting used by customer services colleagues to ensure that the categorisation of jobs and their priority was correct. There is clear guidance now in operation now to ensure categorisation is clear as to what requires a two-day response (i.e. urgent) and what are non-urgent requests.
34. It is anticipated therefore, that an improvement in the compliance statistics will be experienced as a result of the update.

Number of repeat visits to same tree arising from the same customer enquiry or complaint

35. Due to the recording capabilities of Lagan, we are unable to identify the number of repeat visits to trees arising from customer enquiries.

Number of trees removed infected with more than 50% Ash Dieback

36. The Forestry Commission recommend that any tree suffering from greater than 50% Ash Dieback be removed. There have been no Ash trees removed due to the above.

Further information on the action plan is included in **Appendix 2**.