

21 July 2023

**Management of Durham County Council
Woodland Estate - update**

**Report of Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods
and Climate Change**

Electoral division(s) affected:

All

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide an update on the management of council-owned woodland and tree planting programmes.
- 2 To highlight the challenges and opportunities for woodland management and creation.

Executive summary

- 3 The Council owns approximately 1800ha of woodland across 86 sites throughout the county, which is 10% of the County's total woodland resource. Over 300ha of this woodland is ancient. These woodlands have generally existed since 1600 and have considerable wildlife and historical value, which if lost is irreplaceable (see appendix 2).
- 4 Appropriate management of all these sites offers a major opportunity for improving the carbon performance of woodlands and their role in tackling climate change. It will also increase amenity value, benefit wildlife conservation and enhance the quality and range of timber products and other ecosystem services that woodlands can provide.
- 5 The Council has an excellent track record in woodland creation, with nearly a million trees planted since 2000 as well as planting 2300 street trees and planting or restoring over 320km hedgerow. Furthermore, we are one of few local authorities nationally that have a Forestry Authority approved management plan for its woodland sites, along with Woodland Improvement Grants towards a five-year improvement programme.

- 6 There are several programmes and initiatives in place that continue to build on this work including Durham Woodland Revival (DWR), the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCf), Durham Woodland Creation (DWC), Trees for Children, the North East Community Forest (NECF) and comprehensive management of council-owned woodland through Forestry Commission led initiatives.
- 7 This focus on woodlands over recent years has highlighted inconsistencies in how the Council approaches woodland management. It has also emphasised the need to look at woodland certification options and management of deer populations to promote healthy and sustainable woods that have economic viability.
- 8 The DWR team has successfully sought an extension by National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) until April 2024. This provides the opportunity to set up a system which maximises the benefits of community woodland volunteers for the environment and local communities.
- 9 The role of the DWR Community Engagement Officer will be extended for 2 years beyond the end of the DWR programme in April 2024. This is to allow the continuation of support for community interest in volunteering within council-owned woodland whilst addressing the practical and legal implications of such activity.
- 10 Working with Corporate Property and Land (CPaL), sites have been identified for tree planting under the DWC scheme. To date, 46,500 trees have been established across over 45 ha of land. Further sites will go to Corporate Property Board in August that will go some way towards meeting the target of 10,000 trees in each AAP.
- 11 There is funding available from North East Community Forest to extend the DWC programme manager post for a further 12 months. This will enable the management of planted sites and their grant programmes, along with achieving planting targets for NECF and to benefit from the Trees for Climate grant scheme.

Recommendations

- 12 The Committee is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the content of the report and presentation and comment accordingly.
 - (b) Receive a further update on the management of the council's woodland estate in the next work programme.

Background

Management of existing council-owned woodland

- 13 The council owns and manages over 1800ha of woodland throughout the county, about 10% of the county's total woodland resource. Appropriate management of these woodland sites offers a major opportunity to secure timber production, renewable energy/biomass, wildlife conservation and amenity use and provide a valuable and sustainable resource for years to come.
- 14 There are 86 woodlands spread across the county with a combined total of just over 1800 ha. Many of these are typically located on, or include in part, reclaimed and restored land resulting from the coal mining industry during the 1960s through to the 1990s. This is reflected in their distribution which occur mainly through central and eastern areas with very few to the west in the North Pennines and south in the Tees Lowlands.
- 15 The council own 308 ha of ancient woodland which accounts for 6% of the county's resource. These woodlands have generally existed since 1600 and have considerable wildlife and historical value, which if lost is irreplaceable. This type of woodland mostly occurs on the denes of the West Durham Coalfield along the Twizel, Deerness, Browney and Causey with isolated pockets along the Rivers Derwent, Tees and Wear.
- 16 Responsibility for this woodland within the Council is split between departments and teams. Management across these teams varies and is not cost effective or consistent in terms of staff time and resources.
- 17 In recognition that these woodlands needed positive management, action started in 2013 to develop a series of Forestry Commission (FC) approved management plans and a programme of thinning has been in place since 2013. The plans allowed the woodlands to be entered into a Woodland Improvement Grant Scheme (WIGs) - an FC grant which funds a five-year work programme to bring neglected woodlands back into management and improve the condition of ancient woodland. This positive initiative will unlock over £775,000 of funding in total and more importantly, secure improved woodland management throughout the estate. A temporary staff member is in post to coordinate the work.
- 18 Management of trees and woodlands on council-owned land is now being coordinated by an internal cross-service Trees and Woodland

Workstream chaired by the Head of Environment. This helps to provide direction and coordination of woodland management and operations across the council.

19 These woodland management, creation and restoration initiatives have been a very positive development for the council, the environment and local people. Whilst it has brought about greater collaboration between teams, it has highlighted certain inconsistencies in how the council approaches woodland management;

- (a) The need to consolidate woodland management and operations across the council. Management approaches across teams vary, which is not cost effective in terms of staff time, contracts, consistent standards and economies of scale. Greater clarity of direction and coordination from a single team could effectively achieve this, whilst aligning the needs and activities of the various departments and teams.
- (b) Deer density and distribution have dramatically increased over the last century and current levels in the county pose a significant risk to our woodlands and other animals that rely on them. This pressure needs to be reduced to allow woodlands to flourish. Populations will be monitored but it is anticipated that a deer management strategy will need to be considered in the future.
- (c) The UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS) certification process is a recognised means of assuring sustainable woodland management and is widely recognised by the processing and retail sectors. It also provides access to timber markets and there is often a favourable price premium for certified timber. Part of the council's woodland estate has been certified in the past, but the associated benefits have been outweighed by the resources needed to administer ongoing certification and therefore we have had to cease registration since March 2022.

The circumstances are about to change with a council-based renewed programme of thinning and greater volumes of timber going to market. The question of certification needs to be considered again, along with resource implications to be able to join and comply with the scheme.

Durham Woodland Revival

- 20 The DWR programme aims to restore and reconnect woodlands in County Durham. Led by the council and supported by National Lottery Heritage Fund, partners include the Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission, Northwoods, Living Woods NE and Wear Rivers Trust. The programme was established in 2019 and was initially for three years.
- 21 Because of restrictions during the pandemic, some projects had to be put on hold, so an extension was applied for and granted. The programme will now run until April 2024, with final completion in July 2024 when the current apprenticeship comes to an end.
- 22 A dedicated team has been working to give landowners, contractors and people opportunities to learn about, enjoy and manage their woodlands. Highlights to date include the establishment of over 30 ha of woodland on land transferred to the Woodland Trust, with a further 30ha planned; one traineeship completed and one apprentice now in place at Beamish Museum; tree planting and woodland management plans afoot for estates at Ushaw College and Beamish Museum; support for existing/new community woodland groups working in council-owned woods.
- 23 DWR is supporting more than ten community groups who are undertaking a range of woodland management tasks in council-owned woodlands. While these groups carry out important work, resulting in both savings to the council and benefits to communities and woodlands, there are issues with the current arrangement. Groups report to different departments of the council, each with their own agreement type. Some agreements are out of date and some groups have no formal documentation.
- 24 DWR has been working with colleagues across service areas to find a solution that allows groups to help manage sites without leaving volunteers at risk of liability whilst ensuring that the council's liability as a landowner is considered.
- 25 The final solution will require staff to support community interest in volunteering within council-owned woodland in order to satisfy the practical and legal implications of such activity.
- 26 For this purpose, the DWR Community Engagement post will be extended for a further two years from the end of the DWR programme.

Urban Tree Planting Programme

- 27 The council was successful in Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCFF) rounds 1,2 and 3, with over £800,000 being awarded. Planting is targeted at towns and villages with low canopy cover. This year, urban trees have been funded by the Trees for Climate grant, administered by the North East Community Forest. 366 trees have been planted with a grant award of £208,000.
- 28 The Council's Clean & Green team is responsible for planting the trees, along with a maintenance programme for 3 years until they become established. The total number of large standards planted in towns and villages since 2020 is now at 2300. A planting programme for winter 23/24 for 750 trees is currently being prepared.

Durham Woodland Creation

- 29 The Climate Emergency Response Plan (CERP) is supporting a four-year countywide Woodland Creation Programme to establish 10,000 trees in each of the 14 AAPs. As part of this, a Woodland Creation officer was appointed in August 2020 to work with CPaL and local communities to identify and plant up suitable council-owned sites.
- 30 Around 45 ha of new woodland has been created to date. Most of these sites are council owned, others are owned by parish and town councils. Staff have secured Trees for Climate Grant and other funding for establishment costs for the first three years and maintenance for the first 15 years, worth almost £600,000 in total.
- 31 Further sites are scheduled to be considered by the Corporate Property Board in August which should help to secure the target of 10,000 trees in each AAP.
- 32 There is funding available from North East Community Forest (NECF) and the Trees for Climate programme to extend the DWC programme manager post for a further 12 months. This will enable the management of planted sites and their grant programmes, along with achieving planting targets for NECF and to fully capitalise on the Trees for Climate grant scheme.
- 33 The opportunity to generate carbon income from the sale of carbon credits has been pursued in partnership with local firm, Forest Carbon. An initial five-year agreement is in place to provide a range of services including registration and validation with the Woodland Carbon Code, verification and sale of carbon credits.

- 34 Unfortunately, none of the woodlands to date qualify for this scheme due to the additionality rules. This requires that the planting scheme would only be able to go ahead with the additional income that carbon credits can provide. Due to the generous grant support from Trees for Climate funds, and recent changes in additionality rules, our schemes are unlikely to qualify, but we will continue to assess on an individual basis.

Trees for Children

- 35 The 'Trees for Children' programme is the council's commitment to plant a tree for each of the 70,000 school aged children in the county and is running in conjunction with the Durham Woodland Creation Scheme.
- 36 OASES is delivering this element of the programme. OASES is a charity based in Esh Winning, that has been successfully delivering and promoting outdoor learning and global sustainability for over 20 years with excellent links with County Durham schools. It is developing educational resources and educational programmes of practical tree planting events to enable pupils to appreciate their contribution towards meeting the carbon reduction target of the CERP. To date, approximately 5400 trees have been planted by 4315 pupils from 45 schools.

North East Community Forest (NECF)

- 37 The NECF is one of England's 13 Community Forests, collectively forming the largest environmental regeneration initiative in England, delivering urban, economic and social renewal through planting trees and bringing woodlands back into use for people and wildlife. Newcastle City Council is the lead partner, along with Durham, South Tyneside, North Tyneside, Gateshead and Sunderland councils.
- 38 NECF administers Defra's 'Trees for Climate' fund. This is £640 million in total, from the national Nature for Climate Fund for a five-year programme of planting which will secure £17k/ha for new woodland within Community Forests. As stated earlier, this fund is already being accessed to create new woodland in County Durham.
- 39 The planting target for County Durham is 320ha. This includes both public and private sector woodland. Almost 150 ha has been planted or is planned. As the NECF gathers pace and the team expands, more schemes are likely to come forward from the private sector. As contributing partner to the programme, the council will continue to assess land and make available for meaningful woodland creation.

- 40 There are two more planting seasons left to take advantage of this fund. It could be a one-off opportunity that allows us to cover costs of planting, establishment and maintenance of new woodlands with community involvement.
- 41 The Woodland Creation Officer post has been extended using funds from, and to align with the Trees for Climate fund as explained in paragraph 31.

Conclusion

- 42 The council has an excellent track record in woodland creation, with nearly a million trees planted since 2000. Furthermore, we are one of few local authorities nationally that have a Forestry Commission approved management plan for our woodland sites, along with Woodland Improvement Grants towards a five-year improvement programme.
- 43 The council has had success in obtaining a large amount of funding for a range of schemes including Durham Woodland Revival (with support from National Lottery Heritage Fund), the Urban Tree Challenge Fund and Trees for Climate Fund.
- 44 Responsibility for woodland estate within the council is split between departments and teams. Given the current alliance of trees with climate and nature agendas, along with an increasing woodland asset, a review into how best to consolidate the current management of council-owned woodland is required.
- 45 Deer density and distribution have dramatically increased over the last century and current levels in the county pose a significant risk to our woodlands and other animals that rely on them. It is essential that this pressure is reduced to allow woodlands to flourish, in line with Forestry Commission best practice. Following monitoring of populations, a deer management strategy will be developed that considers a range of measures which address the situation that takes account of the sensitivities of public perception and awareness of the issue.
- 46 The UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS) Certification is a recognised means of assuring sustainable woodland management and widely recognised by the processing and retail sectors. It also provides access to timber markets and there is often a favourable price premium for certified timber.
- 47 Part of the Council's woodland estate has been UKWAS certified in the past, but resources deployed to administer ongoing certification

outweighed the benefits and has been paused since March '22. This is about to change with a renewed programme of thinning and greater volumes of timber to market. The benefits of certification will need to be reviewed, along with an assessment of resource implications to be able to join and comply with the scheme.

- 48 The extension of the DWR Community Engagement post until April 2026 provides the opportunity to set up a system which maximises the benefits of community woodland volunteers for the environment and local communities, without leaving volunteers at risk of liability whilst ensuring that the council's liability as a landowner is considered.
- 49 Identifying suitable areas of land, applying for consent and funding for planting schemes is a complex and specialised area of work. The Woodland Creation Officer post only has one more season left and without this post, further schemes will be difficult to resource, and the Council will struggle to contribute to NECF targets. It will also mean that the Council are unable to fully benefit from the Trees for Climate grant scheme. Extending this post will enable the management of planted sites and their grant programmes, along with achieving planting targets for NECF and to fully capitalise on the Trees for Climate grant scheme.

Background papers

None

Other useful documents

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

None

Finance

Establishment and maintenance costs of woodland and tree planting are met through various grant programmes.

Consultation

None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

No impact

Climate Change

Tree planting is an integral part of the Authority's Climate Emergency Response. New planting can absorb carbon dioxide whilst managing existing woodland can improve resilience to climate change and make them more carbon efficient.

Human Rights

The right to life is threatened by Climate Change.

Crime and Disorder

No direct implications.

Staffing

There is one full time permanent forestry post within the council. This will need to be expanded longer term.

Accommodation

None

Risk

Adverse effects of not managing the woodland estate.

Procurement

Appointment of contractors for planting and managing woodland creation sites will be ongoing in line with Council's contract procedure rules.

Appendix 2 Plan of woodlands

