

11 March 2021

Report of	Assistant Director of Environment	Author	Rosa Tanfield
Title	Year 2 – The Woodland & Biodiversity Project		☎ 03300538047
Wards affected	All Wards		

## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report sets out and reviews the progress that has been made through the Woodland and Biodiversity Project which is now in year 2 of its five-year programme.

## 2. Recommended Decision

- 2.1 The Panel is asked to note the contents of this report.

## 3. Reason for Recommended Decision

- 3.1 This report is for information only.

## 4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 Not applicable.

## 5. Background Information

- 5.1 The Woodland Project (as it was initially called), launched in 2019. The project, part of Colchester Borough Council's Better Colchester campaign, was to support the Council's ambitions to make the borough an even more attractive place to live, work and visit. The Woodland Project was one response of many to environmental concerns and the climate emergency announcement. Its ambition was to help offset 32,000 tonnes of carbon over the lifetime of the trees.
- 5.2 In its first year, residents, volunteers and community groups helped plant trees in over 18 locations including Spring Lane Park, Greenstead Slopes and Pondfield open space as part of the initiative to plant more than 200,000 trees across Colchester over the five-year programme. At the end of Year 1 the target to plant 11,760 trees was achieved.
- 5.3 In 2020, a new Strategic Plan 2020-23 was launched and demonstrated a clear commitment to "tackling the climate challenge and leading sustainability" and one of the priorities set out to "conserving and enhancing biodiversity". In considering this focused direction, reviewing the impact and lessons learnt of Year 1, along with responding to feedback and challenge from key stakeholders, the project was reviewed and further evolved. As a result, the project was relaunched; promoting a wider approach to the project, supported by clear principles and objectives that aligned to greater sensitivity to Colchester's environment and biodiversity.

### **Year 2 – Principles and Objectives**

- 5.4 As an impact of the evolution of this project, the project description changed:

Year 1:

#### 'The Colchester Woodland Project'

'Over the next five years, we plan to plant 200,000 trees across the borough as part of the Better Colchester campaign. Trees and woodlands are a vital part of our eco-system, and we are committed to preserving them and helping them to flourish. This is at the very heart of the Colchester Woodland Project. We want to make our borough even greener, and we want to help our community know, love, and use our woods and parks'

Year 2:

#### 'The Colchester Woodland and Biodiversity Project'

We plan to plant 200,000 trees across the borough in the next 5 years, as part of the Better Colchester campaign, as well as to encourage natural recovery networks that help wildlife and biodiversity. Trees and woodlands are a vital part of our eco-system. We are committed to planting trees and to helping them and wider biodiversity to flourish. We want to make our borough even greener. We want to help our community know and love and care for our environment, from wildflowers and meadows, to our woods and parks, old or new.

- 5.5 A new core set of principles were agreed, aligning strongly to the priorities of the Council's strategic plan. These principles are considered and incorporated on each workstream developed by the Project Team, and at each stage of the work programme:

#### Principles:

- We strive to make our borough even greener.
- We are committed to planting trees and to helping them and wider biodiversity to flourish.
- We will plant and manage our sites and spaces without harming existing habitats.
- We will enhance environments to create more space for nature to grow and thrive.
- We will encourage our community to love and care for our environment, from wildflowers and meadows, to our woods and parks, old or new.

5.6 As a result of the revised objectives and setting of key principles and development of the Council's strategic plan, new aims were developed for Year 2:

- Plant 20,500 trees and shrubs.
- Green the Colchester Orbital, better connecting people with green space.
- Phase out the use of Glyphosate weed killer in Council operations.
- Identify the gaps in our nature recovery networks to help wildlife and biodiversity.
- Build and develop our networks and relationships to create strong advocates and partners of the project.
- Provide help, support, and prepare Colchester for the future changes that may come forward from the new Agriculture and Environment Bills.
- Proactively work within communities to make Colchester greener.

5.7 The project has focused on 5 core workstreams to meet these aims:

- Planting and greening
- Urban planting, including Colchester Orbital
- Public engagement
- Stakeholder development
- Planning

5.8 Unfortunately, the Colchester Woodland and Biodiversity Project has not been unaffected by the impact of Covid-19. This impacted Year 1, as the Mayors Woodland and the Community Orchard had to be rescheduled, and it has meant unfortunately that public events in Year 2 could not go ahead as planned and engagement activities had to be moved online. However, several activities have been achieved and these are summarised below.

### **Planting and greening**

5.9 In a move away from just planting trees as approached by the team in Year 1, this workstream now encompasses planting of trees, shrubs and hedgerows, and other activities that aim to reduce environmental impact on green spaces, ecology, and biodiversity, such as meadows and reduced chemical use.

#### Planting achieved

5.10 Whilst public planting days could not be achieved this year, planting and tree distribution has still gone ahead in some form, and by the end of March 2021, the Council will have achieved 14,000 trees planted. So far in Year 2, the Project has planted 145 standard trees on public green spaces, 12,125 tree whips in our parks and countryside sites and 1,840 whips were supplied to local Town and Parish Councils for planting on their green spaces. With each site, assessments have been undertaken to ensure the right balance and minimal impact on biodiversity, ecology, and existing use of the space. Whilst planting has been on existing public open space, the planting has ensured that these areas can continue to be used (e.g. dog walking, sports use), whilst being enhanced by tree/hedge planting and habitat creation.

#### Self-generating sites

5.11 The Council identified 14 sites for self-generation and estimates that this could generate approximately 4,700 trees based on one successful tree every 3m<sup>2</sup>.

#### Trees for Years

5.12 Whilst the traditional Trees for Years event could not proceed this financial year owing to the Covid-19 restrictions it has been rescheduled to commence at the revised date of

November 2021, National Tree Week and it is intended that this will launch the new planting season for 2021/22. The last Trees for Years event took place in 2020 and so it will still in effect be an 'annual' event.

#### Greening Colchester Policy

- 5.13 A policy document was submitted and supported by the Environment and Sustainability Panel on 17 September 2020 that set out a new approach for the Council with regards to verge and weed maintenance. As part of the Council's commitment to the phased removal of the use of glyphosate-based products, this policy also set out to stop or reduce grass cutting in specific areas. The intention being that changing the management regime in this way can improve the biodiversity and visual amenity of the grass verges, whilst also enabling the Council to manage these areas to be left to re-wild and be developed as wildflower areas or left to naturalise as woodland. Across 14 open spaces approx. 1.5ha in total will be left to naturalise with the potential to establish 4,700 trees at 1 tree per 3m<sup>2</sup> over the next 10 years. The cutting frequency of the grass verges on some of the main routes into Colchester e.g., Avenue of Remembrance, Clingo Hill and Cymbeline Way will be changed to one grass cut per year and managed as wildflower verges.

#### Edible Community Orchard

- 5.14 A small number of residents in Greenstead have planted up wooden troughs outside the community centre with fruit and vegetables. There is scope to plant fruit trees on Magnolia Fields when the volunteer group grows.

#### Wivenhoe Project

CBC were approached by Wivenhoe Town Council (WTC) who have been working on areas in Wivenhoe that they would like to see left to grow as wildflowers, and then cut and cleared at the end of September. The following sites were identified: -

- Elmstead Road / Broadfields Junction
- Henrietta Close Open Space
- Boudica Walk
- Frances Close
- De Vere Lane verge
- Coop Triangle
- Bobbits Way and roadside

- 5.16 Working with WTC, a template document is being produced which can enable and guide Town and Parish Councils in changing grass cutting regimes to develop wildflower areas and improve biodiversity. The document takes organisations through the various aspects of changing the grass cutting regime, identifying any potential concerns, outlines the project brief, how the changes can be monitored and recorded, and how any data collected can be documented.

#### **Urban planting, including Colchester Orbital** Colchester Orbital

- 5.17 The Colchester Orbital is the cycling and walking route around Colchester that connects with existing green spaces and countryside. Consultants Plumb Associates were commissioned in March 2020 to look at opportunities for its improvement including tree-planting and other greening opportunities. The draft Action Plan has identified a range of opportunities that fit within the Woodland and Biodiversity vision including restoration of acid grassland at High Woods Country Park, reimagining Cymbeline Meadows to include more native tree and hedgerow planting, naturalisation of grasslands and wetland creation and a range of small-scale planting opportunities such as at Bergholt Road Allotments. The final plan is anticipated in March 2021. Funding and sponsorship are also being

sought to create way-finding signs around the route and remove or replace some obstacles to movement in the coming months.

#### Town Centre

- 5.18 New public realm developments now explore opportunities for greening the High Street and Town Centre. For example, £1m funding from the Accelerated Town Deal will create new public spaces in St Nicholas Square and Balmerne Gate next to the Mercury Theatre. This will see the addition of more greening elements than existing, with new trees planted across both schemes as well as encouraging sustainable travel and improved spaces accessible spaces for pedestrians. Across the wider town centre the introduction of parklets (a partnership project with Our Colchester Business Improvement District) will see the introduction of trees supported by the Woodland and Biodiversity Project in the High Street.

#### Fixing the Link

- 5.19 Idverde, the Council's grounds maintenance contractor is producing a landscape design for the Albert Roundabout. More details of the design will emerge; however, it follows the "Fixing the Link" themes and colour yellow. The Albert Roundabout concept is formed around a symmetrical framework of 600m<sup>2</sup> architectural shrubs, accompanied by drifts of pollinator friendly perennials and grasses. The colour scheme is predominantly yellow to reflect the existing town theme, with a contrast of blues and purples to set it off. The scheme will be dressed with 30mm-80mm cobbles to act as a weed suppressing and water retaining mulch. The outer ring of the roundabout will be planted with a low maintenance ground cover plant, the stones being retained by permanent edging.

#### **Public engagement**

- 5.20 Public engagement is a key part of the project, and lots of work has taken place to involve and encourage our local community to love and care for the environment. This has included changes and improvements to the [Woodland and Biodiversity Project website](#), which is regularly updated on progress of the project and provides other information.

#### Schools

- 5.21 Local schools have been engaged to design signage for 'no mow' areas across the borough. Activity packs with information about the project, and templates for signage were sent to schools along with guidance for seed gathering activity. Future plans include engaging schools to take part in bee and butterfly counts.

#### Social Media

- 5.22 During Year 2 officers have utilised the Council's social media channels to keep the public engaged and updated on the project. This has included a #loveyourtrees campaign where residents were asked to identify well know trees across Colchester, send in pictures of their favourite trees, and provide pictures of trees they had planted as part of the Trees for Years initiative over the years. Residents have also been encouraged to take part in seed gathering activities, with guidance and packs provided at Highwoods Country Park Visitors Centre. Several videos have also been developed and shared across social media to show progress with the project to date and explain future project plans.

#### Building a volunteer network

- 5.23 Volunteers for Year 1 of the project were recognised through a "thank you" video posted on to the Council website and social media, on International Volunteer Day on 5 December 2020. Prior to national lockdown restrictions being implemented the public were asked to sign up to volunteer for public planting days, with over 100 volunteers registered. The details of these volunteers have been retained to allow future engagement with key project initiatives and for the network of volunteers to grow and grow.

## **Stakeholder development**

- 5.24 The project team understand the importance of stakeholder development in ensuring the sustainability and legacy of this project and to that end, have been forging new relationships and enhancing existing relationships. Instrumental to the development of these relationship is the recruitment of a Woodland and Open Spaces Project Officer.

### Together We Grow

- 5.25 Together we Grow is a community Interest Company based in Colchester and founded in 2017 by Wayne Setford. It aims to improve the lives of communities by helping people and nature to grow together.
- 5.26 Wayne led on the Public Planting Events in Year 1 of the project and was so successful at building up a team of committed volunteer tree planters that he was asked to fill the same role for Year 2.

### Essex Forest Initiative

- 5.27 The Essex Forest Initiative was created in October 2019 by Essex County Council to commit to planting £1 million worth of trees over five years to combat climate change by locking up carbon in the environment.
- 5.28 They are looking to work with all interested Local Authorities within Essex to achieve this aim and have partnered with the Woodland Trust in providing native tree stock at a heavily subsidised cost to any Local Authority which has plans to plant woodland on their land.

### Woodland Trust

- 5.29 The Woodland Trust is the UK's largest woodland conservation charity and has planted 47m trees since it first began in 1972. It has agreed to supply the Project with a total of 10,350 tree whips, canes, and rabbit guards completely free of charge for planting in February & March this year.

### Stakeholder group

- 5.30 In light of the renewed focus of the project and to further ensure the direction and sustainability of the project, the Council has formulated an informal stakeholder group. It is anticipated that the membership of this group will flex and alter as the project evolves and develop. In Year 2 the group has been made up of interested individuals and organised groups such as Colchester Natural History Society (CNHS), Essex Wildlife Trust, and the "Together We Grow" Community Interest Group. Many of the individuals are Town and Borough Councillors with a particular interest in wildlife and biodiversity.
- 5.31 The informal group has helped to challenge and therefore influence the refocusing of the project, ensuring the objectives and principles of the project are sound. Members of CNHS have surveyed some of the proposed planting sites and have advised officers on ways to increase biodiversity in these areas which has led to positive changes being made to how the project develops and learns from others with expertise in the field. It is hoped that support like this, or similar, will continue into Year 3 from the existing and other groups, with a particular focus on greater collaboration and engagement.

## **Planning**

- 5.32 With ambitious plans for planting in the coming years, officers have been actively exploring several large sites, undertaking surveys and assessments.

### Cymbeline Meadow

- 5.33 The project team are working with the existing tenant farmer and Countryside Ranger team, who are investigating areas for improving the biodiversity of Cymbeline Meadows

#### Colchester Northern Gateway

5.34 As part of the approved landscape scheme for the Colchester Northern Gateway Sports Park, approximately 500 standard trees were planted and 86,000 hedging whips. Additional areas towards the North of the site and along the cycle routes are being assessed for additional tree planting in 21/22 planting season.

5.35 Officers have also exploring new and emerging strategies and policies:

#### Bee Lines

5.36 “B-lines” is a campaign run by the conservation charity Buglife aimed at creating a series of insect pathways running through the countryside to address the loss of flowers and pollinators across the land. B-lines have been mapped across most of the UK and some major routes run through Colchester Borough and the project team are working to fill the mapped routes with restored and new wildflower-rich areas wherever it can by changing the way the Council maintains the land to a “More grow, Less mow” regime.

#### Landscape guidance for new developments

5.37 The project team is looking to influence a change to existing policies, such as the existing landscape guidance, with reference to urban trees and tree planting in rear gardens, to improve green corridors and connections through the Borough.

#### **Overall summary**

5.38 Whilst Covid-19 has had an impact on the delivery of the service and whilst many of the core project team had to reassess their priorities to the delivery of core services and certain activities and events could not proceed as planned, good progress has been made in each of the workstreams within the last year. It is important that this work is sustained, and that the project continues to evolve and prepares for all and any opportunities as they arise.

5.39 Biodiversity, conservation and enhancement of our green spaces including tree planting is an evocative area. The project has evolved overtime and strives to incorporate a broad spectrum of sometimes conflicting views from stakeholders. The Project Team aim to navigate this spectrum of views and strike a balance, continuing to maintain relationships welcoming support and challenge in equal measure whilst remaining committed to the project principles set out in this report.

## **6. Strategic Plan References**

6.1 This project supports the Councils [Strategic Plan 2020-23](#) of “tackling the climate challenge and leading sustainability” and in particular the priorities of “respond to the climate emergency” and “conserve and enhance biodiversity”. It is also contributing towards “creating safe, healthy and active communities” through the various engagement and planting activities outlined in this report.