

02 November 2022

Report of	Assistant Director of Environment	Author	Nick Christo
Title	Woodland & Biodiversity Project Update		
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 4 of its five-year programme.
- 1.2 The project has evolved over the 4 years and has a clear objective and statement of purpose set out. The project focuses on three, intrinsically linked areas of work:
  - For our communities
  - For our wildlife
  - For our environment
- 1.3 The report sets out the activities being undertaken across these areas and highlights projects that demonstrate the impact being made in each.

## 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. In response to learning, development and challenge, the principles and objectives of the project have evolved; from a clear aim of planting trees to make the borough greener and offset carbon emissions in year 1, to incorporating increased consideration of biodiversity and community focus in year 2, to a project that now focus on developing a legacy of a greener and biodiverse future for Colchester in year 3. The following project descriptions demonstrate the evolution of the project:

### Year 1 (2019/20)

- 5.2 '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 (2020/21)

- 5.3 '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.'*

### Year 3 (2021/22)

- 5.4 'The Colchester Woodland and Biodiversity Project'

*'Is a unique opportunity for everyone to work together and develop a legacy of a greener Borough for future generations.*

*The project aims to bring about improvements in 3 areas, our Communities, our Wildlife, and our Environment.'*

### Year 4 (2022/23)

- 5.5 'The Colchester Woodland and Biodiversity Project'

*The project will continue to develop in 22/23 by continuing to plant trees in suitable areas and by focusing on the naturalisation of sites, enhancing the biodiversity further, reviewing the management regimes and continue to communicate changes to our communities.*

### **Year 4 in detail**

- 5.6 Year 4 of the project focuses on providing a unique opportunity for everyone (no matter what background, location, age, etc) to collaborate with others and create a legacy of a greener place for Colchester in the future. This sees an important shift in how such an ambition might be delivered and articulates the important outcomes from the project. The number of plants the project aims to plant has been removed from the project description, and there is continued focus on the breadth of a diverse programme of activities. To ensure that this aim is met, the project focuses on three intrinsically linked areas which it sets out to make tangible outcomes:

## COMMUNITIES

- 5.7 To add value to the health and wellbeing of our communities and support the development of deep-rooted connection. We will:
- Improve physical health by enabling access to green spaces for everyone
  - Enable more people to be involved in nature based outdoor activities to improve physical and mental health
  - Help communities to benefit from urban planting
  - Help families create precious memories and stories

#### WILDLIFE

- 5.8 To develop, enhance and diversify our wildlife within Colchester. We will:
- Reduce mowing approaches on Council green spaces, in an effort to 'rewild' green spaces, creating habitats and an environment suitable for wildlife such as insects and pollinators
  - Create new woodlands
  - Recover and improve wildlife corridors and networks

#### ENVIRONMENT

- 5.9 Reduce the environmental impact of the Council and influence others to follow our lead: We will
- Help residents and businesses to make informed decisions about their impact on the environment in Colchester
  - Conserve and enhance biodiversity by reviewing our Greening Policy
  - Banning the use of glyphosate herbicide on Council owned green spaces
  - Contribute to the reduction in drought and flood risk
- 5.10 In working towards these outcomes and to deliver the best possible approach, the team have committed to the following:
1. We will not harm existing habitats
  2. We will use natural processes as far as practicable and possible
  3. We will seek to balance the needs of people and nature
  4. We will collaborate, consult, and involve communities and partners
  5. We will allow others to take part and own the project
  6. We will use every opportunity to influence others to follow our example

#### FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

- 5.11 Working with community groups on planting and activities days can deliver immense opportunity and impact on both community and individuals' health and wellbeing. Together We Grow CIC (TWG) has been a partner of the Woodland and Biodiversity Project since year 1. Given the work that TWG do in terms of community engagement, increasing awareness of the mental and physical benefits of working outdoors in nature and their core remit of nurturing and improving a key public outdoor space, it was felt they would be the right choice to assist in carrying out the community element of the project.
- 5.13 During year 3 of the Woodland & Biodiversity Project, seven different sites were planted and with the help of 425 volunteers, a total of 7,170 young trees were planted with a further 23,000 plants supplied to other organisations.
- 5.14 The team are currently working with six other organisations - The Big Green Internet, the Trust for Conservation Volunteers, The Ministry of Defense, Wivenhoe Town Council, The Unity Academy and Kent Wildlife Trust to identify suitable planting locations for the coming year.

- 5.15 In further highlighting the success of the project, a presentation was given to One Colchester Climate Change Network.
- 5.16 To commemorate the Queen's Jubilee year, we delivered the Jubilee Tree Canopy Project in partnership with our local communities. We received requests for 22 Jubilee Oak Trees from Town and Parish Councils 11 of which have now been planted with a further 11 due to be planted in November 2022 when the planting season begins again..
- 5.17 We delivered a Blossoms Circles programme, commemorating 2020 at King's Meadow. Planting took place early in 2022 and the Council facilitated three planting days. With NHS staff attending the second planting day and various Councillors who joined the launch. Around 124 volunteers helped plant the blossom circles. Four local poets were invited to write poems which are now displayed at the site, and the poetry reading event took place in April which was a huge success.
- 5.18 140 Street Trees were planted during year 3 of the project across 7 locations. Work is underway to identify sites for 2022 and an application form has been completed and sent to ECC which requests funding for 125 street trees to be planted in 16 different locations which have been suggested by local Councillors.
- 5.19 The team are also working on the following activities:

C.1 Deliver an engagement campaign (schools, households, business, care homes)	<p><b>So residents can make a difference in their own gardens</b> We are developing an online library of resources and videos to provide guidance and top tips on how people can encourage biodiversity in their own spaces. This will be available via <a href="http://colchester.gov.uk">colchester.gov.uk</a> and shared in weekly posts via our social media channels.</p> <p><b>Recognise those residents who support the project</b> Across many sites in the Borough residents are taking it upon themselves to care and protect the newly planted sites. These 'Tree Guardians' are now being recognised and provided with the tools to help them continue with their roles. A campaign to recruit more Tree Guardians and showcase the wonderful work they do and the impact they make is being shared.</p> <p><b>More communities are aware and involved in projects</b> Local schools (30) have been contacted and offered trees and shrubs, along with farmers, landowners, and businesses for their landholdings.</p>
C.2 Work with Together We Grow and other community organisations on activities	<p>Our new Community Orchards project was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> August with an open invitation to all community organisations, town &amp; parish councils and schools to propose sites where fruit trees might be grown to provide habitats for wildlife and a food source for people and pollinators alike!</p> <p>To date 4 potential sites have been identified and these are being investigated by our staff to assess their suitability for fruit tree growing.</p>
C.3 Deliver community planting days	<p>The ambition to continue to plant trees and plants has not diminished and the project is continuing to deliver this aim. There have been over 65,000 trees planted so far, and in year 4 there are at least a further 10,000 planned. Officers are</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activity and spaces contribute to health of individuals</li> <li>• Larger communities' benefit from urban and peri-urban planting</li> </ul>	<p>currently in the process of developing the plans and consulting on community planting days.</p> <p>As in previous years The Woodland Trust (WT) assess the suitability of each site and the location, scale and species mix of the trees being used. They provide funding for this element of the project and have supported and funded the Council's approach of using only biodegradable rabbit guards, reducing the risk of contaminating the local environment with plastic debris.</p>
<p>C.4 Deliver Trees for Years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So residents can make a difference in their own gardens</li> </ul>	<p>Trees for Years will be delivered across the Borough much like in 2021. This is to ensure easier access for residents and to reduce travel time for those wishing to collect items. It is estimated that 15,000 trees and shrubs will be provided for residents.</p> <p>To ensure resilience and help manage the process, the distribution will be delivered through a click and collect service as this proved very popular this year and enables residents to book a time to collect their trees as a location near to them.</p> <p>To facilitate the click and collect service, tree packs will be developed to suit different garden sizes.</p> <p>Officers will work with Parish Council and community groups for distribution sites, and it is anticipated the same sites will be used for the coming year.</p>
<p>C.5 Use Street Tag to encourage residents to monitor sites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residents are engaged with the impact of biodiversity and habitat recovery</li> </ul>	<p>Community enabling colleagues, working in partnership with the Essex Local Delivery Pilot have launched Street Tag, a free interactive app that promotes physical activity in a fun and accessible way.</p> <p>Street Tag turns physical activity into a game by converting walking, running, and cycling into Street Tag points (tags). It is a way to transform streets and parks into a giant virtual playground for local communities. Competitors compete to top the leader board and win prizes. More information can be found here: <a href="http://www.colchester.gov.uk/street-tag">www.colchester.gov.uk/street-tag</a>.</p> <p>In linking to this project, tags have been added to all the rewilding sites and encourage users to monitor the locations (e.g., the number of butterflies they see).</p>
<p>C.7 Greening the Orbital:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wayfinding, barrier removal, route enhancements as part of Phase 1 of Greening the Orbital programme</li> </ul>	<p>Colchester Orbital wayfinding discs have been installed on all CBC sites. Work is now taking place to install discs on sites that are not owned by CBC</p>

<p>C.8 Undertake (street tree) urban planting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More communities benefit from urban and peri-urban planting</li> </ul>	<p>Officers are working with colleagues on other Town Centre projects to establish the opportunity for further tree planting as plans emerge.</p> <p>Officers are also working with Essex County Council and Essex Highways to establish the ability to increase urban planting. One opportunity is planting where dead or dying trees have been removed historically, and not replaced – these locations will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.</p>
---	---

## FOR OUR WILDLIFE

### Continue to deliver the Colchester Greening Policy

- 5.25 The Greening Colchester Policy was presented and agreed by the Environment and Sustainability Panel on 17 September 2020. Its aim was to stop the use of glyphosate-based products through a phased approach on Council owned land. The timeline published has been met and officers continue to work with partner organisations on implementing changes to their policies also.
- 5.26 Currently the following alternative methods of weed control are being trialled on Council owned land:
- Vegetation around obstacles and play areas is being cut back twice per year.
  - Vegetation along fence lines is being left to grow for wildlife and cut once per year
  - Non glyphosate weedkillers are being used on weed growth in car parks and pathways on CBC owned land.
- 5.27 As part of the Council's commitment to remove glyphosate-based products, the policy also introduced the stopping or reducing of grass cutting in specific areas to improve biodiversity and visual amenity of the grass verges, creating rewilded, wildflower or naturalised woodlands.
- 5.28 In 2022, alternatives to using glyphosate were rolled out on all CBH sites and the Cemetery and Crematorium. Agreed alternative for this year included:
- Obstacles to be strimmed every 6 weeks.
  - Hard surfaces to be hand weeded every 4 weeks.
  - Borders to be hand weeded where required on each visit.
  - Additional wildflower areas added for 2022, with one cut in September.
  - Additional "No Mow" butterfly signs delivered and used on CBC parks land.
- 5.29 Now that the policy has been in place and we have extended it to other sites as above, a review is currently being undertaken on the impact and effectiveness, and recommendations or changes will be made as appropriate.
- 5.30 It has been found that there is excessive weed growth on hard surfaces due to the cessation of Glyphosate herbicide and the initial aim to hand weed every 4 weeks has not been able to be achieved, due to the time it takes to weed at each site. The proposal to rectify this is to use non harmful herbicides such as Katoun Gold twice in the growing season - at the start and at the mid-point – this will enable our contractors to attend every 6 weeks and keep on top of weeds in hard surfaces.
- 5.31 Weeds in borders have also been prevalent and much like hard surfaces above, it is proposed to use non harmful herbicides twice during the growing season. This is a

reduction of using harmful herbicides at every visit and it will allow the teams to continue to hand weed on each visit, however the weed growth will be less. The team in partnership with CBH have also trialled using bark mulch on borders and where this is applied, weed growth has been suppressed significantly. As a result of this positive impact and in conversations with other local authorities, it is proposed that a programme of mulching all border sites be undertaken.

### 5.33 The team are also working on the following activities:

<p>W.1 Undertake Phase 1 planting and planning at Cymbeline Meadow to create a new woodland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create new woodland</li> <li>• Recover biodiversity and habitats</li> </ul>	<p>There is an ambition to create a new woodland and Nature Reserve at Cymbeline Meadow. The aim is to replace agricultural land and enhance existing areas to deliver a diverse and rich mosaic of habitats across the whole site, for future generations of Colchester.</p> <p>Initial concept plans have been drawn up detailing areas of hedge planting, pond and wetland creation, areas of nectar rich grassland, scrubland, bird seed rich crop areas and tree planting, including areas for future coppice woodland.</p> <p>Concept plans are being developed and more detail will emerge for consultation.</p> <p>This work helps to deliver objectives of the Greening The Orbital programme.</p>
<p>W.2 Engage and enable Parish Councils to establish new woodlands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enable others to create new woodlands</li> </ul>	<p>All 31 Town &amp; Parish Councils have been contacted and offered free trees and shrubs for planting on their land or for distribution to their residents</p> <p>The project is partnering with Big Green Internet, Woodland Trust to deliver the Red Squirrel Project to plant up to 4kms (20,000 whips) of new hedgerow on Mersea Island.</p>
<p>W.4 Deliver the Colchester Wetland Restoration Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biodiversity and habitats are improved and more diverse</li> </ul>	<p>Unfortunately, the team were unsuccessful in their application to the Government's Green Recovery Fund, in partnership with En-Form and Abberton Rural Training. But they will continue to work with these partners and others to source the funding to delivery of this project.</p>
<p>W.5 Continue to deliver the Colchester Greening Policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced environmental impact of the Council</li> </ul>	<p>See above</p>

- 5.34 All of the objectives are intrinsically linked and an example of this is the work undertaken with Wivenhoe Town Council.

The Wivenhoe Project (Nature Recovery Sites)

- 5.35 Wivenhoe Town Council (WTC) worked with the Council's officers to trial a "no mow, no sow" management regime between March and September 2021 at 12 designated open spaces and residential verges in the town. The objectives were to work more closely with communities and establish if a local approach could increase biodiversity and to assess public reaction. This would be the first approach of this type undertaken by the project team, undertaken as a trial, so that if it was successful, it could be used as a template and example to roll out to other Councils and partners.
- 5.36 Following the successful trial over the summer of 2021, it was agreed that more sites within Wivenhoe would be left longer incorporating the 'no mow, no sow' principle. A total of 24 sites are now 'no mow, no sow' sites in Wivenhoe.
- 5.37 Other Town and Parish Councils were invited to an open evening where Wivenhoe Councillors and representatives from the Greening Team walked some of the 'no mow, no sow' sites and discussed the projects, shared best practice and issues that arose when changing the management regimes.
- 5.38 Discussions have been held with Ward Members in Greenstead to explore possible Nature Recovery sites. Locations have been agreed at Magnolia Fields and Hickery Avenue to be left as wildflower sites. It is anticipated that more discussions will be held with other Town and Parish Councils and local Councillors to identify further sites across the Borough.
- 5.39 The highlights of the Wivenhoe Project to date include:
- Nearly 150 different species of wildflower have been identified across the sites since March.
  - There were on average 5 times as many wildflowers in the unmown sites, compared to the mown sites.
  - 8 residents have joined the project as volunteers. They are responsible for flower surveys on all the sites.
  - The Council have erected information boards at all sites explaining how the sites are being managed.
  - There have been no problems with mowing. The grounds maintenance contractor has been very receptive and responsive throughout.
  - Separate to the project, there were some concerns from residents about the general length of grass around the town due to the explosive spring growth resulting from the wet winter and late spring. There were almost no concerns about the project sites themselves.
- 5.40 Public response has included:
- 60 letters to neighbours of the project sites were sent explaining the project in March. No objections have been received by WTC in return.
  - No complaints have been received by WTC and only one reported by Council Officers – a repetition of concerns about traffic sight lines at one site.
  - Updates on the project have been posted on the Town Council and Wivenhoe Community Facebook pages. The posts have received widespread approvals and generated many overwhelmingly supportive comments.
  - While most social media comments have been simple statements of support, some important issues have also been raised and resolved, including maintaining safe traffic sight lines at two sites and access to play areas in another.



- Survey volunteers have been approached by 12 members of the public while doing site surveys. All have expressed support for the project, one wanting to join in the surveys with her small children.

#### 5.41 Costs and benefits for Wivenhoe:

- Financial: no costs have been incurred to date by WTC except for the erection of site signage (cost to CBC). Notional savings of contract time are probably too marginal to model reliably at this stage.
- Carbon emissions: sites are cut up to 14 times a year normally. Reducing to one cut a year represents a 93% reduction in carbon emissions on each site included in the project.
- Biodiversity: Five times as many flowering plants have been found in unmown sites compared to mown sites. With plants being able to complete their life cycles we would expect this abundance of wildflowers to increase in future years in unmown areas.
- Public satisfaction: public response has been overwhelmingly positive, with no formal complaints received about the project and strong support expressed on social media and in person by residents.
- The project is showing that summer long “no mow, no sow” is a viable management option for green spaces in residential and urban areas and is effective in increasing native biodiversity at no financial cost to Council taxpayers and with the prospect of cost benefits if it is extended. Key elements to success are local town and parish council buy-in, and positive, explanatory engagement with residents.

#### 5.42 The team are also working on the following activities:

<p>E.1 Initiate the setting up a Greening Colchester Network Forum (<i>working title</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross pollination of ideas</li> <li>• Discover what others are doing</li> <li>• Network development</li> <li>• Sharing of activities</li> <li>• Check in and challenge on the project</li> </ul>	<p>Conversations are underway with partners on either establishing or developing an existing forum and network to support connections between groups and organisations, to learn, replicate and scale action across the network</p>
<p>E.3 Roll out the Wivenhoe Project to other Parish Councils</p>	<p>See above</p>
<p>E.4 Deliver an education campaign</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform others of our management methods and provide examples of how these can be applied</li> </ul>	<p>Officers continue to deliver presentations and talks to others, sharing the work undertaken by the Woodland and Biodiversity Project, locally, regionally, and nationally.</p>

<p>E.5 Provide help, support, and prepare Colchester for the future changes that may come forward from the new Agriculture and Environment Bills, through conversations and dialogue with farmers and landowners.</p>	<p>Officers are working with The Big Green Internet and Colchester Natural History Society to identify local landowners and farmers willing to plant trees and hedgerows.</p> <p>Officers are in discussion with 3 large land-owning local businesses to plant up to 3,300 trees and shrubs on their land.</p> <p>Officers are working with the current tenant Farmer at High Woods Country Park to develop proposals for meadow improvements.</p> <p>Officers are working to draw up Biodiversity Net Gain guidance for developers, officers, Members, and the public, in anticipation of the Environment Bill being enacted this autumn and to identify sites for Net Gain in the borough.</p> <p>Officers are in discussion with partners about how to create a Nature Recovery Network for the borough.</p>
<p>E.6 Influence planning, strategies, policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce the environmental impact of the Council</li> </ul>	<p>Officers are working on developments on the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colchester Orbital Guidelines</li> <li>• Landscape Development Guidance</li> <li>• Green Infrastructure Guide</li> </ul> <p>Officers are also updating the Council's natural assets register to assist with conversations and plans for carbon offsetting.</p>

## 6. Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications

- 6.1 Throughout the work of this project Officers have taken due care in giving due consideration to equality and diversity and this is demonstrated through the rewording of the project and the commitments that the project team have created

## 7. Strategic Plan References

- 7.1 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.

## 8. Consultation

- 8.1 The approach to consultation on each of the activities will be dependent on the scope and aim of the specific activity due to the diversity of the work undertaken, but as the commitments set out in 5.9:

4. We will collaborate, consult, and involve communities and partners
5. We will allow others to take part and own the project

- 8.2 These commitments will be tested throughout the project and due consideration will be given to the timeliness and method of consultation for each activity.

## **9. Publicity Considerations**

- 9.1 As with consultation, due consideration will be given to those who may be affected by activities. The team will consult and listen to feedback and make changes, as can be demonstrated throughout this project.

## **10. Financial implications**

- 10.1 Year 4 the Council has provided funding up to £150,000 to deliver most of the work set out above, including the Woodland Project Officer, purchasing of plants and trees, fencing, marketing, equipment and maintenance, and technical assessments.
- 10.2 To deliver on more ambitious schemes, officers are working with the partners and other organisations to source external funding and support.

## **11. Community Safety Implications**

- 11.1 It is hoped that working with organisations such as TWG and on community planting days, the project can work towards aims of providing opportunities to support community safety and community cohesion.

## **12. Health and Safety Implications**

- 12.1 The project does not cause any harm to the health and safety of the general public.

## **13. Risk Management Implications**

- 13.1 Risks and opportunities are assessed based on each activity due to the variety of the work being undertaken.

## **14. Environmental and Sustainability Implications**

- 14.1 The project has very clear aims and objectives for the project in relation to the environment, nature, and sustainability. The outcomes in delivering these for Colchester residents are:

### Improving health and well being

- Those living closer to greener space in urban areas have been found to experience lower rates of anxiety -[Imperial College London \(2019\)](#)
- Increasing access/proportion of green space in local areas can help develop more active lives, promote communication and socialising with others, as well as helping to capture carbon and improve air quality ([Public Health England, 2020](#))
- [Around 9 in 10 people surveyed by Natural England in May 2020](#) agreed that natural spaces are good for mental health and wellbeing. More than 40% noticed that nature, wildlife, and visiting local green and natural spaces have been even more important to their wellbeing since the coronavirus restrictions began

### Contributing to reducing climate risk:

- It is estimated that there are around 2,000 heat-related deaths each year in England and Wales and this number is expected to more than triple to over 7,000 by the middle of the century, as a result of climate change. ([Link](#))
- Approximately 250,000 properties are at risk of flooding in the East of England, posing risks to mental health and wellbeing of the population as well as the operations of businesses ([source](#))