



Report to Cabinet

Date:	16 th February 2020
Title:	Large Scale Tree Planting on Buckinghamshire Council land holding – progress and next steps
Relevant councillor(s):	Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment
Author and/or contact officer:	David Sutherland, Head of Climate Change and Environment
Ward(s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	Cabinet is recommended to:
i)	NOTE the progress made with respect to options to facilitate planting of over 500,000 trees on Buckinghamshire Council land holdings
ii)	AGREE to progress the production of more detailed woodland creation and project plans for the first phase sites, notably with the aim that, subject to approval of detailed costing and procurement they are delivered within the next planting season.
iii)	AGREE to the overall ambition of the 10 year large scale tree planting programme noting the phasing of sites, i.e. Phase 1(sites delivered next planting season), Phase 2(sites delivered in 2-5 years) and Phase 3 (sites that would be delivered in 5-10 years) noting that sites are subject of change and refinement as the programme develops
Reason for decision:	The recommendation helps deliver against one of the key priorities in the Corporate Plan notably ‘Improving our Environment’.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The report outlines the steps that have been taken to date to scope out the options and feasibility of large scale tree and woodland planting of approximately 543,000 trees on land owned by the Council. The ambition is to create a scheme where one tree can be planted for every citizen of Buckinghamshire which would in part contribute to our wider ambition in addressing climate change and becoming carbon neutral by 2050 or earlier.
- 1.2 This report focusses on the options for large scale planting on Buckinghamshire Council land holdings only, primarily utilising the agricultural estate.

2. Content of report

Background

National Policy Background

- 2.1 The Government's 25 Environment Plan and associated draft England Woodland Strategy have a national target to plant 30,000 hectares of new woodland in the UK every year – nearly a million hectares by 2050. To highlight the scale of the challenge this is equivalent to a space about three-quarters the size of the Isle of Wight every year.
- 2.2 Last year, the UK planted just 13,400 hectares of woodland. Woodland cover needs to increase from 13 per cent to 17 per cent – the equivalent of 1.5 billion new trees.
- 2.3 The government has created a £640m 'Nature for Climate' fund to help support in part its tree-planting commitment the full details of which have not been announced. Nature based climate solutions are a critical part of the package of measures to reduce the Country's emissions to net zero. Indeed the government has recently opened the Woodland Carbon Guarantee that aims to help accelerate woodland planting rates and develop the domestic market for woodland carbon for the permanent removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The scheme enables you to sell your captured carbon in the form of verified carbon credits, called Woodland Carbon Units (WCUs), to the government for a guaranteed price.

Carbon Sequestration

- 2.4 Based on the Woodland Carbon Code, new native woodland can capture 300-400 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent per hectare by year 30. By year 100, it can capture 400-600 tonnes CO₂ equivalent per hectare. 1 tonne of CO₂ equates to 0.27 tonnes of carbon. This project therefore has the potential to be one of the key projects that

supports the Buckinghamshire Council emerging climate change strategy and reducing net emissions to zero.

2.5 An example of the levels of carbon capture for woodland created in Buckinghamshire is set out in the following diagram.

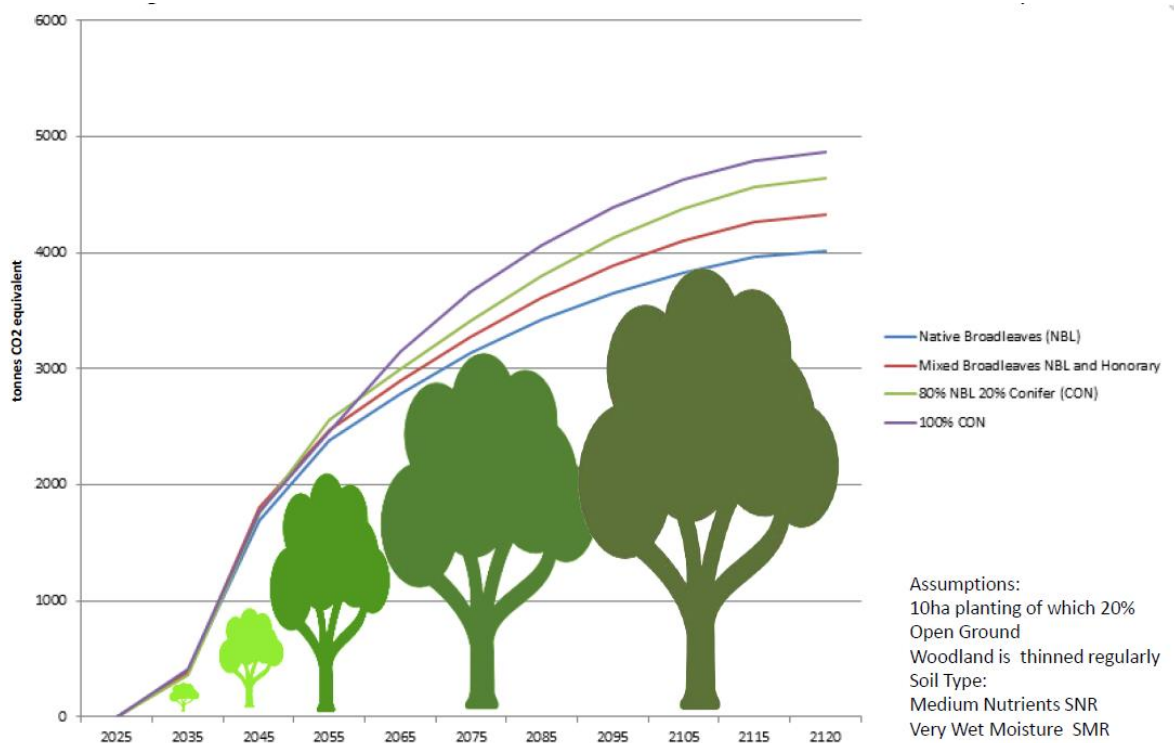


Fig 1 - Example of the carbon units for a 10ha woodland in north Buckinghamshire using the woodland carbon code calculator on a Medium Nutrients and Very Moist site

Other Benefits

2.6 Planting trees provides numerous benefits in addition to capturing carbon i.e. improving air quality, flood mitigation, improving water quality, improving public health & wellbeing, creating suitable habitats for wildlife, reducing soil erosion and sedimentation, enhance recreation opportunities and making a significant contribution to the local economy.

- 2.7 To provide context and as an example, the UK Woodland natural capital accounts, UK: 2020¹ highlight the overall asset value of UK woodland which includes selected woodland ecosystems services is £130 billion. The asset value of the regulating services i.e. carbon capture, pollution removal, flood protection, make up 77% of the overall value, services with the recreation (cultural) asset valued at 18% of the overall total, and only 6% of the value is from the provisioning service of timber and fuel.

Underlying Principles

- 2.8 The key underlying principles in approaching this project is the right tree in the right place with a plan
- **Right tree** – Species selection appropriate and suitable for the local area and environment, and able to adapt to climate change.
 - **Right place** – The overall aim will be to improve and maximise biodiversity and other environmental benefits i.e. carbon capture and flood mitigation, as well as cultural and health benefits. Considering factors in developing woodland creation plans will include land use, access, landscape, historic features and habitat types.
 - **Develop a plan** - to address the above principles and meet UK forestry standard and Woodland Carbon Code. Planting the tree is the start. It must be maintained.

Project Approach

- 2.9 A small project team consisting of representatives from Property, Country Parks, Environment and the Forestry Commission have undertaken the following steps to get us to this point:
- Forestry Commission provided with details of all of Buckinghamshire Council landholdings including agricultural estate.
 - Focussing on areas of land of 10ha and above first(due to availability of creation grants) the Forestry Commission undertook an initial screening

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/woodlandnaturalcapitalaccountsuk/2020>

taking account of a series of environmental and other constraints to identify a number of potential planting sites.

2.10 The suggested suitable sites for large scale tree planting then went through a series of sense checking from Buckinghamshire Council technical teams from both an environment and property perspective. Carter Jonas were then commissioned to undertake the following tasks:

- **Task 1:** Comment on/suggest delivery model for large scale tree planting
- **Task 2:** Calculate how 543,000 trees could be planted on the farms and other landholdings identified for these trees; create an initial business plan cost for regaining land from farm tenancies
- **Task 3:** Identify an initial tranche of sites for tree planting
- **Task 4:** Review Forestry Commission identified holdings. Comment on the suitability of selected sites and make recommendations

Key findings from Carter Jonas report

2.11 The Carter Jonas report indicates that sufficient land can be identified from the Council's land holdings, primarily from within the agricultural estate, to accommodate the planting of 543,000 trees. In addition to the agricultural estate other areas of land owned by the Council that provide early opportunities for the establishment of trees have been identified. This includes assessment of agricultural properties from both the former County and District Council's and some small areas of surplus land within existing operational property portfolios. In most cases the site selection has identified only part of farms being included in order to protect the commercial viability of any retained land and buildings. There are few opportunities of 'whole farm' planting without further impact to the estimated revenue reductions identified below.

2.12 The report identifies a series of landholdings that could deliver the required land in a programme of planting phased over the next 10 years. These are split into

- **Phase 1:** sites that could be delivered in the next available planting season - 4 sites (31 hectares or 15% of overall planting),
- **Phase 2:** sites that will come available for planting due to leasing arrangements over the next 2-5 years – 10 sites (130 hectares or 63% of overall planting)

- **Phase 3** -sites that would be available for planting based on leasing and tenancy arrangements within 5-10 years - 8 sites (43 hectares of planting or 21 % of overall planting)

2.13 Whilst the list is comprehensive it contains a number of options we would further refine for the most appropriate holdings for the tree planting as the programme develops. In that respect the areas identified are subject to change and refinement as the programme progresses.

2.14 The key findings of the report are that based on the preferred density of planting:

- a) A minimum of **200 hectares(530 acres)** would be required depending on density of planting. Due to tenancy arrangements up to ten years should be allowed for the delivery and completion of the overall project.
- b) The project is likely to cost up to approximately **£2.5m** (net of VAT and after available grant) again depending on density of planting, with annual maintenance costs of approximately of £60-75k once complete within the initial few years after planting. The projected project costs include an allowance for potential grant funding to offset costs, based on current funding options. Based upon current rental income levels the Council would experience a loss of income from its Agricultural Estate of between £54,000 and £84,000 per annum (upon completion of the project) and a possible reduction in the capital value of the land of between £4m and £6.3m.
- c) The costs are conservatively estimated and it should be noted we are in a time of great change for both the sources and amount of funding for tree and nature based climate projects. The opportunities for new funding sources will develop dramatically within the next few years, opening up new sources of income and funding (e.g. Woodland Carbon Units, Woodland Carbon Guarantee, Nature for Climate fund, biodiversity offsetting) that would help fund the project delivery costs and future management including ongoing payment for carbon captured. Selling the carbon sequestration opportunity offered by these woodland creations has the potential to secure significant extra funding over a long-term.
- d) Sites with high strategic development potential have been excluded from those sites that have been identified for planting.
- e) The project will be most successfully and cost effectively delivered by the Council taking possession of the required land and delivering the project as landowner and contract manager, either directly or in partnership with appropriate conservation and forestry based charities i.e. Woodland Trust

- f) The woodlands will be most successfully maintained by the Council taking responsibility for the ongoing management of the woodland estate (and not outsourcing the project to its tenants), either solely or in partnership with appropriate bodies as outlined above.
 - g) None of the natural capital benefits that would be generated as a result of the new woodland have been captured as part of this report i.e. carbon benefits, flood management, air pollution regulation etc.
- 2.15 It should be noted that the existing important tree planting commitments i.e. parks, open space and amenity areas, will be undertaken as planned during this and future planting seasons. These trees play a hugely valuable role in our towns and open spaces both from an amenity aspect but also environment perspective i.e reducing air pollution, urban cooling. In recognising the overall number of trees planted by Buckinghamshire Council we would take account of all these sources of planting that are taking place across the authority.

Conclusion

- 2.16 This is one of the key projects to support the Authorities wider ambitions with respect to addressing climate change and reducing emissions to net zero by 2050. It also ties in with its ambitions and strategic aim of enhancing the environment as well as being in line with the current review of the agricultural estate policy.
- 2.17 If delivered in full the project has the potential to create over 200 hectares of new woodland on our landholdings over a 10 year period which would after 30 years of growth to absorb over 60,000 tonnes CO₂ in total (minimum based on 300 tonnes /hectare). Between 2045 and 2050 the annual rate of carbon absorption would be approximately 1,500 tonnes / year and this would be able to offset the majority of Buckinghamshire Council's residual emissions at this key date taking account of the other measures set out in the emerging Climate Change Strategy.

3. Other options considered

- 3.1 This report focusses on the feasibility of large scale tree planting on our own landholding notably the agricultural estate. It should be noted that outside of the scope of this report further work is being undertaken with respect to trees notably:
- a) An officer task group is scoping out how Buckinghamshire Council can support and facilitate Community groups, Community Boards and school based tree planting initiatives.
 - b) Work is being undertaken to update and review Highway Development Tree Guidance as well as replacement and future planting of highway trees

- c) Work is being undertaken with Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust for a possible COVID memorial wood
- d) The emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy of which Buckinghamshire is one of five pilots will identify areas for creation and restoration for woodland and other habitats across the County i.e. not just our own landholdings

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 The financial modelling undertaken including projected overall capital cost, ongoing maintenance cost as well as potential impact the market valuation of the land.
- 4.2 It is envisaged that the Buckinghamshire Council Climate Change Fund (£5m) would pay for the capital (max of £2.5m required after grant funding of approximately £1.8m) and maintenance costs of this project.
- 4.3 The availability of woodland funding grants and opportunities have been taken into account in the financial modelling. In summary the grant funding relates to two main areas:
 - a) Funding for the planning phase of woodland creation
 - b) Funding to facilitate the woodland planting itself (including HS2 Woodland Creation Grant)
- 4.4 A woodland carbon guarantee scheme where sequestered carbon by new woodland can be sold via auction also now exists. Selling the carbon sequestration opportunity offered by these woodland creations has the potential to secure extra funding over the long-term which is not accounted for with the existing financial analysis.
- 4.5 The financial modelling also does not put a valuation on the numerous other benefits mentioned in this report that would be delivered as a result of the woodland creation i.e. carbon sequestered, improvement in air quality, improvements in biodiversity etc.
- 4.6 The costs are conservatively estimated and it should be noted we are in a time of great change for both the sources and amount of funding for tree and nature based climate change projects. The opportunities for new funding sources will develop rapidly within the next few years and this will open up new sources of both income and funding (e.g. Woodland Carbon Units, Woodland Carbon Guarantee, Nature for Climate fund, biodiversity offsetting as well as the new Environment Land Management Scheme) that would help fund the project delivery costs and future management including possible payment for carbon captured over the longer term.
- 4.7 From a property and legal perspective The Carter Jonas report highlights the status of the each site identified including current leasing/tenancy arrangements.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 This proposal directly supports one of the 4 key priorities in the Corporate Plan notably 'Improving the Environment'. This priority specifically mentions that the Council will plant trees as part of wide ranging action to address climate change and reduce our emissions, as well as maintain and improving our green spaces and woodlands. Colleagues in Property who manage the land asset have been a key member of the officer group who have steered the feasibility to this point and their continued involvement will be fundamental as the programme moves into delivery phase.

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 6.1 As this has been a feasibility exercise to this point, detailed briefing have to this point only been carried out with key Cabinet Members i.e Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment and Cabinet Member for Property and Assets. As the programme moves into more detailed planning for specific sites relevant local Councillors views would also be sought on specific creation plans and we would like to maximise community involvement wherever possible with respect to the planting of the trees.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 A more detailed communication plan will need to be pulled together to accompany the programme as it moves into delivery in terms of communication with the various stakeholders concerned.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 In terms of taking the project forward beyond this point it is recommended that more detailed creation and project plans are created for the initial 4 sites identified within the first phase that could, subject to approval of costing and procurement be delivered within the next planting season. The four phase one sites are identified in Appendix A(confidential). Work would also progress to start to secure the relevant grant funding available.
- 8.2 In terms of ongoing review - Bi monthly meetings have been scheduled with the Cabinet member for Climate Change and Environment as well as the Cabinet Member for Property and Assets to update and review the programme progress as it develops.

9. Background papers

9.1 Appendix A(confidential) - Location of proposed planting sites

10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone 01296 382343 or email democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

