

Statement: CS18.01

Cabinet – 8 February 2022

Re: Agenda item 18 – Tree Strategy and Tree Planting Plan

Statement submitted by: Cllr Emma Edwards

The Communities Scrutiny Commission carries out overview and scrutiny of matters that affect Bristol communities, including environmental issues and parks and the ecological emergency action plan. When developing our programme for the 2021-22 municipal year, we prioritised convening a Working Group to examine the challenges and opportunities surrounding the target to double the tree canopy target by 2046; explore the controversies and issues regarding tree management and protection; and identify ways to clarify and improve the policies in the city.

The Working Group has held three sessions, informed by officers from across the authority and have also received evidence from West of England Nature Partnership, Bristol Tree Forum, and the Woodland Trust. Its membership is cross party and we've also had Cabinet members in attendance. We compiled and addressed a great many questions relating to trees.

Initial findings and recommendations are scheduled to be brought to the Communities Scrutiny Commission on the 21 February. This statement, with reference to the scrutiny work the Working Group has undertaken, is submitted to Cabinet as a preliminary summary of issues in order to comment on the proposal for the preparation of a Bristol Tree Strategy and Tree Planting Plan.

The Working Group commends the proposal to prepare a tree strategy and tree planting plan. Members are in agreement that this is a key and necessary proposal and the absence of such strategy was one we were concerned by and led to our working group. The group recommend that it is approved.

In this context we have the following observations and recommendations:

1. Tree planting and tree canopy are not the same thing and while the former proceeds the latter can shrink due to loss of mature trees. This is a significant issue for the city as the benefits of tree canopy are wide ranging but the city has many ageing trees and much development affecting trees. As the report says, the 2046 target is very ambitious and new or replacement trees take decades to develop their canopy.
2. The unequal distribution of trees is a priority and we are conscious that the cost of remedying this with new street trees or new green spaces with trees where there are none or few is considerable and needs to be addressed in the strategy. This should be addressed in the Liveable Neighbourhoods Strategy and in highways and parking schemes.
3. Funding for tree planting is reliant on many sources and the current pace of planting would need to accelerate significantly to meet the target, while the land needed is also subject to many competing demands and pressures, including related matters like green infrastructure and leisure. Not all the same benefits can be met by

planting and protecting trees. If resources are applied to tackling the unequal access to trees then far fewer trees can be planted. We agreed that the Bristol Tree Scheme should be refreshed and the council should consider joining the national Trees for Cities scheme as ways of driving more tree sponsorship.

4. The issues around risk and tree protection are complex and we think much more attention is needed to clarify and communicate how the decisions are arrived at in both management of council owned trees like street trees and the protection that can be afforded in planning. The need to protect trees in parks and open spaces needs to be clear to contractors.

5. We think a briefing about the planning issues would benefit council Members. The range of material considerations is vast and policies are not always understood, not the weight given to them. Decisions to fell trees could be better explained. Where consultation takes place the scope of the issues and options needs to be clear.

6. Measuring and monitoring progress with the targets and the strategies needs to be developed and kept under review. The choice of measures needs to be chosen and explained and a system to show how the city is progressing and the roles of different partners.

7. We recognised that trees have a great many benefits and attributes so they can affect climate protection, climate adaptation, including shade and heat impacts, biodiversity, mental well being, flood protection, childrens play, food, fuel, pollution, and they can also cause damage to property, affect highways, access issues, and street cleansing costs. The interaction with a great many other council strategies and services, plus the work of other city partners is therefore complex and will need to be communicated when the strategies are consulted.

8. The selection and sourcing of trees and finding the right tree for the right place needs to be addressed, including the implications of the changing climate.

The Working Group were very grateful for the extensive input from many officers and from stakeholder who attended and fed into our discussions.