

Communities Scrutiny Commission Working Group: Bristol's Trees

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The One City Plan includes a target to increase Bristol's tree canopy by 25% by 2035 and to double it by 2046.
- 1.2. Increasing tree cover will be significant in helping to mitigate the effects of climate change and promote health and wellbeing.
- 1.3. The Communities Scrutiny Commission, which carries out overview and scrutiny of matters that affect Bristol communities, including environmental issues, convened a Working Group to examine the issues surrounding the tree canopy target and controversies around tree management and protection when it met to draw up its programme for 2021-22.

2. Membership

- 2.1. Members of the Working Group included; Councillors Martin Fodor (Chair), Amirah Cole, Barry Parsons, Emma Edwards, Henry Michallat, James Scott, and Alex Hartley [former member of the Commission].

3. Objectives and Methodology

- 3.1. The Working Group's objectives were to;
 - explore the controversies and challenges regarding tree planting, management and protection; and
 - identify ways to clarify and improve the policies in the city.
- 3.2. Members compiled a list of detailed questions and asked council officers to respond. The Bristol Tree Forum also provided comprehensive responses, on which council officers commented. This approach informed the discussions in the evidence sessions.
- 3.3. Members also invited expert witnesses from various stakeholder groups to submit written evidence and to attend evidence sessions online; and posed these initial questions to help achieve the objectives;
 - *What barriers are there to doubling the tree canopy in the city?*
 - *Why is tree maintenance, protection, planting and felling controversial?*
- 3.4. The Working Group held two evidence sessions to critically examine policies, practice and performance, and to hear evidence about different approaches and good practice;

- Session 1; To gain an understanding of current policies and practice; and issues that affect decisions around maintenance and protection, including communication and resources.
- Session 2; To explore issues around maintenance & management of existing trees, and tree planting across the city.

A third session was held, supported by officers, in which Members identified key areas and agreed recommendations, detailed in this report.

4. Witnesses

- 4.1. Members heard from council officers, Cllr Nicola Beech, Cabinet Member for Climate, Ecology, Waste and Energy, and Cllr Ellie King, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Communities and Bristol One City.
- 4.2. The following witnesses submitted evidence, either in writing and/or by attending evidence session 2;
 - Stuart Gardner, West of England Nature Partnership (WENP) Manager (written evidence)
 - Vassili Papastavrou, Secretary, Bristol Tree Forum (written evidence)
 - Mark Ashdown, Chair, Bristol Tree Forum (written evidence and attendance of session 2)
 - Rosie Walker, Regional External Affairs Officer (Southwest), Woodland Trust (attendance of session 2).
- 4.3. The Chair thanks all witnesses for their valuable contributions; and appreciates the time and expertise provided by all officers, the two Cabinet Members, and external partners – all have ensured the Working Group remained focused and well-informed.

5. Findings and Recommendations

- 5.1. A number of challenges and opportunities have been identified. This report focuses on what are considered as the key areas; (i) Tree Canopy Target and Measuring Progress; (ii) Type of Trees, Location, and their Benefits; (iii) Funding and Resource; (iv) Risk, Tree Protection and Management.

(i) Tree Canopy Target and Measuring Progress

- The Working Group commended the proposal to prepare a tree strategy and tree planting plan. Members agree that this is a key and necessary proposal and the absence of such a strategy is an area of concern. The group supports the proposal of the development of a Bristol Tree Strategy and Tree Planting Plan as noted at [Cabinet, 8th February](#).
- Tree planting and tree canopy are not the same thing and even with improvements in the former 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 in train which will potentially affect trees.

- The 2046 target is very ambitious as new or replacement trees take decades to develop their canopy.
- As well as having a baseline (explained and understood), it is essential to have access to clear information regarding what is happening with tree cover across the city. We heard that technology is moving at pace which can be utilised in the future to track annual change.

Recommendations

- 1) Measuring and monitoring progress regarding targets and strategies should be developed and kept under review.
- 2) The choice of measures needs to be explained and a system be introduced to show how the city is progressing and the roles of different partners.
- 3) As well as having a baseline (explained and understood), there is a need for clearer information regarding what is happening with tree cover across the city. Ways to enable clear information sharing should be investigated, i.e. via the council website and the [Environment Board](#).

(ii) Type of Trees, Location, and their Benefits

- 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 also be included in any Liveable Neighbourhoods Strategy and in highways and parking schemes and through planning agreements.
- The Working Group heard that choices of tree species involve what will grow well, what requires long term management, what is susceptible to disease – as well as what produces large canopy. Variety of tree species is good - the questions raised before choices are made are; “what are we trying to achieve?”; “what benefit do we want from the trees”; and “how do they fit in, and cope with urban environments?”.
- We recognise that trees have a great many benefits and attributes so they can affect climate protection; climate adaptation, including shade and heat impacts; biodiversity; mental wellbeing; flood protection; children’s play; food; fuel; and pollution. 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.

Recommendations

- 4) Tree equity should be prioritised in the tree strategy, with the cost of remedying unequal distribution of trees fully considered; this should also be included in Liveable Neighbourhoods plans and in highways and parking schemes and through planning agreements.
- 5) Appropriate communication and messaging should be considered to demonstrate the benefits of planting trees within local neighbourhoods; and there is a need to have the right budgets in place for the high costs of new street tree sites.
- 6) The selection and sourcing of trees and finding the right tree for the right place needs to be addressed and made clear within the strategy, including the implications of the changing climate.
- 7) The guidance around choice of tree species should be discussed with other key landowners across the city, and knowledge shared.
- 8) The interlinking nature of tree planting and management with other city strategies should be clearly explained in all consultations involving trees.

(iii) Funding and Resource

- 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 limited resources are applied to tackling the unequal access to trees, then far fewer trees can be planted. We heard that there were plans to refresh the Bristol Tree Scheme and joining the national Trees for Cities scheme was being considered, and agree with these approaches so as to help drive more tree sponsorship.

Recommendations

- 9) We agree 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.

- 10) There should be plans and budgets to ensure green infrastructure in the city is properly planned and designed, providing opportunities for trees and their benefits, and that there is resource available for ongoing tree management.

(iv) Risk, Tree Protection and Management

- The issues around risk and tree protection are complex and 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 new developments. The need to protect trees in parks and open spaces needs to be clear to contractors.

- The Working Group heard that mature trees are rarely maliciously damaged and that strimmer damage is cumulative and harmful - grounds maintenance teams do not strim around trees. The use of low dosage highly targeted herbicide application around established trees and surface roots in soft landscapes removes the need to bring machinery close to trees with the potential for damage. Currently the practice is to not use herbicides, with public perception on the safe use of herbicides cited as reasons.

- The range of material considerations, within the context of planning, is vast and policies are not always understood, nor the weight given to them. Trees in planning are the subject of consultation and the decisions on each are provided; although decisions to fell trees could be better explained, especially with regard to management of trees, mainly on council land. Early decisions about redevelopment and design can affect loss of trees.

Recommendations

- 11) Options to have more situations where the grass around the base of a tree is cut less frequently should be considered, and public messaging and communication around the safe use of herbicides should be considered.
- 12) Communication methods and ways to explain reasons for decisions to fell trees should be reviewed.
- 13) Council Members would benefit from a briefing around Tree Preservation Orders, Trees in Conservation Areas, and trees as a material consideration in planning applications.

6. Next steps

- 6.1. This report, further to discussion and appropriate amendments, be adopted by the Community Scrutiny Commission.
- 6.2. It is proposed that the report and recommendations be considered to inform the development of the Bristol Tree Strategy.
- 6.3. Councillor Martin Fodor, Chair of Communities Scrutiny Commission, and all Members of the Scrutiny Working Group, would like to thank council officers, cabinet Members, and representatives of the Woodland Trust, Bristol Tree Forum, and West of England Nature Partnership, who all engaged and provided their expertise and time; enabling constructive and valuable scrutiny.