

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Overview Committee held at Council Chamber, Blackdown House, Honiton on 24 October 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.32 pm

9 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 May 2024

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 May 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record.

10 Declarations of interest

Minute 14, East Devon Trees, Hedgerow and Woodlands Strategy
Cllr Tim Dumper, Affects Non-Registerable Interest, Member of Exmouth Town Council (ETC) and working on ETC's Tree Forum.

11 Public Speaking

No members of the public had registered to speak at the meeting.

12 Matters of urgency

There were no matters of urgency.

13 Confidential/exempt item(s)

There were no confidential/exempt items.

14 East Devon Trees, Hedgerow and Woodlands Strategy

The District Ecologist introduced this item and welcomed Ben Coles of Treeconomics Ltd to the meeting. Treeconomics Ltd had been appointed in July 2024 to start the process of leading the consultation and shaping of the East Devon Trees, Hedgerow & Woodland Strategy (THaWS).

The THaWS is a ten-year strategy which aligns with the Devon Tree and Woodland Strategy, Climate Change Strategy, Local Plan review and Nature Recovery Plan.

Mr Coles and the District Ecologist delivered a presentation to members which provided an overview of the THaWS, its key themes and aims, its development and timeline and a summary of the results from public consultation. The Strategy is expected to be finalised in December 2024.

Members were asked to consider the THaWS and make recommendations, before it is presented to Cabinet for approval in January 2025.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- The strategy sets out a high level aspiration of 30% canopy cover for the district, partly through tree planting but mainly through maintenance and enhancement of existing trees.

Canopy cover can be easily measured using satellite imagery or other technology and progress can be tracked by replicating the exercise at 5 or 10 year intervals.

- Some members were concerned that the strategy does not set a target for the number of trees and felt that canopy cover is less meaningful to residents than numbers. The District Ecologist responded that it is not possible or viable to monitor numbers of trees or to track progress, without access to private land. He added that canopy cover targets better reflect the varying methods of tree establishment and added that, as a district, natural regeneration is the favoured approach.
- In response to a member's question, it was confirmed that a policy is not currently in place concerning replacement of trees on Council owned land. Consideration is being given to whether planting trees is best, or if the focus should be on natural regeneration and maintenance of nearby existing trees.
- The THaWS is a high level strategy document intended to be holistic in its approach and as accessible as possible. Some members expressed concern that the document is not easy for the lay person to understand and engage with. It was felt however that it will be understood by people who activate members of the public and one member outlined the Tiny Forest project in Exmouth, as an initiative in which local residents had become actively involved.
- 6% of consultees had responded that a benefit of trees was noise reduction, and the District Ecologist would ensure this is added the Trees Benefits section of the strategy.
- The actions set out in the strategy are currently in draft format and decisions will need to be taken on where to channel the council's limited resources. Community engagement has been identified as high priority due to the cumulative returns.
- Members recognised the importance of hedgerows in the strategy and were keen to engage the farming community in the planting and protection of hedgerows. It was acknowledged that the council has no direct influence in this respect, but the East Devon National Landscape Team are engaged with farmers on the ground, and management of hedgerows and natural regeneration is covered in the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme.
- Members commented on the importance of protecting existing trees and asked if the policy on enforcement of Tree Preservation Orders could be tightened up. In response, it was noted that East Devon has one of the highest levels of TPOs amounting to more than the whole of Cornwall. To increase the number of TPOs would have significant cost and resource implications arising from the associated administration. The public are asked to contact the Council without delay if they see a tree being cut down.
- Members raised concern that mature trees are being felled on the insistence of insurance companies where it is suggested the trees are undermining the walls of houses. Mr Coles explained that he is currently writing an insurance claims best practice appendix including a subsidence mitigation protocol, which will give more power to the Council's Countryside team in contesting subsidence claims.
- The Local Plan is the mechanism through which the Council can best influence the planting of trees and hedgerows in the district, and the Council's requirements will be set out in detail in an associated Supplementary Plan Document.
- Members were concerned that the proposed Tree & Woodland Project Officer post will be at the expense of a part time Tree Warden, with implications for enforcement and the protection of existing trees. In response, the District Ecologist highlighted the cumulative gains that the Project Officer's role will bring from delivering the Tree Strategy and engaging the community, and stated that this can be as important as direct enforcement for looking after the treescape.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet:

- The adoption of the final draft of the East Devon Tree, Hedgerow and Woodland Strategy 2024 – 2034 which reflects the ambitions and opportunities to protect East Devon's treescape and create opportunities for tree planting working in partnership with key stakeholders.
- To appoint a part time Tree & Woodland Project Officer role to enable the delivery of the Strategy. The budget and costs for this role are already secured within the existing salary budget due to a vacant part time role within the Tree team.

- To note the Overview Committee's concerns about the reduction of the enforcement role within the Tree team and to consider to continue to include this vacant post in the establishment, going forward.

15 **Work Programme 2024 - 2025**

The Committee considered the Cabinet Forward Plan and noted the Work Programme for 2024-2025.

Cllr Del Haggerty provided an update on the progress of the Coach Tourism in East Devon Task and Finish Forum and thanked officers for their ongoing support.

The Chair reminded members that a joint meeting of the Scrutiny Committee and the Overview Committee is scheduled for December 2024 to review the Directorate Plans, followed by a Joint Budget Meeting in January 2025.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

O Davey
T Dumper (Vice-Chair)
D Haggerty
A Hall (Chair)
J Heath
Y Levine
M Martin

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

I Barlow
R Collins
M Goodman
G Jung

Officers in attendance:

Simon Davey, Director of Finance
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Anita Williams, Principal Solicitor (Deputy Monitoring Officer)
Chris Hariades, Landscape Architect, Development Management
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Andrew Wood, Director of Place
Will Dommatt, District Ecologist

Also in attendance:

Ben Coles, Treeconomics Ltd

Councillor apologies:

A Bailey
B Bailey
P Fernley
V Johns
H Riddell

K Blakey

Chair:

Date: