OXFORDSHIRE'S TREES AND WOODLAND, TODAY & TOMORROW

Introduction

Oxfordshire's trees and woodlands are important landscape features and wildlife habitats. They provide a wide range of social, environmental and economic benefits and have the potential to contribute much more.

This Statement sets out the national and regional policy context and outlines the value of Oxfordshire's tree and woodland resources. It looks at how these resources might be developed over the next five to ten years and how the Council might contribute to this.

National and Regional Context

'The England Forestry Strategy' was published by the Forestry Commission in 1998. This was reviewed in 2006 and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) published 'A Strategy for England's Trees, Woods and Forests' in June 2007.

Forestry strategy for the South East Region is guided by the regional forestry and woodland framework "Seeing the Wood for the Trees", published in 2004 www.forestry.gov.uk/seeingthewoodforthetrees.

The framework has four main themes:

- Making better places for people to live
- Enhanced environment and biodiversity
- A stronger contribution to the economy
- A secure future for our woodland resources

The regional framework has been the catalyst for producing local wood fuel strategies.

All three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) within the county have their own forestry strategies and have agreed local accords with the Forestry Commission to deliver them.

The aims and objectives of the regional framework, AONB strategies and the local accords provide a supporting context for this Statement.

Oxfordshire's Trees and Woodlands

Over 17,000 hectares of the county is wooded and there are around 4.4 million non-woodland trees. Around 95% of this resource is privately owned.

Oxfordshire's 7% woodland cover is half the regional average and below the national average for England (8.3%). The extent and type of cover varies greatly throughout the county. In the Oxfordshire Chilterns, woodland cover averages around 25%. In

parts of the North Wessex Downs, it is as low as 1%.   Outside these areas, woodland cover is typically around 4%.

There are few large woodlands.   Around 93% of Oxfordshire's 3,600 or so woodlands are very small, under 2 hectares in area. This pattern will continue, with some 1,800 new, small woodlands planted since 1982.

Nearly half (7,900 hectares) of Oxfordshire's woodland area is scheduled as Ancient Woodland (i.e. it has been continuously wooded since 1600 or before).   These woodlands have considerable landscape, nature conservation and historic importance. There are also many woodlands under 2 hectares in area that are too small to be scheduled but of ancient origin.

Only about 5% of the county's non-woodland trees are in public ownership. About 18% are growing on or alongside public highways, where the County Council is responsible for ensuring their safety and management.

Veteran trees (generally those with a >3metre girth at 1.5m above ground) are of particular importance, because of their great age and the unique biological communities they support.   They are a factor, for example, in Blenheim's World Heritage Site status. Ancient orchards also have high biological and cultural value.

The ecological value and importance of Oxfordshire's trees and woodland are recognised by the Council and by its partners in the Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum. Further information is available on the Council website and on http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk.

Oxfordshire's woodlands produce around 250,000 tonnes of wood each year, most of which is not harvested.   There is a backlog of unharvested material, probably amounting to millions of tonnes.   Amenity tree management produces another 50,000 tonnes of wood annually, of which much still goes to waste.   This considerable resource, if brought to market, is a significant economic opportunity and could generate funds to promote woodland improvement.

A shared view

Over recent years and through various consultation processes a number of broad views on forestry in Oxfordshire have emerged.   The following paragraphs summarise these:

- Economic returns to woodland owners must improve, to underpin efforts to make woodland management sustainable.   This might be achieved by:
  - Promoting the use of local wood;
  - Promoting better use of wood; and
  - Promoting the use of low value wood for fuel and other purposes.

- With increasing fossil fuel prices and various initiatives promoting new fuel crops, there are opportunities to encourage the development of new fuel wood coppices in ways to minimise environmental damage and to provide new

public and environmental benefits. This has the potential both to support the economy in rural areas and to reduce carbon emissions.

- The value and importance of woodlands in education and as a resource to promote, maintain and improve public health, is already recognised. There is considerable potential for these benefits to increase.

- The Forest of Oxford proposal to create new woodland resources and manage existing woodland in the Oxford greenbelt, in ways to provide greater public and environmental benefit, has broad support.

- Public access to woodland in Oxfordshire is generally poor. Only around 10% of Oxfordshire's woodland provides any public access (compared to 30% average for the South East Region).   Small, scattered woodlands are not generally well suited for providing public access and currently make little contribution. Nevertheless, there are parts of Oxfordshire, the Chilterns for example, where woodland cover is well above the county average and access is very good. Oxfordshire rates poorly (lower quartile) against the Natural England Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard. The Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum is keen to see improvements in this position, including additional woodland access.

Position Statement

The County Council recognises the social, environmental and economic benefits provided by the county's trees and woodlands.

Conserving and enhancing the county's trees and woodlands is fully in accord with the County Council's priority to protect the environment. It supports woodland creation, improvement and development, in particular:
- Retaining, sustaining and developing Oxfordshire's unique heritage of ancient trees, small woodlands and orchards, maintaining or improving their valuable contribution to landscapes and biodiversity.

- Creating new woodlands to:
  - provide sustainable resources
  - enhance the environment
  - improve public access and recreation.

Developing the economic potential of forestry, particularly to provide wood fuel, supports the County Council's priorities to promote economic development and to mitigate the impact of climate change caused by carbon emissions.

The Council supports the development and promotion of local use of, and markets for, wood and woodland products.

While the Council's resources to promote forestry are limited and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, it can set an example, and influence management standards, in the way in which it manages its own trees and woodland. It may also

be able to support local forestry, and related industry, in the way it designs, builds and heats its buildings.

The County Council recognises that these objectives can only be achieved by harnessing public interest and involvement in woodland and environmental management, and by working in partnership with other agencies, local communities, landowners and environmental charities, to improve the contribution of trees and woodlands to the environment, education and the local economy.