

Report to: **Hub Committee**

Date: **1st Feb 2022**

Title: **Natural woodland regeneration at Council sites**

Portfolio Area: **Lead Member for Natural Environment – Cllr Lynn Daniel**

Wards Affected: **Burrator and Buckland Monachorum**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: After call in period

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Recommendations:

1. Members note the proposed way forward to deliver natural woodland regeneration at Council owned sites at Harrowbeer Lane, Yelverton, and Bedford Bridge near Horrabridge.

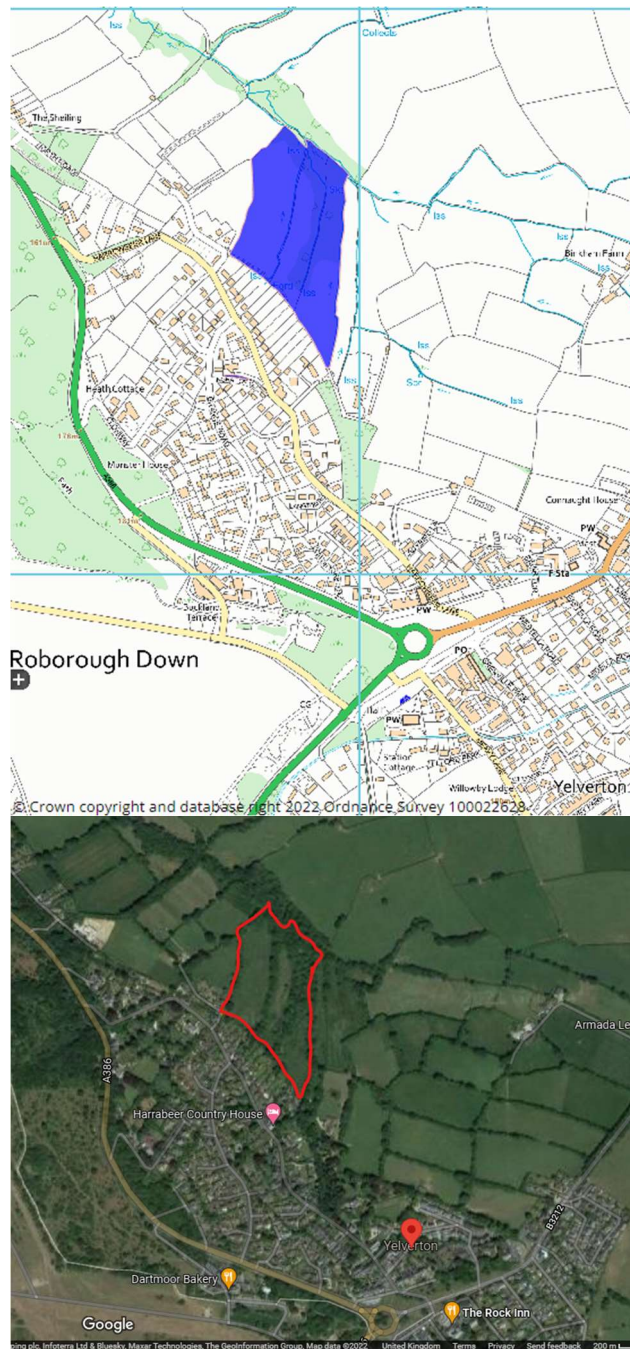
1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on a key action in the Climate Change and Biodiversity Plan and Plan for West Devon, which seeks to deliver new woodland at two Council-owned sites.
- 1.2 The proposals set out to establish new woodland deliver against the following actions from The Plan for West Devon:
 - i. NE 1.5 - A 10% increase in biodiversity on Council land
 - ii. NE 1.7 - Support Nature recovery through larger wildlife habitats, wildlife corridors and Nature preservation schemes
 - iii. NE 1.9 - Work with partners to promote tree planting within the Borough

- 1.3 A total area of 8.2Ha across the two sites will benefit from the proposals and the limited cost of management is likely to be covered through grant funding via an application to English Woodland Creation Offer.
- 1.4 The Council will work in partnership the Woodland Trust and it is hoped that through this strategic partnership the resultant carbon credits can be registered.
- 1.5 The woodland regeneration will link adjacent habitat and are in a priority area for nature recovery. After 5 years both sites should have seen an increase in biodiversity of around 80%.
- 1.6 The Council will furthermore be contributing to the national target of 30% coverage for nature, set out in the Environment Act 2021.

2. Background

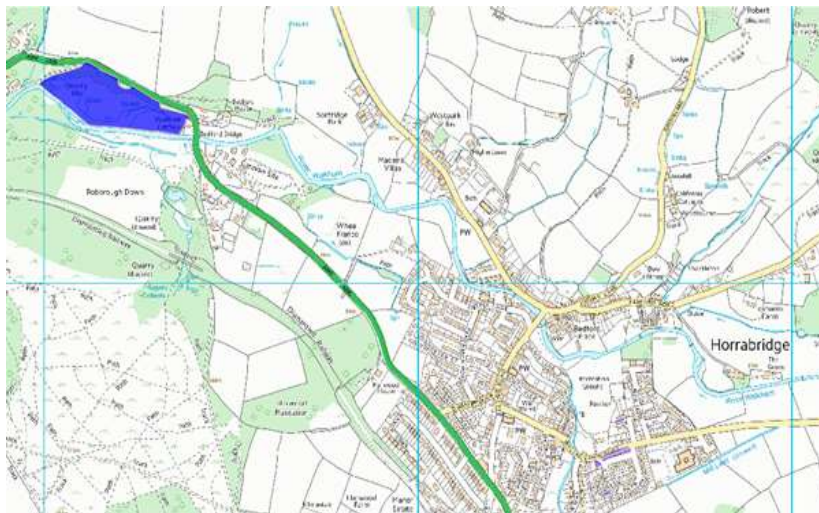
- 2.1 Most Council-owned green space takes the form of estate green spaces serving adjacent dwellings. The Council owns very limited 'significant' sized spaces, particularly with the potential to undertake meaningful interventions for the benefit of the natural environment. The exceptions to this are the two sites at Harrowbeer Lane, Yelverton and Bedford Bridge near Horrabridge.
- 2.2 The 4.7ha site off Harrowbeer Lane, Yelverton (in Buckland Monachorum Ward) was previously grazed, but has now been vacant for a few years following cessation of the previous arrangement. The location of the site is shown below.

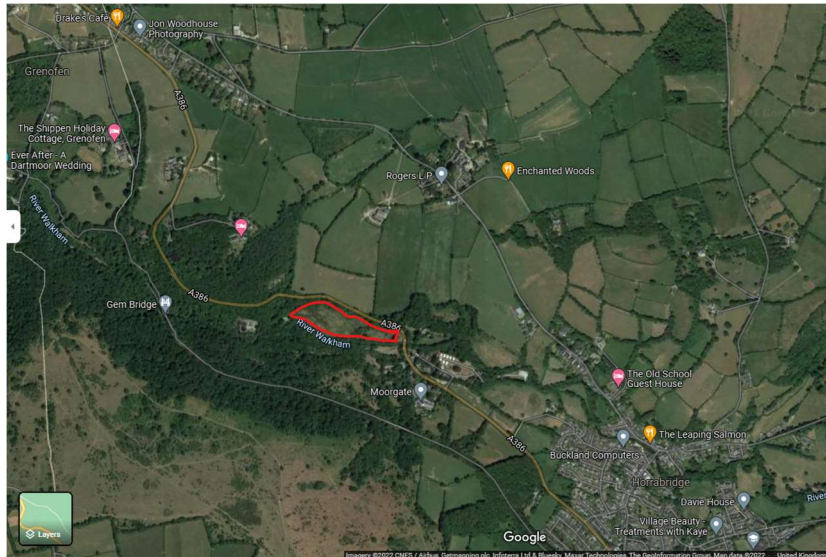


- 2.3 The site consists of three fields, with overgrown pasture, scrub, tree lined hedgerows and deciduous woodland. With the cessation of grazing, there is already evidence of 'rewilding' and natural regeneration, particularly adjacent to the wet woodland and tree line hedgerows with self-seeding of thorny plants in particular.



- 2.4 The fields do not lend themselves to public access, with access from a private driveway or an adjacent public right of way. The fields themselves being overgrown would not be favourable for the likes of dog walking or informal recreation without new infrastructure and creation of paths.
- 2.5 The 3.5ha site at Bedford Bridge, near Horrabridge (Burrator Ward) lies between the A386 and River Walkham and is grazed, with 12 months' notice having been served on the existing tenant in September 2021 and vacant possession will be obtained in September 2022. The location of the site is shown below.





- 2.6 The site consists of two fields bounded to the south by the tree lined River Walkham, and to the north by the tree line A386. The site is often damp, is well grazed and has some extensive areas of bracken.



- 2.7 Public access would not be possible at the site. Whilst there is a nearby carpark (to the north of Magpie Viaduct), the approach to the field access via the A386 over Bedford Bridge is not safe for pedestrians.

3. Outcomes/outputs

- 3.1 Both of these sites are within the Forestry Commission High Spatial Priority Area for Biodiversity – this being the Priority Habitat network layer for nature recovery that builds upon the adjacent areas of existing Deciduous Woodland (a Priority Habitat) – the easternmost of the three fields at Harrowbeer Lane already containing some of this existing woodland habitat layer.

- 3.2 Delivering woodland creation or enabling natural woodland regeneration at the sites could deliver multiple benefits including:
 - a. Creating new woodland habitat contributing to nature recovery
 - b. Reducing flood risk
 - c. Storing carbon and contributing to combatting climate change
- 3.3 This is consistent with Council priorities identified within the 'Plan for West Devon' (including supporting Nature recovery through larger wildlife habitats and woodland habitat corridors, and delivering biodiversity Net Gain on Council owned sites – actions NE1.5, NE1.7 and NE1.9), as well as within the 'Climate Change and Biodiversity Action Plan' to support tree planting/natural regeneration on Council owned sites and establish natural flood management approaches (action ID3.2 and ID3.7).
- 3.4 The proposal would also lead to a modest contribution to removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and mitigating the effects of climate change.
- 3.5 Considering the sites in the context of the Defra Biodiversity Metric calculator, woodland creation (including scrub as a successional habitat), could result in a 'biodiversity net gain' at the sites of around 80% after around 5 years through creation of new habitat.

4. Options available and consideration of risk

- 4.1 To create new woodland there are two main approaches, the most common of which typically comprising planting of small whips, each with a stake and plastic spiral tree guard. This carries some benefit in terms of more confidence in the scale of delivery, which can assist when signing up to the Woodland Carbon Code (in terms of forecasting the amount of carbon that the planted woodland would sequester).
- 4.2 Disadvantages include the disturbance of soil to ensure trees survive and grow well – this can release carbon, and taking time to overcome the initial carbon deficit. Plastic tree guards are becoming increasingly unpopular, as they are not biodegradable, and commonly end up littering the countryside. This approach also tends to require a commitment to maintenance, including replacing failed whips, re-staking/replacing tree guards, and control of competing vegetation.
- 4.3 Natural regeneration does not offer the same confidence in terms of forecasting carbon that a woodland would sequester, namely as the number of trees that will grow cannot be known at the outset, and there is generally an expectation that natural woodlands may take a long time to develop.
- 4.4 This approach is however popular in terms of a more natural approach, and for the first time is now rewarded through the

Forestry Commission's flagship English Woodland Creation Offer grant. The approach results in young trees of local provenance (from self-seeding) and well adapted to their natural environment, with trees succeeding where conditions suit them, and with better survival rates than planted trees.

- 4.5 In terms of delivery, the Council is able to apply for funding support through the English Woodland Creation Offer to prepare and maintain sites, and would be entitled to various contributions (e.g. with respect to nature recovery, flood risk reduction, being close to settlements). These would be expected to cover 100% of costs associated with the sites, regardless of whether a natural regeneration or tree planting approach was undertaken.
- 4.6 There is also potential to register the planting projects under the Woodland Carbon Code and to either sell carbon credits, or to claim these to offset the Council's own carbon deficit. It is noted that the administration costs associated with the formal Woodland Carbon Code validation and subsequent verification processes (potentially approximately £18,000 over the lifetime of a project) are such that they may outweigh the benefit of the claimable carbon credits from the planting project (it is estimated that such credits could be worth up to £6,000 per site). Effectively it would likely be more cost effective for the Council to purchase the comparable amount of carbon credits from the market avoiding the cost associated Woodland Carbon Code administration, but this will remain under review.
- 4.7 There is potential to work in partnership with the Woodland Trust, by which the Woodland Trust would arrange the registering and subsequent verifications of the project under the Woodland Carbon Code. The Woodland Trust would pay the Council for the anticipated carbon that would be captured, and would meet the administrative costs of the Woodland Carbon Code reporting themselves. Such an approach would mean that the Council could not register this carbon capture against its own carbon footprint, even if the carbon is still being captured and the management approach would be facilitating others to offset their carbon deficit.

5. Proposed Way Forward

- 5.1 It is proposed to apply to the English Woodland Creation Offer in 2022 for financial support to undertake natural woodland regeneration at both of these sites. It is estimated that this grant support may result in upfront payment of approximately £7,000 per site with ongoing annual maintenance payments from the Forestry Commission grant of approximately £500 a year for 10 years for each site.
- 5.2 Initial meetings with both the Forestry Commission and Woodland Trust about the sites have been positive, favouring a natural regeneration approach, taking into account the benefits of this approach for nature recovery, with suitable seed sources onsite and adjacent to the sites. In the case of the Harrowbeer

Lane site, it is evident that nature is already taking its course and some regeneration is already underway, and at Bedford Bridge there is an expectation that with the cessation of grazing natural regeneration will follow.

- 5.3 Specifics of the grant application will be informed by subsequent detailed discussion with the Forestry Commission, however it may be as straightforward as simply leaving the sites alone. Subject to advice, there may potentially be further items included in any grant application such as bracken control and temporary deer fencing, the grant scheme can cover 100% of the cost of such items.
- 5.4 It is proposed that an arrangement with the Woodland Trust be explored with respect to the Woodland Carbon Code, benefitting from some modest income to the Council, whilst eliminating administrative costs related to the Code.
- 5.5 The sites would be monitored, with the regeneration of the sites needing to meet a target in the case of the Woodland Creation Offer – 60% woody cover (which includes bramble and thorny scrub) and a minimum of 100 stems a hectare after 10 years. This target is modest when considered in the context of a minimum stocking density of planted broadleaves expected under the English Woodland Creation Offer of 1,100 trees a hectare.
- 5.6 There is a higher target under the Woodland Carbon Code, requiring 400 stems a hectare after 5 years. It is noted however that if natural regeneration fell short of this, supplementary planting could be undertaken to ensure this target was met (and there are sources of free trees that would enable this without cost).

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance		<p>The Council has a general power under the Local Government Act 1972 to maintain land that it owns either for the purpose of its functions or the benefit, improvement or development of the Council’s area.</p> <p>The Council also has a duty to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of its policy and decision making under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.</p>
Financial implications to include reference		<p>There is negligible cost associated with the proposal. It is estimated that English Woodland Creation Offer grant support may result in upfront payment of c.£7,000 per site with ongoing annual</p>

<p>to value for money</p>	<p>maintenance grant payments of c.£500 per site each year for 10 years. Any additional capital costs (such as fencing) could be included in the grant application if needed, and 100% of this cost covered.</p> <p>The sites are located such that long term implications of tree management are unlikely to cause issues (i.e. the woodland will not border roads and have limited boundaries with residential dwellings). Public access will not be encouraged, and accordingly tree safety inspections would not be required.</p> <p>Estates officers have previously sought appraisals for the sites as part of the options appraisal previously undertaken. Based on agricultural values without any restrictions or obligations a guide price of £85-95,000 was given for the Harrowbeer Lane site, and £65-75,000 for the Bedford Bridge site.</p> <p>Disposal is deemed a poor use of the land when considered against the vision of the 'Plan for West Devon.'</p>
<p>Risk</p>	<p>Risk associated with the proposed way forward is limited. The sites are effectively being left alone with minimal intervention, allowing nature to take its course.</p> <p>The main identified risk to successful natural regeneration is deer grazing. It is noted that natural regeneration is already underway at the Harrowbeer Lane site following cessation of grazing a few years ago and there can be confidence that this will continue. At the Bedford Bridge site, the likelihood of success of is more of an unknown. The site will be discussed with the Forestry Commission, and options such as deer exclusion fencing can be included in the grant application if considered necessary.</p> <p>There is a risk that the trees per hectare may fall short of the 10 year target of the grant scheme and the 5 year target of the Woodland Carbon Code for natural regeneration. If this was the case, any natural regeneration would be supplemented with additional tree planting, the cost of which could be met by free tree schemes.</p> <p>It is considered likely that there will be broad support for the proposal. Officers have discussed the proposal with the Woodland Trust, Dartmoor</p>

		National Park Authority and the Forestry Commission and there has been no concern raised about the proposal.
Supporting Corporate Strategy		Plan for West Devon - Growing our natural environment Actions NE1.5 (increase in biodiversity on Council land) and NE1.7 (support nature recovery) and NE1.9 (support tree planting)
Climate Change - Carbon / Biodiversity Impact		The proposal would lead to nature recovery at the sites, with natural woodland regeneration ultimately extending the area of adjacent existing Priority Habitat into these high spatial priority areas Supports delivery against the Climate Change and Biodiversity Action Plan Action ID3.2 (support tree planting) and Action ID3.7 (natural flood management approaches)
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity	N/A	
Safeguarding	N/A	
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder	N/A	
Health, Safety and Wellbeing	N/A	
Other implications	N/A	

Supporting Information

Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

None

Approval and clearance of report

All reports must have Finance clearance from the s151 Officer and, Legal clearance from the Monitoring Officer. Your report will only receive clearance if the implications in Section 6 are considered by the Finance and Legal Services to be complete and accurate. Make sure you contact Finance and Legal officers early on for advice where there are potentially financial or legal implications. If there are other resource implications you must forward your report to the appropriate Head of Practice for clearance. If those clearing the report make amendments they will advise you of that fact and refer you to the relevant changes. As report author you are responsible for finalising the report and its content but you are required to have regard to the comments of the Finance and Legal Services and clear reasons for not following their advice.

Process checklist	Completed
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Portfolio Holder briefed/sign off	Yes/No
SLT Rep briefed/sign off	Yes
Relevant Heads of Practice sign off (draft)	Yes/No
Data protection issues considered	Yes/No
Accessibility checked	Yes/No