

Executive Summary

Trees and woodlands are a crucial part of the West of England's environment and provide an array of services to our society and economy, such as supporting wildlife, sequestering carbon, providing natural flood management, producing timber and other wood products, cooling our urban spaces, and improving our health and wellbeing.

As the severity of the climate and ecological emergencies are recognised, and the Covid-19 pandemic underscored the importance of the natural environment to our health and wellbeing, there is increasing demand for new trees and woodlands in our region, backed by an ambitious regional target to double West of England's semi-natural tree and woodland cover by the middle of the century. However, to maximise the benefits that trees and woodlands can provide, we need to ensure that we plant the right tree in the right places, aligning to our regional ambition, and that we care for them properly, as well as enabling natural regeneration of woodland. It is also imperative to manage well what we already have.

A strong and improving evidence base for the natural environment is developing, including the West of England Nature Recovery Network (NRN) and woodland opportunity mapping, and the West of England Joint Green Infrastructure Strategy (JGIS) provides a prospectus for increasing investment in green infrastructure within the region. Additionally, the upcoming England Tree Strategy and Environment Bill will facilitate funding for trees and woodland across England, and there is increasing interest from the private sector in financing nature-based solutions.

The West of England is also fortunate to have one of England's Community Forests – the Forest of Avon, which covers all of the West of England with the exception of the two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). This Strategy will, therefore, act as the updated Forest of Avon Plan, as well as being consistent with Cotswolds and Mendip Hills AONB Management Plans.

The Forest of Avon Plan: A Tree and Woodland Strategy for the West of England will guide collective action to deliver an agreed vision for better managed and connected trees and woodland making a vital contribution to a thriving natural environment, society and economy in the West of England. It will also ensure that action for trees and woodland facilitates delivery of the NRN and JGIS.

This Strategy has been produced through the West of England Nature Partnership, with content commissioned from the Forest of Avon Trust, in response to a key Strategic Project (S5) in the West of England JGIS. WENP is a cross-sector partnership working to restore the natural environment in the West of England through embedding the value of nature in decision-making across spatial planning, public health and economic development.

The Strategy sets out:

- A collective vision and agreed targets for Trees and Woodland in the West of England, which will help to guide policy development in the region;
- A five-year Action Plan that provides an initial set of actions and projects that will accelerate the delivery of our vision and help to achieve our targets;
- Strategic Woodland Areas in which tree planting and woodland creation would strengthen the woodland network in the West of England;
- The Funding and Delivery Mechanisms that we will need to utilise to achieve our vision.
- The existing evidence base for Trees and Woodlands;
- Identified challenges to protecting and managing our existing trees and woodland, and to establishing new trees and woodland, and potential solutions to these challenges;

A set of principles has been developed to guide tree planting, woodland creation and the management of new and existing woodland across the West of England. The intention is that through use of these principles, as well as supporting guidance and best practice, new and existing trees and woodland can be established and managed in a way that maximises the multiple benefits that they provide.

Finally, priorities for trees and woodland have been identified for each of the Green Infrastructure Areas in the West of England, helping landowners and delivery bodies to ascertain what the most appropriate actions for trees and woodland are in their area.

Our ambitious vision reflects the scale of action that is needed to meet the challenge that is presented by the climate and ecological emergencies. Delivering this vision would provide significant benefits to the region, including an estimated additional £540 million worth of carbon sequestration, air quality improvements and hazard regulation. This is in addition to benefits from increasing biodiversity, health and wellbeing benefits, improving water quality, and goods and services such as timber and recreation. The value of the quantified benefits alone far exceeds the estimated costs of delivery.

This Strategy is a starting point on the journey towards achieving the vision, and the Action Plan contained in this document sets out some of the immediate work that is needed to accelerate its delivery. By working together and drawing upon the commitment and expertise of individuals, local and regional government, charities, businesses and many others, transformative change is within reach.

