

Report to Drinkstone Parish Council

From Parish Tree Warden

Future Organisation and Role of Parish Tree Wardens

1. Introduction

“England’s trees, woods and forests are an important and much-loved natural asset. They produce fuel and wood, support plant and animal life and help reduce climate change and its effects. Whether they are single street trees or networks of woodland in the countryside, they provide leisure, recreation and natural beauty. Climate change, population growth and the increasing pressures on the land put trees and forests at risk. Diseases and pests also pose an increasing danger. We need to make sure our trees, forests and woodland are properly managed and protected.” (Source: DEFRA Policy Paper 2010-2015, government policy forests and woodlands , updated 8th May 2015).

The United Kingdom and Suffolk in particular, has a relatively low woodland cover compared to most European countries (UK 13%, Suffolk 8%, EU 38%; source: Forestry Commission Inventory of Woodlands and Trees 2002).

2. Background

The Tree Warden Scheme is a national initiative to enable people to play an active role in conserving and enhancing their local trees and woods. The scheme was founded, and is co-ordinated by, The Tree Council who have worked with County and District Council Tree Officers to recruit, train and support parish tree wardens. Wardens are volunteers, appointed by parish councils or other community organisations, who gather information about their local trees, get involved in local tree matters and encourage local practical projects related to the trees and woods.

Suffolk was one of the first counties to set up a network of parish tree wardens around 17 years ago. In Suffolk it was the District Councils who provided organisational support and training events for tree wardens. The programme has been taken up most widely in Mid Suffolk and Babergh where there are currently 81 tree wardens out of a total of around 200 parishes.

Throughout Britain, District and County Councils are finding they no longer have the resources to support and train parish tree wardens and Mid Suffolk District Council is no exception. A meeting on 1st March 2017 attended by the Tree Council, local authority tree officers and parish tree wardens in Suffolk confirmed a strong commitment to see the tree warden programme continue but to move to a self managed network of parish tree wardens across the county.

3. A Possible Model for a New Parish Tree Wardens Network in Suffolk

The Tree Council will continue to distribute support material via central networks of tree wardens across the country and have offered to help develop new self organising groups. Such DIY groups have already been established in Herefordshire and Surrey along the lines of a community interest company, adopting a “Constitution Lite Model” with basically a chairman, treasurer, communications officer and a bank account. We have commitment from within the existing cohort of tree wardens to expand and run a network of parish tree wardens in Suffolk. In the coming weeks a working group, with support from the Tree Council, will develop a draft constitution that includes a definition of purpose and identification of training needs. It is important that tree wardens have the confidence and skills to fulfil the role. The door will be left open for District and County Council tree officers to attend tree warden meetings and events in future.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

Funding is an important issue both in terms of setting up an independent self-governing group, and delivering training programmes, events and action on the ground. Mid Suffolk and Suffolk County Council have offered to help write funding bids and it will be important to demonstrate that we are seeking to deliver a step change rather than just looking to replace former local authority funding. As an independent community interest group the Suffolk Tree Wardens Network could bid for funds to support tree planting on both public and privately owned land from organisations such as The Woodland Trust.

Suffolk is a relatively large county and it can be difficult for volunteers to travel relatively long distances to meetings. In the course of working up a model for a Suffolk Network of Tree Wardens, groups of tree wardens in a relatively small local area will be identified so they can meet and call on each other for mutual support.

Suffolk County Council is developing a Tree Policy for the County that should be adopted by its Cabinet in July 2017. One of the proposals contained in this policy is to put more emphasis on, and support for, tree planting carried out by tree wardens and local communities. New digital aerial photography and satellite imagery is being used to map existing tree cover under a “Canopy Cover” initiative. This has already been completed for Ipswich where the Borough Council is using the results to plan and instigate new tree planting. The County Council is keen to support parishes identify opportunities for, and to promote new tree planting.

“Ash Die Back” (*Chalara fraxinea*) poses the biggest single threat to tree cover across the UK over the next decade, and early survey results suggest that perhaps 90% of ash trees could be lost over this period. There are several other serious tree pests and diseases that threaten the nation’s trees and woodlands, including Asian longhorn beetle and Acute oak decline. A concerted effort will be needed by government bodies, landowners, non-government organisations and local communities to counter these threats to our landscape and wildlife.

The implications of Brexit in terms of land use change could also be dramatic and may provide opportunities for tree planting on a large scale. It would appear unlikely that the UK Government will continue to subsidise agriculture on the same scale as under the Common Agricultural Policy. On the one hand if basic income subsidies for farmers are scrapped and nothing else is put in their place then land prices will fall and less productive land will go out of production. A more likely scenario is that post 2020 the UK Government will pay farmers out of public funds to deliver a range of environmental services. At the Oxford Farming Conference in January 2017 George Eustice, Secretary of State at DEFRA, stated that "rather than telling them (i.e. farmers) here's a subsidy now here's a list of environmental demands, we should be saying to farmers you have a role to play to enhance our agricultural environment, and we are going to reward you for those services that you offer." Under either of these scenarios even in a lowland county like Suffolk with a high proportion of fertile and versatile soils, there would be opportunities to promote and implement planting schemes for wider environmental benefit.

5. Issues for Drinkstone Parish Council to consider.

- a) Does the Parish Council endorse the proposal to set up an independent network of parish tree wardens?
- b) Up to now parish tree wardens have been covered by District Council insurance; would a tree warden appointed by the Parish Council be covered by its insurance?
- c) Does the Parish Council agree that the priorities for a parish tree warden should include working with farmers and other landowners to carry out new tree and hedge planting and manage existing habitats and features?
- d) If so what would be the best approach to engage with landowners?
- e) Would Drinkstone Parish Council consider in principle funding tree planting and conservation projects in the Parish?

Peter Holborn
Drinkstone Parish Tree Warden
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