

CLEAN AND GREEN COMMITTEE

11 DECEMBER 2023

REPORT TITLE:	Hole Farm Community Woodland Update
REPORT OF:	Phil Drane, Director of Place
REPORT IS FOR:	Information

REPORT SUMMARY

A new community woodland is being created in Brentwood borough (Hole Farm Lane, Great Warley). To compensate for the environmental impacts of the Lower Thames Crossing project, National Highways has partnered with Forestry England to plan, plant and manage Hole Farm Community Woodland. This will be a multi-purpose woodland by creating:

- An inspiring place for people to visit and explore; and
- A thriving wildlife habitat and source of sustainable timber.

The new community woodland will include wildlife-rich habitats and species rich grassland, linking to the wider Thames Chase Community Forest. 1,000 trees were planted on site by the local community last year, which are establishing well. A further 70,000 trees are to be planted this winter. To support the community woodland, some development is required including visitor facilities and a car park.

This report provides an overview and update on the project.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Lower Thames Crossing

- 1.1 The Lower Thames Crossing is a proposed new motorway connecting Kent and Essex through a tunnel beneath the river Thames. On the south side of

the Thames, the new road will link the tunnel to the A2 and M2 in Kent. On the north side, it will link to the A13 (Thurrock) and junction 29 of the M25 (London Borough of Havering), and areas for associated works in the south-west of Brentwood borough. The project will provide much needed new road capacity across the river east of London with quicker and more reliable journeys locally, regionally and nationally. It is the largest single road investment project in the UK since the M25 was completed almost 40 years ago. The crossing under the Thames will be the longest road tunnel in the country. At 16 metres in diameter, it will be one of the largest bored tunnels in the world.

- 1.2 The Lower Thames Crossing project is being led by National Highways. National Highways are a government company that plans, designs, builds, operates and maintains England's motorways and major A roads, known as the strategic road network.
- 1.3 The Lower Thames Crossing is a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP). To receive permission to build and operate the new crossing National Highways must seek consent through the award of a Development Consent Order (DCO) from the Planning Inspectorate. The DCO application was submitted in October 2022 and the examination is currently ongoing. A decision on the DCO is expected very soon.
- 1.4 As part of work to prepare the project for DCO submission, environmental implications were considered. It was identified that compensation should be provided for ancient woodland loss, habitat creation compensation for the potential impacts of nitrogen deposition generated by vehicles using the Lower Thames Crossing, and replacement 'Special Category Land' to compensate for the permanent acquisition of land used as public open space. As a result, four proposed compensation sites for habitat creation were identified along the route amounting to approximately 250ha. One of those sites is Hole Farm in Great Warley (99.14ha), within Brentwood borough.

Hole Farm Community Woodland

- 1.5 The compensatory environmental works for the Lower Thames Crossing DCO meant that in April 2021 National Highways purchased Hole Farm in Great Warley to deliver benefits for communities and the environment. Hole Farm was deemed suitable as a compensatory habitat because of being close to Codham Hall Woods and other designated sites. The farm's established agricultural use ceased in September 2022.
- 1.6 National Highways partnered with Forestry England on the planning, planting, and managing of a new community woodland proposal. The land is owned by

National Highways and the community woodland has been leased to Forestry England to manage in perpetuity.

- 1.7 For over 100 years, Forestry England have been growing, shaping and caring for over 1,500 of the nation's forests for the benefit and enjoyment of all, for this generation and the next. They have built walking, running and cycling trails, supplied England's largest amount of sustainably-sourced timber, and conserved the habitats of thousands of plants and animals.
- 1.8 The joint vision of National Highways and Forestry England is for Hole Farm to create a multi-purpose woodland, which will become an inspiring place for people to visit and explore, a thriving wildlife habitat and a source of sustainable timber. The new community woodland is to include a mosaic of wildlife-rich habitats and rides & glades species rich grassland, linking into the wider Thames Chase Community Forest. This ties in with Forestry England and National Highways shared vision to:

"deliver a legacy of inspirational multi-purpose forest creation projects that will enhance and integrate the Lower Thames Crossing landscape for the environment and wellbeing."

- 1.9 A community planting day was held on 4 December 2022, which saw around 1,000 trees planted and marked the first step of transforming the site into a new community woodland. These first trees are establishing well. The second year of tree planting begins this winter, where another 70,000 trees will be planted on site. Two community tree planting days were recently held to help with this on 26 November and 2 December 2023.
- 1.10 To support the community woodland, the proposal includes development of a car park, visitor shelter, modular cafe with toilets, multi-user paths, ponds, signs, play features, a community room, and an operational office and yard area. A planning application(s) is needed for the buildings, hard landscaping infrastructure and engineering operations.

Planning Applications

- 1.11 Proposals for Hole Farm are separate from the Lower Thames Crossing DCO examination with regard to decision-making. Whilst the compensation is essential for the wider scheme, individual sites for compensatory measures are determined by the relevant local planning authority (in this case Brentwood Borough Council). As set out in paragraph 1.3, the DCO examination is expected to conclude very soon. Confirmation of the council's determination of the development proposals on site is an important part of the

Planning Inspectorate's decision on whether the Lower Thames Crossing compensatory measures have relevant approvals to proceed.

- 1.12 Three planning applications have been received for development needed to create Hole Farm Community Woodland, as follows:
- a) Hybrid planning application (part Detailed, part Outline) (reference 23/00862/FUL):
 - i. Demolition of grain and agricultural machinery stores for creation of a community woodland facility comprising: new community building, including staff welfare and office facilities and outdoor terrace, construction of a Forestry England Barn, new vehicular access into a 94-space car, with EV charging points and overflow area; coach parking space, staff and disabled car parking, service yard and vehicle turning circle, surfaced and unsurfaced woodland paths, creation of six new ponds and informal natural play areas, bin store, cycle parking and landscaping (detailed application).
 - ii. Construction of an open sided visitor shelter, modular cafe with covered outdoor seating area, and WC facilities, and substation (outline application, all matters reserved except access).
 - b) Listed Building Consent application (reference 23/00863/LBC): Demolition of grain and agricultural machinery store.
 - c) Advertisement Consent application (reference 23/01058/ADV): 2x non-illuminated entrance signs, 3x non-illuminated banner structures, 22x non-illuminated pedestrian waymarker posts, 3x non-illuminated pedestrian signs/combined information structure, 7x non-illuminated thin information structures, 3x non-illuminated pedestrian signs/lectern structure, and 3x non-illuminated lectern structures.
- 1.13 At the time of writing this report, these applications are pending decision but expected to be determined imminently having been recommended for approval and cleared the council's weekly list process without referral to Planning Committee.
- 1.14 There are elements of the project that do not require planning permission, such as the creation of new woodland, other planting, and rides & glades species rich grassland. However, the application site red line boundary includes all elements of the proposed community woodland to demonstrate how the project as a whole would appear and operate once complete. The proposed planting areas that do not require planning permission are subject to

a separate Environmental Impact Assessment process for afforestation, which is considered by the Forestry Commission.

2. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

None

3. RELEVANT RISKS

- 3.1 Although National Highways own the site, the new community woodland is leased to, and managed by, Forestry England on a long-term basis. The initial capital costs for developing the Hole Farm Community Woodland scheme are to be funded by National Highways, through discretionary funding, regardless of whether the Lower Thames Crossing project proceeds.
- 3.2 Ongoing running costs for the Community Woodland will be funded by Forestry England using income generated from the activities on site, such as the car parking and café.

4. ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 4.1 The Lower Thames Crossing project has been subject to several public consultations that inform the current proposal being examined. Details of the council's approved consultation responses are set out below in Subject History.
- 4.2 The Hole Farm Community Forest proposal was first proposed as part of the Lower Thames Crossing Local Refinement Consultation in May 2022. As part of the consultation response approved in July 2022, the council welcomed the commitment of National Highways to continued engagement on the community forest project. The council requested clarification on accessibility of the site to the public and confirmed the expectation that non-motorised users had improved access through the community forest, including to links outside. These questions have since been clarified through details provided in the planning applications. Details of the council's approved consultation response is set out below in Subject History.
- 4.3 The planning applications received by the council for the community woodland have been subject to consultation with the public, statutory bodies and other stakeholders. Representations received in response have informed the decision on these applications, as set out in the accompanying officer reports.
- 4.4 Forestry England has undertaken consultation through stakeholder engagement workshops (February – March 2022), drop-in sessions, meetings

with the Great Warley Conservation Society (February and June 2022), stakeholder roundtable meeting (July 2022), and a final public consultation (September 2022), which all informed proposals for the planning applications. Design changes were also accommodated after this following feedback from officers at Brentwood Borough Council and Essex County Council regarding ecology, historic buildings, environment, and flood risk, among other things. Further information can be found in supporting documentation, such as the applicant's Planning Statement.

4.5 That final consultation included questionnaires sent to 7,000 households in the surrounding area to gauge people's opinions on the project and to hear what they would like to see, do and experience at the community woodland. Four follow-up virtual workshops were held with the local community to discuss the four main themes of the project:

- a) community and recreation;
- b) design and delivery;
- c) nature and biodiversity; and
- d) access, traffic and public rights of way.

4.6 People shared a wide range of views and Forestry England were able to explore these further during drop-in days, which included guided tours of the proposed community woodland. The information gathered was used to develop Hole Farm's woodland design and final consultation drop-in days were held in Great Warley on 2 and 3 September 2022.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Tim Willis, Director – Resources (Section 151 Officer)
Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / tim.willis@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

5.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report. Proposals for the creation of Hole Farm Community Woodland do not involve any financial liability for the council.

6. LEGAL/GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Claire Mayhew, Acting Joint Director – People & Governance (Monitoring Officer)
Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / claire.mayhew@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

6.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report. Proposals for the creation of Hole Farm Community Woodland do not involve any formal legal involvement from the council.

7. ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Phil Drane, Director – Place

Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / phil.drane@brentwood.rochford.gov.uk

- 7.1 Hole Farm Community Woodland will create a new visitor attraction for the borough. Experience of other similar community woodlands operated by Forestry England, and analysis by their commercial modelling team, suggests that Hole Farm could attract between 50,000 and 150,000 visitors per year. This is likely to have an economic benefit for Brentwood and the wider area.
- 7.2 In terms of job provision, Forestry England plan to hire an additional staff member to help manage the site, with infrequent visits from other staff members. It is anticipated that a tenant will take over the café on site, and it will be their responsibility to hire staff to run it. Thames Chase Trust staff and volunteers will be on site to manage the tree nursery.
- 7.3 Forestry England run a permissions system should local businesses wish to use the community woodland for activities. The community room on site will be available for hire, providing opportunities to host events for businesses and community groups, for example.

8. EQUALITY & HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Kim Anderson, Corporate Manager - Communities, Leisure and Health

Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / kim.anderson@brentwood.gov.uk

- 8.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
- a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful.
 - b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not, including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 8.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil

partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Name & Title: Henry Muss, Sustainability & Climate Officer

Tel & Email: 01277 312500 / henry.muss@brentwood.gov.uk

- 9.1 Creation of Hole Farm Community Woodland is required to compensate for the environmental impacts of the Lower Thames Crossing project. While the whole site will be a community woodland, it will also serve other purposes for the Lower Thames Crossing. Planting on some of the site will provide compensation for the loss of ancient woodland and replacement public open space for Folkes Lane Woodland.
- 9.2 Forests improve the health and wellbeing of everyone, with careful management required. They help to offset carbon emissions, restore ecosystems and provide people of all ages and abilities with fresh air and spaces to enjoy. This community woodland is an investment for a sustainable future.
- 9.3 Purely for Brentwood borough, this will have a positive environmental impact. Tree planting and species rich grassland will provide for wildlife-rich habitats. It will also create a visitor attraction for all ages wanting to enjoy the woodland environment and learn at the visitor centre.

REPORT AUTHOR:

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APPENDICES

None

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Details of planning applications can be viewed on the council's website at: <https://publicaccess.brentwood.gov.uk/online-applications/search.do?action=simple&searchType=Application>

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Policy, Resources & Economic Development Committee, Item 84, Lower Thames Crossing Local Refinement Consultation	13/07/2022
Policy, Resources & Economic Development Committee, Item 140, Lower Thames Crossing Community Impacts Consultation and Development Consent Order	30/09/2021
Policy, Resources & Economic Development Committee, Item 497, Lower Thames Crossing Design Refinement Consultation	09/09/2020
Policy, Resources & Economic Development Committee, Item 432, Lower Thames Crossing Supplementary Consultation	18/03/2020