

Proposal to Brentwood Borough Council

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1 Summary

The engagement of partners within the Thames Chase Community Forest area has led to the delivery of a wide and diverse range of benefits, both to the contributing partners and residents. Whilst the financial contribution is relatively modest, the funding generated as a result of the Thames Chase Trust has been considerable: within the last three years £15 has been delivered for every £1 contributed by partners.

Further funding and delivery is planned. Brentwood Borough Council's renewed participation as a contributing partner would provide influence over where this delivery takes place, helping to bring future benefits and funding to the borough. These benefits would support and meet many of the objectives within the Corporate Plan, helping the Council to find efficiencies, increase the value of its assets, and improve residents' health and engagement opportunities.

2 Purpose

This paper is presented to the Brentwood Borough Council (BBC) Environment Subcommittee on behalf of the Thames Chase Trust (TCT) for consideration and recommendation on formally engaging with the Thames Chase Community Forest (TCCF).

This paper provides the background on the recent work of the Thames Chase Trust, identifies where the synergies are between the objective BBC and TCCF, and outlines a proposed approach for BBC to engage with the TCT in managing the TCCF.

3 Background

3.1 Thames Chase Community Forest

The TCCF was formed as one of the twelve Community Forests in 1990.

The TCCF includes the London Boroughs of Havering, and Barking & Dagenham, Thurrock, Essex CC and Brentwood; all of whom were originally involved in the strategic management of TCCF. Natural England and the Forestry Commission were also involved in the strategic management of the TCCF, providing national support. Additional partners have also been brought on, mainly through the management of estates within TCCF, including the Woodland Trust and the Forestry Commission (Public Forest Estate).

The TCCF was funded predominantly through the constituent Local Authority (including Essex), and Natural England (subsequently the Forestry Commission) between 1990 and 2008.

In 2010, with significant pressure on Local Authority funding increasing, Barking & Dagenham and Brentwood had both decided to cease funding TCCF. With the reduced budget and loss of support, the other Local Authorities started to question the viability of the TCCF. However, an interim agreement was set up which disbanded the directly employed TCCF management team and handed strategic management of the TCCF to the Thames Chase Trust (a newly formed voluntary organisation around the TCCF), with operational management being delivered through a contract with the Forestry Commission. This "holding pattern" has worked well, enabling significant successes to be gained to help reignite the interest and momentum in TCCF.

The TCCF is currently run by the TCT, which sets the top level strategic direction for the TCCF. Delivery and work packages are developed and agreed amongst a Delivery Board,

formed of key partners including TCT, the Forestry Commission and each of the funding Local Authorities. The Delivery Board bring forward and agree the scope for individual packages of work. The Thames Chase Plan (due to be published in March 2015) provides the spatial context for this work and through recognition within the National Planning Policy Framework, adds legitimacy in planning terms to this delivery.

3.2 Benefits of the Community Forest

The key benefits of the TCCF are:

- A joint strategic consideration of green spaces and green infrastructure within an area under pressure from development.
- Cross administrative boundary partnership working amongst Local Authorities that would otherwise struggle to justify dedicated resources to green space issues alone.
- A public facing joined up gateway to green spaces for residents and visitors to the TCCF (www.thameschase.org.uk).
- The TCCF (as with all Community Forests) is a material consideration (National Planning Policy Framework). As such, the Thames Chase Plan provides a base document for planning authorities to use when assessing planning proposals (ref www.thameschase.org.uk/about-thames-chase/thames-chase-plan-joe).
- Development, coordination and delivery of fundraising opportunities, both within and across administrative boundaries. This joined up approach provides greater interest to funders, and opens the door to larger funding bids. Over the past three years, £1.4m has been leveraged in through the TCCF using a total investment of just over £90k.
- Engagement with the voluntary sector and local communities, both through the TCT (itself formed of volunteers), and the work undertaken, supported and funded by TCCF activities.

3.3 Recent Achievements

Below is a select list of key achievements relating to funding that has been secured either as a direct result of TCCF involvement, or through the support of the TCCF. These successes are focused on projects that are delivered with the funding partners. This has been a necessary part of the new working model for Thames Chase.

- Phase 1 Bid for HLF Landscape Partnership Funding.
- Multi-agency bid to the GLA's Big Green Fund provided vital funding which will improve links, access and signage across open spaces.
- NESTA Rethinking Parks: Funding secured to review the way in which Eastbrookend Country Park is managed.
- Bretons Bridge: Sustrans led bid to secure funding through Transport for London (TfL).
- Roding Beam and Ingrebourne Catchment Partnership (RBICP): Catchment Partnership Fund award enabling the Thames Chase Trust and Thames21 to co-host the RBICP.
- East London Green Grid funding secured which enabled pump priming of a vital brownfield restoration project.
- Woodland Planning Grant (Havering and Thurrock).
- Multi-agency project receiving funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Veolia Mardyke Trust (now known as the Veolia North Thames Trust) and the Forestry Commission.

- Catchment Partnership Fund award enabling the Thames Chase Trust to host the SECP.
- Funding received to enable the Thames Chase Trust to administer and Chair the All London Green Grid Area 3 Steering Group.
- Thames Chase Forest Centre Natural Play Funding
- Thames Chase Forest Centre Landscaping.
- Heritage Lottery Fund Transition Funding to support the development of the Thames Chase Trust into a more financially sustainable environmental charity.

Further details are provided within **Appendix 1**. This demonstrates the geographical spread of achievements across the TCCF area, illustrating the benefits provided to participating LPAs.

In addition to these, the following are packages of work that the TCCF has delivered on behalf of partners. The unique benefit brought by engaging TCCF in delivering this work is also identified.

- Outline review of woodfuel potential in Essex and Thames Chase. TCCF were able to use existing networks with Local Authorities to source the background information required, thereby reducing the overall cost of the work.
- Advice, support and collaborative working for successful funding bids at three sites in Barking and Dagenham. The inclusion of all three sites within the TCCF is thought to have been material to the success of these bids.
- In the region of 1.5 million trees have been planted, helping to restore areas damaged by landfill and create open space across the whole of the TCCF. The ability of the TCCF to bring in the Forestry Commission as a partner was crucial to this achievement.
- Increased community engagement in the planning process. The TCT has been instrumental in initiating and developing strategies for increased public consultation, helping local communities help shape their local environment.

Whilst the delivery of benefits is as much about the “triple bottom line”, delivering on economic, social and environmental gains, the Key Performance Indicator of grant funding success is a specific objective for the TCT. Overall, the activity of the TCT has resulted in the delivery of £15 for every £1 contributed by partners over the last three years.

3.4 Current Pipeline of Work

The current workstreams being undertaken are detailed below, which have been either agreed or are in active development with the TCCF Delivery Group (made up of the funding partners of TCCF):

- Cycle Hire Project (which includes working with Positive Parents) at the Thames Chase Forest Centre.
- Project to improve the interpretation in the Thames Chase Visitor Centre and across the community forest through digital technologies (website, apps etc).
- Formation of the Thames Chase Wildlife Group.
- Public Art in the Community Forest.

The TCT is keen to work with BBC to identify and engage with specific opportunities that are present within Brentwood.

4 The Benefits of Engagement

4.1 The Thames Chase Plan

The Thames Chase Plan (TCP) provides the TCCF vision for 2030, together with key objectives. To achieve this strategic delivery programmes are set out under five areas, these being: Forestry; Agriculture; Access; People; Promotion. These are summarised in **Appendix 2**.

The TCP is the guiding strategic document that sets out the objectives of the TCCF; in essence a form of Green Infrastructure Strategy. The TCP is a particularly important document as it forms the basis of comments by the TCCF to planning applications (as the TCCF is a Material Consideration), and helps to direct the efforts of the TCT and the TCCF partners in delivering greenspace priorities.

4.2 Meeting BBC Corporate Objectives

The Brentwood Borough Council Corporate Plan 2013 – 2016 contains many overlapping objectives with the TCP. BBC engagement with the TCCF can help both organisations to meet these objectives more effectively, achieving synergistic benefits. This is demonstrated below, with greater detail provided in **Appendix 3**.

Street Scene and Environment

- Volunteer involvement in all five TCP areas helps residents and communities take responsibility for and deliver a cleaner environment
- Cross boundary partnership development is integral to delivering the TCP

Localism

- Volunteer involvement in all five TCP areas helps empower residents and communities to get involved in the management of local open spaces
- Private sector investment can benefit local communities
- Having a position on the board increases BBC's ability to represent its residents' influence over external partners,

A Prosperous Borough

- Forestry and Landscaping objectives support economic growth and sustainable land use
- Access objectives support infrastructure development
- Having a position on the board increases BBC's ability to represent its residents' influence over key issues

Housing, Health & Wellbeing

- Links with the health agenda improve local health service delivery
- Improved volunteering and access opportunities generate health and well-being benefits

A Safe Borough

- Increased volunteer and community engagement, together with access improvements, help discourage anti-social behaviour and encourage community confidence

Delivery of the TCP programme can support BBC CP objectives across the board, helping BBC to deliver its own programme more effectively and efficiently.

4.3 Additional Funding and Delivery

The map in **Appendix 1** shows both the location and extent of funding delivery arising from the TCT during the past three years. The lack of delivery within the Brentwood Borough is evident, which indicates a significant opportunity for a much greater level of delivery within Brentwood. There is further evidence from the large green and wooded estate that Brentwood own and manage, representing a significant opportunity to deliver joint BBC and TCCF priorities. One such opportunity exists at Shenfield Common, where TC could seek additional funding, delivering community engagement and education work that supports BBC management work.

Further funding and delivery is already planned. In particular, proposals are now being developed for the stage 2 funding bid for £1.8million from the HLF Landscape Partnership, to deliver a 5 year programme of work. BBC engagement would provide the Council with the opportunity to help shape where this delivery takes place, helping to bring some of it to the Borough.

Based on discussions with Officers in BBC, the following opportunities have already been identified are warranting further discussion and exploration. This would be agreed and achieved through the TCCF Delivery Group (a seat at which would be offered to BBC should BBC elect to fund the TCT):

- Developing the woodfuel theme to look at opportunities around cooperatives, TCCF wide production, and certainty of supply and demand. This could include linking potential harvesting opportunities with the development of the Dunton Garden Suburb, enabling this link to help shape the development.
- Developing more robust assessments of woodlands as a financial resource, extending beyond timber value, to support management plan development.
- An increasing role in delivering highly targeted management interventions, to increase the capacity of partners on specific projects. This includes community engagement / ranger based activities as well as green space management and delivery (for example looking at conservation grazing schemes). The Thames Chase Conservation Volunteers could provide additional volunteer capacity to support such projects.
- Reviewing and developing a greater presence with planners, seeking to exploit the “Material Consideration” element that the National Planning Policy Framework affords to Community Forests. TC can act as an ‘external planning consultee’ at the request of BBC, particularly pertinent to the development of the Dunton Garden Suburb, helping to support development of mitigation-focussed and accessibility strategies.
- Creating a map showing the “area of influence” that TC covers; looking at defining and explaining the grey boundaries that exist in light of landscape and administrative boundaries.
- Thurrock and Havering councils are already in discussion with the TC regarding a countryside management review, exploring the delivery of mutual savings via a joined-up strategic approach. BBC could join this discussion, helping to shape the development of new delivery models, including the development of a shared Community Ranger resource, to free LA of burden of employing someone, but to ensure a presence on the ground at key sites.

5 Proposed Approach

This proposal is therefore presented as a starting position, with a clear aim of ongoing adaptations to both the opportunities within the TCCF and the priorities of BBC.

The TCT are seeking to engage BBC in the continued development of the TCCF. In exchange of an agreed annual contribution to the TCT, this would include a seat at the Delivery Board which agrees the work packages for the TCCF. In addition, engagement with BBC would take place on all relevant opportunities presented to TCCF, including funding rounds, planning liaison, strategic support for green spaces and operational support (if required).

The proposed contribution from BBC is £8,000 per annum. The TCT is seeking a commitment for the financial year 2015/16, and ideally with a clear intention to continue for at least two further financial years (subject to performance of the TCT and BBC budgets).

The contribution sought from Brentwood is based on factors including:

- The opportunities for BBC,
- The area of BBC within the TCCF,
- The current resourcing arrangements of the TCCF (specifically the low overheads and subsequent delivery capabilities).

6 Next Steps

The TCT would like to formally offer the opportunity to BBC to take part in the TCCF Delivery Group, and to further explore the priorities that have been laid out, in exchange for the £8,000 proposed funding for FY 2015/16.

The TCT welcomes any questions that BBC may have and looks forwards to a response to this proposal.

Yours sincerely

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Chair of the Thames Chase Trust

6 January 2015