

Agenda Item 13

Cabinet Member: Councillor Claire Malcomson, Cabinet Member for Environment

Strategic Leadership Team Lead: Paul Anderson, Executive Head of Service
(People and Environment)

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Date: 24 November 2020

Ward(s) affected: all

Key Decision: No

SUBJECT: Consideration of Council Motion 14/2020- Miyawaki Forests

Recommendation:

That the Cabinet decides whether it wishes to recommend that Council approves, rejects or amends Notice of Motion 14/2020.

Council has the authority to determine the Recommendation

1.0 Background/Introduction

1.1 The following motion was proposed at the Council meeting on 13 October 2020.

“This Council recognises the potential opportunity that the natural and built landscape of Mole Valley has to reduce the impact of climate change and that strategic use of public land could set an example to local residents and businesses, educating and inspiring them to change their own behaviours as well as motivating other local authorities to do the same. Sympathetic tree planting is one such opportunity and, in many areas internationally, is being pursued in a small scale sites through an initiative called Miyawaki Forests.

This Council applauds the efforts being made by many local voluntary groups, such as the Climate Reality Group, to stimulate the public awareness and action to address climate change and is committed to considering the use of all council assets in partnership to support the aims of such groups working to address the Climate Emergency.

This Council resolves to work with the Climate Reality Group to:

- Jointly review a map showing land owned by Mole Valley to identify five potential sites for Miyawaki Forests.
- Calculate the area of the locations identified that is suitable for planting and calculate roughly how many trees would be needed.
- Identify the tree mix for each location dependent on site specific factors such as soil condition, including taking advice from expert organisations such as the Woodland Trust and exploring the potential to enroll for their Community programme.
- Commit to planting the trees in nominated areas that meet criteria for success to be agreed.
- Identify a group of volunteers to help plant the trees and set out the aims of the initiative to such volunteers so that they may in turn act as advocates more widely in Mole Valley.
- Plant our first Miyawaki Forests.”

1.2 The purpose of this report is to provide some background as to what Miyawaki Forests are, summarise some of their climate benefits and provide some broader context to enable Members to make a decision on the Motion.

2.0 What is a Miyawaki Forest?

2.1 They are densely planted woodlands, designed to be planted in smaller areas. They originated in Japan and as a concept is now gaining enthusiasts across Europe. At a basic level, the key features are that they are:

- Grown with native species
- Densely planted (3- 4 saplings per square metre)
- Planted with at least 30 varieties of tree to recreate the layers of a natural forest
- Required to be watered, weeded and monitored regularly for three years to allow it to establish. Once established they apparently require no human intervention other than any safety works which may occur due to plant mortality, climatic issues, vandalism etc.

2.2 They grow ten times faster than typical tree planting and are reported to have significant biodiversity benefits, certainly when compared to traditionally planted forestry tree schemes with a low number of tree varieties. The suggested smallest size for a forest is 12 sqm, so there are many opportunities for them to be created.

2.3 It is worth noting that the ecological value of newly planted sites does not compare to existing woodlands and can take many decades to become as rich. In fact, that is also true of comparing a newly planted woodland to any existing area of ecological interest. Chalk grasslands for example, can contain up to 30 different species of plant within a square metre. Each of these species of plant will have something that requires it for food, shelter and/or breeding and there will be something feeding upon them and so the ecological chain grows. Moreover their underlying soils have been undisturbed for centuries and can be very important carbon stores in their own right.

2.4 Furthermore in Mole Valley, there are many excellent, ecologically diverse woodlands from ancient semi-natural woodlands (ASNW), secondary woodland (trees which have developed upon land that was once open), parkland and scrub.

2.5 These ecologically important sites (both wooded and open) are of vital importance and should be managed sympathetically. The State of Nature 2019 report found that populations of the UK's most important wildlife had fallen by 60% in the last 50 years. Inappropriate planting of trees on these sites could have a serious detrimental effect causing more long term harm than good. As such the siting of any Miyawaki forests should be carefully considered and is best suited to degraded sites of little ecological value where they will benefit the environment and desired outcomes best.

3.0 Capacity and Resources

3.1 A key focus for the Parks and Environment Team will be the delivery of the Climate Change Strategy. The action plan sets out the short term actions that will be delivered in the period through to March 2022. The focus on the strategy is about reducing MVDC's carbon footprint and officer resources are in place to deliver these.

3.2 There are a number of actions in the Strategy that focus on tree planting, either directly by MVDC, or through working with community groups, as set out below:

- Work with partners to facilitate the planting of native trees in appropriate areas, including supporting community tree planting initiatives and leading by example by planting on MVDC's own land
- Support community groups interested in transforming spaces into pocket parks, community gardens or food growing spaces, maintained by local people
- Investigate options for acquiring land to plant trees and further improve biodiversity

3.3 In addition, MVDC is working with SCC and other districts and boroughs on a county wide exercise to identify sites for tree planting. This study is being funded by SCC.

3.4 In addition, the Parks Team are continuing to focus on their everyday tree work, including the ongoing programme of mapping high risk trees and dealing with issues relating to Oak Processionary Moth and Ash Dieback as well as the day to day responsibilities of managing MVDC's 50,000 trees. The team are also updating the management plans for the Council's countryside estate to ensure they are managed to maximise their nature conservation value.

3.5 That said, the team would have the capacity during 2021/22 to undertake an exercise to identify sites that would be potentially suitable for a Miyawaki Forest, subject to financial and other resources being available in 2022/23.

3.6 There is external funding that is available for tree planting schemes. The Woodland Trust offer charitable organisations 75% of the cost of schemes such as this. Should Council support the motion, this will be researched as part of the production of a report for consideration alongside the budget setting process. Notwithstanding the decision on the motion, the Woodland Trust grants scheme will be promoted to local tree groups.

4.0 Experience Elsewhere

4.1 One of the first Miyawaki Forests in the UK was created in Witney, Oxfordshire. The delivery of that forest was led by a charitable organisation, working with the Town Council. The key learning points for them were:

- Choose the charitable partner carefully. The body that they worked with did not have the full set of skills to deliver one of these forests, which led to the Town Council having to incur additional costs and staff time.
- Properly research the Forests before committing to them. The specific requirements in terms of ground conditions, depth of digging and fencing were not fully understood prior to committing to the creation of the forest.
- Engage with local residents. Witney planted theirs adjacent to a residential area, which caused a number of concerns with residents relating to parking by volunteers, deliveries, damage to surfaces etc.
- They hadn't appreciated that the forests need replanting or moving after ten years – as at that point they start to become too dense and there is a risk of the trees dying.

5.0 Financial Implications

5.1 The timescale between the Council motion and this meeting mean that it has not been possible to fully cost the Motion. If Members are minded to support the Motion, it is proposed that detailed costings be included in the budget report to be considered in February 2021. Costings will need to be identified for:

- Land surveys (to identify suitable sites)
- Site preparation
- Sapling purchase
- Regular watering, weeding and maintenance(for a three year period)

5.2 It is anticipated that the cost of creating the forest will be around £25k - £30k. If Members are minded to support the Motion, the budget report will set out how these works will be funded, either from service reductions in Parks and Environment, or from elsewhere within the Council. This will set out the initial one-off cost plus the ongoing maintenance costs. The annual cost of the additional watering alone is estimated at £1,600 annually.

6.0 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications as such with the Motion. There may be insurance and other related matters, particularly if community organisations took the lead on the planting.

7.0 Risk Implications

The key risk in agreeing the Motion would be around the impact on other agreed areas of MVDC's work – particularly the delivery of the Climate Change Strategy.

8.0 Options

Cabinet has the option to recommend to Council that it supports, rejects or amends the Motion.

6.0 Corporate Implications

Monitoring Officer commentary

The Monitoring Officer confirms that all relevant legal implications have been taken into account.

S151 Officer commentary

The Section 151 Officer confirms that all relevant financial implications have been taken into account.

Equalities Implications

There are no equality or diversity implications arising from this report.

Employment and Resource Implications

As set out in the report, there are no resources available within the Council the moment to deliver on the Motion as proposed.

Sustainability Issues

The creation of Miyawaki Forests would undoubtedly have a positive environmental impact. However, in terms of delivering a measureable environmental impact it is considered that a greater impact will be achieved through delivering against the MVDC Climate Change Strategy.

Consultation

Not applicable

Communications

Not applicable

Background Papers

None