

Committee: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 16 December 2021

Title of Report: Cumbria Coastal Community Forest

Report by: Angela Jones, Executive Director – Economy and Infrastructure

Cabinet Member: Celia Tibble, Cabinet Member – Environment

What is the Report About? (Executive Summary)

1. Cumbria County Council (the Council), Cumbria Woodlands and the National Trust submitted a joint bid for Cumbria Coastal Community Forest (CCCF) to join the Trees for Climate Programme coordinated by England's Community Forests (ECF).
2. In November 2021 the Council received confirmation that CCCF has been accepted on to the scheme and awarded an initial £220,000 boost to kickstart the scheme, with the aim to plant 150 hectares of woodland by the end of March 2025. It is anticipated that further funding will be made available in future years to achieve this aim.
3. The Community Forests can help enhance Cumbria's natural capital and provide more opportunities for our residents to benefit from the direct and indirect values that the natural world provides. Helping to make the whole of Cumbria an ever more inviting place to live and visit.
4. This report seeks Cabinet approval for Cumbria County Council to be the accountable body for the Cumbria Coastal Community Forest Project.
5. The report seeks approval for the Executive Director of Economy and Infrastructure to agree the terms of the grant agreement between the Council and Cheshire West and Chester, whereby the Council will act as Accountable body for Cumbria Woodlands. The Council will receive the funds on behalf of Cumbria Woodlands who are the main decision maker for the CCCF project.

Recommendation of the Executive Director

It is recommended that:

6. Cabinet agrees in principle that the Council will act as accountable body for Cumbria Coastal Community Forest project.
7. Cabinet delegates to the Executive Director of Economy and Infrastructure the acceptance and approval of the terms of the grant between the Council and Cheshire West and Chester (as the national accountable body).

8. Cabinet delegates to the Executive Director of Economy and Infrastructure the acceptance on behalf of the Council as the accountable body, receipt of the initial grant funding of £220,000 (£170,000 capital funding and £50,000 revenue funding) in year one, from Cheshire West and Chester (as the national accountable body). Subsequent year's funding will be brought back to Cabinet for acceptance. Once received this funding will be held on behalf of CCCF.
9. Cabinet agrees to recommend to Council the addition of a new scheme of £220,000 to its Capital Programme 2021-2026 (Cumbria Coastal Community Forest) funded by the Nature for Climate grant received from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) – see figure 2 below for the governance.

Background to the Proposals

10. England's Community Forests (see Appendix 1) have for nearly 30 years been transforming the landscapes and communities in and around towns and cities. The aim is to bring trees and people together to create healthy, inspiring, resilient places for humans and nature to live, side by side. Figure 1 below shows the three core pillars of the community forests being place, purpose and organisation.

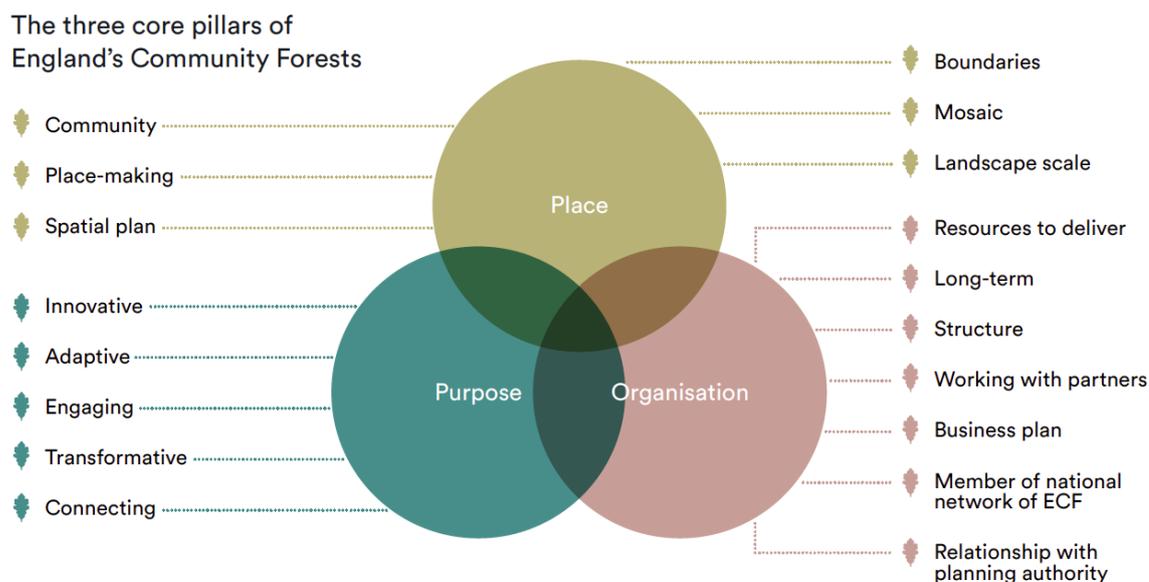


Figure 1: The Three Core Pillars of England's Community Forests

11. The Community Forest project is focused on increasing local access to nature from urban areas with high levels of economic deprivation. These forests not only contribute to climate change adaption and mitigation but have direct benefits for the people living in these areas, through enhancing the natural capital bringing, for example, better access to nature, improved flood management for towns and enhancing biodiversity.
12. In the UK government's Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener October 2021 (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/net-zero-strategy>), DEFRA have committed to boost the existing £640 million Nature for Climate Fund with a further £124 million, ensuring total spend of more than £750 million by 2025 on peat restoration, woodland creation, and management.

13. As part of Nature for Climate Programme announced in March 2020, England's Community Forests were asked to put together a project pipeline and develop a full business case to deliver:
 - 6,755ha of new woodland in England's Community Forests and
 - Three new Community Forests (Cumbria, Plymouth and the North-East) to add to the existing capacity (of 10 CFs) to deliver the 6,755ha target and extend the benefits of Community Forests to new areas.

14. DEFRA awarded Cheshire West and Chester Council Nature for Climate Funds under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003. Cheshire West and Chester Council will need to enter into a funding agreement with Cumbria County Council to identify the council as the Accountable Body. Please see figure 2 that outlines the governance structure:

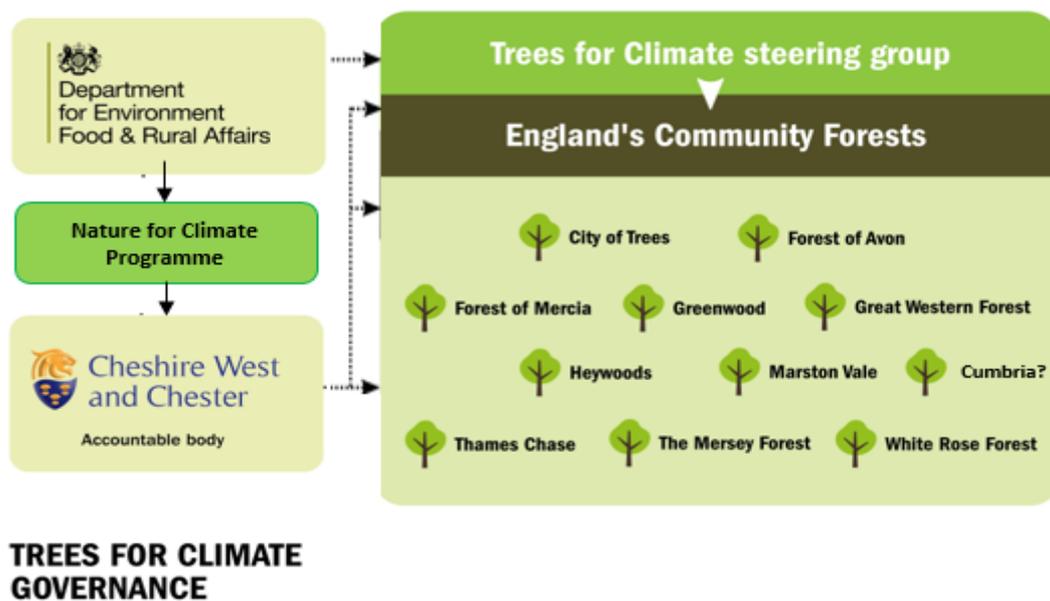


Figure 2: Trees for climate governance

Cumbria Coastal Community Forest

15. In June 2021 Cumbria County Council along with Cumbria Woodlands and the National Trust submitted a joint bid (see appendix 2) to be part of England Community Forests. This was accepted in November 2021, awarding an initial kickstart fund of £220,000 for year one, with future funding planned to facilitate this scheme between now and 2025. With the aim to plant 150 hectares of trees within a four-year period.

16. Having been accepted onto the ECF, a steering group is being formed, comprising of relevant stakeholders, including county and district council officers.

17. The proposal for the Cumbria Coastal Community Forest is to develop a range of woodlands that provide direct benefit for the communities of Cumbria, providing a corridor between these communities, through the development of new tree planting and woodland creations.

18. Cumbria has an abundance of natural capital which is the sum of our ecosystems, species, freshwater, land, soils, minerals, our air and our seas. They are all elements of nature that either directly or indirectly bring value to our people and the county at large. We have an opportunity with community forests to enhance our environments and enable more of our residents to enjoy the benefits that nature brings, including providing clean air and water, helping mitigate the risks of hazards such as floods, enhance our biodiversity and providing opportunities for recreation. With the opportunities for nature recovery, carbon storage, flood resilience, green jobs and importantly enjoyment and engagement for local communities, helping with physical and mental wellbeing.
19. The area that this project will initially focus on is the coastal corridor between Barrow and Carlisle, with extensions nearby. Please see figure 3, a map showing the suggested area.

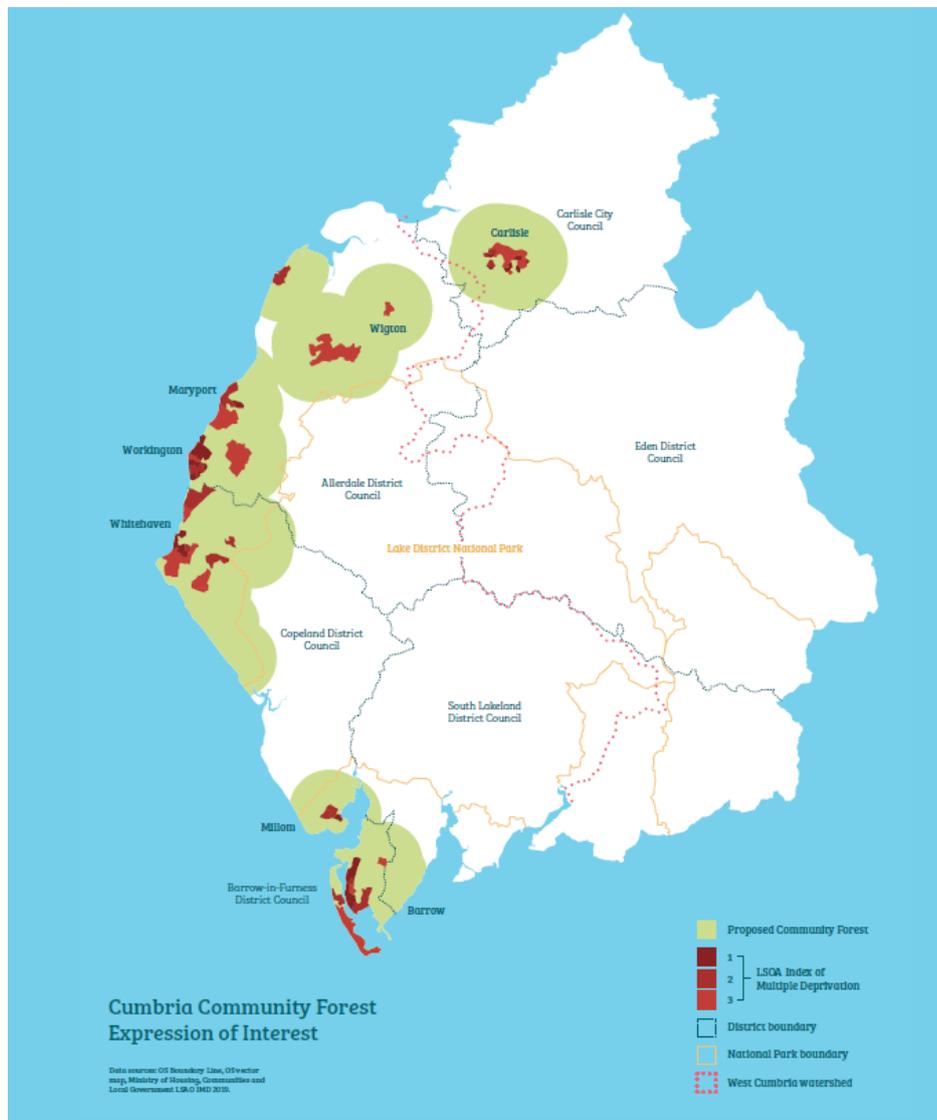


Figure 3: Map showing the proposed areas for community forests

20. The community forests offer a wide variety of benefits for our county, for nature, people and for the climate. The forests:

- Provide green spaces for communities – local and visiting, that engage, educates, and inspires.
- Creates a diverse range of jobs, both direct and indirect to benefit local communities.
- Provide opportunities for skills development and apprentice schemes
- Deliver nature recovery priorities and enhance natural capital
- Develop a landscape that will be resilient to climate change, and provide resilience to help reduce the effects of climate change, such as flooding and drought, on local communities through carbon capture, and nature-based solutions
- Develop new collaborations that we can learn from and develop to inform future delivery of green recovery
- Enhanced biodiversity and habitat creation through reforestation and planting
- Community participation in planting and managing forests e.g. giving every child in Cumbria the opportunity to plant a tree
- Commercial opportunities around carbon offsetting/sequestration as a service (to e.g. large supply chain organisations)
- Creating a mixed landscape centred on woodland that creates a diversity of habitats across woodland, woodland pasture and scrub to deliver multiple 25-year environment plan and green recovery benefits.

21. This bid has been supported by local councils including Allerdale BC, Barrow BC, Carlisle CC, and Copeland BC and other local organisations such as Art Gene, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and Britain's Energy Coast. These organisations helped with the initial bid, but we are keen to reach out to more communities to help deliver this ambitious scheme.

22. CCCF has a large planting pipeline already available and by 2025 it is anticipated they will contribute over 150ha of new woodland as part of ECF woodland creation programme (c7,000 ha England-wide) and in the longer term aim to reach the 30% target of woodland canopy cover.

Governance

23. The Council will be the accountable body receiving the funds on behalf of the CCCF. Cumbria Woodland will be the lead decision maker, with guidance from the steering group. The Council as Accountable Body for this initiative will have the right to stop grants where they would be a breach of the grant agreement between the Council and Cheshire West. This is following CCC successfully leading the DEFRA Local Nature Recovery Strategy Pilot, working closely in collaboration with other stakeholders.

24. Cumbria Woodlands will manage the programme and provide the technical expertise. Cumbria Woodlands is hosted by the Lake District National Park Authority. Landowners will submit bids for grants to Cumbria Woodlands for determination. Any grants awarded will have a grant agreement between Cumbria Woodlands and the landowner.

25. The Council has engaged with our local area committees prior to submitting the bid. Along with engagement with external stakeholders, as Cumbria has existing stakeholder forums, for example the Local Nature Partnership and the Zero Carbon Cumbria Partnership and these provide a helpful wider forum for consultation and engagement – Cumbria Woodlands and the steering group will continue to maximise such engagement opportunities.
26. The funding will complement the Council’s Environment Fund projects and future levelling up bids for green infrastructure, such as cycling and walking corridors and improved footpaths. This will accompany our cycling and walking ambition as part of the Cumbria Transport Infrastructure Plan, the ambition is for Cumbria to be known as one of the best places to walk and cycle in the UK.
27. It is possible to increase the grant if we can provide more areas for tree planting. This will be reviewed throughout the four-year process and hopefully beyond.

Options Considered and Risks Identified

Option (a) - Cabinet decides to be the accountable body for the CCCF

28. This is the preferred option enabling an initial kickstart of £220,000 of funding to be received in Cumbria for woodland creation, with future funding anticipated.

Option (b) - Cabinet decides not to be the accountable body for the CCCF

29. Cabinet does not approve the request, resulting in a missed opportunity for Cumbria’s Coastal Communities. The funding must be assigned to a Local Authority as the accountable body. There would be some reputational risk to the council by not opting to become the accountable body due to the cessation of the programme and associated funding.

Risks

RISKS	MITIGATION
That the grant terms and conditions are detrimental to the Council as accountable body	Liaison between the legal services of CCC and ECF/Cheshire West and Chester. Due consideration of the grant undertaken.
Cumbria Woodlands does not follow the monitoring, financial and procurement regulations required by the County Council	A memorandum of understanding will set out what is required between the Council and Cumbria Woodlands to mitigate this
The project fails to deliver the tree planting requirements by 2025, and the Council has to pay back the money received from DEFRA via Cheshire West and Chester	Close programme management and monitoring of the scheme will mitigate this risk.

Reasons for the recommendation/Key benefits

30. Agreeing to be the Accountable Body for the CCCF will enable the ambitious programme summarised above, helping our residents gain access to nature whilst significantly contributing to climate change adaption and mitigation in the area.

31. The project will lead to sustainable and systematic improvements in the lived experience of our residents in coastal communities.
32. The project will support the Public Health Strategy; and will help meet the ambitions of the Cycling and Walking Strategy.

Financial – What Resources will be needed and how will it be Funded?

33. Should Cabinet agree to this and terms are agreed under the delegated arrangements set out in the recommendations, the Council would receive the funding, which will be held on behalf of CCCF and the lead authority.
34. As Accountable Body the Council will be responsible for ensuring CCCF meet the terms and conditions of the grant agreement with Cheshire West and Chester Council. The exact details of the Accountable Body responsibilities and potential liability of the Council will be determined by the terms of the grant between the Council and Cheshire West and Chester, the approval of which is to be delegated to the Executive Director of Economy and Infrastructure.
35. The woodlands will be the property of landowners who will be responsible for annual maintenance. Cumbria Woodlands will enter into grant agreement with the landowners.
36. Should Cabinet decide not to agree to the recommendations there is a risk that the Trees for Climate Programme investment could be lost and the woodland would not be planted by the end of March 2025, unless an alternative delivery method could be agreed.

Legal Aspects – What needs to be considered?

37. Under rule 36.1 of the Council's Financial Standing Orders Cabinet is responsible for agreeing that the Council can act as an Accountable Body. Cabinet is required to make the decision based on the following:
 - Terms of the funding agreement (where known)
 - Description of arrangements for allocation of funding
 - Description of applicable financial and audit procedures
 - Risk assessment/management plan relevant to the County Council acting as Accountable Body
 - Recovery of costs incurred by the County Council acting as accountable body
38. This report deals with some of the above and for the remainder it is recommended Cabinet delegates their resolution to the Executive Director for Economy and Infrastructure.
39. To mitigate the risk to the Council of being Accountable Body a detailed review of the grant agreement between Cheshire West and the Council (Head Grant) will need to be undertaken. A binding agreement will need to be entered into between the Council and Cumbria Woodlands to regulate the use of the grant. Should there be an issue with the legal nature of Cumbria Woodlands the Lake District

National Park may need to be a party to any such agreement. Further the Council should ensure it is confident the grant agreements between Cumbria Woodlands and the land-owning grant recipients are robust enough to ensure the grants are used correctly and do not contravene the Head Grant agreement.

40. Cabinet is able to make delegations to officers under paragraph 2.2 of Part 3 of the Constitution. Such delegations include the full range of powers to discharge the function, unless Cabinet limits these powers.

Health and Safety Aspects – What needs to be considered?

41. The Cumbria Public Health Strategy recognises that there is increasing evidence that connections with nature and other forms of life can have a significant beneficial impact on health and wellbeing.

Council Plan Priority – How do the Proposals Contribute to the Delivery of the Council’s Stated Outcomes? (Outcomes - People in Cumbria are Healthy and Safe, Places in Cumbria are well connected and thriving, the Economy in Cumbria is growing and benefits everyone)

42. The proposals aim is to give everyone access to green spaces and nature. These contribute to the delivery of the following objectives from the Council Plan:
- People in Cumbria are Healthy and Safe.
 - Places in Cumbria are well connected and thriving.
 - The economy in Cumbria is growing and benefits everyone.

What is the Impact of the Decision on Health Inequalities and Equality and Diversity Issues?

43. Having the forests on people’s doorsteps makes it far more accessible to all. Including local schools, whereas before young people would have to travel to experience outdoor classrooms, with the CCCF they will be easy to access.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – England’s Community Forests 2020
 Appendix 2 - Cumbria Coastal Community Forest Bid Document June 2021

Key Facts

Electoral Division(s): Allerdale, Barrow, Copeland, Carlisle

Executive Decision	Key Decision Included in Forward Plan	Exempt from call-in	Exemption agreed by scrutiny chair	Considered by scrutiny, if so detail below	Environmental or sustainability assessment undertaken?	Equality impact assessment undertaken?
Yes	Yes	No	N/A	No	No	No

Approved by the relevant Cabinet Member on 16 December 2021

Previous relevant Council or Executive decisions

None

Consideration by Overview & Scrutiny

None

Background Papers

None

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