

Report title	Treescape Funding Application – Tiny Forests
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Department	Community Services
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

- **To resolve**

Synopsis of report:

This report provides an overview of the work that has been undertaken by officers, having been alerted to a potential grant funding opportunity, working in partnership with Spelthorne Borough Council and Earthwatch Europe.

In undertaking this work, it has been identified that the submission date for the grant application is June 30th, and given this, a report is brought to members to determine whether, from the information gathered to date, they wish for the council to proceed as a partner within the grant application.

Should this be the decision of members, the report also outlines further work that is necessary in order to provide an informed position that would enable a decision to be taken as to whether to proceed with the project, or withdraw post submission of the application.

Recommendation(s):

- i. It is recommended for the council to proceed with the application process to the Treescapes Fund, working in partnership with Earthwatch Europe and Spelthorne Borough Council, subject to being able to withdraw from the process at a future point, with a final decision on being able to proceed to be taken following receipt of a further report to committee in September 2024.**

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 Following contact from a ward Councillor regarding a grant funding opportunity that Runnymede Borough Council may wish to engage in, officers have undertaken research of the opportunity to determine whether it is something that the council may wish to engage in.
- 1.2 The funding opportunity is made available through the Local Authority Treescapes Fund, a government grant scheme available to local authorities to restore tree cover in non-woodland areas.

- 1.3 Being considered, is a partnership funding bid between the council, Earthwatch Europe and Spelthorne Borough Council, with Earthwatch completing most of the preparatory work for the application and the application submitted in the name of Spelthorne Borough Council.
- 1.4 The funding bid is for the creation of Tiny Forests in Runnymede. These are groupings of up to six hundred trees, planted in an area of approximately 0.49 hectares. In addition, there is the opportunity for the Council to bid for additional trees in the form of Standards (over 1.2m), Feathers (80-120cm), and Whips (<80cm), for smaller planting arrangements at locations within the borough.
- 1.5 Given the late contact regarding the funding bid, which is to be submitted by the end of June 2024, this report is intended to provide an overview of the opportunity, the partnership approach proposed, and the implications for the council in proceeding with the opportunity.
- 1.6 This report asks Members to determine whether they wish for officers to further the application, mindful that as work develops, the council may decide not to proceed should the project, conditions of the grant, or the implications for the council make it unviable.
- 1.7 If approved to proceed with the application, a further report would be provided to Community Services Committee in September 2024, where a recommendation to formally proceed or withdraw will be given.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 Having been made aware of the potential funding opportunity, work has been undertaken to engage with Earthwatch and Spelthorne Borough Council to gain a greater understanding of the opportunity, benefits and ongoing requirements and implications for the Council. This has been done to reach a more informed position on the project and to determine whether this is an opportunity the council would like to proceed with.
- 2.2 A funding bid is intended to be submitted to the Local Authority Treescapes Fund (LATF), in what is believed to be the final round of the funding. The submission is intended to be a partnership bid between the council, Earthwatch and Spelthorne Borough Council, with Spelthorne being the lead applicant.
- 2.3 The partnership intends for Runnymede and Spelthorne boroughs to each receive an allocation of funding, and for Earthwatch to lead the delivery of the project in, at least, the first two years.
- 2.4 From the meeting with Earthwatch, it is understood that the primary focus of the application, is to create Tiny Forests, each consisting of approximately six hundred trees within an area of approximately 0.49 hectares. Previous applications for Tiny Forests, coordinated by Earthwatch have focussed on creating Tiny Forests in the following locations:
 - Areas of relative deprivation
 - Where there is low tree canopy cover
 - Where there has been recent large development of an area

- Areas where there is a requirement to re-establish lost trees.
- 2.5 Tiny Forest are planted based on a planting concept known as the Miyawaki method, and see small forests planted over the size of a tennis court, which are highly dense (3 saplings per m² and are 100% native and species rich (containing a variety of up to twenty-five trees and shrubs). Tiny Forests are designed to fast track to the stable ecosystem of a mature woodland, within a 20–30-year period, rather than 100-200 years through natural woodland development.
- 2.6 The introduction of Tiny Forests, in partnership with Earthwatch, would include the opportunity to engage communities through volunteer planting days, environmental education sessions and through the recruitment of a community tree keeper volunteer team of 4-5 volunteers, who will undertake basic, low-level maintenance such as litter picking, weeding, and re-mulching. In addition, Earthwatch will also train volunteers in citizen science to monitor the environmental and social benefits of the forest and provide resources to assist with nature learning.
- 2.7 In undertaking the above activity, Earthwatch will lead the delivery of the project for at least the first two years, with the Council's role in delivery during that time limited to officer oversight of the project and support provided to any of the volunteer initiatives delivered with residents.
- 2.8 In addition, following changes to the application criteria in April 2024, councils are also able to submit for funding of other standards, feathers, and whips, which can be planted in other areas. Having this second element of the bid is encouraged as it is felt it would give a greater chance of it being successful.
- 2.9 To submit a bid, the council will be required to determine the number of Tiny Forests they would like to apply for funding for, as well as the number of other trees (standards, feathers, and whips) that it would like to include.
- 2.10 In determining the number of Tiny Forests, the council would ideally identify the sites that would be used. There is a need to consider the most appropriate sites across the borough and where there may be appropriate volunteer capacity to support the project.
- 2.11 If the council were to proceed, and on an assumption Tiny Forests would be established on council owned land, a land release will be required to be signed as part of the agreement with Earthwatch. In doing so the council will agree to retain the Tiny Forest on site for a minimum of ten years.
- 2.12 The opportunity to secure funding for the borough, and to collaborate with a partner in Earthwatch, is viewed as a positive opportunity. However, given it is intended for potentially 1,500 trees to be planted in the borough, there is the need to consider the ongoing liabilities to the council, particularly the ongoing financial implications of undertaking maintenance following the first two years when Earthwatch will oversee this activity.
- 2.13 Within years one and two, in establishing the trees, watering may be required in the event of hot weather/drought conditions. However, Earthwatch have advised that the cost of this could be incorporated into the funding bid. Officers will request that the bid includes sufficient funding for Earthwatch to appoint a contractor to undertake this function, to not create additional resource requirement within the operational team in Environmental Services.

- 2.14 Within the first two years, where trees are vandalised, or have died, Earthwatch would replace them. This is to ensure that the Tiny Forests mature as intended and to ensure that the tree survival rate target of 75% is achieved as per the conditions of the funding.
- 2.15 Therefore, we are informed that the potential maintenance requirements in the first couple of years, will be most likely in response to damage to any fencing erected, bench installed or the plaque/information board promoting the Tiny Forest.
- 2.16 Once established, officers have been advised that because of the planting method used, the maintenance requirements for the council would be limited, and Earthwatch have given an example of where over a four-year period (years 1 – 4), at a different Tiny Forest, the maintenance costs averaged at £120 per annum. A summary of maintenance requirements, provided by Earthwatch, details the maintenance ongoing required by the council as the landowner and by the volunteer tree keepers can be found in Appendix A.
- 2.17 However, considering the current situation faced by the council regarding management of trees across the borough, and given the assumption of volunteers completing basic maintenance tasks, officers feel that should the Council proceed with this application and subsequent project, a budget provision should be set aside for maintenance, albeit at a time of financial efficiency being sought and nil financial growth.
- 2.18 Therefore, the intention is to allocate a dedicated budget for future maintenance of the chosen sites from within the existing Parks and Open Spaces budget with the money vired across accordingly.
- 2.19 Should Members wish to participate in the partnership application, and in doing so, officers suggest an application for 2 x Tiny Forests and an additional 20 standards, 50 feathers and 500 whips.
- 2.20 Timescales have meant that elements of the project have not been fully considered at this time. These include the identification of appropriate sites in the borough, obtaining a greater understanding of the maintenance requirements for the trees and any consequential increase in grounds maintenance costs, possibly by engaging with other local authorities who have entered such arrangements, and the identification of the funding that would be used to create the maintenance contingency fund. Equally, assuming there are agreements required between partners, specifically Earthwatch, colleagues in Law & Governance have not had chance to review these.
- 2.21 Given this, if approved to be part of the application, it is proposed that further work is undertaken by officers in the coming months, with a further report brought to committee in September 2024, where a final recommendation to proceed or not will be presented, as well as details on preferred sites, confirmed identification of funding etc.
- 2.22 To ensure such a flexible approach is possible, confirmation that the Council can withdraw from the process/project after the application has been submitted, has been sought, and an update is intended to be provided in the presentation of this report at committee.

3 Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The intended project proposed, supports the delivery of the Council's Climate Change Strategy and Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

4. Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 Resource implications for the council in relation to this potential project, relate to the following:

4.1.1 *Identification and use of land assets for the purpose of installing Tiny Forests*

The Council will be required to identify appropriate land that is suitable and can be made available for the planting of Tiny Forests, and in doing so commit to the land being limited for this purpose for a minimum of ten years, although most likely indefinitely.

4.1.2 *Supporting the delivery of the project through the allocation of staff resources.*

Whilst Earthwatch will lead the project in the first two years, there will be a requirement for officers to have oversight of the project and be engaged/visible in the work with communities.

4.1.3 *Identification of finances to create both a maintenance contingency fund and a small routine maintenance budget.*

Whilst the installations and early-stage costs will be met by the grant received (excluding possible repairs to any fencing, bench, or signage), there is a need to ensure that the council can undertake the ongoing maintenance requirements of the forests and any increased grounds maintenance costs, without conflicting with the corporate priority linked to financial efficiency.

Officers believe that, based on the information received to date, a £500 annual maintenance budget will be sufficient to cover future costs. This money will be transferred from elsewhere in the Parks and Open Spaces budget. Over the next few months officers will undertake additional work to understand all the future maintenance requirements and, if there is an increased budget requirement, options for funding the difference will be explored with a final decision on whether to proceed with the scheme, being subject to a further report to committee in September 2024

4.1.4 *Operational resources to complete routine maintenance.*

To complete the routine maintenance required ongoing with the Tiny Forests, and other trees planted, confirmation that this can be accommodated within the resources of the operational team in Environmental Services will be required. All trees planted will need to be recorded on the council's tree asset register, and therefore likely be managed ongoing in accordance with the council's future tree maintenance arrangements.

- 4.2 All of the above will need to be considered further, ahead of a further report to committee in September 2024, to determine whether the council can proceed with the project.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 At the time of writing this report, it is felt likely that there will be legal implications relating to this project, including the requirement for a land release agreement, agreement with Earthwatch Europe for the delivery of the project locally and agreeing

to the terms and conditions of the grant funding. A full breakdown of these and any other requirements will be sought for the report to be presented in September 2024.

- 5.2 In addition, the project will also create other legal implications around public liability and insurance relating to volunteer groups working on council owned land (and the conditions under which they volunteer), as well as general risk relating to residents accessing the newly created areas.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 There are no equality implications associated with this report. However, if determining to proceed, an equalities impact assessment would be required for the project.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 Information received from Earthwatch outlines the environmental, sustainability and biodiversity benefits of the Tiny Forest project. Appendix B provides a report on these benefits, covering the following five areas: biodiversity, tree growth and carbon storage, flood management, thermal comfort, and social benefits.

8. Risk Implications

- 8.1 The main risk implication to be considered is the ongoing maintenance requirements and associated liability for the Council.
- 8.2 In terms of the risk this creates, in the event of planting new trees, this would need to be incorporated within the plans for the management and maintenance of all council tree assets. This is covered in the risk management system, as risk ID HO31.

9. Timetable for Implementation

- 9.1 The deadline for applications to the Local Authority Treescapes Fund is 30th June 2024. To make a final determination as to whether the council is to proceed with the project (assuming a successful application is made), a report will be brought to committee in September 2024, and project commencement, decision dependent, thereafter.

10. Conclusions

- 10.1 This report outlines a potential opportunity for the council, which is time bound by a deadline for the submission of funding applications.
- 10.2 The potential to work in partnership with others to deliver a new environmental project in Runnymede, at what officers are informed to be limited cost, is seen as a positive opportunity that Members may wish to engage in further.
- 10.3 However, the short timescales for research and engagement have meant that officers have not been able to give it the full consideration required for Members to make an informed decision as to whether to proceed. Therefore, if minded applying for funding, further work will be undertaken against the various considerations outlined in the report, for a final decision to proceed or not to be made in September 2024.

11. Background papers

- None

12. Appendices

- Appendix A – Maintenance Requirements for Tiny Forests (Earthwatch Europe 2024)
- Appendix B – Tiny Forest Monitoring Report 2023