

# Environment and Sustainability Committee



18 June 2024

<b>Title</b>	Tiny Forest bid
<b>Purpose of the report</b>	To authorise Spelthorne Officers to submit a bid to the Local Authority Treescapes Fund (LATF) in partnership with Runnymede Borough Council to fund one or more Tiny Forests in Spelthorne.
<b>Report Author</b>	Anna Fjortoft – Biodiversity Officer (Neighbourhood Services) Gina Cook - Climate Change Officer (Projects)
<b>Ward(s) Affected</b>	All Wards
<b>Exempt</b>	No
<b>Exemption Reason</b>	n/a
<b>Corporate Priority</b>	Community Resilience Environment
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authorise Spelthorne Officers to submit a funding bid to the LATF.</li> <li>• Delegate authority to Head of Corporate Governance to enter a contract with Earthwatch to deliver the Tiny Forest project.</li> </ul>
<b>Reason for Recommendation</b>	The creation of one or more Tiny Forests in the borough supports our Climate Change Strategy, the Climate Change Emergency declaration made by Spelthorne Council in 2020, and three targets in the Corporate Plan. Additionally, a Tiny Forest provides the opportunity to connect people to nature and restore habitat for urban wildlife.

## 1. Summary of the report

What is the situation	Why we want to do something
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spelthorne Borough Council declared a climate emergency in October 2020</li> <li>• Biodiversity is one of the 9 key sections within the strategy.</li> <li>• Grant funding is available from LATF, which can be used to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Tiny Forest is a tennis-court sized woodland aiming to restore woodland habitat in urban areas. Benefits include connecting people with nature, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change, and providing nature-rich habitat to support urban wildlife.</li> </ul>

<p>apply for a Tiny Forest, whilst working with the organisation Earthwatch to implement it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is an opportunity for partnership working with Runnymede, who also want to create Tiny Forests in their borough. This will contribute to creation of biodiversity corridors across our shared boundary.</li> <li>• Each Tiny Forest costs approximately £32,960 for creation and three years of management and engagement with Tiny Forest. If successful, the bid will cover all costs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This will support actions in the Climate Change Strategy Action Plan, specifically related to biodiversity and carbon sequestration and resilience. It also supports actions in the corporate plan.</li> </ul>
<p><b>This is what we want to do about it</b></p>	<p><b>These are the next steps</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply for the funding from LATF to work with Earthwatch.</li> <li>• Create one or more Tiny Forests in the borough.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain approval to submit a bid proposal.</li> <li>• Find an area of land that can be used for this purpose.</li> </ul>

- 1.1 Tiny Forest is a planting project package created by Earthwatch Europe which is based on a planting concept known as Miyawaki. These small but powerful forests are tennis court-sized (200m<sup>2</sup>), highly dense (3 saplings per m<sup>2</sup>), 100% native and species rich (25 trees and shrubs) woodlands. They are designed to fast track to the stable ecosystem of a mature woodland in 20-30 years, rather than 100-200 years through natural woodland development. Therefore, they deliver the associated benefits of a forest ecosystem much faster.
- 1.2 This planting project offers unique and additional benefits to existing woodlands and tree planting in Spelthorne. While the Council already actively plants trees, they are usually planted in a small copse, grouped in small numbers (not usually more than ten, spaced out), or in narrow rows to form hedgerows. These do not provide the same dense habitat for wildlife, they won't grow as quickly as a Miyawaki forest and therefore do not provide as many benefits.
- 1.3 Tiny Forest also offer a unique opportunity for community engagement; Earthwatch organise volunteer planting days including environmental education sessions, engaging a tree-keeper team of 4-5 community volunteers (1hr/month in spring summer of first two years to weed and water), train volunteers in citizen science to monitor the environmental and social benefits of the forest, and provide resources to assist with nature learning. Earthwatch are involved for a minimum of three years to support the early stages of establishment. After establishment, Earthwatch will continue to be involved as much as they are able; it is in their interest to keep volunteers

engaged and to continue citizen science monitoring in order to collect data about Tiny Forests. The timetable of events is provided by Earthwatch in a project Agreement which is signed by Earthwatch, the Council and the landowner.

- 1.4 The Corporate Plan highlights the need to 1) plant more trees to reduce flood risk; 2) to identify habitats of high carbon sequestration and plant species to adapt to future environmental changes; and 3) to promote local 'greening the grey' initiatives via schools and community groups.
- 1.5 This project will help us to achieve these aims. Tiny Forests will contribute to alleviation of flooding as tree roots help water to penetrate the soil at a faster rate, reducing surface run-off whilst leaves and branches intercept rainfall, slowing the rate of soil saturation. The dense planting of Miyawaki planting results in accelerated growth rates and hence carbon sequestration rates. Trees are all native to support native wildlife optimally. Additionally, the forests will provide cooling and shading to adapt to the urban heat island effect. Lastly, Earthwatch will recruit and organise community groups and schools and provide citizen science training and resources to them so they can monitor and mind the forest as it grows. They will monitor biodiversity, survival, air temperature, personal experience, soil condition etc.
- 1.6 Applying for the bid with Runnymede will strengthen our bid as the LATF favour partnership working. It does not require any ongoing collaboration between Spelthorne and Runnymede regarding the Tiny Forests, but the Councils will benefit from updating one another on the development of our Tiny Forests.

## **2. Key issues**

- 2.1 Surrey Wildlife Trust reports that species have declined on average by 19% since 1970, and in Surrey the rate of decline is even faster. As one of the most urban boroughs within Surrey, Spelthorne has one of the lowest percentage tree canopy covers in Surrey. Tiny Forest is an ideal method for restoring lost woodland in urban areas.
- 2.2 Environmental issues such as flooding, heat stress and loss of biodiversity are increasingly affecting urban areas. Creating thriving and climate-resilient urban areas that support economic growth, whilst also enhancing livelihoods and wellbeing, is a considerable challenge. Tiny Forests capture carbon from the atmosphere, help with urban cooling, provide much-needed urban wildlife habitats and increase accessibility to nature.
- 2.3 We are investigating potential sites for the Tiny Forests, prioritising locations where we know woodland has been lost previously, where there is already a community group who will want to support, or in proximity to the Runnymede boundary. The landowner, whether Spelthorne or another landowner we collaborate with, will sign a land release as part of the Agreement with Earthwatch. The landowner will agree not to remove the forest for ten years. If a site on Spelthorne land is identified, a report will come back to Environment and Sustainability seeking authorisation to enter a Land Release Agreement.
- 2.4 LATF are providing an opportunity to submit a funding bid that would cover the costs of the creation of one or more Tiny Forest and three years of establishment costs. After three years, the Tiny Forest is self-sustaining.

- 2.5 We have identified schools as a highly suitable location. Having a Tiny Forest in their school fields will enrich wildlife education for students. School sites also have the benefits of providing more security from vandalism and a pool of volunteers to care for the forest.
- 2.6 Whilst the addition of a Tiny Forest to a school field may reduce the area for sports recreation, a Tiny Forest will be a valuable asset to the school; it will provide an opportunity for students to actively learn about conservation, climate change and biological monitoring. Earthwatch provide specific resources tailored to school students to assist with these lessons. Whether a school has space for the addition of a Tiny Forest is at the school's discretion. Surrey County Council Tree Planting Officers are supporting this and attending school visits to assess site viability.
- 2.7 We have already received an expression of interest for collaboration from Riverbridge Primary School (Staines) and Thames Water (Ashford, or around the King George VI or Queen Mary reservoirs) and are progressing discussions on site viability with the assistance of Earthwatch and the SCC Tree Planting Officers.
- 2.8 We will also be looking for sites on Spelthorne-owned land. A separate report will be submitted to the Environment and Sustainability Committee if sites have been identified.

### **3. Options analysis and proposal**

- 3.1 **Option 1:** For the Committee to recommend the application of the bid to LATF for a Tiny Forest (recommended option). This will support the Climate Change Strategy and Corporate Plan.
- 3.2 **Option 2:** For the Committee to reject application for a bid. This will not support the Climate Change Strategy and Corporate Plan.

### **4. Financial implications**

- 4.1 As per 2.4, Earthwatch has stated that the project will incur zero costs to the Council and will be fully funded through the LATF bid. If successful in the bid for a Tiny Forest, the grant will cover all costs for the first three years, apart from any officer time used to assist with the project.
- 4.2 Officer time will include identifying sites for the forests and liaising with Earthwatch whilst they write the bid. Following the bid submission (June 30<sup>th</sup>), Officer time will be minimal. Earthwatch will act as a supplier and carry out the entire project on the Council's instruction. Officer time can be covered by existing resources.
- 4.3 In the unlikely circumstance that the forest fails, and survival is less than 75%, Earthwatch will replant the following season with zero cost to the council. This will be included in the Agreement.
- 4.4 The bid will include watering by a third-party contractor for six weeks in the first summer and/or second summer of planting.

### **5. Risk considerations**

- 5.1 At this stage there is no direct risk to the Council.
- 5.2 If the Officers are successful in the bid but sites are then found to be unsuitable, it is possible to change the planting sites. If no sites can be

identified, the Council will repay the money and project will end with no loss other than Officer time.

- 5.3 As we continue to experience the impacts of climate change, climate resilience will continue to be a risk. Recognising this risk and taking action now is important.

## **6. Procurement considerations**

- 6.1 There are no procurement considerations at this time. Earthwatch are the only viable organisation to carry out this project and offer this level of support, including writing the bid application on Spelthorne's behalf.

- 6.2 Since 2020, Earthwatch have planted over two hundred Tiny Forests in the UK including a number of London Boroughs, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Scotland to name a few. They have worked with more than twenty eight UK Councils, and with organisations including DEFRA, Forestry Commission, Nature Scot, Thames Water and a number of other businesses. They are experienced in preparing bids to be submitted by councils to the Local Authority Treescapes Fund and have one hundred percent success rate across the forty bids they have previously prepared.

## **7. Legal considerations**

- 7.1 Legal Services ([g.legal@spelthorne.gov.uk](mailto:g.legal@spelthorne.gov.uk)) will be consulted for advice on the terms and conditions of the Grant Agreement; and on the preparation of a Collaboration Agreement with Runnymede Borough Council and / or Earthwatch Europe.
- 7.2 Legal Services will advise and assist in the preparation of any other relevant agreements that may be required as a result of a successful bid.
- 7.3 Legal Services will further advise on compliance with the Council's Contract Standing Orders where applicable and the Council's statutory duty to deliver best value under the Local Government Act 1999.
- 7.4 Prior to entering into a binding commitment Legal Services will also be consulted on any potential user restrictions or incumbrances in respect of the land identified for the proposed planting of Tiny Forest as well as the release agreement referred to in paragraph [1.3, 2.3, 4.3].

## **8. Other considerations**

- 8.1 There are none.

## **9. Equality and Diversity**

- 9.1 The climate emergency and its impacts affect all of us. However, many of the effects will be disproportionately felt by those residents and communities who are most vulnerable. The proposed Tiny Forest concept creates areas in urban environments that ensure additional resilience to the impacts of climate change.
- 9.2 Earthwatch assist in the creation of a Tiny Forest and work closely with communities to implement the project. This provides members of the community a role in helping to care about their environment. Access to green space and education should be accessible for all.

## **10. Sustainability/Climate Change Implications**

- 10.1 Environmental issues such as flooding, heat stress and loss of biodiversity are increasingly affecting urban areas. As we continue to experience the impacts of a changing climate, the need to provide areas of refuge in urban spaces will continue to grow.
- 10.2 The creation of such spaces will be significant to ensure that Spelthorne is responding proactively to the climate emergency through appropriate mitigation and adaptation actions, alongside the positive biodiversity and health impacts.

## **11. Timetable for implementation**

- 11.1 To be submitted to the Environment and Sustainability Committee on the 18<sup>th</sup> June 2024. If approval for submission of this bid is given, the bid will be prepared by Earthwatch and submitted by the Council before the deadline of June 30<sup>th</sup> 2024. Planting of Tiny Forest would commence in November 2024.

## **12. Contact**

- 12.1 Anna Fjortoft [a.fjortoft@spelthorne.gov.uk](mailto:a.fjortoft@spelthorne.gov.uk)
- 12.2 Gina Cook [g.cook@spelthorne.gov.uk](mailto:g.cook@spelthorne.gov.uk)

**Background papers:** *None.*

**List as Appendices:**

**Appendix 1: Tiny Forest Fact File**