



Report to Town Council

(This report covers the Tree Group's major activities in seasons 2020-2021 and 2021-2022)

The summers of 2020 and 2021 were again hot and dry and newly planted trees needed weekly attention from April until September. A 1000 litre bowser together with an increased capacity pump, purchased with support from a grant from the Essex Association of Local Councils, proved to be a great asset in this task.

The creation of the War Memorial Park between Bramble Road and Honeysuckle Way was completed in the autumn of 2021. BDC are arranging for signs to be placed at either end of the Park and an information board to be located centrally. The initial intention, to create a linear copse to commemorate those who fell in WW1, grew into a major project to remember those who fell in war generally including the war in Afghanistan. In total 124 trees were planted. The Tree Group were supported in most phases of the project by Bee Brook Tree Services and community volunteers including staff from Aegon and on one occasion students from Rickstones Academy.

In the past two years we have undertaken two projects jointly with Eastlight Community Homes. The first on the Hatfield Road estate where we planted 17 trees, the second on the Forest Road estate where we planted 12. Eastlight provided the funding for the purchase of the trees for both projects and the Tree Group sourced the posts, mesh and ancillary materials from the Town Council budget allocation to the Group. As a supplement to the Forest Road project with Eastlight the Group planted three trees off Cut Throat Lane between the Electricity Station and Hemlock Close with support from a BDC Community grant sourced with the help of Cllr Weekes. We also planted 200 whips supplied by The Conservation Volunteers (TCV), supplemented by various saplings provided by Group members and a member of the public, to screen the Electricity Sub-Station. A full list of trees planted by the Group is available on our website www.withamtreegroup.org.uk

It is now ten years since the Group was formed and it is perhaps a good time to take stock, review what has been achieved and to examine ways in which our prime objective, to see an increase in the tree cover in Witham, can be even better fulfilled.

We have planted over 300 quality trees and thanks to our planting techniques and subsequent after care and maintenance, in particular our practice of watering newly planted trees throughout their first two summers, we have had very few failures. We have also planted over 1000 whips and several smaller trees donated by residents. We identified sites for over 150 trees planted and maintained by Kings Nursery under contract to BDC, funded by a s.106 agreement. We have developed an excellent relationship with BDC Landscape Services and in recent times with Eastlight Community Housing and have received excellent support from members of the public and especially staff at Aegon. But we have been

increasingly concerned that our efforts to increase tree cover may not be keeping pace with losses elsewhere.

The ability of trees to mitigate the impact of climate change through carbon capture is well understood but it takes up to 40 years for a tree to reach a level of maturity when it can begin to make an impact. Meanwhile we are reducing levels of carbon capture each time a mature tree is lost. In recent times trees have been lost through disease eg Dutch Elm disease and Ash Dieback, storm damage, retail and housing developments.

There is little we can do to prevent losses through disease but we have seen clear evidence that some recent losses have been due to poor planting techniques. Trees that were probably planted some 15 or so years ago have died long before their time and then been uprooted during storms. Examination of the root ball has shown that they failed to put down stabilising or feeding roots. This can only be due to failures at planting time to tease out pot bound roots and to provide space and soil conditions for young roots to grow.

Large scale retail and housing developments in and around Witham have resulted in the loss of many mature trees. Planning requirements call on developers to provide tree planting schemes to mitigate for the losses. A typical feature of these schemes is that the developer undertakes to replace any tree that fails to establish within a period of 5 years. It is clear from our research that many trees planted under these schemes fail to establish. This is almost certainly due to a failure on the part of the developer to provide sufficient aftercare ie watering. It may also be due to poor planting practice. It would appear that developers find it more cost effective to replace a failed tree before the expiry of the five year period rather than maintain a watering regime to help the tree establish in the first place. No provisions are made in the contract as far as we are aware that would ensure that the replacement tree survives. If this practice is allowed to continue our new housing and retail developments will end up with a tree landscape that is far from that envisage by the original plans.

To rectify this situation, we would urge the Town Council to make strong representations to Braintree District Council Planning Department to revised the conditions attached to landscaping requirements relating to new developments to ensure that recognised planting practices are followed and appropriate aftercare (watering) procedures are adopted and to carry out strict enforcement action to ensure that those conditions are met. We would also urge BDC to discuss with present developers how they might rectify the present appalling situation whereby so many young trees they have planted have failed to establish.

Barry Fleet
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