

NEWS RELEASE



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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THOUSANDS OF NEW TREES TO HONOUR BOROUGH'S COVID LOSSES

A commemorative woodland is set to be planted in Wokingham Borough to honour those who lost their lives during the coronavirus pandemic.

The council is poised to agree a lasting memorial at the south-eastern corner of Rooks Nest Farm in Finchampstead parish, with work hopefully starting in September and finishing in early 2024.

The 7.7-hectare plot lies immediately north of California Country Park and would become an extension of it. It would be planted with about 6,600 native trees and additional wildflower seeding.

A sculpture or similar memorial would be installed with two benches and footpaths to make this new public space welcoming to all. It would be in easy reach as the traffic-free greenway from Arborfield Green to Finchampstead runs along the southern edge.

Supporting the environment as well as people's welfare

The idea has cross-party support as the pandemic has sadly claimed hundreds of lives in the borough since March 2020. There is no other current or planned use for the site, which the council already owns, and the trees would support its ongoing efforts to tackle the climate emergency because they absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

The scheme would also help meet the council's goals to help the borough achieve net-zero carbon status by 2030, reach international Tree Cities of the World standards and convert 170 hectares in the borough to new woodland, hedgerows and orchards.

It will also increase biodiversity by offering a richer habitat for wildlife, improve air quality by absorbing harmful pollutants and reduce the flood risk by soaking up surface water.

Benefits to continue for decades to come

Cllr Clive Jones, the council leader, said: “Having come up with and proposed this idea, I’m delighted to see it come closer to reality. For every death in the pandemic, many more people were dealt the cruel blow of a sudden, unexpected loss which they will carry for the rest of their lives.

“While we offered a wide range of support to our residents, many in the borough are still coming to terms with the past few years’ events. Even for those whose friends and relatives thankfully remained well, it was a deeply frightening and unsettling period.

“It’s important that people have a peaceful space to reflect on these things and to know that, as a community, we stand together and recognise those who are still grieving as well as those who are no longer with us.

“The benefits will last for many generations, even for those not yet born, as time spent in nature improves people’s wellbeing generally. Given this and the positive environmental impact, it’s a sound investment which will more than pay for itself.”

Investing wisely and finding external funding

At a meeting of its decision-making executive next Tuesday (21 March), the council is set to agree a budget of up to £188,385 towards planning and implementing the scheme.

The upfront cost for supplying and planting the trees can be funded through the Woodland Trust’s Emergency Tree Fund, which has committed £300,000 to various forms of planting across the borough.

Costs will be offset by people using nearby facilities like the popular café at California Country Park, which was extensively refurbished last year, and through “biodiversity net gain units” – a Government-backed scheme that requires developers to offset their impacts on wildlife in the borough by enhancing other areas.

This would partly cover at least 30 years’ running costs. As always, the council is working to minimise its own outgoings as it strives to balance sound finances with providing the services and amenities that improve residents’ lives.

Maintaining a green and pleasant borough

This news comes as the council presents hundreds of free saplings to residents and businesses under its Garden Forest Scheme, also supported by the Woodland Trust.

It is continuing to develop its Tree Strategy, which will set clear policies on how trees and other flora are planted, maintained and protected, following public consultation this year.

For more about the borough's public green spaces including its country parks and nature parks, visit www.wokinghamcountryside.co.uk.

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Further information:

1. More from the council's communications, engagement and marketing team at cem@wokingham.gov.uk