

Meeting:	Combined Executive Member Decision Session
Date:	1 July 2025
Report by:	Chief Strategy Officer
Portfolio holder:	Executive Member, Environment and Climate Emergency

Decision Report: Strategic Partner Endorsement of the White Rose Forest Strategic Plan 2025-50

Subject of this report

1. The purpose of this report is to note that a new Strategic Plan has been developed and approved by the White Rose Forest (WRF) partnership, and to seek City of York Council's endorsement as a strategic partner.

Recommendations

2. The Executive member is recommended to:
 - a) Note that a new WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50 has been developed and approved by the WRF partnership and to formally endorse it, demonstrating City of York Council's support.
 - b) Note how the Council can play its part in successful delivery of the Strategic Plan with reference to the priorities and targets for York.
 - c) Note the progress made to date towards York's priorities and targets.

Background

3. The WRF is the Community Forest for North and West Yorkshire. A partnership of local and combined authorities, National Park authorities and national landscape organisations, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) organisations, alongside national, regional and local charities, businesses and community enterprises.
4. The WRF is not a single 'forest', but the network of all trees, woods and forests across North and West Yorkshire, including trees in gardens and on residential streets, in town and city centres, along transport routes, in parks and green spaces, by rivers, canals and lakes, on farmland and in the countryside.
5. The WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50, see Appendix 1, is the long-term strategic document governing development of the WRF, setting out the partnership's vision,

aspirations and targets for tree and woodland establishment and management in North and West Yorkshire.

6. Its purpose is influencing/advocating, profile raising and securing commitment, plus being used as the basis for bidding for and directing the use of resources. Its principal audience is therefore local political/business leaders, funders (including government) and partners.
7. The partnership has progressed the development of a new Strategic Plan over the last 18 months, with the process now completed with the approval of the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50 by the partnership's Strategic Board on 26 March 2025.

White Rose Forest Strategic Plan 2025-50 vision and objectives

8. The WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50 builds on the foundations of the WRF Action Plan 2021-25 and experience and learning of the partnership over recent years. It creates an umbrella strategy for North and West Yorkshire, which accommodates more bespoke strategies/plans/actions at a local level and establishes a structure for more detailed action planning.
9. The Strategic Plan articulates the broad and diverse benefits (environmental, economic & social) of trees and woodland and emphasises the concept of an extensive network of all trees and woodland across North and West Yorkshire and wanting to expand, improve and better connect this. It broadens the aims and objectives to reflect the current priorities, making these more obvious (e.g. nature recovery, woodland management, community engagement, accessibility, partnership).
10. The Strategic Plan demonstrates the level of ambition for the WRF area and what could be possible in 25 years and highlights that everyone has a part to play and how the partnership will work together to deliver on the ambition.
11. The Strategic Plan expresses the partnership's long-term direction and level of ambition through a Vision: *"The White Rose Forest partnership is leading landscape transformation in North and West Yorkshire, creating a vast and varied treescape that connects and permeates our towns/cities and countryside. Our work has made our region more prosperous and resilient to a changing climate, improved health & wellbeing and supported nature recovery."* and a set of Strategic Objectives (and associated targets):
 - Expand the area of trees and woodland and improve connectivity.
 - Protect and restore more trees and woodland.
 - Engage more people, communities and businesses in the planning, designing, planting, management and use of trees and woodland.
 - Promote the transformative role of trees and woodland.
 - Grow the impact and sustainability of the White Rose Forest partnership.
12. The WRF Strategic Board is now seeking endorsement of the Strategic Plan 2025-50 from strategic partners, to raise the profile of the WRF and the partnership's new

Strategic Plan, and to demonstrate strategic partner support for its long-term direction and ambition.

13. Trees and woodland are one of the most effective nature-based solutions for adapting to climate change and providing habitat to protect and enhance biodiversity. Due to this and the societal benefits, there is also strong public support for more trees and woodland.
14. Successful delivery of the Strategic Plan will provide a wide range of direct and indirect (and often multiple) benefits for: business; the environment; nature; and communities.

Linkage with existing Strategies and Plans

15. The WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50 links to the following Council strategies and plans:

- Local Plan and emerging Supplementary Planning Documents – creating greener and more sustainable places
- Climate change strategy and action plan – sequestering residual carbon and mitigating urban heat and flooding through nature-based solutions
- Health and wellbeing strategy – including access to green space, improved air quality, and more resilient health related buildings and services through nature-based solutions
- Economic strategy - making York an attractive place to live, work and invest
- Emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy – protecting and enhancing nature.

How City of York Council can support successful delivery of the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50

16. The Council has an ambition to see York's tree canopy cover rise from 10.8% to 13% by 2050 to support nature recovery, climate resilience and access to green space (see Background papers below).
17. Alongside new tree planting, the Council seeks to protect and restore York's trees and woodland through active management and community engagement, with a focus on risks such as ageing stock, climate resilience and disease. Work to enhance York's flood resilience includes nature-based solutions and natural flood management in the Swale, Ure, Nidd and Ouse (SUNO) catchments to 'slow the flow'. These goals and actions form the basis of the Council's contribution to the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50, as set out on page 16 of Appendix 1.
18. The Council has made a significant contribution to WRF regional targets in recent years. In 2020, the Council initiated the award-winning York Community Woodland project which, through a partnership with Forestry England, has seen circa 200,000 new trees and shrubs planted on a 79-hectare peri-urban site in the west of the city. This will deliver multiple ecosystem service and community benefits including the storing of circa 18,500 tonnes of CO₂e towards the Council's net zero goal.
19. More recently, the Council has planted circa 5,300 trees as part of the York Green Streets initiative, exceeding a Council Plan commitment to plant 4,000 trees by 2027. These trees, supported by £430,000 of external grant funding, will deliver long-term

ecosystem service value, including improved access to green space, biodiversity gain, carbon sequestration and health and wellbeing benefits. Almost 80% of trees planted are in areas rated as 'high' and 'moderate' priority for tree cover according to the Woodland Trust and within sixteen of York's 21 wards. Over 100 volunteers helped with tree planting.

20. The aspirations of the WRF Strategic Plan require significant land for tree planting and woodland creation, far beyond that owned or managed by City of York Council therefore the Council will work with others in the WRF partnership, subject to resources being available, to engage with landowners and managers across our area to identify and utilise sites. To this end, the Council is working with the York Sustainability Leaders Group to promote the transformational role of trees and woodland, and it will seek to monitor partner contributions to new tree planting so these can be fed into the WRF 'delivery pipeline and count towards York's overall canopy target. The Council will continue to manage its tree assets in line with the agreed Arboricultural policy.

Engagement and Consultation in WRF Strategic Plan development

Stakeholders

21. The WRF partnership led on the development of the Strategic Plan 2025-50 and hence the engagement of stakeholders, which has taken place throughout the Strategic Plan development process, in many ways, facilitating place and thematic input, including from:
- WRF District Groups
 - Catchment Partnership workshops
 - Green Streets workshop
 - Ancient Woodland sub-group
 - Local Nature Recovery Strategy (x2) involvement
 - Community Engagement project
 - Data and Mapping workshops
22. A formal Stakeholder Engagement survey ran from 4 December to 17 January 2025, comprising a small number of open prompt questions to provide a high-level structure for free text feedback on a Summary Strategic Plan produced as the basis for engagement, with responses received from a good range of stakeholders.
23. Considerable support for the Summary was expressed, with it aligning well the stakeholder policies, strategies and plans. Stakeholders raised many useful suggestions for how the strategic plan could be further developed / enhanced, which have all been considered in finalising the Strategic Plan.
24. All respondents confirmed they felt a degree of alignment between the Summary Strategic Plan and their policies, strategies and plans, with almost half indicating full alignment.
25. All respondents confirmed support for the long-term direction and level of ambition, as articulated in the vision and targets, with over 70% indicating full support.

Public

26. A Public Engagement survey ran from 6 to 28 January 2025, comprising a number of multiple choice or rating / ranking type questions, with just over 300 responses received.

27. This has helped raise the profile of the WRF and confirmed public support for the proposed long-term direction, level of ambition and approach outlined in the Summary WRF Strategic Plan. In addition, it has provided some useful input on the value the public place on trees and woodland and what they would like to see prioritised in the future. Finally, contact details have been provided by 153 respondents who would like to be contacted regarding the work of the WRF and the opportunities to get involved in the future, supporting ongoing community engagement. Some key findings were:

- Respondents overwhelmingly agreed (93% strongly agree or agree) that we need more trees and woodland in North and West Yorkshire
- Many more respondents thought that trees and woodland close to where they live had declined (40%) rather than improved (25%) in the last 5 years
- Respondents overwhelmingly supported the long-term direction and level of ambition outlined in the Summary Strategic Plan (91% Strongly support or Support)

Internal

28. Members of the York Sustainability Leaders group were invited to comment on a Draft version of the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50. This is a group made up of key anchor institutions and a range of City of York Council officers representing different service areas.

Options

29. The options considered for recommendation are:

- To endorse the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50
- To not endorse the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50

30. By endorsing the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50, City of York Council will be demonstrating its support for the WRF partnership and the long-term direction and level of ambition of its Strategic Plan.

Organisational Impact and Implications

- **Financial** - There are no direct financial implications of endorsing the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50 for City of York Council. The WRF Agreement, of which the Council is a signatory, is clear that there will be no obligation on any signatory to make an annual financial contribution, although voluntary contributions can be made. The

WRF Agreement signatories have committed to working collectively, collaboratively and in good faith towards securing and accessing funds for the delivery of the Strategic Plan and associated 5-yearly Action Plans. The WRF partnership will take a pro-active approach to securing funding, exploring and developing a broad range of options and will do so in a co-ordinated manner to optimise outcomes. The Strategic Plan will help coordinate and prioritise resources to maximise resource efficiency. The WRF partnership delivers significant financial benefits, enabling the Council to access external funding to deliver local priorities, reducing the burden on its resources.

- **Human resources** - For City of York Council to effectively support the delivery of the Strategic Plan dedicated human resource will be required. This will be through the utilisation of existing resource and any potential additional resource when funding becomes available.
- **Legal** - There are no direct legal implications of endorsing the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50. City of York Council is a signatory to the WRF Agreement, and as such is a member of the Strategic Board which approved the WRF Strategic Plan 2025-50, on behalf of the partnership.
- **Procurement** - There are no implications directly arising from this report.
- **Health and wellbeing** - There are no implications directly arising from this report. Trees and green space make a positive contribution to health and wellbeing.
- **Environment and climate action** - Trees and woodland are one of the most effective nature-based solutions for adapting to climate change and providing habitat to protect and enhance biodiversity. They also play a role in offsetting carbon emissions and supporting our transition to net zero carbon.
- **Affordability** - There are no implications directly arising from this report.
- **Equalities and human rights** – There are no implications directly arising from this report.
- **Data protection and privacy** - There are no implications directly arising from this report.
- **Communications** - Endorsing the White Rose Forest Strategic Plan 2025–50 presents a valuable opportunity for the Council to demonstrate leadership in climate action, community resilience, and regional collaboration. Communications should clearly articulate York’s role within the broader landscape transformation effort, celebrating achievements like York Community Woodland and Green Streets, while aligning messages with the Council’s climate, health, and economic strategies. The plan’s strong public backing and emphasis on partnership offer a platform to amplify citizen engagement, reinforce York’s environmental credentials, and position the Council as a key enabler of long-term change, without overcommitting resources. Strategic, consistent messaging will be essential to maintain trust, galvanise action, and attract future funding.
- **Economy** - There are no implications directly arising from this report.

Wards Impacted

Not applicable

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Background papers and references

- City of York Tree Canopy Expansion Target Report – Executive Member Decision Session, Environment and Climate Emergency 21 May 2021

Appendices

Appendix 1: White Rose Forest Strategic Plan 2025-50