

Meeting:	Decision Session - Executive Member for Environment and Climate Emergency
Meeting date:	29 April 2025
Report of:	Director of Transport, Environment and Planning
Portfolio of:	Councillor Kent, Executive Member for Environment and Climate Emergency

Decision Report: Service Developments and Updates – Public Realm

Subject of Report

1. The Council Plan 2023-2027 sets a clear vision for the council - by working with the city *we will establish the conditions that would make the city healthier, fairer, more affordable, more sustainable and more accessible*. Improving green spaces, parks and play-areas that are freely available, whilst enhancing the biodiversity and increasing pollinators to ensure the spaces are more sustainable, is directly aligned to the council's vision. In addition, residents have told us in petitions, the development of the Local Plan, and throughout consultations that they value the city's unique character and how it is enhanced through well-maintained green spaces. Investing in the protection and development of public spaces leaves a lasting and positive impression of a city residents are justifiably proud of.
2. The Public Realm Team focuses on both the everyday tasks of street cleansing, parks and open spaces and grounds maintenance as well as the longer-term investment and development of spaces. This report follows on from a report previously taken to the Executive Member for the Environment and Climate Emergency at a decision session in February 2024

3. There are several updates on progress achieved in 2024/25 together with some options for future service developments in 2025/26 and beyond. The main areas the report covers include cleansing of the city centre, weed control, verge management, sustainable planting, the Bar Walls and the City's Parks. In so doing the report also responds to the issues raised in two e-petitions submitted to Full Council on 19th September 2024 regarding the condition of York's Parks and Bar Walls, and 'Hull Road Park'.
4. The named lead on the petitions have been invited to speak or make a representation as part of this meeting.

Background

5. York is regularly recognised as a great place to live as well as attracting over 9 million visitors per year. It has long been recognised these everyday services are important to our sense of place and pride in our city and neighbourhoods and the role that they play in our economy. This was reflected in the recent budget consultation undertaken in autumn 2024.
6. However, just as important is how we undertake these tasks, ensuring that our actions reflect our commitments to the environment. This commitment is defined by our various strategies and plans such as the Climate Change Strategy, Pollinator Strategy and our Electric Vehicle Strategy which detail our response to the climate emergency and seeking, where possible, to reduce our impact on the environment and reverse the change where possible.

Benefits and Challenges

7. There are several benefits and challenges in respect of verge and open space management. There are opportunities to increase biodiversity and deliver the aspirations within the Council's Pollinator Strategy, with the obvious benefits to the environment. It is also important that the city and surrounding villages and areas remain clean and well maintained but there are opportunities to offer more diverse habitats through effective land management practices. In addition, it must be recognised that the Council has an active community of volunteers and Friends groups which play an active role in the maintenance and upkeep of various parks and open spaces and add many hours of assistance to the core service provided by the Council.

8. In terms of sustainable planting, there are some real benefits in changing the ways in which some of our bedding areas are managed. In 2024, trials were undertaken in a few select areas to move towards more sustainable planting to (i) encourage greater biodiversity and a wider plant mix and (ii) a reduction in emissions and resources involved in the planting and removal of bedding plants and watering of bedding plants. There are proposals within the report to extend this approach still further.
9. There are a number of benefits and challenges the Council, and indeed the world faces, in effective weed control. The Council has a duty to manage its highway and footway network effectively; this is especially important given the Council's focus on accessibility and extends to all the public realm estate and not just highways. This needs to be balanced with a move to protect the environment and seek to reduce where possible, the amount of pesticides and herbicides, including glyphosate used across the city as per the Pollinator Strategy. The Council will work to ensure that all areas remain accessible and effectively controlled. Therefore, it is important to report on the changes to weed control that were introduced in 2024 as we seek to reduce the amount of glyphosate used.
10. There are a number of benefits and challenges the Council faces in relation to cleansing. Revised arrangements and working practices have been trialled in the city centre and are detailed in the report and will feedback and the benefits realised through changing the Council's operating model.

Policy Basis for Decision

11. In the new Council Plan, there is a key core commitment to the climate. This commitment is about understanding and reducing our impacts on the environment and enhancing it. One of the priorities identified within the Council Plan is to *"increase biodiversity and plant an additional 4,000 trees across the city"* and another is to *"understand and consider the climate and biodiversity impacts when taking council decisions"*.
12. At Full Council in July 2023, a motion was passed on safeguarding York's future and recognised that the *"ecological crisis should be tackled shoulder to shoulder with the climate crisis through a more joined up approach, with a focus on reversing the destruction of nature by 2023, not just halting it"*.

13. In March 2023, the Council adopted a 10-year Climate Strategy that outlines the commitment to “protect green spaces, for less air pollution and an increase in biodiversity”.
14. In September 2021, the Council adopted a Pollinator Strategy with a commitment to *“ensuring the Council will consider the needs of pollinators in the delivery of its duties and work. CYC will seek to protect and increase the amount and quality of pollinator habitat and manage its greenspace to provide greater benefits for pollinators. We will ensure local people are provided with opportunities to make York more pollinator friendly”*. There was also a specific objective to increase the value of parks and other green spaces for pollinators. There was a further objective to reduce the use of glyphosate with trials.
15. In 2019, the Council declared a Climate Emergency and committed to a target of making York carbon neutral by 2030.

Financial Strategy Implications

16. The proposals within the report are in accordance with the proposed budget for 2025/26. There are some savings to be achieved in 2025/26 that were agreed as part of last year’s budget mainly in respect of reduced watering through a move to more sustainable planting. There are also items of growth within the proposed budget for 2025/26, including new investment in parks and neighbourhood caretakers, which offer opportunities to make further visible differences improvements in communities.

Recommendation and Reasons

17. The Executive Member is recommended to:
 - i. To give consideration to the 2 petitions received by the Council and consider if the actions already undertaken and proposals contained within this report address the concerns raised.

Reason: *To inform the future direction in the management of parks, open spaces and the Bar Walls to ensure they are managed appropriately and that the council can work with relevant groups to deliver these changes.*

- ii. To note the outcomes of the weed treatment programme in 2024 and approve the recommended approach for 2025, and future years, to continue with two applications, as set out in the report, and work with contractors to reduce the amount of glyphosate used in the treatment of weeds across the city.

Reason: *To note the progress towards reducing the amount of glyphosate used in the treatment of weeds across the city delivering on the Council Plan.*

- iii. Note the content of the report and support the changes proposed in the report in respect of the management of verges and open space in selected areas.

Reason: *To build climate resilience and adaptation to climate change and improve the biodiversity of our green spaces by determining how these spaces will be managed in the future; recognising the importance of maintaining and looking after our city but that not all changes can be made immediately*

- iv. Note the content of the report and support the expansion of sustainable planting across the city.

Reason: *Sustainable and pollinator friendly planting is the Council's adopted policy.*

- v. To note that a separate report will be brought forward on the Parks Investment Fund detailing how this new budget will be used for the effective management and maintenance of the park's assets. The fund will also be used to make improvements to parks and open space across the city but particularly to deliver the Council's ambition to have more Green Flag parks.

Reason: *To inform the future direction in the management of parks, open spaces to ensure they are managed appropriately and that the council can work with relevant groups to deliver these changes.*

Background

18. Public Realm are the outdoor spaces in our city and villages which are publicly accessible; this includes roads, paths, verges, parks, strays and play areas. Highways and Public Realm teams manage these spaces across the city.
19. The Public Realm team are responsible for
 - urban and rural grass cutting,
 - mechanical and manual sweeping,
 - emptying dog/litter bins,
 - litter picking,
 - cleanliness of the city centre,
 - cleansing of the A64,
 - leaf clearance works,
 - removal of fly tipping,
 - dealing with dead animals,
 - treatment of highway weeds and weeds around verge obstacles,
 - shrub beds and planting,
 - management of hedges,
 - opening and closing of the bar walls,
 - inspection and maintenance of play areas,
 - tree planting,
 - inspection and arboriculture works,
 - inspection and maintenance of lifebuoys and riverside safety equipment,
 - safety inspection of headstones and memorials,
 - management of some closed churchyards and burial grounds,
 - management of parks and open spaces across the city,
 - directing the work of the Environment and Community Officers, and
 - supporting community groups who manage green spaces on behalf of the Council.

In Parished areas, some of these activities are undertaken by Parish or Town Councils.

20. Public Realm work closely with the Environment and Community Officers, Friends groups and with many volunteer groups across the city in respect of the management of parks and community sites across the city. Several thousand hours of volunteer activity supplement the Public Realm operational teams, ranging from horticultural, environmental and property maintenance, to educational activities and event management.
21. The Environment and Community Officers directly support 1963 (@ March 2025) individual volunteers (some people volunteer in more than one role); roles include Gardeners, Litter Pickers, Snow Wardens, Tree Wardens, Leaf Clearers and Park Lockers/Unlockers. The goodwill and time given by all our volunteers, who volunteer for activities that matter to them personally, make a massive difference to the appearance of the city and is greatly appreciated
22. In February 2024, the service presented a report to the Decision Session of the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Emergency with a number of suggested service developments. The report provides an update in respect of the suggested service developments and changes in that report together with other changes that have occurred in 2024/25.
23. The report identifies some immediate recommendations and some options that could be considered in future years as the service seeks to update verge management arrangements, introduce more sustainable planting and other opportunities to improve biodiversity and reduce our impact on the environment in a way that fits our historic city.

Consultation Analysis

24. Officers have worked closely with colleagues in Public Health teams and the Council's Ecologist in developing these proposals. Officers and the Executive Member have worked with partners as part of the city centre rejuvenation partnership and talked to city partners at a range of meetings including the York Climate Commission involving organisations such as St Nick's, York Cares, City Nature Challenge, University of York and will continue to work together where possible for the benefit of the environment.

Options Analysis and Evidential Basis

Cleansing and local environmental quality

25. The Council has made a number of improvements to cleansing activities over the past 6 to 12 months that have made a significant difference in the city. In the city centre the Council has installed a number of larger litter bins (which house a 240-litre wheelie bin) at key locations. These bins offer increased capacity ensuring that more rubbish can be contained and there is less likelihood of bins being blocked by large items or overfilled. To date, the bins have been installed in two areas in the city centre; the southern end of Parliament Street and heading east along Stonebow and in Duncombe Place and along Blake Street towards York Minster.
26. In 2025, there are plans to increase the number of these bins and locate them on Station Road (outside the train station area) adjacent to the Cholera Burial ground. Other sites can be considered in the future as and where appropriate. An example of the bin is located below: -



27. The Council has enhanced its vehicle fleet in the city centre with the addition of an electric Goupil vehicle. This vehicle, due to its ultra-compact size can easily navigate the narrowest spaces within the city centre. The vehicle allows the team to collect litter bins from select locations more quickly and is fitted with a high-pressure hose to clean litter bins, low level stains and such like.



28. The Council has also trialled new working arrangements in the city centre with staff working a new shift pattern to increase the number of operational hours per day. The revised working arrangements were tested over a two-month period that encompassed the Christmas market. The new working arrangements cover all 7 days, meaning more hours are available on the ground and will be formally adopted in Spring 2025.
29. In 2025, the Council will introduce an additional road sweeper into its vehicle fleet.

Weed Control

30. The Council Plan contains a commitment to reduce the use of herbicides. Managing the Council's highway and footway infrastructure (keeping our pavements and highways accessible to all), whilst seeking to minimise the use of herbicide, is a difficult balancing act for the Council. In keeping with the rest of the country, the herbicide product used contains glyphosate.

31. Since the formation of the authority, the majority of highway weed control has been undertaken by an external contractor. Working with our contractor, over last couple of years, several different approaches and trials have been undertaken regarding weed control.
32. In 2021, the Council undertook a trial of alternative weed treatment methods which included the use of a nonanoic acid, an acetic acid, glyphosate and manual weed removal. The nonanoic acid and acetic acid were not as successful as glyphosate in the treatment of weeds and proved ineffective. Manual removal of weeds is effective but cannot be replicated citywide due to the size of the highway network that we manage.
33. In 2022 and again in 2023, the Council undertook a pilot approach in relation to weed control. Ward Councillors were provided with an opportunity to reduce the number of weed sprays in their respective wards as part of the weed pilot. In pilot wards, this saw the number of sprays reduced from three sprays to two sprays. The rest of the city maintained a three-spray model.
34. In both 2022 and 2023, the following wards reduced to two weed sprays; Guildhall (whole ward), Osbaldwick and Derwent (whole ward), Micklegate (whole ward), Fishergate (whole ward with some back streets excluded from spraying), Holgate (defined areas only had two sprays; no spraying on St Paul's Square) and Wheldrake (whole ward apart from Elvington which received no sprays).
35. In 2022, Hull Road and Rural West (all wards apart from Skelton) opted for two sprays. In 2023, Copmanthorpe reduced from three sprays to two sprays. In addition, in 2023, Dringhouses and Woodthorpe ward retained the 3 sprays on the highway but requested a strim not a weed spray of Public Realm areas (this can't be replicated citywide).

36. In 2024, the Council allowed areas that had consensus to opt out of spraying completely and manage weed removal themselves manually. The Council has an ambition to decrease weed growth through mechanical sweeping and manual removal where possible, with residents free to weed the pavement in front of their homes. The only areas that are currently treated by Council operatives are around street furniture and at perimeter fences of parks and playgrounds (no other spraying is done in parks and playgrounds other than to treat invasive or noxious weeds such as Japanese Knotweed).
37. In 2024, the Council sought prices and treatment options from suppliers for up to 2 weed treatments of the highway network. Suppliers were asked to identify their preferred treatment method and to outline which weed treatment material(s) or methods they would use. Following the open procurement, the Council entered a 2-year contract with a supplier, with an option to extend for a further 2 years to ensure a timely review and that the service is as efficient as possible.
38. In 2024, spray one was undertaken between 17th June and 2nd July 2024 and spray two was undertaken between 4th and 22nd October 2024. The contractor's primary treatment method is through a weed wand method of application using a glyphosate-based product (Gallup Hi-activ). It is used at a dose rate of 4.4 litres per hectare at a volume rate of 170 litres per hectare. The amount of glyphosate used across the city in 2024 was down 17% when compared to 2023 spray records through the introduction of a 2-spray schedule. The in-house spraying by Public Realm teams (of nomix dual) was down 27%.
39. In 2024, monitoring has shown that in the overwhelming majority of areas two sprays has been effective in managing weed growth. Pictorial evidence has been gathered across a cross section of wards during spray one and spray two. These images are included at Annex 1.
40. Based on the performance achieved in 2024, it is recommended that the Council continues to follow a two-spray model citywide. It is also recommended that areas that have and continue to want to opt out of any weed sprays, are allowed to do so; providing that effective manual weed control methods are applied in those areas and areas remain accessible to all and infrastructure is protected.

41. Looking further ahead currently, glyphosate remains the only affordable option within current arrangements and established ways of working to treat weeds. The contract does include provision for the highway network weed contractor to participate in any future weed treatment trials. Therefore, if any new technologies or products emerge, they can be trialled effectively in the city.

Mechanical street cleansing

42. In 2016 city wide maps were produced which show the frequency a mechanical sweeper will visit each street. This is known as an input based approach to service delivery. These maps have not been reviewed since 2016 and do not reflect current practices.
43. Government guidance is that street cleansing should not be managed in terms of frequency and inputs, but instead services should be responsive to local circumstance and demand. This is known as an output-based approach. Using a tree lined street as example, streets with high levels of leaf fall would receive more visits than a street without leaf fall. This approach is also reflected in the work of Keep Britain Tidy, who are a leading independent environmental charity who helped develop the standards.
44. As detailed in paragraph 29, the Council has just ordered an extra mechanical sweeper and is investing in Neighbourhood Caretakers. This additional resource means the current maps will not be accurate. Together with our existing sweepers this creates more capacity to be flexible in the way and where sweeping takes place and will be incorporated into the Neighbourhood Caretaker approach being developed.
45. In promoting this approach, the Government has defined what constitutes a clean street.
- Grade A: No litter or refuse
 - Grade B: Predominately free of litter and refuse apart from some small items
 - Grade C: Widespread distribution of litter and/or refuse with minor accumulations
 - Grade D: Heavily affected by litter and/or refuse with significant accumulations

46. The Government recognises that a Grade A cannot be always maintained, and the presence of a few small items of litter and refuse, not yet accumulating, are regarded by the public as acceptable for short periods of time. Therefore, the aim is to intervene before an area drops to a Grade C.
47. The Government have also outlined the response times when an area falls below an acceptable standard recognising that the response time for high intensity areas such as the city centre or secondary shopping areas needs to be different to infrequently used rural areas. York aspires to respond much quicker than the government guidance on response. Therefore, the service and information provided to residents will transition to reflect this approach.

Buzz about York

48. The Council has undertaken several changes and improvements over the past 12 months. These have resulted in trials in the management of verges and open spaces, revised approaches to sustainable planting and general approaches to encourage more biodiversity and natural habitats. A number of these changes have been completed under the banner 'Buzz about York' www.york.gov.uk/BuzzAboutYork which promotes the use of pollinator friendly sustainable and perennial planting in selected locations across the city. The following sections detail what has happened, and what is planned for 2025 and beyond.

Verge and Open Space Management

49. The Council is responsible for the management of all verges that are adopted highway except the verges along the A64 and the roundabouts over the A64. The Council also cuts grass in communal housing areas on City Council housing estates and parks and open spaces managed by the City Council. The way grass is cut varies within and between urban and rural areas.
50. In urban areas, during 2024, the Council transitioned to cutting highway verges and communal housing areas 6 times during the growing season (March to October). The cutting regime received some early scrutiny because of a wet start to the 2024 growing season which delayed the start of grass cutting until the 3rd week of April. The teams completed the prescribed cutting schedule of six cuts. The six cuts were effective at keeping the sward length

generally down to the 15cm tolerance and we received fewer complaints on grass cutting in 2024 than in the previous year. It is recommended that no fewer than six cuts are undertaken annually in the future. Prior to 2024 grass in these areas had traditionally been cut on average 6 to 8 times per year, weather dependant.

51. In relation to urban highway verges and housing land, there is a balance to be struck between the environmental value and amenity value it provides. Through reducing the amount of grass cutting, there is less disruption to insect communities, and it permits shorter plants like clover an opportunity to flower and seed, increasing biodiversity. Therefore, officers recommend that grass in these locations is maintained at a height of approximately 15 cm (this will effectively mean approximately 6 cuts per year). This will obviously be subject to weather conditions.
52. During 2024 the number of verges or areas within vergers where no mowing or only end of year mowing take place has been expanded. One notable example where this has taken place and proved to be high beneficial is the A19 at London Road where over 80 species of pollinator plants were identified. Such sites have been mapped and a list of locations is included within Annex 2.
53. Supporting this programme, the Environment and Community Officers use an Allen scythe for certain recreation sites which were cut every two to three weeks during the growing season in 2024. Depending on the location and size of area to be cut this may be undertaken by either tractor and gang mower or ride-on mowers depending on the location and size of area to be cut. Examples of these sites are the Knavesmire, Glen Gardens and Millennium Bridge Field (part). The plan is to maintain this provision in 2025.
54. Other recreation sites such as areas in Rowntree Park, Little Hob Moor have differential mowing regimes which cater for both recreational use and encouraging natural habitats and wildlife. Within these locations some areas are cut every two to three weeks with other areas left to longer grass and are purposefully managed as such. The Council, supported by friends' groups and volunteers, plan to maintain this provision in 2025.

55. The Council also trialled some areas where it employed 'cut and collect' methodologies at the end of the growing season. The Council was fortunate to be able to utilise cut and collect equipment supplied by Natural England for these trials and we thank them for sharing their equipment with the Council. It is fair to say that some of the trials were a success (e.g. Shipton Road) and others were not as effective (e.g. equipment struggled to manoeuvre arounds trees). As a result of this, we will continue to review and if practical expand the areas where cut and collect occurs
56. For rural grass verges of 'A and 'B' roads, footpaths and cycleways, we cut a 1-metre-wide strip to ensure grass does not impede the passage of traffic. On other rural roads, grass cutting is restricted to priority locations, bends and corners, areas where grass may obstruct the line of sight leading to a public hazard (for example, bridleways and footpath exits but not private drives). Subject to weather conditions, the grass in rural areas is cut twice per year; the first cut is in June/July and the second cut in October/November. The remaining areas in the verge are left long to encourage natural habitats to form which encourage biodiversity. This work is undertaken on the council's behalf an external contractor who also clears vegetation obscuring road signs and laybys along the A1237 as part of the winter work.
57. Some rural verges have historically been cut by farmers and landowners. Whilst cutting visibility splays into private entrances has obvious safety benefits, large scale verge cutting is not accordance with our environmental, climate and flood management policies. In 2024, the Council consulted with farmers and landowners, on a verge management policy, drawing on their experience and knowledge to co-develop a robust set of guidelines. The policy was adopted in July 2024 and is included as Annex 3.

Sustainable Planting

58. Historically, the council planted up a series of flower beds around the city and in the main parks and gardens with seasonal flowering plants. This would happen twice a year, in autumn with winter / spring flowering plants such as Pansies and Primula; and again, in the with summer / autumn flower plants such as Geranium and Begonia. This practice has now ceased and instead is replaced with more sustainable forms of planting, which do not require new plants twice a year and do not require regular watering. This reduces vehicle movements, reduces carbon emissions and frees up staff

time, while continuing to provide an attractive visual display in the city centre.

59. Following previous work in the main parks and gardens, in 2024, the Public Realm service undertook a trial to introduce sustainable planting in three areas in the city. These trial areas were selected to assess the success of the sustainable planting itself and what care and attention these areas required compared with more traditional planting. The locations trialled in 2024 for sustainable planting were:
- Duncombe Place/Blake Street
 - Beds at Station Rise (3 beds)
 - Skeldergate Island (Regimental Boar War memorial)
60. When making visual changes of this nature, it is important that the public are updated about the changes. Signage was installed at the newly changed beds and supporting sites such as Clarence Gardens contained information on 'Buzz about York'. Information was also provided online www.york.gov.uk/BuzzAboutYork, both outline the benefits of making these changes.
61. The implementation of sustainable planting has been a success. The beds were refreshed with topsoil in early April and planted up in April 2024. The beds have established well with the plants blooming at different stages of the season. Images of the beds with sustainable planting are below:



63. Based on visual assessment, sustainable planting has generated a lot more bee and insect activity than the more traditional bedding plants that were planted previously.
64. Due to the success of the sustainable planting, the approach will be rolled out to more sites in 2025, including Leeman Road (raised bed next to Triangle Gardens), Triangle Gardens, Prices Lane / Bishopgate Street, Fishergate / Paragon Street, Barbican / Festival Flats and Rosemary Place. Annex 4 details all the above sites and identifies options for the continued roll out in 2026 and beyond and includes a sample list of plants used.

Bar Walls

65. The Council is responsible for managing the grass embankments on the Bar Walls (City walls ramparts). Here, different maintenance regimes are required which reflect a range of considerations including the angle of slope, presence of daffodils, proximity to a pavement and safe working arrangements:
- On the flat lower-level ride-on mowers are used
 - On the sloping ramparts (the majority of the Walls) a specialist piece of equipment called a Roboflail
 - Whilst on the inner walls adjacent to West Offices it is not possible to cut at all due to access issues and health and safety considerations.
66. In a few selected locations cutting is supplemented by a strim at the end of the year to ensure there is no encroachment onto the pavement e.g. Moatside Court, off Lord Mayor's Walk, Piccadilly.
67. The practice for several years has been to commence the main grass cut from July onwards once the daffodils have fully died down. Given the amount of grass to cut this generally took all summer to complete the first cut. In some years it was possible to carry out a follow up cut in a few limited locations. In 2024 the cutting regime was formalised as one cut on the outer walls and two cuts on the inner walls, where cutting takes place. A number of stretches of the bar walls are planted with daffodils which flower between April and June. In 2024, we moved to a revised maintenance approach on the Bar Walls where we cut once per year on the outer walls and two cuts on the inner walls. Arisings (the cut vegetation) are not collected.

Station Rise

68. In 2024, the Council has embarked on the 'York Walls in Bloom' to transform the Station Rise embankment into a vibrant pollinator friendly display www.york.gov.uk/YorkWallsInBloom. This historically was an area of short mown grass with formal bedding which offered little for pollinators. The project aims to
- Enhance the appearance of the Bar Walls ramparts by introducing a greater variety and number of flowers and plants.
 - Improve biodiversity by creating a richer habitat that supports wildlife in this unique urban green space.
 - Implement more sustainable management practices to reduce resource/labour intensive maintenance and increase the resilience of the monument against extreme weather events, aiding in the long-term conservation of the Bar Walls.
69. In 2024, the ramparts at Station Rise were prepared for a new floral display designed to balance visual impact with a pollinator-friendly, sustainable approach. Following extensive ecological and archaeological assessments, and with donations from the Grand Hotel and support of York Cares the existing turf was removed to create two large planting areas sown with a carefully selected mix of native and non-native flowers.
70. On 19th September 2024 Full Council received an e-petition seeking to “restore the condition of Yorks Parks and Bar Walls”, see Annex 5. In response, most of the city walls have had no or little change in the way they have been maintained. Where change has happened at Station Rise, we will seek public feedback on the 'York Walls in Bloom' once its impact can be fully appreciated. Other sections later in the report respond to the comment on City parks.
71. From late spring through to autumn 2025 the area should produce a continuous display of flowers (weather depending), including Phacelia Tanacetifolia (Fiddleneck), Delphinium ajacis (Larkspur), Papaver Shirley Mixed (Shirley Poppy), Coreopsis tinctoria (Dyers Tickseed), Linaria maroccana (Toadflax). Regular checks will be made on what plants work best, what could be added along with habitat monitoring. At the end of the growing season once the flower seeds have dispersed, the area will be cut with a scythe. Details of what has been sown (and planted) are provided as Annex 5.

72. A second 'York Walls in Bloom' project is being developed for summer 2025. The Council is supporting The Friends of St Nicholas Fields, a charity who work across the City on Environmental Projects and often referred to as St Nick's. This involves developing a new sustainable floral display at Foss Islands Road. A site has been carefully chosen to enhance the aesthetics of the City Walls, in what is an area of short mown grass with very limited habitat value.
73. To respect the site's archaeological sensitivity, a "no-dig" approach is being trialled. Imported soil will be laid on top of the existing grass to create a 10m x 25m area. Native species will be planted, and the first floral display is expected in spring and summer 2025 with the site looking its best from 2026 when the plants have established. The site will be carefully monitored, reviewed and adapted to ensure it is looking its best and delivering the intended environmental benefits. Details of what has been sown (and planted) are provided as Annex 5.

Fishergate Postern Tower

74. In 2024, the Friends of York Walls, with guidance from the Council's ecologists, launched a project to explore how the local ramparts could be enriched with more diverse and visually appealing flowers. The initiative trialled several native plant species to determine their ability to establish themselves within the dominant grassland of the ramparts. Four different ground preparation methods were tested:
- Bare earth exposure
 - Clearing grasses
 - Scarification
 - Direct planting into the existing rampart vegetation

The success of these methods was carefully monitored.

75. In 2025, the second phase of the project will assess how well the plants re-establish in spring and how they withstand the routine twice-yearly cutting of the ramparts. The results will inform future biodiversity initiatives on similar sections of the ramparts, with the dual aim of enhancing floral diversity and improving the overall aesthetic of the monument.

Queen Street.

76. As part of the green corridors project, the area of rampart affected by the works on the station frontage scheme will be resown with a flowering lawn mix which includes: [Centurea nigra – Common Knapweed](#), Galium verum – Lady's Bedstraw, [Leucanthemum vulgare – Oxeye Daisy](#), [Medicago lupulina – Black Medick](#), [Plantago media – Hoary Plantain](#), [Primula veris – Cowslip](#), [Ranunculus bulbosus – Bulbous Buttercup](#), [Trifolium repens – White Clover \(aq\)](#). With the cutting regime adapted to accommodate the new plants to ensure they thrive.

City's Parks and Gardens

77. In 2024, three of the Council's parks and gardens were awarded Green Flag status. Green Flag is the international quality mark (assessed by independent judges) and is awarded to spaces that boast high environmental standards, are well-maintained, connect with their local community and have a range of visitor facilities. In 2024, parks achieving the Green Flag standard were West Bank Park in Acomb, Clarence Gardens on Haxby Road and Glen Gardens in Heworth. One of the innovations that impressed the judges was in Clarence Gardens, where the redundant bowling greens have been turned into a wildflower garden to support pollinators and showcase species like cornflowers and daisies. Indeed, both Rowntree Park and West Bank Park are used by the Green Flag administrator for training new Green Flag judges.



Winter 2024 Clarence Gardens



Summer 2024 Clarence Gardens

78. Once a park has received its Green Flag it is important that qualitative improvements continue. In January 2025, the Executive Member for Finance, Performance, Major Projects, Human Rights, Equality and Inclusion approved a series of exciting developments for West Bank Park. This included the inclusion of the land surrounding 14 New Lane into the main body of the park which increases publicly accessible land by the equivalent of two tennis courts; and the release of the remaining funds from the 14 New Lane insurance payment to future projects within the park. Initial work to link the two sections of land together started in March.
79. Looking ahead, an application for a Green Flag assessment has been submitted for Rowntree Park for this year. This site has historically been awarded the Green Flag, and was due to be entered in 2024, however with the disruption caused by flooding over winter 2023/24, this was put on hold until now. Since the last judging in 2022 much has gone on in the park including:
- Rowntree Tennis Club have completed phase 1 of the tennis pavilion refurbishment
 - Ponds and peripheral wetland habitats have been expanded, in part through a partnership with St Nicks and the assistance of the Friends
 - In response to last winter's flooding, management of the lake has been adapted so that it is set at a lower level for the winter which allows for more rainwater to be stored before flooding occurs
 - The unfenced play area has been retained and surfacing refreshed
 - A more zonal approach has been taken to grass cutting, including setting aside areas for wildlife benefit

- The Friends continue to expand their activities and thrive. Their visual impact can be seen through the park interpretation, gardening and art projects and the Making Space for Girls initiative. The latter won Best initiative in the UK to engage and increase use of parks by women and girls' Green Flag Awards 2023. <https://www.greenflagaward.org/news/best-of-the-best-uk-award-winners-announced/>

80. The application for Green Flag status for Rawcliffe Country Park is currently suspended. This site has historically held the award but remains on hold until the Environment Agency compound is removed following the completion on their flood protection works.
81. The main Council site without the award is Hull Road Park, and, at full Council on 19th September 2024, the Council received an e-petition regarding 'Hull Road Park' and perceptions around its current condition. The petition on 'Hull Road Park' can be found at Annex 5.
82. All the Council's parks and gardens have changed over time, and when implementing major change, the aim is to inform and engage with the public. With hindsight, the most recent changes to the beck could have been better communicated. Several years ago the boundary privet hedge was removed to open views into the park and create a greater sense of security, this initially drew criticism. Now it is an accepted arrangement, and one which has been replicated more recently at Clarence Gardens.
84. Over the last 15 years Hull Road Park has seen numerous changes including:
 - New play area added at Tang Hall Lane entrance
 - Footpaths have been resurfaced and a new path added at Flaxman Avenue
 - Privet boundary hedges were removed
 - The main play area was fenced, new paths added, and the range of equipment doubled
 - The Pavilion was brought back into use as a base for an horticultural employment training provider
 - The Old ranger pavilion was reroofed and refurbished and became the base for York Men's Shed
 - The tennis, basketball, and five a side courts were all refenced and court surfaces painted
 - Chose to 2 Youth café opened

- Sustainable planting and new beds added at Melrosegate entrance, supported by York Cares

More recently

- Solar lighting was installed along the length of the park
- A woodland boundary path along Alcuin Avenue has been added
- The pavilion is now a base for the Trust for Conservation Volunteers (TCV). TCV to run community gardening and young people's activities and woodcraft group, supported by Lottery funds.
- The Environment Agency identified the watercourse as failing on several indicators, including water quality, pollution, connectivity and habitats, and undertook a joint project with the Council to naturalise the beck and improve its performance against these indicators.

85. In July 2024 a public meeting was held to raise concerns about the park. The key issues included:
 - Who owns the park and who is responsible for what
 - The condition of the beck, the impact of the recent work on biodiversity and water quality
 - Possible soil contamination and sewage leaks
 - Public engagement and a possible Friends group
 - How will maintenance be carried out and what is the role of 3rd parties in the park
86. Taking each point in turn, City of York Council owns the park and has overall responsibility of the site. The Environment Agency has an interest in the Osbaldwick Beck given its designation as "main river". Several statutory services have facilities in and under the park which also affects its operation, most notably Yorkshire Water.
87. The Environment Agency had identified the watercourse was seen as failing on several indicators, including water quality, pollution, connectivity and habitats. Working with the City Council and later St Nicks, the project aimed to restore the ecology and natural function of the water course. The first task was to create openings in the three weirs, this allowed unhindered water flow which in turn assisted the formation natural channels, boggy areas and areas of dry ground.

88. In some areas wooden posts and brash screens were added to create a meandering form. Relocated soil has been used to create earth banks on top of the existing concrete flags. The resulting mix of grass, reeds, shrubs and trees has created more opportunities for all manner of invertebrates, which in turn support fish, birds and mammals. Water Vole, one of England's key habit indicators and one of the UKs most endangered species, are now present in the park. To reinstate the weirs would be detrimental to the above and likely to place the Council in breach of the Water Directive Framework Regulations.
89. In spring this year, a more formal assessment of the environmental quality of the Osbaldwick Beck in the park was carried out using the River Habitat Survey (RHS) methodology. (See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/river-habitat-survey-guidance-manual> .) Survey points being the lower section (500m) extending from Melrosegate culvert to just below the former middle weir and the upper reach (400m) from the old middle weir to Tanghall Lane. Comparisons with the last survey in 2018 show that habitat quality has improved significantly as the beck moves to a more naturalist stated and the impact of modification decreases.

Year	habitat quality assessment (HQA) - the higher the score the better		habitat modification score (HMS) - the lower the score the better	
	Lower section	Upper section	Lower section	Upper section
2018	34	27	54	52
2025	51	47	30	27

90. Hull Road Park mirrors all the Council key park sites, in that the Council works with a range of 3rd parties who bring skills and resource which ordinarily are not available in house. The Conservation Volunteers - TCV for example, in collaboration with North Yorkshire Youth, are engaging local young people in gardening activities leading towards a City and Guilds certificate and have just started a Duke of Edinburgh group for young people who would not ordinarily engage with the school or uniform organisations who run the award.
91. A very recent, welcome development happened in February when the Friends of Hull Road Park group was established. One of the Friends ambitions is to act as link between the Council and local community. In response, officers have committed to working with the Friends over the coming months and years to improve the condition of the park, to share Council plans and ideas, and receive feedback and requests as to how the park should develop.
92. At full Council on 27th February 2025, a two year £500k investment into the Council parks was announced. Below are some initial indicative criteria:
- Sites within communities which score higher on Indices of Multiple Deprivation,
 - Projects which address long standing maintenance issues e.g. footpath rebuilding,
 - Play areas where the equipment is over 15 years old, (in some cases the council has equipment which is nearly 30 years old),
 - To support the expansion of Green Flag standard e.g. Hull Road Park, and,
 - Where projects have or potential for 3rd party funding contributions
93. A further report will be brought forward with a list of schemes.

Neighbourhood Caretakers

94. At Full Council on 27th February 2025, a growth item was passed for investment in 'neighbourhood caretakers'. The item was discussed at the Economy, Place, Access and Transport Scrutiny Committee on 28th January 2025. The budget will provide an additional £150k for neighbourhood caretakers. This funding will be used to recruit additional staff and harness volunteer activity to make noticeable improvements to public spaces in local communities.

95. The work will be informed through the identification of ward priorities (involving ward councillors) and walk arounds and target those areas of greatest need. It is likely that meetings will be held to develop proposed ways of working and recruitment will take place in Spring 2025 with a view to the new team being established by Summer 2025. Members will have the chance to shape the activities that take place in their wards through prioritisation of areas for attention.

Organisational Impact and Implications

96. The implications are as follows:

- **Financial:** The proposed budget saving for Public Realm for 2024/25 was agreed to be split over two years with the total saving £130k. The proposals in the report are consistent with the requirements to save £30k in 2025/26 from the overall Public Realm budget. Other financial impacts include the additional £150k budget provided for neighbourhood caretakers, and £500k capital funding over two years for parks improvements.
- **Human Resources (HR):** There are no HR implications contained within this report. However, should additional resource be required by the Council to introduce neighbourhood caretakers, this would be established and resourced in accordance with council policy.
- **Legal:** The Council has a duty to maintain the highway under section 41 of the Highways Act 1980. Grass verges are considered to form part of the highway. In addition, the Council has a power to maintain grass verges and to ensure that anything on the verge does not hinder the reasonable use of the highway by any person entitled to use it, or cause nuisance or injury to the owner or occupier of premises adjacent to the highway. The highway has to be maintained in such a state of repair that it is reasonably passable for the ordinary traffic of the neighbourhood without danger being caused by its physical condition.
The Councils policy approach to the management of highways and open spaces should take into account all relevant considerations. As set out in this report, these include safety, accessibility, ecological impact and cost. There is a growing body of case law which emphasises the importance of public bodies taking proportionate steps to combat climate change.

- ***Health and Wellbeing:*** When approached, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) directed public health officers to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance, which advises that in cases where there is a need for glyphosate usage in the public realm, it is safe to do so if used within current guidance. The HSE state: 'All companies wishing to obtain approval for their pesticides are required to submit substantial data dossiers to support their applications. The extensive range of studies undertaken on pesticides is aimed at establishing acceptable safety for people, animals and the wider environment. This process has been applied to glyphosate which has been approved as safe and efficacious for a number of years now. The risks associated with the use of pesticides in amenity areas such as parks are specifically considered as part of the authorisation process. Legally enforceable conditions of use are imposed on the way products can be applied, to ensure the public are not exposed to levels of pesticides that would harm health or have unacceptable effects on the environment. It is important that users (or those who cause or permit others to use pesticides) not only comply with the authorised conditions of use but also use products in a responsible and sustainable fashion. The responsible use of pesticides in amenity areas as part of an integrated programme of control can help deliver substantial benefits for society. These include: management of conservation areas, invasive species and flood risks; access to high quality sporting facilities; and safe public spaces (for example, by preventing weed growth on hard surfaces creating trip hazards), industrial sites and transport infrastructure.'

It will be important therefore to ensure that if glyphosate is used by City of York council public realm teams, it is done so:

- in accordance with the authorised conditions of the products;
- with operatives wearing the required PPE and adhering to exposure guidance;
- appropriately training provided to operatives; and
- a suitable method of application used for the product.

The guidance and emerging evidence on the use of the product internationally, should be regularly reviewed and taken into account by CYC.

- ***Environment and Climate action:*** The focus of this report is to ensure our Public Realm maintenance practices align to the Council's environmental intent, building climate resilience and climate adaptation through techniques such as biological carbon sequestration.
- ***Equalities and Human Rights:*** The Council has taken account of the Public Sector Equality Duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other prohibited conduct; advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it and foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it, in the exercise of a public authority's functions.
The changes are not envisaged that there will be any impact on these with protected characteristics. It is anticipated that the changes to regimes will continue to keep pavements free from hazards. Should these changes to weed control and/or grass cutting cause obstructions, an immediate review will need to be undertaken.
- ***Data Protection and Privacy:*** The data protection impact assessment (DPIA) screening questions were completed for the recommendations and options in this report and as there is no personal, special categories or criminal offence data being processed to set these out, there is no requirement to complete a DPIA for this report at this time. However, this will be reviewed following the approved recommendations and options from this report and a DPIA completed if required.
- ***Communications:*** Communications support will be required to ensure that effective promotion is undertaken around changes so that the public can be updated on key developments and what this may mean for their area.
- ***Economy:*** York is regularly recognised as a great place to live and to visit. Effective maintenance of public realm supports a sense of place and pride in our city and neighbourhoods and the important role they play in our local economy. The move towards more sustainable planting in and around the city centre align with the 'Sustainable City' theme in the Council's updated 'Our City Centre' vision, approved by Executive in October 2023.

Risks and Mitigations

97. The key risk is if the changes to planting and mowing do not deliver biodiversity improvement as planned. There are not perceived to be any adverse impacts, this is something that the Council will keep under review. Should any adverse impacts be identified then an immediate review will need to be undertaken.

Wards Impacted

98. All wards are impacted by the decisions and recommendations contained within the report.

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Background papers

Executive Member Decision Session 27 Feb 2024

Service Developments - Public Realm

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=870&MId=14374>

York Climate Change Strategy

<https://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/8948/york-climate-change-strategy-2022-to-2032>

Pollinator Strategy

https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s141785/Annex%206%20CYC%20Pollinator%20Strategy_Draft%20v2.pdf

Annexes

Annex 1 – Weed control assessments photographs

Annex 2 – Management of verge and open spaces

List of non / less mow sites

List of ECO Allen scythe areas

Annex 3 – Guidance to farmers / landowners on rural verge cutting

Annex 4 – Sustainable planting locations:

2024 sites

2025 sites

Future options

Sample plant list

Annex 5 – Petitions