

Meeting:	Combined Executive Member Decision Session
Meeting date:	27 January 2026
Report of:	Director of Environment and Regulatory Services
Portfolio of:	Councillor Kent, Executive Member for Environment and Climate Emergency

Decision Report: Adapting the Management of the Bar Walls Ramparts to Maximise Ecological Value, Sustainability and Aesthetic Appeal

Subject of Report

1. This report seeks approval for proposals to adapt how the ecology of the Bar Walls ramparts is managed to promote sustainability, biodiversity, and community engagement.
2. The proposals entail identifying sites suitable for a revised management approach and developing tailored site-specific methodologies that reflect both heritage and ecological needs.

Benefits and Challenges

3. Principal benefits:

- Increased biodiversity in a key urban greenspace, improving habitats that support a wide range of plants and animals.
- Greater sustainability of management practices, contributing to the Council's journey towards net zero.
- Enhanced visitor and resident experience of the Bar Walls through improved aesthetic value and interpretation.

- Opportunities to work with partners and volunteers, reducing the burden on Public Realm resources.
- Stronger engagement with residents and communities adjacent to the Walls, encouraging participation in ecological management in line with wider project aims.

4. **Principal challenges:**

- Managing visitor and resident reactions to a changed appearance of the monument and ensuring clear communication of the benefits and rationale.
- Climate change and extreme weather events, which pose risks to any ecological or horticultural initiative.
- Reliance on volunteers, which may create risks in maintaining consistent personnel resources.

Policy Basis for Decision

5. This proposal supports and contributes to the following Council Plan priorities:

- **Equalities and Human Rights:** The project contributes directly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (3 – Good Health and Wellbeing; 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities; 13 – Climate Action; 15 – Life on Land).
- **Affordability:** The project seeks to raise funds to support the conservation and preservation of heritage assets owned by CYC. As access to the Walls remains free, the impact on residents will be minimal. Visitors will be invited to contribute on a voluntary “pay what you can” basis.
- **Climate:** The Bar Walls ramparts form a key “green corridor” and invaluable habitat within the city. Traditional conservation practices, alongside the embodied carbon within historic fabric, will be central to efforts to reach net zero.

- **Health:** The Walls provide opportunities for physical health (walking, jogging) as well as supporting mental wellbeing and community identity.

Financial Strategy Implications

6. The upfront costs of the project will be predominantly covered through external grant funding secured by partner organisations, with St Nicks having already obtained UK Biodiversity funding to support the initial phase. Efforts will be made to secure additional funding to enable the expansion of project activities; however, in the absence of such funding, further developments will not proceed. Contributions towards specific structural elements—such as signage, access improvements, and similar features—may be supported through allocations from the existing City Walls budget or from City Walls Donations. The project also seeks to reduce future maintenance demands on the Public Realm team, thereby creating potential efficiency savings over the longer term.

Recommendation and Reasons

7. Executive Members are recommended to approve Option 1 (see paragraph 16), namely:
 - Approve the Ancient Monuments Team to work with partners to adapt the management of the Bar Walls.
 - Approve the principles of site-based management plans reflecting the diverse ecology, heritage, and aesthetics of the City Walls, ensuring best-practice management is achieved.

Reasons: There are opportunities on the embankments to introduce locally native wildflowers which are suited to the soil conditions and current management arrangements. Although non-native species may produce visually appealing displays, they are of little benefit to the vast majority of our native invertebrates, which co-evolved with native plants; incorporation and enhancement of native plant diversity is paramount to dampening declines in plants and invertebrates.

This project will support the Council's climate and net zero commitments, align with Historic England's guidance on sustainable heritage management, and improve biodiversity at a nationally significant monument. It will also contribute to placemaking, enhance visitor experience and local amenity, while reducing the maintenance burden on the Council by fostering volunteering and community engagement.

Background

8. The City Walls and ramparts are CYC's largest and most important group of heritage assets, comprising around 9 hectares of green spaces which support ancient habitats and rare species such as bee orchids. Enhancement of this biodiversity, integrating nature for the benefit of both the natural and historic environment is a principal aim of the sustainable conservation management of York City Walls in alignment with EH guidance (English Heritage 2023, 14–15, [City Walls Conservation Management Plan](#) – page 136 '3.3.7 The Natural Environment', 196 '5.3.3 Landscape and Environment')
9. The ramparts are currently cut once annually on the outside and twice on the inside. This regime encourages habitats dominated by tall grasses which are important for supporting invertebrates and small mammals and providing an essential food source for urban birds and bats supporting CYC's adopted [Pollinator Strategy](#)
10. The present regime also benefits the conservation of soils and the monument itself: long grass provides thermal insulation, regulates soil moisture, reduces runoff, and stabilises ramparts through root growth.
11. Some residents and visitors may perceive long grass as an indication of neglect rather than ecological management.
12. However, trial planting at Station Rise in 2024/25 demonstrated that, despite initial resistance, improved communications and striking floral displays generated positive feedback, particularly via social media.

13. Building on Station Rise and trials at Red Tower, Fishergate Postern, and Queen Street, the project intends to extend interventions to other sites such as Lord Mayor's Walk, Nunnery Lane, and Station Avenue. Site-specific methodologies will be developed for each, balancing ecology, archaeology, and visual amenity.
14. Projects will be delivered with support from volunteers (e.g. St Nicks, York Cares, Friends of York Walls), enhancing grant funding opportunities from bodies such as the Biodiversity Challenge Fund, Biffa Awards, and the National Lottery.
15. A key element will be a communications and interpretation strategy, engaging residents and visitors in the changes being made and explaining the rationale. Lessons learned from Station Rise will inform this strategy.
16. The project will aim to reduce the maintenance burden on Public Realm, for example by reducing the frequency of grass cutting in some areas in order promote the growth of more diverse flora, and thus a reduction in the frequency of PR staff visits to those locations. Ultimately this may require changes to current practices, which will be developed collaboratively to ensure long-term sustainability.

Consultation Analysis

17. Consultation will be undertaken with Historic England, St Nicks, the Friends of York Walls, the University of York.

Options Analysis and Evidential Basis

18. **Option 1** (Recommended): Approve the Ancient Monuments and Public Realm teams to work with partners on projects to improve sustainability, biodiversity, and aesthetics of the ramparts.

Pros: Delivers identified benefits, enhances CYC's reputation, and demonstrates innovation in managing historic monuments.

Cons: Risk of reputational damage if proposed changes fail to achieve anticipated outcomes, particularly regarding aesthetics.

19. **Option 2:** Retain current maintenance regime and undertake no new projects.

Pros: No risk of reputational harm from failed projects.

Cons: Missed opportunity to deliver ecological, aesthetic, and community benefits. Dissatisfaction with current practices likely to continue.

Organisational Impact and Implications

20. None

Financial implications:

21. Financial: There are no financial implications associated with this report. The report proposes an adaptation of the current ecological management practices of the Bar Walls ramparts, with the aim of enhancing environmental sustainability, promoting biodiversity, and strengthening community engagement.

Efforts will be made to secure additional external funding to enable the expansion of project activities; however, in the absence of such funding, further developments will not proceed.

22. Human Resources: None.

- 23. Legal: Some changes will require Scheduled Monument Consent under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. This will be managed by the Ancient Monuments Team.
- 24. Procurement: Whilst there are no direct procurement implications relating to the report itself, should any priorities require procurement, all works and/or services must be procured via a compliant, open, transparent, and fair process in accordance with the council's Contract Procedure Rules and where applicable, the Procurement Act 2023. Further advice regarding the procurement process and development of procurement strategies must be sought from the Commercial Procurement team.
- 25. Health and Wellbeing: Supports both physical and mental wellbeing by improving the environment for residents and providing volunteering opportunities,
- 26. Environment and Climate: Increases sustainability of rampart management, enhances biodiversity, and supports resilience to climate change.

Affordability:

- 27. Aims to reduce costs while maintaining free access.

Equalities and Human Rights:

- 28. Contributes to UN Sustainable Development Goals, while creating inclusive volunteering opportunities managed by partners such as St Nicks and York Cares.

Data Protection and Privacy:

- 29. The completion of data protection impact assessment (DPIA) screening questions evidenced there would be no processing of personal data, special categories of personal data or criminal offence data processed, so there is no requirement to complete a DPIA.

Communications:

30. Builds on York Walls in Bloom, with a tested and effective communications strategy.

Economy:

31. Supports York's tourism and heritage economy.

Risks and Mitigations

32. In compliance with the Council's risk management strategy, the risks associated with the proposal are:
- Health and safety of residents, visitors, and volunteers during works.
 - Reputational risk if outcomes fall short of expectations.
 - Heritage risks, particularly regarding buried archaeology.

Wards Impacted

33. Guildhall, Micklegate, Fishergate

Contact details

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Background papers

- York Walls Conservation Management Plan, 2021. (Donald Insall Associates).
- English Heritage's *Sustainable Conservation Principles* (EH 2023, 14–15).
- City of York Council Pollinator Strategy 2020-2025

Annexes

- Annex A: Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)