
Scrutiny Management Committee

20th May 2025

Report of the Director of Environment, Transport and Planning

Update on Tree Planting and Management

Summary

1. The Chair of the Scrutiny Management Committee has requested information on:
 - a. The performance and challenges relating to City of York Council's tree management
 - b. Any recent or impending changes in legislation
 - c. An update on the number of trees planted and lost
 - d. Engagement with third party owners of trees

Background

2. Trees deliver multiple long-term benefits contributing to climate change mitigation, climate adaptation, nature recovery and health and wellbeing outcomes. Urban treescapes contribute to flood alleviation, urban cooling, improved air quality and reduced noise pollution. They can create green corridors for wildlife and support the shift to sustainable transport as well as attracting inward investment and raising property and asset values.
3. Trees also deliver significant social and cultural value, as recently explored by the University of York's 'Branching Out' research project that gathered the experiences of residents across four cities of the UK, including York. The Council experienced significant community and resident interest in helping plant and care for trees as part of the York Community Woodland project and there is significant opportunity to build on and expand this interest going forward.

4. In May 2021, the Council set a target to increase York's tree canopy cover from a baseline of 10.8% in 2021 to 13% by 2050. This will contribute to the UK government's target to increase the amount of land covered by trees and woodlands in England from 14.5% to 16.5% by 2050 as part of its Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23).
5. For its part, the Council has made a significant contribution in recent years. In 2021, the Council initiated the York Community Woodland project which, through a partnership with Forestry England, has seen almost 200,000 new trees and shrubs planted on a 79 hectare / 200-acre peri-urban site in the west of York. York Community Woodland is an award-winning large-scale woodland creation project delivering multiple ecosystem service and community benefits, not least of which is sequestering 18,500 tonnes of CO₂e over the next 100 years towards the Council's net zero aim.
6. More recently, between 2023 and 2025, the Council planted circa 5,300 trees outside of woodland as part of its 'Green Streets' initiative predominantly focussed within York's urban area. Utilising circa £430,000 of external grant funding mainly sourced via the White Rose Forest, the initiative will deliver long-term ecosystem service value including improved access to green space, biodiversity gain, carbon sequestration and health and wellbeing benefits. Over time the new trees will achieve significant asset values.
7. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) Paragraph 136 says 'trees make an important contribution to the character and quality of urban environments and can also help mitigate and adapt to climate change. Planning policies and decisions should ensure that new streets are tree lined, that opportunities are taken to incorporate trees elsewhere in developments (such as parks and community orchards), that appropriate measures are in place to secure the long-term maintenance of newly planted trees, and that existing trees are retained wherever possible. Local planning authorities should work with highways officers and tree officers to ensure that the right trees are planted in the right places, and solutions are found that are compatible with highways standards and the needs of different users'.
8. Significant challenges stand in the way of increasing tree canopy cover in areas like York, where competition for urban space is high. Even when suitable sites free of constraints can be found, the challenge is then one of deliverability, such as securing resident support, accessing grants to fund delivery, and procuring contractors able to deliver within set timescales.

9. The Council follows the maxim of 'Right tree in the Right place', ensuring tree species and planting specifications are appropriate for the specific location and site conditions.

Tree Management

10. The Public Realm team manages the Council's tree stock of over 30,000 recorded trees. These are the large trees found along our highways, in parks and open spaces, closed churchyards, car parks and communal housing area. There are a further estimated 10,000 unrecorded trees in our woodlands (e.g. Acomb Wood, Rawcliffe Country Park), and in new or recently planted areas which have yet to mature (e.g. Bootham Stray, Victoria Fields, Millennium Bridge Field).
11. Details of trees owned by the Council, as well as those in conservation areas and with Tree Preservation Orders (TPO's), can be found on the Council website at <https://www.york.gov.uk/PublicTrees>.
12. On average, Public Realm will plant between 25 to 40 new standard trees¹ per year. This is supplemented by work by third parties on Council land, such as St Nicholas Fields and the Environment Agency. Planting by third parties can be both standards and whips².
13. All of our own trees are managed in accordance with the Arboricultural Policy for York³, which contains details relating to tree risk management, tree protection, tree replacement, tree maintenance and tree related insurance claims.
14. The Council uses a combination of Active and Passive tree inspections to monitor the health of trees and to determine if any work is required. Active scheduled inspections are carried by qualified Arboricultural inspectors on a 4 yearly rotation with one quarter of the city inspected each year. Passive tree inspections and reports are those carried out daily by the public and council staff when travelling around the authority area. The Arboricultural Manager will assess any Passive reports and determine if an Active inspection is required and any resulting work.
15. More information of how the Council manages its trees is provided in the Arboricultural Policy for York and can be found at <https://www.york.gov.uk/PublicTrees>

¹ A standard tree is a more mature tree with a clear, straight stem of at least 1.8m (6 feet) before the branches begin

² A whip tree is a young, slender, unbranched tree seedling, typically 1-2 years old

³ <https://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/2450/arboricultural-policy-for-york-november-2017>

Legislation

16. Section 31 Agreement 2024/2025 - Duty to Consult on Street Trees – The Environment Act (2021) imposes a change to the Highways Act (1980) requiring Highways Authorities to hold a full and detailed consultation before trees could be removed, baring a list of exemptions. These exemptions include if the tree has died, become diseased and/or dangerous, is causing an obstruction, needs to make way for a dropped kerb. The duty does not apply to trees with trunks less than 8cm in diameter.
17. This duty came into force on 1st December 2023. The consultation process aims to ensure public involvement in decisions about street tree management and make decision-making more transparent.

York Green Streets

18. In early 2022, the Council secured grant funding to support an opportunity mapping exercise aimed at identifying potential tree planting sites within York. Elected members, parish and town councils, local schools and internal council teams were invited to put forward site suggestions.
19. Groundwork Yorkshire was appointed to evaluate suggested sites and assign a technical feasibility rating to each based on factors including the presence of physical constraints such as underground and overhead utility apparatus. As reported to the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change in September 2022, Groundwork identified sixty-four technically feasible sites providing outline opportunity for almost 4,000 new trees.
20. In 2023, grant was secured from the Forestry Commission to support additional council officer capacity to take forward these sites. A key focus of this work has included detailed consultation with specialist council teams, identifying grant funding opportunities, submitting funding bids, procuring contractor services, and overseeing delivery.
21. Thirteen sites (including three public open space and ten school sites) were selected to deliver within the 2023/24 tree planting season. The necessary grant funding was secured and by the end of the planting season all sites were successfully delivered resulting in circa 2,500 new trees being planted.

22. The focus of sites for the 2024/25 planting season were mostly within the Council's public realm and highway verge, presenting a very different set of challenges in terms of risks and costs to sites delivered in 2023/24. During this planting season, 1,300 trees were planted in public open space and 230 in highway assets.
23. In addition to those trees noted above, the Council secured grant funding from the Government's Coronation Living Heritage Fund (CLHF) to create two new micro-woodlands in the city. Sites were identified in 2023/24, and planting was completed in 2025 to create the 200sqm micro-woods in Rawcliffe (South-West of Village Street) and Heworth (Burnholme Sports Centre).
24. Almost 80% of the trees planted through 'Green Streets' were in areas rated as 'high' and 'moderate' priority for new canopy cover according to the Woodland Trust Tree Equity Score and over 100 local volunteers were engaged in their delivery. Sixteen out of York's 21 wards took part in the initiative.
25. The initiative ended on 31 March 2025 as UK Government grant funding streams ended. Trees planted through the initiative will continue to receive grant funded management and maintenance support up to March 2028.
26. All new tree planting by the Council going forward will be overseen by the Council's Public Realm team, with additional contributions arising via Council-led regeneration, Housing development and transport infrastructure projects and programmes, amongst others.

Tree Loss

27. Each year trees across the city are lost or felled. Reasons for loss vary between years, but can include formal instruction from the Council's insurance provider in cases of subsidence claims, natural process of ageing and decay (highlighted through our safety inspections), because of wilful damage (this may take several years to come into effect) and storm damage.
28. Where it is safe to do so, trees are left as standing dead wood, providing an important habitat for several years. Examples of this can be seen along New Walk and in Rowntree Park.
29. Limitations for replacement trees include:

- a. availability of suitable space, with utilities and previous tree roots limiting options,
- b. no specific tree planting budget, rather the work is funded out of the wider public realm budgets.
- c. conflicts with archaeology and ecology (Species-rich grasslands are important for wildflowers, fungi and insects. They also already store carbon. Additional trees can shade out existing species and be detrimental to wildlife, resulting in a net loss of biodiversity.)
- d. maintaining open aspect of historical strays
- e. community and resident objections

Engagement With Third Parties

30. 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 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.
31. Since 2007, Treemendous⁴ have been supporting tree planting initiatives across the city. In that time, the organisation has planted in excess of 100,000 trees and hedgerow with the support of community volunteers. In October 2024, the Treemendous initiative came to an end, with activity transferring to St. Nicholas Fields.
32. Another example of third-party engagement is with York Rotary Tree Planting Partnership⁵, which has supported various initiatives, including the Family Tree planting initiative and activity at York Community Woodland.

Consultation

33. In drawing up planting proposals, the Council has consulted utility companies regarding their existing utility apparatus and future plans. Officers have ensured proposed new trees are sufficiently distanced

⁴ <https://www.treemendousyork.com/index.php>

⁵ <https://www.yorkrotary.co.uk/tree-partnership>

from utility apparatus to avoid future damage. Where drainage pipes are present officers have planned for a minimum 3m distance and where existing trees are present a minimum distance of 10m has been planned for.

Risk Management

34. There is no one approach to tree planting. Some sites are more straightforward to plant and maintain than others, such as those within existing public open space, away from utility apparatus and other constraints, unlikely to require road or pathway closures to install and unlikely to pose future risk to nearby hard infrastructure. Other sites, like individual street trees within a constrained highway setting are likely to entail a different approach, in some cases requiring traffic management orders to ensure safe installation and the use of tree pits or root barriers to minimise potential impact on nearby hard infrastructure and utility apparatus over the longer-term. The latter approach generally entails additional cost.
35. Officers have considered National Joint Utilities Group (guidelines (NJUG Volume 4 Issue 2) concerning the planning, installation, and maintenance of utility apparatus in proximity to trees. The guidance notes that damage to utility apparatus from trees is possible where apparatus is within the first 600mm from the tree and has existing defects to joints, cracks etc. The guidance states that intact apparatus is not generally penetrated by roots and that direct damage is rare, as it is usually the root that will distort rather than the apparatus itself. Indirect damage is restricted to shrinking soils. abrasion to overhead cables and falling branches. The conclusion of the guidance is that the generally low incidence of damage to underground apparatus makes it neither practical nor justifiable to impose absolute limits on the proximity of trees to apparatus.
36. In relation to equalities requirements, tree planting proposals have been designed to ensure that minimum access widths are maintained. In relation to future enhancements to transport infrastructure, officers have sought to avoid planting proposals that would constrain options. As part of the planting process contractors would be required to ground scan the planting area prior to work commencing and, in some cases, dig trial pits.

37. It should be acknowledged that more trees, especially in locations where there currently are not any could have cost implications for the council's gully cleaning operations and resources. However, of the highway verge locations currently being considered the majority have existing trees present.
38. Adding to the Council's tree assets entails additional tree management and maintenance liabilities:
- a. Short-term (1 to 3 years) – watering and weeding
 - b. Medium-term (5 – 10 years) – removal of tree guards, supports and temporary fencing
 - c. Long-term (10+ years) – condition inspection once every four years as part of the Council's tree management procedures
- Long-term aftercare and ongoing maintenance are vital both in terms of the successful establishment of planted trees and minimising the associated cost.
39. The Environment Act (2021) imposes a change to the Highways Act (1980) requiring Highways Authorities to hold a full and detailed consultation before trees could be removed, baring a list of exemptions. These exemptions include if the tree has died, become diseased and/or dangerous, is causing an obstruction, needs to make way for a dropped kerb. The duty does not apply to trees with trunks less than 8cm in diameter.
40. To mitigate the potential additional burden this duty places on Highways Authorities, officers have worked to the principle of Right Tree in the Right Place.

Recommendations

41. Members are asked to
- 1) note the information provided in this report.

Reason: Provide comment and feedback on the Council's approach to tree planting and management

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**Report
Approved**



Date 13/05/2025

Wards Affected: *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

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For further information please contact the author of the report

Abbreviations

CLHF – Coronation Living Heritage Fund

CO₂e – Carbon Dioxide equivalent

EIP23 - Environmental Improvement Plan

NJUG – National Joint Utilities Group

NPPF – National Planning Policy Framework

TPO - Tree Preservation Order

UK – United Kingdom

WRF – White Rose Forest

Background Papers

<https://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/2450/arboricultural-policy-for-york-november-2017>

https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s178332/EMDS%20Report_Micro-woodland.pdf

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s178883/York%20Green%20Streets%20Report.pdf>

<https://democracy.york.gov.uk/mglIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IId=64153&optionId=0>