

## **Executive Member Decision Session**

**16 December 2020**

Report of the Chief Operating Officer

Portfolio of the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change

## **York Community Woodland Delivery Pathway**

### **Summary**

1. The report outlines a proposed woodland delivery pathway for the creation of a new multi-functional amenity woodland for York, known by the working title 'York Community Woodland' (YCW).

### **Recommendations**

2. The Executive member is asked to:
  - i. Note the progress made to date
  - ii. Review and approve the following:
    - a) Draft project initiation document (PID)
    - b) Draft project plan and key milestones
    - c) Draft engagement framework and strategy
    - d) Communications plan

### **Background**

3. City of York Council (CYC) announced a climate emergency in March 2019 and subsequently set the ambition for York to become carbon neutral by 2030. To support this ambition, CYC set an aim to plant 50,000 trees by 2023.
4. To achieve this aim, CYC joined the White Rose Forest (WRF) partnership, a local authority joint venture supporting the creation of new community woodland across West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire and York. The WRF partnership is a constituent of the Northern Forest initiative that aims to plant 50 million trees across northern England.
5. Budget Council February 2020 approved a £3 million 'Northern Forest' fund to enable the purchase of suitable land for tree

planting. 154 acres of arable land in the west of York was subsequently purchased in September 2020. A project team was set up and tasked with initial project design to ensure a robust, funded and planned approach to woodland creation.

## **Progress to date and proposed woodland delivery pathway**

### Draft Project Initiation Document (PID)

6. The PID (Annex 1) sets out the project aims and how the project will be run. The document builds on information contained in the Executive report dated 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020, 'Creating a new Woodland/Stray for York'.
7. The PID includes a risk log (Annex 2); a working document that will be regularly updated and reviewed. Current short-term risks include the potential presence of archaeology that could impact on the proposed project timeline and longer-term supply chain risks such as the availability of trees and materials.

### Project management and governance

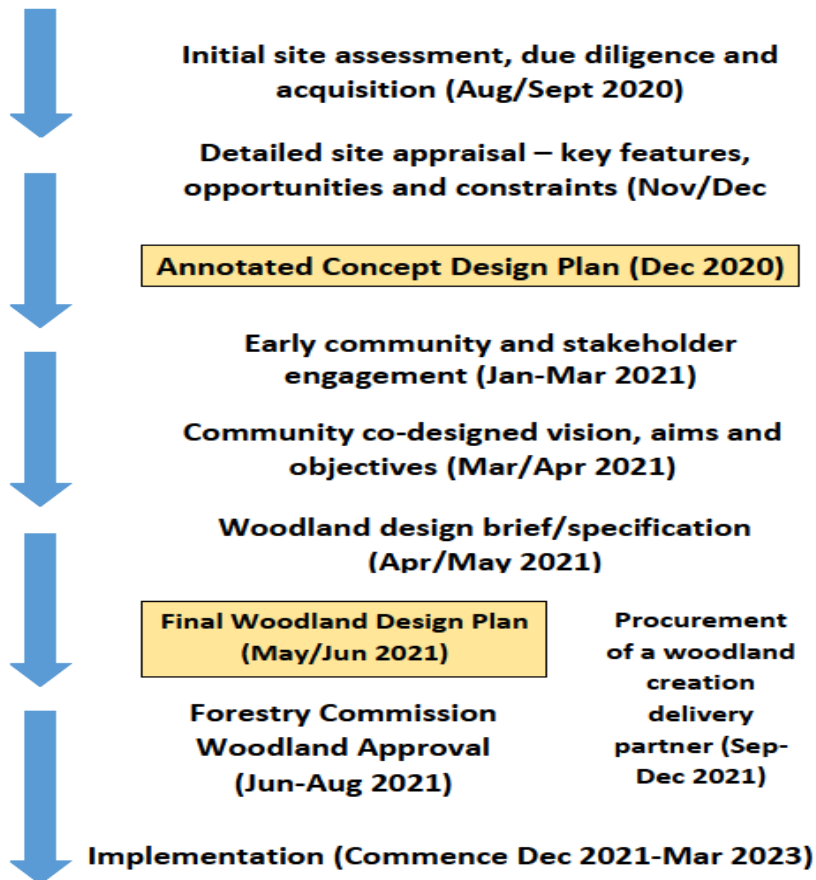
8. The project management resource is located within the Corporate Strategy and City Partnerships (CSCP) team and currently comprises 1fte project manager. The post is currently resourced via a grant from the WRF partnership and reports to the Head of Carbon Reduction. These project start-up arrangements are currently being reviewed to identify a staffing model that can best support ongoing project development and delivery.
9. It is proposed to establish in January 2021 a high level Project Board to steer delivery, undertake progress reviews, sign-off outputs and own and monitor risks. A key first task will be to collectively assess risks through a risk matrix using a RAG methodology.
10. It is proposed the Project Board includes senior officers from the Carbon Reduction, Planning, Health and Wellbeing, Transport, Finance and Procurement and Parks and Open Spaces teams. This broad-based group will ensure key linkages are made across the organisation to maximise the woodland's potential to deliver shared objectives.

11. As well as harnessing internal expertise, there is opportunity to capture expertise from within WRF, as well as a range of local organisations and stakeholder groups. It is proposed that a multi-agency YCW Stakeholder Advisory Group be established to support and guide the council. The group will be a key interface between external partners, project team and relevant council officers as the project develops. Suggested membership and Draft Terms of Reference are attached (Annex 3). The group would provide advice and guidance to the Project Board, with no decision-making responsibilities.

Project milestones and Draft Project Plan

12. The following project milestones were developed for YCW in consultation with the Community Forest Trust (CFT) and WRF. These milestones have been used as the basis for the detailed draft Project Plan (Annex 4).

**York Community Woodland – Project milestones**



13. The project milestones provide a clear pathway from initial site purchase through to procurement of a woodland creation delivery partner to implementation of the agreed woodland design plan. The pathway is configured around the aim to commence tree planting in October 2021 to March 2022 and to have at least 50,000 trees planted by 2022/23, in line with Council Plan 2019-23 commitments.
14. The task based draft Project Plan maps out what needs to happen, when, by who and how each step will, or could, be funded. The Plan demonstrates how woodland creation is a sequential undertaking with later stages dependant on, and informed by, earlier ones.
15. A key next step in the pathway is to undertake detailed site appraisal to inform the development of a concept design plan (Nov/Dev 2020) to underpin community and stakeholder engagement in the New Year 2021.
16. A report will be brought to Project Board and the Portfolio holder early in the New Year detailing the outcome of this work and seeking approval for the concept design plan and approach for stakeholder engagement.
17. Following a comprehensive programme of community engagement during January-March 2021, a further report will be brought to Project Board and Executive Member detailing community feedback and identifying a community-owned vision and objectives.
18. The vision and objectives will inform the development of a final woodland design plan in June 2021 which, subject to sign-off by the Project Board and Portfolio holder, will be submitted to the Forestry Commission for woodland approval. The approved final woodland design plan will determine what package of funding is best suited to support woodland delivery and longer-term woodland management.
19. Temporary crop licenses have been issued to a local farmer to continue farming the land until tree planting and related works commence. This will provide a financial return during 2021 and enable the land to remain productive.

## Project communications

20. The Communications Plan (Annex 5) highlights the key messages, audiences, channels and milestones. It has been developed in consultation with the Portfolio holder, communications team and the project team. Activities to date include:
- Early information sent to locally elected representatives including parish councillors and MPs
  - Publication of a YCW [web page](#) highlighting the vision and objectives driving the woodland creation, identifying site location, explaining the current project status and inviting people to subscribe for updates
  - Creation of a [YorkCommunityWoodland@york.gov.uk](mailto:YorkCommunityWoodland@york.gov.uk) mailbox
  - 'Woodland memories' on-line consultation running in late November- December 2020.

## Stakeholder and community engagement

21. The draft YCW Engagement Framework (Annex 6) sets out seven themes, around which ongoing engagement will be shaped. These are Governance, Environment, Health & Wellbeing, Learning & Skills, Facilities & Features, Community and Access. The framework also sets out the six principles that will guide the engagement approach and ensure consistency. These are Trust, Transparency, Commitment, Clarity, Accessibility and Variety.
22. An ongoing process of stakeholder mapping is underway to build a database of engagement contacts including community and specialist interest groups, neighbouring landowners and businesses and a growing list of interested individuals who have asked to be kept informed.
23. The draft YCW Engagement Strategy (Annex 7) sets out the proposed nature and timing of engagement activity to be undertaken in three phases:
- Phase 1** November-December 2020  
Early engagement with principle stakeholders, establishing effective networks and capturing offers of help. Provision has also been made for an on-line survey to elicit how people value woodland.
  - Phase 2** January-March 2021

Full consultation to arrive at a community-owned vision and objectives based on a detailed understanding of the site, opportunities and constraints. Approaches being considered (subject to Covid restrictions) as part of this phase include:

- Information drop-in sessions in various locations
- Interactive workshop style sessions
- Curated social media conversations
- On-site woodland fair and/or information day
- Opportunities for practical community planting on the proposed wildflower meadow

iii. **Phase 3** April-July 2021

Consultation feedback and refinement of woodland design in line with community vision and objectives. Opportunities for ongoing community and stakeholder engagement, longer-term sustainable woodland management and commercial options to cover costs.

### Site planning and regulations

24. The Forestry Commission (FC) has been engaged in early project planning and a joint site visit took place on 23 October 2020. The FC play a crucial regulatory role in woodland creation and must approve woodland plans prior to work on site.
25. The FC recommend undertaking a Detailed Site Appraisal (DSA) leading to a Concept Design Plan (CDP) that can be used as a tool for early community and stakeholder engagement. Fully understanding the site and comprehensive stakeholder engagement are key considerations in the FC woodland approval process.
26. A DSA and CDP brief has been drawn up (Annex 8). The work seeks to build on initial site screening completed as part of site acquisition 'due diligence'. CYC has commissioned CFT to undertake this work within established timescales at no cost to CYC.
27. The CYC archaeologist has advised of the need to do a geophysical survey across 50% of the Knapton site for possible archaeological remains. This is due to high potential for the survival of significant archaeological features and deposits relating to prehistoric/Romano-British land use and settlement. This is the

standard approach used nationally in planning to assess any destructive scheme in a green field area. Any tree planting scheme could impact negatively on any surviving archaeology on this site as it will exist just below the topsoil cut into natural clays. Work is currently underway to commission this work through the council's procurement framework and this work will run concurrently with the DSA.

28. Following evaluation, a mitigation strategy will be established which will require excavation (depending on extent/location of archaeology and tree planting) or a scheme design which preserves archaeology in-situ. Site surveys such as this clearly present a key project risk. In a worst case scenario the presence of significant archaeological remains of high cultural value (e.g. a Roman Villa), would have significant implications for proposed project timescales and cost. However, there is scope within this archaeological investigation to work with the community/interest groups ahead of the creation of the woodland and to potentially create a scheme of interpretation about the historic landscape in this area.
29. The DSA, site survey findings, CDP and agreed community vision will be brought together in April/May 2021 to shape a Final Woodland Design Brief. This will inform refinement of the concept design plan alongside FC regulatory requirements for United Kingdom Forest Standard (UKFS) compliance and generate a holistic plan taking all factors into account such as hard landscaping, car parking, paths and trails, play areas, outside classrooms etc.
30. A final Woodland Design Plan will be submitted to the FC for woodland approval and environmental impact assessment (EIA) screening and be subject to public consultation. It is envisaged the consultation will run concurrently to FC decision making processes. Involving FC early and at each stage of the woodland design and consultation process can be an effective way to mitigate risks associated with securing woodland approval.

#### Woodland creation and ongoing woodland management

31. As a detailed woodland design plan emerges, thought will also be given to how best to deliver the physical works needed to create

the woodland and to ongoing woodland management arrangements.

32. An approved woodland design plan will be a firm base from which to develop a woodland delivery contract specification. There are likely to be several options regarding site delivery and tree planting, with the possibility of a combination of commercial and community approaches. The precise balance and nature of the works will be shaped by the woodland design plan, the scope/availability of community options to deliver at the pace and scale required and available management resources and costs.
33. A preferred option at this stage is the procuring of an experienced commercial or third sector 'woodland delivery partner' to undertake phased implementation of the woodland design plan through a detailed schedule of works. Phasing is likely to be over two years to include the 2021/22 and 2022/23 tree planting seasons. The specification could include provision for ongoing and direct community participation in tree planting and other works to meet our community woodland aspirations. Key benefits of this approach include retaining control through robust contract management whilst minimising the council's exposure to direct project risks.
34. The project team will continue to take advice and guidance from partners on these delivery options and a report will be brought before Project Board and Portfolio holder before selecting a delivery approach.
35. The project team is advised that key features of the site infrastructure (other than trees and wildflower meadows etc.) will require planning permission and will work with the Council Planning Authority to secure this where required.
36. The draft Engagement Strategy includes provision for early community-based wildflower meadow creation and demonstration tree planting on part of the site during spring 2021. A seven acre field, adjacent to Knapton village, with good access to sustainable transport infrastructure has been set aside for this purpose. The Executive Member and the project team recently visited the Woodmeadow Trust in Escrick, York and will be seeking to harness their expertise on this particular initiative.



37. The project team have been advised by FC and WRF that tree supply chain issues could present a major project risk. A range of mitigating actions have been suggested and captured within the risk and issues log and the Council's procurement team have been advised early of the likelihood of significant tree procurement activity in summer/autumn 2021.
38. Options for longer-term community woodland management will be explored as the stakeholder engagement and woodland design phases are developed. This will include research and possible study visits to existing community woodland that could provide relevant insights and good practice. The WRF provides a suitable network through which to explore these possibilities.

### Project funding

39. A range of funding options is available to support woodland creation as tree planting and carbon sequestration have risen up the national agenda. A list of currently available funding sources is attached (Annex 9).
40. Budget Council 2020 made provision for a £3 million capital budget to support the council's tree planting ambitions (2020-2023). £1.65 million of this was used in the land purchase in West York and a further £400,000 was approved for the purchase of adjacent land subject to negotiations with the current landowner (ongoing). Council also allocated £25,000 revenue funding (2020-2021) rising to £50,000 in 2021/22 and 2022/23 to support woodland creation and this budget sits within the CSCP budget.
41. The Council aims to minimise call on its allocated 'Northern Forest' budgets by securing as much external funding as possible. It is likely CYC will be able to secure a significant proportion of overall project costs, capital and revenue, from external sources given the funding opportunities available at each stage of woodland design and woodland creation.
42. An opportunity arose in September 2020 to access funding from the Government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) to support project costs up to a total value of £250,000 and a funding application was submitted on 2 October 2020. The Heritage Lottery Fund announced on 3 November 2020 that this application was unsuccessful. However, the process of putting this bid

together created new contacts and relationships, and helped identify other sources of potential funding better suited to the project. National Government has recently announced a second round of GRCF, with further details to be published.

43. A funding application (circa £58,000) was submitted to WRF on 6 November 2020 for funding support primarily to cover project staff costs, stakeholder engagement activities and archaeological site survey fees up to 31 March 2021. This application was successful and will go a significant way in back-filling the council's Northern Forest revenue budget utilised during this period. The project team is advised by WRF that project revenue costs incurred from 1 April onwards can be capitalised within the planned funding application to the 'Trees for Climate' fund (see below) and backdated accordingly.
44. An alternative to WRF funding is the FCs Woodland Creation Planning Grant (WCPG), following a review of eligibility criteria announced on 2 November 2020 that removed the requirement for 70% productive woodland. This is under consideration; however, WCPG and WRF funding ultimately comes from the same pot (Department for Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs) and they will not double fund.
45. The project team anticipates securing significant capital funding from the WRF 'Trees for Climate' fund once a woodland design plan is finalised. Based on an available grant of £17,000 per hectare, anticipated funding is between £850,000 and £1.1m.
46. There are several other sources of potential funding available to the project. CFT has formally written to the WRF Funder's Group on behalf of CYC in line with the WRF Delivery Pathway, detailing YCW project objectives and timescales and requesting information about:
  - Key eligibility criteria associated with each available funding stream
  - Funding limits e.g. maximum amount total or per hectare
  - Timing issues e.g. specific application windows, deadlines.
  - Timing issues with agreements e.g. when could an agreement be in place / Is multi-year funding available
  - Other important information that would be helpful at this stage

47. Once a response is received, the project team will work with the Council's finance colleagues to profile a budget strategy and a further report will be submitted to the Project Board to outline the proposed way forward.
48. The project team are advised that the precise blend or stacking of funding most appropriate to support the later phases of woodland creation and longer-term woodland management are best identified once the woodland design plan is agreed. The project team remains confident, based on discussions with WRF partners to date, that significant external funding support in excess of £1 million can be secured from one or more of the currently identified sources.

### Project evaluation

49. A project of this scale and ambition, led by a local authority, represents a bold and exciting undertaking and there is scope to embrace innovative policy and practice. There is opportunity to learn important lessons, not just concerning project impacts but also project delivery, and these lessons can inform future policy and practice and be shared with others embarking on similar projects.
50. The DSA will help set a comprehensive baseline for much of the evaluation, though further work is needed to design an evaluation methodology that enables us to fully understand the effectiveness of project design and stakeholder engagement over the course of the project. Initial discussions have been held with University of York and further options are also being considered to scope an evaluation methodology. Proposals will be brought to the Project Board at the appropriate time.

### **Recommendations**

51. The Executive Member is asked to:
- i. Note the progress made to date
  - ii. Review and approve the following:
    - a) Draft project initiation document (PID)
    - b) Draft project plan and key milestones
    - c) Draft engagement framework and strategy
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## Consultation

52. This report and associated documents has been developed in consultation with a range of partners including the White Rose Forest and Community Forest Trust. Ongoing project design and delivery will be informed by a wide range of internal and external stakeholders and the woodland design and woodland creation will be shaped through extensive community and stakeholder consultation.

## Council Plan

53. The project accords with the Council Plan 2019-2023 in regard to the following core outcomes of the Plan:

- **A greener and cleaner city** – Carbon sequestration and amenity green space
- **Getting around sustainably** – New pedestrian and cycle routes
- **Good health and wellbeing** – Creation of new open spaces to support healthy lifestyles for residents, businesses and visitors.
- **Safe communities and culture for all** – A range of leisure opportunities for residents
- **Well paid jobs and an inclusive economy** – Green skills development

## Implications

**Financial** - There are no additional financial implications at this stage, as provision has already been made within the 2020/21 approved budget for the work outlined in this report. However, as the project progresses further work will be undertaken to develop a funding strategy to ensure we maximise the available opportunities and minimise any financial risk to the Council. The ongoing financial impact will continue to be carefully monitored and any variations reported to Executive in the regular finance and performance monitoring reports.

**Human Resources** – Start-up staffing arrangements are being reviewed to ensure the project is fully supported by a dedicated project team and proposals will be brought back to CMT/Project Board/Portfolio Holder in January 2020

**Equalities** – A CIA was completed as part of the Executive report 27 August 2020. Community and stakeholder engagement strategies related to this report will be fully EIA tested

**Legal** – None associated directly with this report

**Crime and Disorder** – None directly associated with this report

**Information Technology** – None associated directly with this report

**Property** – None associated directly with this report

**Other** – None associated directly with this report

**Risk Management** – A risk and issues log is been maintained and regularly reviewed as part of this project (see above and attached at Annex 2)

## Contact Details

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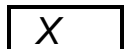
Ian Floyd  
Chief Operating Officer

**Report Approved**  
**Date** 11/11/20



### Wards Affected:

All



**For further information please contact the author of the report**

## **Background Papers:**

- Council Plan 2019-2023
- City of York Council Executive report: Creating a new Woodland/Stray for York 27 August 2020

## **Annexes**

- **Annex 1** YCW Project initiation document (Draft)
- **Annex 2** YCW risks and issues Log
- **Annex 3** YCW Project plan (Draft)
- **Annex 4** YCW Project advisory group terms of reference (Draft)
- **Annex 5** YCW Communications plan
- **Annex 6** YCW Engagement framework (Draft)
- **Annex 7** YCW Engagement strategy (Draft)
- **Annex 8** Detailed site appraisal and concept design brief
- **Annex 9** Woodland creation funding sources