

Executive

26 August 2021

Report of the Assistant Director of Policy and Strategy
Portfolio of the Executive Member for the Environment and Climate
Change

**York Community Woodland community co-design vision and
process for selecting capital funding and delivery partner**

Summary

1. The report summarises the outcomes of the community co-design and stakeholder engagement work to inform final woodland design
2. It also sets out a recommended process for agreeing the final woodland design plan, the external capital funding source to support woodland creation and management and appointment of a woodland creation delivery partner.
3. Extremely ambitious project timescales were established at the outset, with significant milestones to achieve before planting could commence. All milestones have been met to date and the project is running on time and within budget. The success of securing capital grant funding will reduce the council's call-off from the Northern Forest budget by almost £1m.

Recommendations

4. Executive is asked to:
 - i. Note the views of residents and stakeholders gained through community consultation and approve the community woodland vision and woodland name

Reason: To ensure the York Community Woodland project fully reflects the views and priorities of local residents and stakeholders

- ii. Delegate Authority to the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change to approve the final woodland design, select the source of external capital funding to support woodland creation and approve the carrying out of a procurement process to appoint a woodland creation delivery partner

Reason: To ensure a timely decision regarding woodland design in order to meet the 2021/22 tree planting season (Oct-Mar).

- iii. Delegate Authority for the Director of Governance to take such steps as are necessary to enter into the funding agreement and to procure, award and enter in the resulting contracts for the appointment of a woodland creation delivery partner should the Executive member for Environment and Climate Change select the White Rose Forest Trees for Climate fund as the external capital funding source to support York Community Woodland delivery.

Reason: To ensure timely entry into the lease to meet project deadlines.

- iv. Delegate Authority to the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change to approve the publication of any necessary 'open space' disposal Notice under S. 123 of the Local Government Act 1992 and to consider any comments received from the public in response to such Notice should the Executive member for Environment and Climate Change select Forestry England as the external capital funding source to support York Community Woodland delivery in return for the council granting Forestry England a long term lease of the land.

Reason: To ensure timely entry into the lease to meet project deadlines.

- v. Delegate Authority for the Director of Governance to take such steps as are necessary to enter into the resulting lease with Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs for the York Community Woodland site at Knapton should the Executive member for Environment and Climate Change select Forestry England as the external capital funding source to support York Community Woodland delivery.

Reason: To ensure timely selection and appointment of a woodland creation delivery partner to meet project deadlines.

Background

5. Executive considered a report in August 2020 setting out the council's vision and objectives for York Community Woodland in pursuit of its ambition to reduce carbon emissions and plant 50,000 trees by 2023. The report paved the way for a significant land purchase to the west of York near Knapton village using c£1.61m capital funding from the council's £3m Northern Forest (NF) budget.
6. Project objectives include a nature based solution to climate change mitigation, a new amenity woodland connecting more people with nature to improve peoples' health and wellbeing, more diverse habitats to support wildlife and the recovery of threatened species and new green employment, volunteering and nature based learning opportunities.
7. Executive called on officers to minimise further call on the NF budget by securing as much external revenue and capital grants as possible to cover woodland design, woodland creation and ongoing management.
8. Officers have successfully secured £110,000 revenue grant from White Rose Forest (WRF) in return for agreeing to deliver 70 ha of new woodland. The grant covers the 2020/21 and 2021/22 financial years and is being used to support project management, site assessment (incl. related survey work), woodland concept design and community engagement. The council has also benefitted from expert advice and guidance from woodland professionals directly funded by WRF.
9. Officers have also secured £1,000 revenue grant from the Forestry Commission's Woodland Creation Planning Grant (WCPG) Stage 1 fund. This has been used to support follow-up site survey and concept design work. Forestry Commission has invited the council to submit a further WCPG Stage 2 application later this year, opening up a further £10,700 to support final woodland design and master planning work.
10. As part of the woodland community co-design process, a public consultation ran from 14th April – 26th May 2021. The goal of this

phase was to receive feedback on the vision, objectives and concept plans, and to guide the final stage of woodland design.

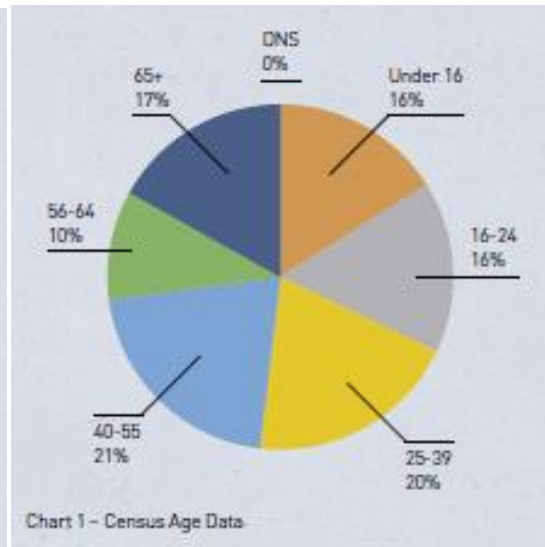
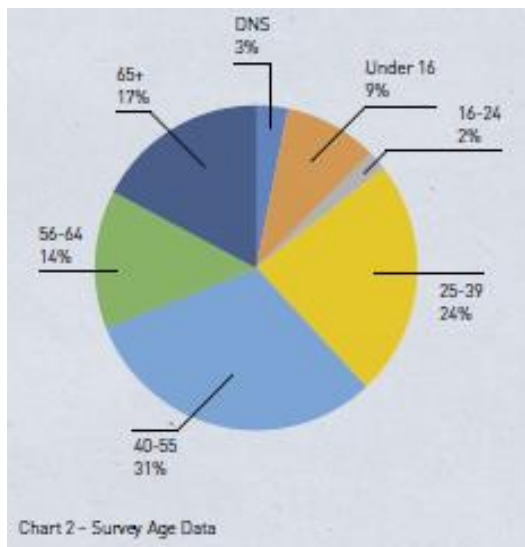
11. The consultation aimed to reach a wide and diverse audience from across the City of York. Access points were provided through an online survey, online meeting/webinars, postal surveys, school surveys and direct contact with a wide range of community & local interest groups, including parish councils, local ward councillors, local businesses, schools, colleges and universities.
12. The project's Stakeholder Advisory Group held its first meeting in March 2021. Made up of woodland experts, interest groups, local businesses, landowners and local members, the group provides advice and support for the co-design and overall project. An internal council officer group representing a wide range of service areas has also met regularly to help steer the project forward and ensure shared objectives are maximised.
13. Responses gathered through the co-design process have been analysed by the design team appointed to produce the final woodland design and is presented in the attached 'Community & Stakeholder Engagement Response Report' (see Annex 1).
14. Additional engagement activity in this period included:
 - Hosting local primary school children on site to help sow a wood meadow
 - Installation of a public noticeboard on site
 - Hosted the National Executive board of the Forestry Commission on a visit and tour of the woodland site
15. Woodland engagement now moves to phase 3 and will include:
 - Walking tours as part of York Environment Week
 - Tree planting opportunities to support delivery
 - Workshops and site specific events

Consultation

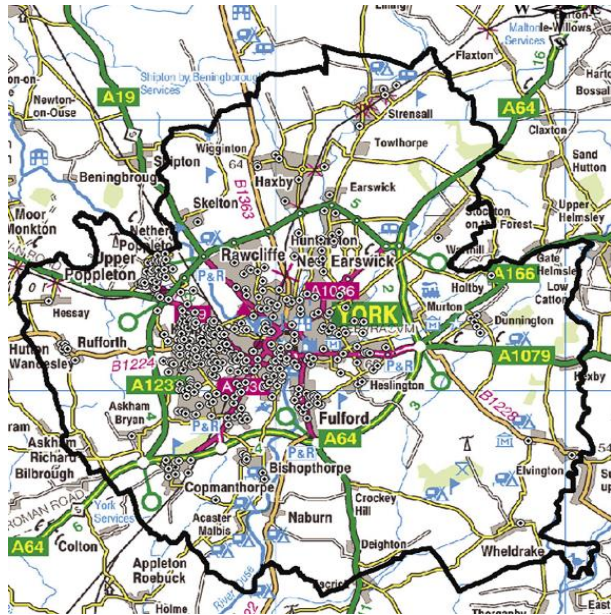
16. This report has been developed in consultation with partners from within the WRF and Community Forest Trust. Colleagues in the council's Legal, Property, Finance, Planning, Carbon Reduction and Procurement teams have also been consulted during the drafting of this report.

Community Co-design Process

17. Feedback from the co-design process is summarised in the 'Community & Stakeholder Engagement Response Report'. The report:
- Sets out the engagement process undertaken including who responded;
 - Summarises the key themes and messages emerging from the 6-week community and stakeholder engagement process;
 - Identifies woodland design features to be carried forward into the final woodland design masterplan;
 - Identifies the key issues and concerns raised by the public and suggests suitable council responses and mitigations.
18. Over 780 responses were received. The breakdown of respondents by age is shown below and compared to census data. These charts show that young people were less well represented within the main survey, and the 40-55 year olds group slightly over represented. It should be noted that these charts do not include the school survey respondents, all 54 of whom were under 16. With this in mind, the overall engagement exercise did reach groups of all ages.



19. Geographically, responses to the consultation were well distributed across the city. A concentration of responses were received from residents close to the site, which is to be expected.



20. Overall the consultation programme is considered to have been wide reaching and successful in engaging people from all walks of life, including harder to reach groups. The variety of feedback methods was appropriate for the scale of the scheme and there was plenty of time for respondents to provide their feedback.

Woodland vision

21. The current woodland vision (as set out in Section 1 of the report) is supported by 78% of those responding to the survey. Analysis of the detailed responses suggested that an additional reference to carbon capture/environmental benefits be added to reflect what members of the public consider the key objectives. Subsequently it is proposed the Woodland Vision be revised to:

*"The new woodland will be a well-designed, bio-diverse, green space providing a place for peaceful contemplation and leisure for the people of York. This will create a new stray for the city, **support the climate change ambition**, enhance the setting of the city and make York an even greater place to live, work and visit."*

Project objectives

22. Respondents were asked to identify which of the five objectives were most important to them. The results were:

- 96% see increasing biodiversity and creating habitats as an important function of the woodland.
- 91% see carbon capture as an important function of the woodland.
- 91% see access to green space for health and wellbeing as an important function of the woodland.
- 76% want to see York’s active travel network enhanced to include new walking and cycling routes as part of YCW.
- 74% see the creation of new green jobs and the development of skills/volunteering opportunities as an important function of the woodland.

23. It is clear that the biodiversity and ecological value of the woodland, along with its environmental function are key for respondents. The space should be useable, but trees, habitats and wildlife should take priority. The project design will be sensitive to the importance of the plants and wildlife, whilst maintaining useable areas for leisure and mindfulness.

24. Overall, the public responses aligned well with the original project objectives. These will be retained to drive the project forward.

Woodland features

25. Respondents were asked to rank woodland features in order of importance, providing feedback on what elements they would like to see included in the final design. The results were as follows (a larger version of this table is attached at Annex 2:



26. It is clear that respondents valued natural features above built forms and hardstanding areas. Planting, ponds and trails should be included in the design, alongside areas of different habitat types to support a variety of wildlife.
27. Educational and volunteering opportunities should be provided; a forest school and informal space for community events will be included. While the consultation has shown little demand for formal events space, visitor centre or café on site at this stage. There is anecdotal evidence that these features are wanted and provision will be made for them to be incorporated in the future as the woodland matures and becomes a more established space.
28. The majority of respondents intended to walk or cycle to the woodland. The site is already well served by footpaths, cycle routes and bridle ways and these will be retained through the proposals to encourage sustainable travel. An accessible network of paths is planned for the site for all user groups as is cycle parking.
29. Some visitors will drive; therefore, to maximise accessibility for all users, provision will be made for some car parking, disabled parking, minibus parking and a drop-off area. These will be carefully planned to ensure disruption is kept to a minimum.

Community involvement

30. Respondents are very keen to be involved in the creation and long-term use of the Woodland. Provision should be made for volunteers and educational pursuits within the woodland design, as well as informal community space.
31. Respondents consider the long-term management of the woodland to be an important element in its success. Funding and provision for this must be secured through the proposal's development and accommodated within the detailed design.
32. We will ensure that opportunities for ongoing community engagement (phase 2) are hardwired into the design through the inclusion of coppice areas, orchards and other community areas.

Naming options

33. The co-design consultation asked the public to suggest a name for the woodland receiving 322 answers and comments across all platforms (online survey, primary school survey and public comment). Support was mostly shown for:
- York Community Woodland
 - York Wood
 - Knapton Wood
34. The working title of York Community Woodland is well-received and gained recognition through the engagement process. The concept of a 'Community' woodland represents a contemporary view of woodland creation and clearly differentiates it from ancient woodlands in the area. It is therefore recommended that this name be retained.

Technical responses

35. In addition to the survey, we also received official responses to the co-design from: The Woodland Trust, Natural England, Forestry Commission, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and Forestry England.
36. Responses are summarised in the attached report and show overwhelming support for the project, with Forestry England commenting that they, "*strongly support the feedback received at consultation 'for the simple enjoyment of woodland'*"

Final Woodland Design Brief

37. CYC appointed the services of an expert woodland design consultant following a competitive procurement exercise in May/June 2021. Pegasus Planning Ltd won the contract and commenced the process of drawing up a proposed final woodland design masterplan on 14 June 2021 working to the following brief:

The final woodland design will:

- deliver the community woodland vision and show how the design meets project objectives following community and stakeholder consultation

- be Forestry Commission (FC) UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) compliant and meet FC Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) requirements
 - remain within White Rose Forest (Trees for Climate), Forestry Commission (English Woodland Creation Offer) and Forestry England (Woodland Partnership Offer) funding criteria
 - enable achievement of agreed project success measures (See attached as Annex 3)
38. An internal council officer group has met regularly to help steer woodland design and project delivery with representatives from the council's planning, transport, health and wellbeing, ecology, archaeology, Public Rights of Way, finance, procurement, communities and carbon reduction teams.
39. Pegasus Planning Ltd will submit the final draft woodland design and master plan to CYC by 16 August. This will include a schedule of indicative capital costs and an indicative implementation schedule showing suggested key phases of woodland creation.
40. Executive is recommended to delegate Authority to the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change, in consultation with the Corporate Director of Place, the Chief Finance Officer and Director of Governance (or her delegated officers) to approve the final woodland design
41. Once approved officers will submit the woodland design to Forestry England for woodland approval as part of a Forestry England Woodland Creation Planning Grant Stage 2 application.

Capital funding Options for woodland creation and management

42. There are a number of capital funding streams available to support woodland creation and ongoing management. In May 2021, officers sent a request for information questionnaire to all known funding bodies and received a good response (See Annex 4 for a summary of these responses).
43. Analysis of the responses enabled officers to evaluate the various funding sources against project objectives and timescales. Two sources in particular were considered to offer

the best alignment and package of benefits - the White Rose Forest Trees for Climate (TfC) grant fund and the Forestry England Woodland Partnership (WP) 'offer' (see Annex 5 for a summary of the evaluation exercise).

44. These capital funding opportunities represent two very different propositions:
 - The TfC opportunity is essentially a straightforward capital grant funding 100% of woodland creation and 15 years woodland management costs. It involves CYC retaining full responsibility for procuring and managing the services of a woodland creation delivery partner to physically create and then maintain the woodland on its behalf.
 - The WP offer involves Forestry England taking full responsibility for woodland creation and ongoing management/maintenance in return for a long-term lease (60-120 years) for which CYC would receive an annual rental income.
45. Officers have actively pursued these grant funding opportunities over several months and, as of 30 July 2021, can confirm that CYC has been successful in securing formal offers from both the WRF (TfC) and Forestry England (WP), subject to final woodland design and negotiated funding agreements. Officers are currently exploring and negotiating the finer terms of these offers and will conduct a further options appraisal with recommendation for Executive member consideration once this process is finalised towards the end of August.
46. It is recommended that Executive delegates Authority for the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change to consider this options appraisal and approve the recommended capital funding stream for woodland creation and management at a future Executive Member Decision session.

Woodland Creation Delivery Partner

47. The route City of York Council (CYC) takes regarding woodland creation and ongoing management will be determined by the funding route:

- White Rose Forest TfC funding – CYC will conduct a procurement process to appoint an external woodland creation delivery partner to undertake woodland creation and ongoing (15yrs) management and maintenance
 - Forestry England WP funding – Forestry England will take full responsibility for woodland creation and ongoing woodland management through a 60-120 year lease agreement with CYC.
48. Should the WRF funding be the preferred funding route officers will commence the procurement of a woodland creation delivery partner to physically deliver the woodland masterplan. Executive is recommended to delegate Authority to the Director of Governance to take such steps as are necessary to enter into the funding agreement and to procure, award and enter into the resulting contracts for the appointment of this delivery partner.
49. Should the Forestry England offer be the preferred funding route Executive is recommended to delegate Authority for the Director of Governance to take such steps as are necessary to negotiate and enter into the resulting lease with Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs for the York Community Woodland site at Knapton.

Council Plan

50. 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** – The council funded the land purchase cost of £1.61m in 2020/21. Accessing external grant to fully fund the capital costs of woodland creation and ongoing woodland management will meet the council’s objective to minimise call on the CYC capital budgets. The two funding offers being considered for woodland creation and management means the project can continue without council subsidy.
- **Human Resources** – None directly associated with this report
- **Equalities** – A full Equalities Impact Assessment will be carried out for the Final Woodland Design and accompany the report at the EMDS. The Impact Assessment will be continuously monitored as the project progresses.

- **Legal** –

- White Rose Forest Trees for Climate (TfC) grant fund

In the event the TfC grant fund is the selected grant funding route, the procurement process to select the delivery partner shall be undertaken in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and the Council’s Contract Procedure Rules.

The grant funding proposal will be reviewed to ensure it is in compliance with the Subsidy Control regime (previously State Aid).

- Forestry England Woodland Partnership (WP) offer

Any land owned by the Council is classed as ‘open space’ under S.336 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 if it is (or arguably has recently been) “used for the purposes of public recreation”). It is understood that following invitation by the Council, a small number of the public (approximately 10 – 15 people per day) have accessed a small part of the proposed woodland site (known as “Bell Field”) between 4th August 2021 and 15th August 2021 between the hours of 10am – 4pm (outside of which hours the gate providing access to the land was kept locked). In case access for recreation by invitation during that limited period was sufficient for the land to be classed as “open space” (for the purposes of S.336 T CPA1990), it is recommended that before the Council potentially grants a lease of the land to Forestry England (or any other third party) it would

be prudent to publish a Notice in a local newspaper advising of such proposed disposal and then consider any comments/objections received in response to such Notice in accordance with S.123(2A) of the Local Government Act 1972.

Legal services will continue to be consulted at appropriate points in time or as and when need arises at various stages of the project. Full legal implications of the funding and delivery partner decisions will accompany the report at the next EMDS.

- **Crime and Disorder** – None directly associated with this report
- **Information Technology** – None associated directly with this report
- **Property** – Property services will be consulted at appropriate points in time or as and when need arises at various stages of the project.
- **Other** – None associated directly with this report

Risk Management

51. The various funding streams featured in this report involve different levels of project risk with the Forestry England offer currently assessed as delivering the lowest woodland creation and ongoing management risks.
52. In-principle offers from WRF and Forestry England significantly reduces the risks around project funding.

Contact Details

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Report Approved ✓

Date 12/08/2021

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Wards Affected: All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

- Executive report 27 August 2020: Creating a new woodland/Stray for York

Annexes

- Annex 1: YCW Community and stakeholder consultation report
- Annex 2: Summary of community responses re. woodland features
- Annex 3. Project success measures
- Annex 4. Summary of responses to the CYC funders' questionnaire
- Annex 5. Evaluation of funding sources against project objectives and timescales