

REPORT TITLE: Urban Forest Strategy (2026-2036)

To: Cabinet 25 September 2025

Relevant Cabinet Member: Cllr Martin Smart, Cabinet Member for Nature, Open Space and City Services

Report by:

Matthew Magrath, Urban Forest Manager

Tel: 01223 458526 Email: matthew.magrath@cambridge.gov.uk

Wards affected:

All

Director Approval: Director James Elms confirms that the report author has sought the advice of all appropriate colleagues and given due regard to that advice; that the equalities impacts and other implications of the recommended decisions have been assessed and accurately presented in the report; and that they are content for the report to be put to the Cabinet/Cabinet Member for decision.

1. Recommendations

1.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Approves the progression to consultation on the new Cambridge City Council Urban Forest Strategy (2026-2036) (UFS).
2. Notes that consultation will take place in two stages: an internal consultation with service delivery partners, followed by a public consultation alongside the Biodiversity Strategy review.
3. Delegates finalisation of consultation documents and proposals to the Director of City Services.

2. Purpose and reason for the report

- 2.1 The current Cambridge City Council Tree Strategy (2016-2026) is due to expire in 2026. A replacement strategy is required to ensure the Council continues to manage and enhance the city's urban forest proactively, to the benefit of existing and future communities, the local environment, and our arboricultural heritage.

The new UFS keeps the same vision as the 2016-2026 Strategy but is shorter and easier to follow. Supporting text and detailed evidence are now provided separately in a suite of Topic Papers, while the main strategy sets out the Council's principles, delivery approaches, and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This ensures both clarity of direction and accountability for delivery.

The UFS also reflects the Council's adoption of the term "urban forest¹" in place of "tree strategy," recognising the success of the previous strategy in embedding this concept in public and organisational understanding. The renaming of the Senior Arboricultural Officer post to Urban Forest Manager acknowledges the importance of the urban forest and the need for collective action in its stewardship.

This report seeks approval to proceed to consultation on the draft UFS, to test its deliverability with internal service partners and to seek views from residents, community groups, and other stakeholders.

3. Alternative options considered

- 3.1 1. **Allow the 2016-2026 Tree Strategy to expire.** This option was rejected as it would result in a loss of strategic direction and risk the de-prioritisation of work to protect and enhance canopy cover in the city. It would also waste the investment and progress already made, including tree planting programmes, community schemes, and new evidence from recent studies. Without a successor strategy, this progress could stall or be reversed, reducing the city's

¹ [How to protect and manage the urban forest - GOV.UK](#) (last accessed 27/08/25)

resilience to climate change and the benefits the urban forest provides to communities.

2. **Extend the current Tree Strategy temporarily.** This option was rejected as it would delay the introduction of the improved framework set out in the new UFS. While an extension would maintain continuity, it would postpone the benefits of a clearer structure, measurable KPIs, and a stronger emphasis on equity, biodiversity and climate resilience. It would also risk the UFS becoming misaligned with current policy developments, including the Council's Climate Change and Biodiversity Strategies.
3. **Develop a joint Greater Cambridge Tree Strategy with South Cambridgeshire District Council.** This option was rejected as urban and rural arboricultural needs differ, requiring different approaches to management. In addition, South Cambridgeshire District Council does not currently have a tree strategy in place, and developing a joint approach would therefore delay progress in Cambridge and risk diluting the focus required to manage an urban forest effectively.

4. Background and key issues

4.1 Background

Cambridge's trees and woodlands make a vital contribution to the city's character, environment, and quality of life. They provide shade, improve air quality, reduce flood risk, support wildlife, and make the city more attractive. The Council manages over 30,000 trees on public land, with many more on private land contributing to the wider urban forest.

Since adoption of the Tree Strategy in 2016, progress has been made through new tree planting, improved engagement, and the introduction of new data sources such as canopy cover studies (2008-2018)², the Bluesky Proximitree (a proprietary tree canopy dataset) datasets, the Tree Equity Score UK³ (a tool that measures how fairly tree canopy is distributed across neighbourhoods, based on social and environmental factors), and i-

² [tree-canopy-cover-in-cambridge-between-2008-and-2018.pdf](#) (last accessed 25/08/25)

³ [Tree Equity Score UK](#) (last accessed 25/08/25)

Tree Eco (a tree valuation tool) valuations⁴. These show both the overall value of Cambridge's tree canopy and the unequal way it is spread across the city.

The new UFS continues this direction, updating the framework to reflect organisational changes and best practice. It incorporates learning from the past ten years, strengthens focus on biodiversity, climate resilience, and equitable access to green infrastructure, and introduces measurable KPIs to track delivery.

4.2 Continuity with the 2016-2026 Strategy

The vision set out in the 2016-2026 Tree Strategy remains largely unchanged: to protect, manage, and expand Cambridge's urban forest so that it continues to provide environmental, social, and cultural benefits for current and future generations.

The new UFS carries this vision forward but presents it in a more streamlined and accessible way. Supporting text, detailed analysis, and technical background are now set out separately in a suite of Topic Papers, enabling the main strategy document to focus clearly on principles, delivery approaches, and measurable outcomes.

Together, the UFS and Topic Papers set out a 2025 baseline for trees in Cambridge, showing canopy cover, species mix, risks, and opportunities.

4.3 Key improvements introduced in the new Strategy include:

1. A simpler structure organised around the delivery approaches of Manage more, Protect more, Plant more, Engage more.
2. Introduction of principles to guide delivery and KPIs to support accountability and track progress.
3. Greater emphasis on climate resilience, biodiversity, and equitable canopy cover, responding to new evidence and policy developments.

⁴ [i-Tree Eco project - Cambridge City Council](#) (last accessed 25/08/25)

4. Alignment with the Council's Climate Change and Biodiversity Strategies, ensuring a joined-up approach across interrelated priorities.

4.4 Evolving terminology

While the 2016-2026 document was presented as a 'Tree Strategy,' in practice it functioned as an urban forest strategy in all but name. At that time the decision was taken to avoid the term 'urban forest' as it was considered specialist language.

Since then, through the success of the Tree Strategy and related programmes such as the Cambridge Canopy Project⁵, awareness and acceptance of the concept of the urban forest has grown significantly. The strategy now adopts this terminology to reflect a broader understanding that the city's trees and woodlands form part of a single interconnected urban forest, best managed collectively for public benefit.

This change is reflected organisationally in the renaming of the Council's Senior Arboricultural Officer role to Urban Forest Manager, recognising both the importance of the urban forest to the city and the need for joined-up, cross-sector action in its stewardship.

5. **Corporate plan**

5.1 The Council's Corporate Plan⁶ sets out four priorities for Cambridge:

- Responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies and creating a net zero council by 2030
- Tackling poverty and inequality and helping people in the greatest need
- Building a new generation of council and affordable homes and reducing homelessness
- Modernising the council to lead a greener city that is fair for all

⁵⁵ [Nature Smart Cities across the 2 Seas programme - Cambridge City Council](#) (last accessed 26/08/25)

⁶ [Corporate plan 2022-27: our priorities for Cambridge - Cambridge City Council](#) (last accessed 26/08/25)

Cambridge's urban forest is a vital natural asset, valued at over £1 billion and delivering more than £1.6 million of ecosystem services each year. Good management of trees and woodlands is essential for climate mitigation and adaptation, and strengthening the role the urban forest plays in tackling inequality and shaping healthy neighbourhoods. Also prioritising innovation to effectively deliver services, the UFS contributes to all four of the Corporate Plan priorities

Specifically, the UFS will:

- Support climate and biodiversity goals by maintaining and expanding canopy cover, storing and sequestering carbon, reducing urban heat, and protecting and enhancing habitats.
- Address inequality by targeting new planting, protection and engagement to areas with lower canopy cover and greater social need, ensuring that all communities benefit from the health and wellbeing value of trees.
- Help create sustainable homes and neighbourhoods, by helping to embed arboriculture into planning and housing design, ensuring new developments include high-quality, resilient green infrastructure.
- Drive modernisation of council services, by providing a clear framework through the four delivery approaches (Manage more, Protect more, Plant more, Engage more) that integrates arboriculture with planning, housing, operations and community services, while helping to attract external funding and innovation.

In this way, the UFS helps deliver the Council's wider vision of a fairer, greener, and healthier Cambridge.

6. Consultation, engagement and communication

6.1 Consultation will take place in two phases:

Phase 1 – Internal consultation (between October and December 2025):

Targeted engagement with internal services and delivery partners to identify any practical or operational issues, ensure alignment across service areas, and confirm that

the UFS's proposals are deliverable.

Phase 2 – Public consultation (between December 2025 and February 2026):

A co-ordinated public consultation will be held alongside the Biodiversity Strategy review, using an umbrella approach. This integrated engagement will enable stakeholders and residents to provide feedback across the two inter-related strategies, while ensuring efficient use of resources and maximising participation.

Feedback from both stages will shape the final UFS. The internal consultation will check that the UFS is practical. The public consultation will give residents and stakeholders the chance to influence it. The final UFS is planned to be presented to Cabinet in March 2026 for adoption, alongside the Biodiversity Strategy review and Climate Change Strategy. Presenting the three strategies together will demonstrate their interconnections and provide a joined-up framework for managing climate, nature, and the urban forest.

7. Anticipated outcomes, benefits or impact

7.1 Approval to consult will let the Council test and improve the new UFS, continuing and strengthening our long-term approach to managing Cambridge's trees. The UFS is expected to deliver the following outcomes:

1. **Improved plan quality:** insights from internal services and the public will help ensure the UFS is both deliverable and widely supported, with principles and KPIs refined in response to feedback.
2. **Increased participation and engagement:** the consultation will raise awareness of the urban forest and encourage greater involvement of residents, community groups, developers, and landowners in its protection and expansion.
3. **Clearer accountability:** the introduction of measurable KPIs will allow progress to be monitored transparently over the lifetime of the UFS.
4. **Raising awareness and education:** positioning “urban forest” as a shared

concept will reinforce collective, public and private, responsibility for the city's trees and woodlands.

5. **Equity and diversity:** by aligning with evidence such as the Tree Equity Score UK, the UFS will be able to target interventions in areas of greatest need, ensuring the benefits of canopy cover are shared more fairly across the city.

What does good look like?

1. A UFS that is accessible, evidence-based, and widely supported.
2. Improved alignment across council services, with delivery roles and responsibilities clearly understood.
3. Broad public awareness of the urban forest as a vital city asset, and active participation in its care.
4. A clear 2025 baseline and KPIs to measure canopy cover, equity, biodiversity and community engagement over the UFS's lifetime.

8. Implications

8.1 Relevant risks

Risk 1: Limited engagement or low participation in the consultation could reduce the quality of feedback.

Mitigation: Strong communications, use of multiple channels (online, events, stakeholder networks), and aligning with Biodiversity and Climate Change consultations to maximise visibility.

Risk 2: Misalignment across internal services may create delivery challenges.

Mitigation: Two-phase approach ensures internal consultation first, identifying practical issues before wider public engagement.

Risk 3: Delay in consultation or strategy adoption could leave a gap in strategic direction when the 2016-2026 Tree Strategy expires.

Mitigation: Forward planning timetable; ability to return to Cabinet later if additional time required.

Risk 4: Loss of key personnel. The Biodiversity Project Officer post is currently fixed term until 2026, with 50% of her role dedicated to the legacy Cambridge Canopy Project engagement activities. If this post is not retained, delivery of the *Engage More* elements of the Strategy will be significantly hampered.

Mitigation: Options for extending or mainstreaming this role will be explored ahead of 2026 deadline to secure continuity of delivery.

Financial Implications

- 8.2 There are no direct financial implications arising from this decision, as approval is only sought to consult on a replacement strategy. Consultation and engagement will be delivered within existing service budgets.

Legal Implications

- 8.3 There are no direct legal implications arising from this decision. The Council already has legal duties to manage and protect trees, and to consult on some decisions, under laws such as the Town and Country Planning Act and the Highways Act. The Urban Forest Strategy will help ensure these duties are met within a clear framework.
- This paper has been checked with Legal Services who confirm they do not have anything to add to the report

Equalities and socio-economic Implications

- 8.4 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been completed, reviewed and accepted by the Sustainable City team.

The UFS explicitly addresses issues of equitable access to tree canopy cover across the city. Analysis has highlighted inequalities in canopy distribution that correlate with social and economic deprivation. The UFS responds to this evidence by embedding equity considerations into future planting and management priorities.

Delivery of these priorities depends on effective community engagement. Currently, this is supported by the Biodiversity Project Officer, with 50% of her post dedicated to the legacy Cambridge Canopy engagement programme. As this post is fixed term until 2026, there is a risk to continuity of the Engage More elements of the Strategy if the role is not extended or mainstreamed.

Net Zero Carbon, Climate Change and Environmental implications

- 8.5 Trees and woodlands are a vital part of climate mitigation and adaptation. The UFS sets out a proactive approach to maintaining and expanding canopy cover, contributing to:

- Carbon storage and sequestration, supporting the Council's net zero targets.
- Urban cooling and shade, reducing the impacts of extreme heat.
- Stormwater management, helping reduce local flood risk.
- Biodiversity enhancement, contributing to Biodiversity Net Gain and habitat connectivity.

The UFS complements and aligns with the Council's Climate Change and Biodiversity Strategies.

A climate change rating of MEDIUM POSITIVE has been reviewed and accepted by the Climate Team

Procurement Implications

- 8.6 There are no procurement implications arising directly from this decision as approval is only sought to consult on a replacement strategy.

Community Safety Implications

- 8.7 There are no community safety implications arising directly from this decision. The UFS supports public safety through continued proactive tree management, inspection, and maintenance.

The UFS will guide decision-making across multiple service areas, including Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Services (trees and planning), County Highways (street trees), Greater Cambridge Partnership (transport schemes), City Services Group (public realm, estate management, cemeteries and the crematorium, estate management, projects, flood management and biodiversity), Economy and Place Group (commercial property), Corporate Hub (climate strategy) and Communities Group (environment, community, housing and engagement). Early internal consultation will help ensure consistency and avoid duplication of work across teams.

8.8 Checklist - Impact of the decision:

Financial: No new funding is required for the consultation, which will be delivered within existing budgets. Future delivery of the UFS may require external funding, building on the Council's track record of securing over £1 million since 2019. Actions without identified funding are included in the UFS as aspirational and will only be taken forward if resources become available.

Legal: No new legal duties are created. The UFS supports compliance with existing duties such as tree preservation, the Highways Act, the Environment Act street tree duty, and planning requirements.

Corporate Priorities: The UFS contributes to all four Corporate Plan priorities: responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies, tackling poverty and inequality, supporting

sustainable housing and neighbourhoods, and modernising council services.

Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainability: The UFS has a positive impact. It will help increase canopy cover, capture carbon, provide shade and cooling, deliver biodiversity net gain, and reduce stormwater flooding.

Crime and Disorder / Community Safety: The UFS indirectly supports safety through proactive tree inspection and maintenance.

Discrimination and Equality: The UFS explicitly addresses equity and will identify areas with low canopy cover and higher social need, ensuring fairer distribution of the benefits of trees.

Human Resources: The UFS does not create new posts, though it reinforces the Urban Forest Manager role and may guide future staff development.

ICT: Existing systems such as GIS and online mapping will support delivery and monitoring.

Property: Trees on council land are an asset class but there are no new property implications.

Procurement: None at consultation stage. Future procurement for planting or maintenance will follow standard council processes or our Framework Agreement⁷.

Customer Services: The UFS will provide a clearer framework for responding to public enquiries, complaints and FOIs.

Communications, Consultation & Engagement: A two-stage consultation is planned: internal consultation followed by a public consultation with the Biodiversity Strategy review.

⁷ [Our tree-work partners - Cambridge City Council](#) (last accessed 26/08/25)

Council's values and Target Operating Model: The UFS supports cross-service working, measurable performance through KPIs, fairness through tree equity, sustainability through canopy expansion, protection and resilience, and improved customer focus.

9. Background documents

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

9.1 Draft Urban Forest Strategy 2026-2036

11 Draft Topic Papers 2025 that support the UFS

Tree Strategy 2016-2026 downloadable from <https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/tree-strategy> (last accessed 26/08/2025)

10. Appendices

- 10.1
 - 1. EqlA – 10/09/25
 - 2. Draft consultation plan 8/9/25
 - 3. Draft topic papers – to follow
 - 4. Draft urban forest strategy – to follow
 - 5. Climate Change Rating Tool 10/09/25

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact:
Matthew Magrath; 01223458526; matthew.magrath@cambridge.gov.uk