

REPORT TITLE: Urban Forest Strategy 2026-2036: Pre-decision Scrutiny Update

To: Services, Climate & Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (11 March 2026) Report by:

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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 scrutiny for consideration.

1.	Recommendations
1.1	<p>It is recommended that the Services, Climate & Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:</p> <p>a) Notes the progress made in developing the Urban Forest Strategy 2026-2036, including the evidence base and consultation undertaken to date (see version control summary at Appendix 6).</p> <p>b) Reviews and comments on the proposed Urban Forest Strategy and supporting Topic Papers (v4.2), with feedback reported to Cabinet ahead of its consideration of adoption on 24 March 2026, including the Strategy's delivery framework, actions, policies and Key Performance Indicators (Section 7 & Appendix 10).</p> <p>c) Recommends the Urban Forest Strategy (Appendix 7) to the Cabinet for adoption.</p>
2.	Purpose and reason for the report

2.1	<p>This report is presented in response to the Committee’s request for a clear summary of the strategic rationale underpinning the proposed Urban Forest Strategy (UFS) 2026-2036, ahead of Cabinet consideration of adoption on 24 March 2026.</p> <p>The report is structured around three key questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where have we been? • Where are we now? • Where are we going? <p>It also explains the evidence base and rationale for the proposed long-term ambition to achieve at least 20% canopy cover across Cambridge by 2050, including why this level is considered ambitious yet appropriate for the city.</p> <p>The report summarises consultation undertaken to date, highlights how feedback has informed changes to the Strategy, and sets out the continuity and evolution from the 2016 Tree Strategy to the proposed Urban Forest Strategy.</p> <p>Feedback from the Scrutiny Committee will be reported to Cabinet and used to inform the final version of the Strategy (v5) prior to adoption.</p>
3.	Alternative options considered
3.1	<p>Option 1: Retain the Citywide Tree Strategy 2016-2026</p> <p>This option is not recommended. The 2016 Tree Strategy is time-expired and does not reflect current evidence, statutory duties, climate and biodiversity priorities, or the need for a whole-city approach to managing and expanding canopy cover.</p> <p>Option 2: Update and adopt the Urban Forest Strategy (preferred option)</p> <p>This option provides a clear, evidence-led framework to guide protection, management and expansion of Cambridge’s urban forest over the next decade, aligning tree policy with climate adaptation, biodiversity recovery, health and equity objectives.</p> <p>Option 3: Delay adoption of the Urban Forest Strategy</p>

	<p>This option is not recommended. Delay would create a policy gap, weaken coordination across Council services, reduce clarity and defensibility in planning and subsidence-related decisions, and risk loss of momentum following consultation.</p>
<p>4.</p>	<p>Background and key issues</p>
<p>4.1</p>	<p>Strategy history and rationale</p> <p>This section summarises the strategic journey of Cambridge’s urban forest and the rationale for updating the 2016 Tree Strategy to a broader Urban Forest Strategy (UFS). It draws on the evidence set out in Topic Papers 8 (Achievements), 10 (Baseline and Change) and 12 (Growing the Canopy), included at Appendix 8.</p> <p>Where have we been?</p> <p>Over the last decade, Cambridge City Council has established a strong foundation in urban forestry through delivery of the 2016 Tree Strategy, including proactive management of over 30,000 Council-managed trees through systematic inspection regimes, delivery of significant planting and canopy expansion programmes across streets, parks and neighbourhoods, securing significant external funding to support urban forestry delivery, embedding trees within the Council’s Climate Change Strategy, Biodiversity Strategy, and Air Quality Strategy, developing a robust evidence base on canopy cover and ecosystem services, and building public and community engagement through initiatives such as the Cambridge Canopy Project¹, Trees for Streets², Free Trees for Babies³ and other planting programmes. These achievements demonstrate that Cambridge has made tangible progress in managing and expanding its tree stock, while also highlighting the limitations of a strategy focused primarily on Council-managed land and the need for a whole-city approach to deliver long-term canopy outcomes.</p> <p>Where are we now?</p> <p>The current evidence base shows that canopy cover increased modestly from 17.1% in 2008 to 17.6% in 2018, that canopy cover is unevenly distributed across the city with lower canopy in some eastern wards, that approximately three quarters of existing</p>

¹ [Nature Smart Cities across the 2 Seas programme - Cambridge City Council](#)

² [Sponsoring new trees - Cambridge City Council](#)

³ [Trees for Babies scheme - Cambridge City Council](#)

canopy is located on private or institutional land rather than Council-managed land, that historic species composition presents resilience risks, and that there are relatively few large trees within the urban forest, reinforcing the importance of protecting existing mature canopy and enabling current trees to grow to full size. This baseline demonstrates that, while progress has been made, overall canopy remains below long-term ambitions and is unevenly distributed, thereby justifying a more strategic, citywide approach that focuses on both protection and growth.

Where are we going?

The UFS sets out a long-term direction of travel to grow and sustain Cambridge's tree canopy to 2050 and beyond, recognising that canopy cover, rather than planting numbers alone, is the most meaningful indicator of urban forest outcomes and associated climate, biodiversity and health benefits. The evidence indicates that protecting large and mature trees and enabling existing trees to increase their canopy delivers faster and more reliable canopy gains than planting alone, that mobilising private and institutional land is essential to achieving citywide outcomes given the distribution of existing canopy. This direction of travel is intended to embed trees and canopy into planning as routine city infrastructure, rather than as an add-on.

Justification for the 20% canopy cover target

The proposed long-term ambition of achieving at least 20% canopy cover by 2050 is evidence-led and grounded in Cambridge's baseline canopy data and growth modelling, is ambitious in the context of the city's current canopy levels and urban form, is deliverable over appropriate timescales given the long growth periods required for trees to deliver meaningful canopy, focuses on canopy outcomes and associated ecosystem services rather than simply on planting numbers, is paired with a commitment to prioritise lower-canopy and more heat-vulnerable neighbourhoods in order to address environmental inequality, and is framed as a minimum ambition rather than a ceiling, with scope to exceed this level where opportunities arise through development, partnership working and investment.

4.2 **Continuity of purpose:** 2016 Tree Strategy⁴ and UFS

⁴ [Tree strategy - Cambridge City Council](#)

	<p>The UFS represents an evolution of the 2016 Tree Strategy rather than a departure from its core purpose. It retains a focus on tree protection, risk-based management, duty of care, replacement planting, public engagement and evidence-led decision-making, while extending the scope to a whole-city approach that recognises the role of private and institutional land, introduces a citywide canopy ambition, strengthens the framing of trees as essential infrastructure, and places greater emphasis on cross-service and partnership delivery.</p>
5.	Corporate plan
5.1	<p>The UFS supports delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan priorities by responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies, tackling inequality and improving health and wellbeing, supporting sustainable neighbourhoods, and modernising the Council through evidence-led, cross-service working. Cambridge's urban forest is a major city asset delivering climate adaptation, cooling, air quality, biodiversity and wellbeing benefits, and the Strategy strengthens how this asset is protected, expanded and embedded across planning, housing, public realm and community services. The UFS aligns with and complements the Council's Climate Change Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy, providing an integrated framework for nature-based solutions across the city.</p>
6.	Consultation, engagement and communication
6.1	<p>Consultation was undertaken in two phases: internal consultation (November-December 2025) to test deliverability and cross-service alignment, followed by public consultation (January-February 2026) delivered alongside the Biodiversity Strategy mid-period review.</p> <p>Internal consultation demonstrated strong support for the overall direction and deliverability of the UFS, with feedback focused primarily on clarity, structure and accessibility. Comments were used to refine the UFS and Topic Papers, with no material barriers identified.</p> <p>Leadership Team feedback requested a shorter and more accessible main document, stronger alignment with related strategies, reduced technical language, clearer explanation of the canopy ambition and greater use of visuals. These changes have been</p>

	<p>incorporated into v4.2.</p> <p>Public consultation responses showed strong support for the urban forest concept, retention of mature trees, increased canopy ambition, equitable distribution of benefits, climate-resilient species selection and community involvement. Feedback has been used to improve clarity, reduce misinterpretation and strengthen narrative coherence.</p> <p>A detailed analysis of the consultations can be found in Appendices 2,3,4, & 5.</p>
6.2	<p>Internal consultation summary (Appendix 2 - full report)</p> <p>Internal consultation on the draft UFS showed strong support across services for the overall direction, aims and delivery approach, with respondents broadly confident the strategy is achievable. Feedback focused on improving clarity, navigation, terminology and signposting to evidence, rather than raising concerns about deliverability, resourcing, governance or legal risk. The comments have been used to refine the document and Topic Papers, address points of misunderstanding, and strengthen links to evidence and policy, with no material issues identified that would prevent progression to public consultation.</p>
6.3	<p>Leadership Team feedback summary (Appendix - 3 detailed timeline)</p> <p>The Leadership Team asked for the UFS to be shorter and more accessible, better aligned in structure and tone with the Climate Change and Biodiversity strategies, clearer in presenting a unified 'One Council' position, less reliant on technical jargon, and supported by stronger use of visuals and headline data, with a clearer explanation of the 20% canopy ambition and its timescales. In response, the UFS has been restructured and shortened, with detailed actions and KPIs moved to appendices and Topic Papers, the main document aligned more closely with the Climate Change and Biodiversity strategies, the corporate 'One Council' framing strengthened, technical language reduced, visuals and signposting to evidence improved, and the rationale, baseline and timescales for the canopy target clarified, with only minor presentational refinements remaining following Leadership Team's subsequent review. These refinements will be undertaken in conjunction with the Climate Change and Biodiversity Strategies subject</p>

	to Cabinet approval in March.
6.4	<p>Subsidence Topic paper feedback (Appendix - 5 detailed timeline)</p> <p>The Subsidence Topic Paper was refined following independent legal and technical review to improve clarity, proportionality and legal defensibility, without changing the overall policy direction. Changes included clearer distinction between mitigation and legal claims, removal of unworkable cost-splitting between trees, climate and foundations, correction of how shallow foundations are treated, explicit inclusion of consultation duties at mitigation stage, and stronger requirements for sequenced technical evidence that considers climate change and heave risk, while retaining the principle that tree removal is a last resort and evidential standards rise with amenity value.</p>
6.5	<p>GoVocal consultation and email responses summary (Appendix 4)</p> <p>Go Vocal responses indicate that the UFS has been well received, with the majority of feedback in support of the urban forest concept and the strategy vision, aims and delivery approaches. Comments on canopy equity indicate general support for focussing increasing canopy cover in less well represented areas. The majority of respondents would like increased investment in new tree establishment and there was also strong support for community involvement in this area. The majority of comments support a more ambitious target for canopy cover increase than is proposed and support prioritising the planting of climate resilient species, actively diversifying species mixes and integrating canopy cover with habitat connectivity. Feedback supports the retention and protection of mature trees, unless there is significant justification for removal. While some respondents requested easier access to resources, clearer communication, and practical help, many respondents focused on improving community-led planting, care, and monitoring; education and engagement through schools and families; accessible volunteering; and support for biodiversity in private gardens, supporting the urban forestry approach. Suggestions and recommendations have been made through Go Vocal but predominantly through emailed feedback. These suggestions were aimed at strengthening policy, embedding UFS policy in Draft Local Plan and addressing perceived gaps. In addition, we have received comments that indicate a misunderstanding of the text or how the strategy works. There is a</p>

	<p>common request to increase the number of policies or add operational and/or technical commitments to existing policies. However, the UFS has been designed to be achievable, workable and to minimise the core document length, to improve accessibility, providing the operational and technical information, research, guidance and background in a series of Topic Papers. Suggested alterations/additions that improve the strategy narrative have been actuated. Where comments indicate a misunderstanding of the text, the strategy wording has been edited to reduce the potential for misinterpretation.</p>
<p>7.</p>	<p>Anticipated outcomes, benefits or impact</p>
<p>7.1</p>	<p>Delivery Opportunities, Actions, Key Performance Indicators KPIs and Policies</p> <p>Subject to Cabinet approval, the UFS will provide a clear, evidence-led framework for protecting, managing and expanding Cambridge’s urban forest over the next decade. It will improve alignment across Council services, strengthen accountability through measurable KPIs, and support more equitable access to the benefits of tree canopy.</p> <p>Delivery is structured around four approaches: Manage More, Protect More, Plant More and Engage More. These are supported by a delivery framework, action plan and monitoring arrangements set out in the UFS and summarised at Appendix 10.</p> <p>The UFS is expected to increase participation and shared stewardship by promoting the urban forest as shared city infrastructure, improve transparency through monitoring and reporting, and target interventions to areas of greatest need in order to support more equitable access to the benefits of canopy cover such as cooling, air quality and wellbeing. These anticipated outcomes are set out in the UFS’s Vision, Principles and Aims, and are operationalised through the four Delivery Approaches (Manage More, Protect More, Plant More, Engage More).</p> <p>The proposed delivery framework (see Appendix 10 for a summary) for implementing the UFS in practice is set out in the Delivery section of the UFS and the accompanying Topic Papers. The proposed actions for delivery are set out in the Action plan in the appendix to the UFS, which identifies priority actions, lead services and indicative</p>

	<p>timescales.</p> <p>The proposed monitoring and KPI framework is set out in the Monitoring, Evaluation and KPIs section, also in the appendices to the UFS, which describes how progress will be tracked over time and reported. Together, these elements provide the basis on which Cabinet will be asked to consider the UFS, delivery opportunities, actions, KPIs and associated policies as a single, coherent package.</p>
8.	Implications
8.1	Relevant risks
	<p><i>Risks if the decision is made (approve the Urban Forest Strategy):</i> Approving the UFS carries a low level of strategic risk, primarily relating to deliverability and expectations rather than policy intent, as progress towards long-term canopy and biodiversity outcomes will depend on sustained funding, cross-Council coordination, engagement on private land, and external factors such as climate impacts, development pressures and tree disease. There is a risk that targets are perceived as guaranteed outcomes rather than long-term ambitions, that delivery capacity varies year to year due to funding constraints and local government reorganisation, and that some individual decisions (for example on biosecurity, subsidence or development-related tree loss) may attract challenge; however, these risks are mitigated through realistic long-term targets, a proportionate, evidence-led approach, alignment with existing statutory duties and corporate strategies, and monitoring and reporting to enable adaptive management.</p> <p><i>Risks if the decision is not made:</i> Not approving the UFS carries a higher strategic risk, including loss of policy direction for managing and growing the city’s tree canopy, weaker alignment with the Climate Change and Biodiversity strategies, reduced ability to influence development and partner activity, and increased exposure to ad hoc or inconsistent decision-making in high-risk areas such as biosecurity, subsidence, development pressure, tree protection and tree asset management. This would weaken the Council’s ability to secure external funding, undermine transparency and defensibility of tree-related decisions, and increase the likelihood of canopy loss and inequitable</p>

	outcomes, particularly in low-canopy and high-heat vulnerability areas, financial, environmental and reputational risk.
	Financial Implications
8.2	There are no direct financial implications arising from this decision, as approval is sought to adopt the UFS rather than to commit new funding. The UFS has been developed so that delivery can be achieved within existing budgets, with aspirational elements clearly identified to support future internal funding bids or external grant applications should opportunities arise. A proposed 0.5 FTE post to support engagement delivery, included in the recent BSR has been approved by Full Council, will help accelerate elements of UFS delivery. This report has not been checked with Financial Services; however, Finance was consulted on earlier drafts of the UFS (v2 and v3) and raised no objections. Any future funding proposals arising from delivery of the UFS would be subject to the Council's normal budget approval and governance processes.
	Legal Implications
8.3	There are no direct legal implications arising from this decision, as the Council already has statutory duties to manage and protect trees, and to consult on certain decisions, under legislation including the Town and Country Planning Act. The UFS provides a clear, consistent framework to support lawful and defensible decision-making. This report has not yet been checked with Legal Services; however, Legal Services were consulted on earlier drafts of the UFS (v2 and v3) and raised no objections. In addition, Topic Paper 4 (Subsidence and Structural Damage) has been independently reviewed and refined following specialist legal scrutiny by a barrister with expertise in tree law and subsidence, strengthening the legal robustness of the Council's approach should decisions be challenged.
	Equalities and socio-economic Implications
8.4	An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been prepared for v2 of the UFS and attached as an appendix to this report (Appendix 1). The EqIA prepared for v2 has been reviewed for ongoing relevance and remains

	<p>applicable to v4.2, as the strategic aims and equity principles have not changed.</p> <p>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.</p>
	<p>Net Zero Carbon, Climate Change and Environmental implications</p>
8.5	<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 and habitat connectivity. <p>The UFS complements and aligns with the Council’s Climate Change and Biodiversity Strategies.</p> <p>A climate change rating has been completed for v2 of the UFS and it attached at Appendix 9. The Climate Change Rating completed for v2 remains applicable to v4.2, as the Strategy’s direction and climate outcomes are unchanged.</p>
	<p>Procurement Implications</p>
8.6	<p>There are no direct procurement implications arising from this decision. Any future procurement for planting, maintenance, projects or surveys arising from delivery of the UFS will follow existing Council frameworks and procurement processes.</p>
	<p>Community Safety Implications</p>
8.7	<p>There are no direct community safety implications arising from this decision. The Urban Forest Strategy supports public safety in relation to the Council’s tree asset through continued proactive inspection, risk-based management and maintenance, and provides</p>

	<p>a consistent framework to guide tree-related decision-making across multiple Council services.</p>
8.8	<p>Checklist - Impact of the decision:</p> <p><u>Financial:</u> Future delivery of the UFS may require external funding, building on the Council’s track record of securing over £1 million since 2019. The 0.5 FTE post to support engagement delivery is included in the recent BSR and approved by Full Council will help strengthen delivery capacity and accelerate engagement elements of the UFS. Actions without identified funding are included in the UFS as aspirational and will only be taken forward if resources become available.</p> <p><u>Legal:</u> No new legal duties are created. The UFS supports compliance with existing duties such as safety, tree preservation and planning requirements.</p> <p><u>Corporate Priorities:</u> 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.</p> <p><u>Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainability:</u> 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.</p> <p><u>Crime and Disorder / Community Safety:</u> The UFS indirectly supports safety through proactive tree inspection and maintenance.</p> <p><u>Discrimination and Equality:</u> 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.</p> <p><u>Human Resources:</u> The UFS does not create new posts, though it reinforces the Urban Forest Manager role and may guide future staff and team development.</p> <p><u>ICT:</u> Existing systems such as GIS and online mapping will support delivery and</p>

	<p>monitoring.</p> <p><u>Property</u>: Trees on council land are an asset class but there are no new property implications.</p> <p><u>Procurement</u>: Future procurement for services, planting or maintenance will follow standard council processes or our Framework Agreement⁵.</p> <p><u>Customer Services</u>: The UFS will provide a clearer framework for responding to public enquiries, complaints and FOIs.</p> <p><u>Communications, Consultation & Engagement</u>: A two-stage consultation process has been undertaken, comprising internal consultation followed by public consultation alongside the Biodiversity Strategy review. Both stages indicated overall support for the direction and aims of the UFS, with feedback used to refine clarity and presentation.</p> <p><u>Council’s values and Target Operating Model</u>: 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.</p>
<p>9.</p>	<p>Background documents</p> <p>Documents used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, are listed in the appendices.</p>
<p>10.</p>	<p>Appendices</p> <p>Appendix 1 Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) for Urban Forest Strategy (v2)</p> <p>Appendix 2 Internal Consultation Summary Report (Nov-Dec 2025)</p> <p>Appendix 3 Leadership Team Feedback: Timeline and Summary of Changes</p> <p>Appendix 4 Public Consultation (Go Vocal) and email responses - Summary Report</p> <p>Appendix 5 Subsidence Topic Paper: External Review Timeline and Summary of Changes</p>

⁵ [Our tree-work partners - Cambridge City Council](#) (last accessed 26/08/25)

	<p>Appendix 6 UFS Version control details</p> <p>Appendix 7 UFS v4.2</p> <p>Appendix 8 Topic Papers 1-12 v4.2</p> <p>Appendix 9 Climate Change Rating Tool for UFS (v2)</p> <p>Appendix 10 Summary of UFS Delivery Framework</p>
11.	<p>To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact Matthew Magrath, Urban Forest Manager, matthew.magrath@cambridge.gov.uk, 01223458576</p>