



Subject:	Notice of Motion on the 'Vital Role of Trees'
Date:	13 th January 2026
Reporting Officer:	Stephen Leonard – Director City & Neighbourhood Services
Contact Officer:	Alan McHaffie - Senior Woodland & Recreation Manager

Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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1.0	Purpose of Report
	This report is in response to Cllr Hedley Abernethy's Notice of Motion on the 'Vital Role of Trees' and to give an update on (i) the Belfast Tree Strategy (ii) the One Million Tree initiative and (iii) the management of Street trees on behalf of the Department for Infrastructure.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	Members are asked to note the content of this report.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	At its February meeting the Committee agreed to adopt a Notice of Motion that the Council recognises the vital role of trees in enhancing the health and well-being of people and communities, addressing climate change, and supporting biodiversity; commits to raising awareness among residents about these benefits and to actively support efforts to plant and protect the right trees in the right places and for the right reasons, ensuring that everyone can share in the benefits trees provide; and, will commit to exploring how we can educate and raise awareness of trees, the role they play in all our lives across Belfast.
3.2	In addition, the Committee agrees that officers would submit a report which would provide the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• an update on the Tree Strategy, including the 'One Million Trees' initiative.• seek to identify sites within the Council's estate where additional trees could be planted ; and• an outline as to how communities and electoral areas could become involved further in the life of trees in our city."

The Belfast Tree Strategy

- 3.3 The Belfast Tree Strategy was produced with the aim of managing and improving the city's tree-scape over the next 10 years, focussing on protecting, enhancing, and expanding the Council's woodlands, hedges, and trees, connecting people to nature, and ensuring that they continue to be a major asset to everyone who lives in, works in, and visits Belfast city.
- 3.4 After an extensive public consultation exercise which involved a public questionnaire and the facilitation of five public workshops at locations across the city, the Belfast Tree Strategy was launched on the 5th of October 2023 at Belfast Botanical Gardens.
- 3.5 The Tree Strategy set out 37 key actions which will be delivered over the life of the Tree Strategy, and aligned with the key actions, a commitment was given to undertake an independent review of the Tree Strategy after year one and thereafter, once every 3 years until 2033.
- 3.6 In December 2024 the Council completed its first independent review/audit of the Belfast Tree Strategy. The audit process was designed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) to help stakeholders responsible for the planning and management of urban trees and forests, and to ensure trees and forests are accounted for and well-integrated into relevant planning, management and governance activities at the local level. The audit of the Tree Strategy included a scorecard of which Belfast scored a total of 42 points out of 50 which is 'Very Good' (71-85%) The next independent audit will be undertaken in 2027.
- 3.7 Tree canopy cover across Belfast averages 18.6%, as measured by Google satellite data. This ranges from 20.8% in urban and suburban areas, to 15.0% in rural areas. The Ward with the highest tree cover in Belfast is Bellevue, with 43.9% tree cover and the lowest is Ardoyne with just 4.6%. The average tree canopy cover for Northern Ireland is 11.8%. The council's woodland team will direct attention to increasing tree canopy cover in areas across the city highlighted within the Tree Establishment Strategy.
- 3.8 An increase in canopy cover will contribute to Belfast's emission reduction targets – 66% reduction by 2025; 80% by 2030; 100% by 2050. The existing trees in Belfast already store around 319,000 tonnes of carbon and sequester more than 8,890 tonnes of carbon annually (equivalent to approx. 1% of the City's annual emissions) with associated values of around £290 million and £593,000 respectively. These trees also trap and remove over 210 tonnes of air pollution annually at a value of nearly £7.5 million from reduced healthcare costs (largely from Sycamore, Beech and Ash which have a large canopy). The IUCN Urban Alliance suggests a tree a 30% tree canopy target and the Tree strategy has adopted this as the target for the city.
- (See Appendix 1. – Belfast Tree Canopy by Electoral Wards).
- 3.9 As part of the stakeholder exercise on the Council's Belfast Tree Strategy, there was a clear and recurring theme from members of the public, quote:
- "A volunteer drive would be fantastic to engage the community in the drive to increase trees, as well as a scheme to teach people how to plant trees in their own gardens safely."
- 3.10 In collaboration with the climate team, the council has recently appointed a woodland officer for a fixed period to assist the council's Woodland team in establishing a 'community champions and a tree planting volunteer' network, engaging with local communities across the city with the objective of having tree planting volunteers throughout the city. With a particular focus on areas identified with the lowest tree canopy cover this scheme will look to provide volunteers with the resources and skills to plant trees within community settings.

One Million Trees initiative

- 3.11 The Belfast One Million Tree initiative was a strong call to action when it was launched in December 2020. It got everyone thinking about trees, their importance, especially in supporting the city to deliver its climate targets and objectives. The ambitious project was inspired by an original idea from the Belfast Metropolitan Residents' Group and is a collaboration between public, private, and voluntary sector partners. The initiative was part of the Northern Ireland-wide 'Forests of our Future' project with the aim of improving the city's resilience to climate change and enhance the quality of life for its residents.
- 3.12 Public consultation and engagement, followed by the launch of the Belfast Tree Strategy in October 2023, has shown that the city needs to be more sophisticated and targeted in its approach. Rather than focusing purely on a target number of trees, our goal is now to increase overall tree cover in the city – from 18.6% to 30% (set by IUCN Urban Alliance) – taking in woodlands, hedges and trees. To achieve the 30% canopy target will require increased tree planting and the one million trees initiative has an important role to play in this regard. It will also require a strong focus on managing our existing stock for example dealing with extreme weather conditions and managing the impact of diseases like ash die back.
- 3.13 Since the inception of the One Million Trees initiative in 2020 161,240 new trees and 2,761m new hedgerows have been planted, and 6,285 people have been engaged in the programme across the city, including schools, sports and community organisations. This has been achieved in collaboration with external partners and organisations such as the Belfast Hills Partnership, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Woodland Trust.
- 3.14 However, in terms of the Council's own estate council officers are finding it increasingly difficult to identify suitable areas to undertake 'large scale' tree planting. Locations suitable for large scale tree planting going forward are necessary if the city is to meet both the ambitions of the One Million Trees initiative and achieve 30% canopy cover by 2050. Whilst the council will continue to plant new trees and hedges where it can within its own estate, it should be emphasised that the One Million Trees is a city-wide project. We now need more engagement with other landowners to identify and develop sites that would permit larger scale tree planting opportunities. The Nature Towns & Cities initiative provides an opportunity for Council to engage with partners on this and similar initiatives to support both programmes. Officers will begin these conversations with the relevant stakeholders in 2026.

The management of street trees on behalf of the Department for Infrastructure

- 3.15 The council has been managing the city's street tree population on behalf of the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) for the past four decades. During this time, this partnership has delivered over seven thousand new street trees and has ensured their establishment and ongoing maintenance within the greater Belfast Area.
- 3.16 The Council has been receiving 'professional fees' to cover the management of DfI street trees, however over recent years this has put an increasing strain on existing resource capacity within the councils Woodland unit, due primarily to the introduction of the Belfast Tree Strategy and the delivery of the councils 37 key actions over the next 10 years. The council has secured additional funding from the DfI to recruit three new Woodland officers on a fixed term basis and in addition to this, has increased its income generation to cover the management of the new Woodland officers. This will allow the council to continue to work on the management of street trees and sustain this ongoing and successful partnership.

	Biodiversity
3.17	<p>We want to create a sustainable, nature-positive city – it's a key goal in our own Corporate Plan, as well as the Belfast Agenda community plan. This will protect our environment and wildlife, help to combat climate change, encourage people to spend more time outdoors to boost health and wellbeing, and improve the appearance and vibrancy of our city. It also complements other projects including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> securing £850,000 of funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Nature Towns and Cities Initiative to co-design plans for nature recovery in Lagan Valley Regional Park and the Belfast Hills. receiving £472,000 of funding from DAERA Challenge Fund towards the development of a Nature Recovery Network across Belfast, alongside £100,000 set aside to support biodiversity work £50,000 already set aside from council towards four wildflower meadows city-wide. being selected as one of 50 finalists for Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors' Challenge for our project to reimagine the city's alleyways as new shared community assets for neighbourhoods. 23 of our parks already carry the Green Flag accreditation for quality and good park management. exploring new and emerging opportunities to enhance the city's blue and green infrastructure as agreed in the Local Development Plan.
4.0	Financial & Resource Implications
4.1	The Woodland officer post dedicated to the new Tree Volunteer initiative will be a fixed term post and is currently funded by the council's climate fund. Officers have submitted a bid into the estimates setting process for 26/27 to make this post permanent and to include additional monies to treat Ash Die back within the Council's estate.
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment
	None
6.0	Appendices
	Appendix No1 (Belfast Tree Canopy Cover by Electoral Wards).