City of London Corporation Committee Report

Committee: Natural Environment Board	**Dated:** 23 Oct 2025
Subject: City Gardens Tree Annual Update	**Public report:** For Information
This proposal • **delivers Corporate Plan 2024-29 outcomes** • **provides statutory duties** • **provides business enabling functions**	Dynamic Economic Growth Leading Sustainable Environment Providing Excellent Services Flourishing Public Spaces
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	No
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of:	Katie Stewart
Report author:	Jake Tibbetts

Summary

This is the first annual report on the state of the City's Urban Forest, the aim of which is to give members a clear understanding of the health, condition and management of the trees by the City of London Corporation within the square mile as well as to outline aims and objectives for the next year.

City Gardens is responsible for managing a complex and diverse urban forest across the City of London, with approximately 1,187 trees under its care. This includes the 1,565 trees within the City boundary and a further 116 at Bunhill Fields, Islington and 6 in Southwark. The management of this tree stock ensures that the City fulfils its statutory duties as a landowner, whilst maximising the wide-ranging environmental, social, and economic benefits trees provide.

Data indicates that the service continues to perform strongly. Tree health remains high, with 70% of trees classified as being in good condition. Establishment rates for new plantings are also impressive at around 90%. In 2024–25, 79 new trees were planted and 11 removed, a net growth in tree numbers of 68.

The main challenge remains the limited space for new planting in the City's dense urban fabric, where underground utilities and built infrastructure significantly constrain opportunities. However, City Gardens is responding proactively, trialling innovative planting techniques, embedding climate resilience in new species selection, and pursuing new mechanisms for external funding and sponsorship.

The coming years present opportunities to consolidate progress by launching a City Tree Fund, adopting canopy cover as a performance measure, and increasing planting through highway redesigns and public realm improvements.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. As a landowner, the City of London Corporation has a legal duty of care under both criminal and civil law to ensure trees do not present unacceptable risks to the public. The National Tree Safety Group's guidance, *Common Sense Risk Management of Trees*, sets out the principles by which this duty should be discharged. City Gardens adopts these principles, maintaining a robust Tree Risk Management Plan and delivering a systematic programme of inspections and maintenance.

2. Beyond risk management, trees are essential to the City's wider environmental and social objectives. They:

    - Mitigate the impacts of climate change by reducing heat, improving air quality, and managing surface water.
    - Enhance public spaces by providing shade, seasonal interest, and biodiversity.
    - Contribute to the City's Climate Action Strategy and its commitment to climate resilience and net zero.
    - Support wellbeing for residents, workers, and visitors by creating more liveable and attractive environments.

3. The inspection regime in place is designed to balance risk management with operational efficiency:
    - **Four-year cycle**: Each quadrant of the City is inspected once every four years.
    - **Annual inspections**: All mature trees (final third of life expectancy) and those with identified defects are inspected annually.
    - **Targeted inspections**: London plane trees are visually assessed three times per year for Massaria disease.
    - **Methodology**: Visual Tree Assessment (VTA) is the standard technique, with external specialists commissioned for advanced diagnostics (e.g. sonic tomography, load tests) where required.
4. This system ensures that safety risks are minimised, legal duties are met, and long-term tree health is sustained.

Current Position

5. City Gardens manages approximately 1,800 trees, distributed across a variety of locations within and outside the City of London. This includes the 1,700 trees within the City boundary, located in gardens, on highways, within housing estates, in churchyards, at schools, and on private land. Outside the City, responsibility extends to Bunhill Fields burial ground in Islington (107 trees) and Rennie Gardens in Southwark (9 trees).
6. This stock represents not only a statutory responsibility but also a key part of the City's urban infrastructure, contributing to climate resilience, public realm quality, and the achievement of wider corporate objectives such as the Climate Action Strategy.

Tree Health and Condition

7. The most recent assessment (2024–25) categorises the City's tree population as follows:
    - **Good condition**: 1,189 trees (70%)
    - **Fair condition**: 473 trees (28%)
    - **Poor condition**: 34 trees (2%)
8. This profile demonstrates that the vast majority of the City's trees are in a healthy and sustainable state, with only a very small proportion requiring urgent attention. The 2% categorised as in poor health and are subject to closer monitoring and where necessary, remedial works or removal to mitigate potential risk presented by declining trees.

9. The relatively high proportion of trees in good condition is reflective of both the structured inspection regime and the success of the aftercare programme

for newly planted trees. It also highlights the benefits of diversifying species and adopting a proactive approach to climate resilience.

10. The table below shows the total number of trees for each ward and their assessed condition

	Condition				
Ward	**Tree No**	**Good**	**Fair**	**Poor**	**Dead**
Aldersgate	230	130	95	4	1
Aldgate	56	47	8	1	0
Bassishaw	111	73	37	1	0
Billingsgate	34	13	19	2	0
Bishopsgate	61	48	7	2	0
Bread Street	167	136	28	3	0
Bridge	16	6	9	1	0
Broad Street	14	8	6	0	0
Candlewick	0	0	0	0	0
Castle Baynard	122	85	33	3	1
Cheap	33	27	6	0	0
Coleman Street	50	39	8	1	0
Cordwainer	26	20	6	0	0
Cornhill	14	12	2	0	0
Cripplegate	159	74	63	10	0
Dowgate	33	22	11	0	0
Farringdon Within	91	81	10	0	0
Farringdon Without	84	57	27	0	0
Langbourn	14	9	5	0	0
Lime Street	1	0	1	0	0
Portsoken	60	40	20	0	0
Queenhithe	37	32	5	0	0
Tower	101	75	24	2	0
Vintry	46	30	14	1	1
Walbrook	5	4	1	0	0

Planting and Removals

11. Between April 2024 and April 2025, City Gardens planted 79 new trees and removed 11.

12. Trends over the last three years indicate consistent progress:

- **2022–23**: 47 trees planted (31 linked to the Cool Streets and Greening programme). 12 trees removed, net increase of 35 trees.

- **2023–24**: 38 planted (12 linked to Cool Streets and Greening).17 trees removed, net increase of 26 trees.
- **2024–25**: 79 planted (21 linked to Cool Streets and Greening).10 trees removed, net increase of 69 trees.

13. This demonstrates that not only is tree planting being sustained but that tree numbers have increased year-on-year.

14. Tree removals are kept to a minimum, restricted to those trees that are in poor condition, pose a safety risk, or are required to be removed due to development.

Species Diversity

15. Diversity is a cornerstone of urban forest resilience. City Gardens continues to benchmark its tree stock against the 10-20-30 rule (no more than 10% of one species, 20% of one genus, 30% of one family (Santamour 1990).

16. Current values:

    - **Species**: London plane (*Platanus x acerifolia*) represents 11.18% of the total, slightly above the recommended threshold. No other species approaches this level. Importantly, City Gardens has already adopted a policy of not planting new London planes, instead selecting large-canopy alternatives such as silver lime, zelkovas, climate-resilient maples, and disease-tolerant elms.
    - **Genus**: Platanus accounts for 11.66%. Other genera are distributed more evenly (Tilia 10.46%, Prunus 8.01%, Acer 7.35%, Betula 7.05%), ensuring no single genus dominates and stay within the 20% threshold.
    - **Family**: Betulaceae (16.57%) and Rosaceae (16.21%) are the largest families represented, but both remain well within the 30% threshold.

17. This distribution shows that the City's urban forest is **broadly in line with best-practice diversity guidance**, supporting resilience against pests, diseases, and climate-related pressures.

Achievements (2023–25)

18. Over the past two years, the City Gardens team have taken a number of steps to improve the management of the City's trees and ensure that the future Urban Forest is sustainable, diverse and healthy. These are detailed below.

Governance and Systems

- **Planning SLA Established (2025):** This service that was previously provided informally, has been clarified and ensures that City Gardens is adequately resourced to be able to provide this statutory planning function.

- **Tree Inspections In-House (2024):** Ceased outsourcing tree inspections to consultants, now undertaken by City Gardens Project Officer.

Capacity and Funding

- **Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund (2023):** Secured funding to recruit an Arboricultural Projects Officer, enhancing delivery capacity for tree planting and monitoring, in 2025 this post was made permanent, funded through an SLA with planning, by brining inspections back in house and income from project work.
- **Improved Procurement Practices:** Nursery tagging and pre-delivery inspections introduced, ensuring higher quality and accountability in supply chains.

Innovation and Planting

- **New Species and Techniques Trialled:** Climate-resilient species introduced, supported by trials of soil cells and structural soils to expand planting viability.
- **High Establishment Success Rate:** Over 90% of new plantings survive beyond initial three year establishment, reflecting effective aftercare regimes.

Analysis of current position

19. As part of this annual report a SWOT analysis has been undertaken to understand the City's current position and inform a way forward.

Strengths in the Current Position

- **Tree Health**: High proportion of trees in good condition, demonstrating effective management.
- **Establishment Success**: Newly planted trees achieve around a **90% survival rate**, due to robust aftercare including structured watering regimes.
- **Climate-Resilient Planting**: Recent plantings focus on species identified through research and partnership work with Kew, TDAG, and LTOA as suitable for future climate scenarios.
- **Partnerships and Influence**: City Gardens plays a proactive role in the **London Urban Forest Partnership**, aligning local action with London-wide goals such as enhancing resilience and increasing canopy cover.
- **Efficiency**: Inspections have been brought fully back in-house, resulting in quicker turnaround times and better integration of inspection findings with maintenance programmes.

Weaknesses and Constraints

20. Despite strong progress, there are structural limitations to the current position:

- **Space Availability**: The City's built form and density significantly restrict new planting opportunities. Gardens are already well established, and streets are often unsuitable due to narrow pavements or proximity to buildings.
- **Underground Congestion**: Utilities, tunnels, and basements beneath the footpaths present major obstacles, often eliminating otherwise suitable planting sites. Over the past four years, officers have assessed around 75% of the paved highway network, with many potential sites ruled out after radar scanning or trial excavations.
- **Finite Capacity**: It is projected that by the end of the 2026–27 financial year, all available capacity for planting within the existing pavement network will have been identified and planted. Beyond this point, new planting will depend on opportunities created by redevelopment schemes, pavement widening, or public realm transformations.

Opportunities Emerging in the Current Position

21. While space is a key constraint, City Gardens is actively pursuing opportunities to expand planting potential:

- **Innovative Planting Methods**: Trials of structural soils, soil cells, and sand-based systems have the potential to increase soil volume and enhance rooting conditions, thereby improving overall tree health and resilience.
- **Canopy Mapping**: Moving beyond raw tree numbers, canopy cover mapping is being developed to provide a more accurate measure of urban forest health and sustainability.
- **New Public Realm Schemes**: Projects such as Finsbury Circus Western Arm and Greyfriars Square are providing entirely new planting locations by re-purposing highways for green space.
- **Tree Sponsorship and Funding**: Consideration of the feasibility and viability of establishing of a **City Tree Fund** which could allow businesses, developers and the public to contribute financially to tree planting and improvements in the urban forest.

Threats to the Current Position

- **Pests and Diseases**: Global trade and climate change are increasing the risk of new tree pests and pathogens arriving in London.
- **Climate Change**: More extreme weather events (heatwaves, droughts, storms) threaten tree health and longevity.
- **Development Pressures**: Construction activity can lead to tree loss, soil compaction, and root damage, requiring ongoing vigilance and strong planning controls.

Proposals

22. **Maintain Current Approach**
    - Continue with cyclical inspections, replacement planting, and species diversification.
    - Strength: Low risk and resource demand.
    - Limitation: Little scope for significant canopy growth.
23. **Expand Use of Innovative Planting Techniques**
    - Trial structural soils, soil cells, and sand-based planting in collaboration with engineers.
    - Provides trees with increased rooting volume and long-term viability in hostile urban conditions.
    - Requires increased upfront cost but delivers greater canopy growth potential.
24. **Integrate New Monitoring Technologies**
    - Deploy sensors to track tree growth, water stress, and health indicators in real time.
    - Enables early interventions, reduces risk, and supports evidence-led management.
    - Can be linked to canopy cover mapping to provide a fuller picture of performance.
25. **Investigate External Funding Mechanisms (City Tree Fund)**
    - Investigate sponsorship, public and private contributions.
    - Provide a mechanism for developers to offset greening deficits or compensate for necessary removals.
    - Unlock significant new resources for tree planting and the enhancement of the urban forest.

Actions

26. Short-Term (2024–26)

- Deliver the final phase of the highway footpath tree planting programme.
- Trial structural soils, soil cells, and alternative planting substrates.
- Expand the range of climate-resilient species planted.
- Publish annual report on tree establishment rates and species performance.

- Embed the new Planning SLA to ensure arboricultural considerations are integral to development decisions.
- Explore assess options for the establishment of an Urban Tree Fund and present viable options to committee late 2026.

27. Medium-Term (2026–30)

- Identify and deliver new planting through major public realm projects and pavement-widening schemes.
- Introduce IT-based monitoring and canopy cover mapping.
- Review and update the Tree Risk Management Plan to reflect emerging climate and pest risks.

28. Long-Term (2030 onwards)

- Increase canopy cover across the City, with a shift in focus from tree numbers to area of cover.
- Establish the City as a leader in urban forestry innovation, particularly in managing trees in highly constrained environments.
- Ensure tree planting and management continues to contribute directly to the Climate Action Strategy.

Corporate & Strategic

Financial implications

29. The ongoing management of the City's urban forest requires sustained investment in inspections, maintenance, planting, and aftercare regimes. While efficiencies have been achieved through bringing inspections in-house and improving procurement practices, future ambitions such as trialling structural soils, adopting new monitoring technologies, and expanding canopy cover will increase upfront costs. These investments, however, will generate long-term value by reducing tree failure risks, enhancing resilience to climate change, and securing ecosystem services such as cooling and air quality improvements.

Resource implications

30. None

Legal implications

31. As a landowner, the City of London Corporation has a statutory duty of care to ensure trees under its management do not pose unacceptable risks to the public. This duty, informed by civil and criminal law, requires adherence to best practice as set out in the National Tree Safety Group's *Common Sense Risk Management of Trees*. The City Gardens service discharges this duty through a robust Tree Risk Management Plan and systematic inspection regime. The Planning department have a statutory obligation in regards to

trees which is being met through the SLA. Furthermore, ensuring compliance with emerging environmental legislation and alignment with the City's Climate Action Strategy will remain a core legal consideration.

Risk implications

32. The principal risks to the City's urban forest relate to tree safety, pests and diseases, climate change impacts, and development pressures. Failure to maintain a rigorous inspection regime could expose the City to legal liability in the event of tree-related incidents. Pests and disease, along with the potential arrival of new pathogens, present ongoing biological risks. Climate change introduces further threats through increased frequency of droughts, storms, and heatwaves, potentially undermining long-term tree health. There is also a strategic risk that limited planting space may prevent the City from achieving its canopy cover ambitions, unless mitigated through innovation, redevelopment opportunities, and external funding. Proactive monitoring, species diversification, and strategic planning are therefore essential to maintaining resilience and minimising exposure.

Equalities implications

33. Trees provide shade, improve air quality, and create more attractive environments, benefits which are particularly valuable to vulnerable groups such as older people, children, and those with underlying health conditions. Public realm improvements linked to tree planting also contribute to safer and more accessible streets for all users, including people with disabilities. Ensuring equitable distribution of new planting across the City, including areas with high footfall and limited green space, will help avoid disproportionate outcomes and maximise social value.

Climate implications

34. Trees are a critical element of the City's Climate Action Strategy, contributing to urban cooling, improved air quality, and sustainable water management. The selection of climate-resilient species and the adoption of innovative planting techniques are essential to ensure long-term viability in the face of rising temperatures, droughts, and extreme weather events. Expanding canopy cover will strengthen the City's resilience to climate change while supporting net zero targets, biodiversity, and the creation of healthier, more liveable public spaces.

Security implications – N/A

Conclusion

35. City Gardens has a strong baseline: a healthy and diverse tree population, an efficient inspection system, and a proven record of successful planting and aftercare. However, there are clear structural constraints, especially the looming limit on planting capacity within the existing street network. The future

trajectory depends on embracing innovation, external funding, and public realm redesign to expand canopy cover and secure resilience against emerging threats.

Appendices

‘None’

Background Papers

Jake Tibbetts
City Gardens Manager - Environment

T: 020 7332 4127
E: jake.tibbetts@cityoflondon.gov.uk