Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority **Item 11**

30 June 2026

White Rose Forest

Purpose of this report

1. To make Members aware of an intended bid by the White Rose Forest for the new National Forest (Midlands and North)

Recommendations

2. That Members;

   a) note the purpose of the new National Forest, and the bid being prepared by the White Rose Forest (Annex); and

   b) approve the Authority providing support for the development of the bid, as a member of the White Rose Forest partnership.

Strategic Framework

3. The information and recommendation(s) contained in this report are consistent with the Authority's statutory purposes and support the strategic planning framework:

   - Corporate Plan Objectives:

     5. Work with farmers and landowners to encourage creation of a further 200ha of native broadleaf and mixed woodland, including, scrub, wood pasture and natural regeneration by 2031, to create a network that increases resilience to climate change and reduce downstream flood peaks.

     15. Support farmers and landowners to enhance the Dales' landscape, and support nature, climate and farming resilience, including planting field trees to mitigate the impact of ash dieback on tree cover outside woodlands, and creating or restoring 35 km of hedgerows by 2028 (from a 2022 baseline).

Background

White Rose Forest

4. The White Rose Forest is the Community Forest for North and West Yorkshire. A partnership of local and combined authorities, national park authorities and national landscape organisations, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) organisations, alongside national, regional and local charities, businesses and community enterprises.

5. The White Rose Forest is not a single 'forest', but the network of all trees, woods and forests across North and West Yorkshire, including trees in gardens and on residential streets, in town and city centres, along transport routes, in parks and green spaces, by rivers, canals and lakes, on farmland and in the countryside.

6. The Authority has been a member of the White Rose Forest partnership since 2019. In June last year, the Authority endorsed the White Rose Forest Strategic Plan (2025-50), confirming its support for the White Rose Forest partnership and its long-term direction and level of ambition. This is closely aligned with the ambitions that the Authority and it's local partners have already set out in the Dales Woodland Strategy, the Nature Recovery Plan and the new National Park Management Plan.

New National Forest

7. On 26 May, the Government announced it was opening the competition for the third new national forest - committing up to £7.5 million over a five-year period to support the project.

8. The new national forest – to be located in either the Midlands or North of England – is expected to be up to 600 square miles in scale. Large enough to make a significant long-term contribution to tree-planting targets, while sitting comfortably within the area's existing landscape and local identity.

9. The new national forest will have a particular focus on improving health outcomes for communities, with low-income communities disproportionately feeling the impacts of poor access to green and blue spaces. There is compelling evidence that access to woodland and green spaces delivers substantial public health benefits, including:
    a. better mental health and reduced healthcare costs
    b. increased physical activity and chronic disease prevention
    c. cardiovascular benefits and stress relief
    d. stronger social connections and community engagement
    e. cognitive development in children and young people

Consideration

10. The initial Expression of Interest (EOI) put together by the White Rose Forest partnership is attached as an **Annex**. It focuses on the Aire Catchment, and includes a small part of the National Park (primarily Malhamdale).

11. Aside from the obvious potential environmental and health benefits, the key thing to emphasise is that a national forest is not a single contiguous, closed-canopy forest. Both the national guidance (see para 8 above) and the White Rose Forest's EOI make very clear that the proposal would involve significant variety in the type and scale of woodland creation, done in a way that reflects local landscape character and identity. Being part of a national forest would increase the opportunities for farmers and landowners in Malhamdale to access funding for woodland, hedgerows, trees etc but would not introduce new impositions on the way that the land is farmed and managed.

12. Stage 1 of the bidding process will identify potential development partners and broad geographic areas of search that present the best opportunities for meeting the aims of NNF3. This stage is open to all applicants. The deadline for submitting Stage 1 documents is 6 July. If shortlisted, a much more detailed bid – evidencing the need and opportunities would then need to be submitted by the end of September.

Financial Implications

13. There are no direct financial implications for the Authority at this very early stage. The Authority will continue to support the White Rose Forest's ambitions directly and indirectly through our existing woodland team.

Legal Implications

14. None at this stage.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications

15. In line with the national guidance, the proposal should provide significant benefits for communities experiencing multiple deprivations and low tree equity, by increasing access to woodland and green space closer to communities in North and West Yorkshire.

Climate Change Implications

16. Increasing woodland cover is a critical element of Government plans to achieve the legally binding target of net zero by 2050. Being part of a national forest would provide additional funding to support an increase in tree cover that would not only make a positive contribution to storing carbon but would also help to reduce flood peaks, improve air quality, increase the resilience of natural habitats, and provide cooling effects.

Conclusion

17. The White Rose Forest's proposed bid for the new National Forest could provide huge benefits for communities across West and North Yorkshire. The inclusion of a small area of the National Park at the top of the catchment area has the potential to provide additional impetus and financial support to help achieve the ambitions that the Authority and its local partners have already set out in the new National Park Management Plan.

Richard Graham
Director of Conservation & Community

Annex

Name of organisation: White Rose Forest
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Our proposed **NNF Yorkshire** focuses on the Aire River Catchment with links into the lower catchments of Calder and Colne (approx. 150k ha in total with the aim of achieving >30% canopy cover) connecting 3.5 million people living and working in the towns and cities of Skipton, Keighley, Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, Leeds and Wakefield. Many neighbourhoods in this area experience multiple deprivations and low tree equity.

NNF Yorkshire offers an opportunity for a transformative new National Forest to serve the resilience of our communities and our climate through nature-based solutions to flooding, biodiversity loss, placemaking, and improving health outcomes (through active travel and better access to nature), as well as creating new green jobs, training and volunteering opportunities. The variety of woodland creation – from urban through to rural upland catchment areas - along with woodland management, hedgerows and habitat networks, will create a national forest with a unique mosaic of form and function.

This EOI has the support of the White Rose Forest (WRF) Strategic Board, as well as the support of the Forestry Commission, Canal & River Trust, Aire Catchment Network, Aire Rivers Trust, Calder Rivers Trust, Aire Resilience Company, National Trust, The Conservation Volunteers, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, Environment Agency.

Justin Wilson, Head of Environment at West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) said: "*There is strong alignment between the objectives of WYCA, the WRF 2050 Strategic Plan and the NNF, particularly our shared ambition to use trees, woodland and green infrastructure to deliver long-term environmental, social and economic transformation. This runs through the West Yorkshire Plan, our Climate and Environment Plan, and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), all of which seek to build a greener West Yorkshire, with space for nature and people. The importance of the ecosystem services that trees provide is also key to our upcoming Climate Resilience Assessment, and the impact that trees, or lack thereof, can have on climate mitigation, safety, and health.*

The proposed project supports WRF's 2050 vision and both West Yorkshire and North Yorkshire and York LNRS, by combining large-scale woodland creation and improvement with urban tree planting. Thereby helping to tackle climate change through carbon sequestration, increasing biodiversity and ecological resilience, improving water quality, and delivering health, wellbeing and placemaking benefits for communities through nature connectedness. It also reflects our commitment as a partnership to landscape-scale collaboration, working across multiple partners and boundaries to maximise impact and outcomes in the Aire River Catchment and beyond.

This EOI is anchored in WRF's established role as a regional convenor and builds on an extensive record of co-delivery that reflects a truly collaborative, partnership-driven approach that maximises benefits for people, nature and the economy. As an example, partners have been committed to funding natural flood management measures for over a decade including a £1.9m WYCA investment in the Landscapes for Water programme with National Trust, Yorkshire Water and the WRF.

NNF Yorkshire helps build on that work, restoring our habitats and keeping communities safe. By embedding woodland creation and management within wider land-use, regeneration and community priorities, this proposal demonstrates the integrated approach championed by WRF and supports shared national and regional ambitions for net zero, nature recovery and climate resilience.