

Policy Brief: Protecting London's Urban Forest in a Changing Climate

The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) fully supports the findings from [Future Climate Suitability of London's Public Realm Trees](#) and calls for swift and decisive action to prevent avoidable loss of the city's tree canopy, urging policymakers and stakeholders to act now to safeguard London's urban forest for future generations.

This report was jointly commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the Forestry Commission following a 2024 scoping exercise. The study analysed data from over 1.1 million public trees across London. Each species was assessed for its suitability to London's projected climate in 2090 using a composite scoring system that combined global species distribution data and plant trait analysis. This assessment places London among the very small number of cities globally undertaking detailed, evidence-led climate suitability modelling for their public tree stock.

London's trees are crucial for cooling urban areas, improving air quality, and supporting biodiversity. However, research shows that many existing trees could struggle or even die as climate conditions evolve, unless proactive measures are put in place. By 2090, forecasts indicate that **up to 73% of London's public trees may not survive or thrive** under future climate scenarios, while only 0.38% of current species are highly suitable for these conditions. Immediate intervention can avert this outcome.

Any delaying acting on the findings of the report heightens risks and costs, increases tree vulnerability, and stalls adaptation efforts, potentially resulting in irreversible canopy loss. To address this, London must protect and revitalise its tree population to preserve vital environmental benefits. Recognising urban trees as essential infrastructure rather than ornamental features that strengthens climate resilience and public health is key to safeguarding their ongoing value.

Important steps include diversifying tree species, refining procurement strategies to prioritise resilience, and measuring success through survival rates and canopy growth, rather than simply counting newly planted trees.

The updated [London's Public Realm Trees](#) Map now incorporates species suitability projections to 2090, provides a powerful evidence base for planning, allowing Boroughs and land managers to make informed decisions about species selection and canopy planning.

The [London Environment Strategy](#) (2018) sets a target to increase tree canopy cover by 10% by 2050 and highlighted the importance of succession planning and careful species selection.

The Mayor's target is an encouraging milestone, but the Future Climate Suitability analysis underlines that simply planting more trees is not sufficient. Without prioritising climate-resilient species and providing sustained care and resources, there is a risk of repeating mistakes, planting trees that cannot survive and missing out on the intended social and environmental benefits.

Decision-makers across London now face a pivotal choice: act promptly to secure a thriving future canopy, or risk losing one of the city's most important natural assets. Fast, decisive, and well-coordinated action is essential.

What We Recommend:

- **Support for Young Trees:** Provide extended support for young trees beyond their initial planting to help them thrive and contribute to canopy growth over time
- **Improve Procurement Practices:** Revise procurement policies to prioritise tree species that can withstand future climate conditions and increase the diversity of London's urban forest by encouraging Boroughs and public-realm managers to use the latest suitability data in all procurement decisions
- **Strengthen nursery and supply-chain capacity:** Ambitions to diversify species and increase planting will fail without reliable, biosecure nursery production and forward planning for climate-suitable stock. The CPRE-commissioned [Woodland Creation advocacy report](#) highlights nursery capability as a practical constraint and includes an appendix of nurseries able to supply the programme - reinforcing the need for longer lead times, clearer demand signals, and procurement approaches that support a resilient planting pipeline
- **Use the latest suitability data:** Ensure planning, planting, and public-realm development decisions are grounded in the GLA's updated tree-suitability modelling through to 2090.
- **Strengthen Accountability and Reporting:** Establish robust accountability systems to monitor, report, and evaluate both canopy development and the survival rates of newly planted trees on a regular basis
- **The GLA and all London Boroughs support a professional approach to the planting and management of trees in the urban forest.**

About the Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF)

The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) is the UK's Royal Chartered professional body for forestry and arboriculture. As the sector's independent authority, the ICF upholds professional standards, advances evidence based practice and represents more than 2,000 qualified tree and forest professionals across the UK. Its expertise ensures that policy and decision making are informed by robust science, professional competence, and long-established sector leadership.