

OUR Auckland

Auckland's tree canopy cover grows by 60 hectares

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Community groups and council come together to plant cabbage trees at Puhinui. Credit: Auckland Council Parks volunteer team

If you've been for a stroll through Totara Park or visited Puhinui Reserve in south Auckland recently you might notice some new young trees starting to flourish.

Thousands of native plants in public parks and open spaces across the city have been planted by Auckland business and community groups working together with the council to revegetate and regenerate our environment.

These groups are doing their bit to help achieve the ambitious goal of the council's Urban Ngahere Strategy to increase urban tree canopy coverage to 30 per cent.

Between 2013 and 2018 average urban ngahere (forest) canopy cover across Auckland increased by about 60 hectares, an area equivalent to around 60 sports fields.

"The benefits from our urban ngahere range from supporting climate resilience to stormwater management to animal habitats and even providing shady spots for families to enjoy a day at the park.

"Unfortunately, the 2015 changes to the Resource Management Act has meant a really difficult few years for Auckland's environment as the removal of a blanket tree protection led to ongoing losses of mature trees across the city and particularly on privately-owned property.

"Despite this, inequities remain. There are areas where tree cover is far lower than others and well below our targets. Addressing this inequity is a real priority for us.

"I want children across Auckland, no matter the suburb, to be able to walk home from school sheltered from the sun," he adds, "it takes years to see the trees planted grow large enough to show up in our data. What we prioritise now will have an impact well into the future."

Deputy Chair Councillor Pippa Coom agrees, emphasising the role of volunteers and community groups.

"Community involvement is vital in growing and caring for trees – as we're seeing in places like Totara Park and Puhinui Reserve – and through groups like the Kaipatiki Project. Our community want to see an increase in tree cover and have made an enormous difference through planting, ecological improvement and pest control," she says.

"We really need to acknowledge their efforts and thank them for both their advocacy and work on and in the ground. It's encouraging to see our urban forest cover maintaining and even beginning to grow again as it is a real priority for the council and for Auckland."

Benchmarking Auckland's urban forests

Next week the council will present to the Environment and Climate Change Committee an update on the Urban Ngahere Strategy's progress since launching last year.

Auckland Council Head of Parks Services, Mark Bowater, explains that alongside new planting initiatives one of the first projects underway is to benchmark the state and size of Auckland's tree canopies to help inform future work.

"We have embarked on a series of research initiatives and our first snapshot report shows no loss to the overall size of Auckland's urban forests," he says.

"These results are promising for Auckland but there is much more work ahead if we are to keep making a positive trajectory on growing the scale of our urban forests – and to help offset loss of mature trees.

"Building key partnerships with businesses, groups and various agencies' in support for the Urban Ngahere Strategy's goals has been a crucial first step towards this," he adds.

Survey gives a treetop view

The latest tree canopy coverage study gives a high-level, snapshot of treetops across the city's 16 urban local board areas,

The survey showed average tree canopy coverage across the city was 18.4 per cent; similar to the 2013 baseline average cover of 18.3 per cent but well below the 30 per cent long term goal for the city identified in the Urban Ngahere Strategy.

At a local board level, average canopy cover ranged from 8 per cent to 31 per cent. The Kaipatiki and Upper Harbour local boards had the highest average cover (respectively 31 per cent and 28 per cent) and Māngere-Ōtāhuhu and Ōtara-Papatoetoe local boards the lowest (respectively 8 per cent and 9 per cent).

The results also indicate that increases in canopy coverage are mainly across public land and road corridors while losses are widespread - the majority of removals has taken place on privately-owned property.

Mr Bowater says the council is addressing the results by focusing efforts on areas that need the most; south Auckland is one of the key areas identified in the strategy and the latest survey as having consistently low tree canopy cover.

It's a balance of looking at what's needed across the city, he adds: "Development is ongoing across the city so into the future public parks and open spaces are only going to become more important to us. The planting that we've put into Totara Park, for example, is turning retired farmland into an ecological area of high value for communities and the environment."



Auckland Council parks volunteer team

Continuing to grow our urban forests

"Everybody can do their bit to help protect and grow trees in Auckland and be a good environmental steward for the city," says Councillor Hills.

"It's really heartening to see so many people getting involved with planting initiatives – community and business involvements like this are at the heart of what it takes to make positive changes to our environment and for the good of our climate.

Adds Mr Bowater: "Like any maintenance project requiring skilled tradespeople, we encourage Aucklanders to seek professional advice from qualified arborists when looking for information about the care of trees on their property, noting there are usually a range of management options to enable the retention of some trees on private property."

Next steps for Auckland Council

Council officers are asking for in-principle support from the committee to prepare a funding bid for Long-term Plan deliberations later this year, to increase funding to accelerate the work.

"We're actively working with a number of organisations both public, private and community to look at various funding options and initiatives to continue our efforts to grow Auckland's tree canopy cover through large-scale plantings on public and private land," says Mr Bowater.

Adds Councillor Hills: "We are in a tough situation right now and financing projects in the short term is going to be challenging, given the severe economic constraints we are facing.

"But I believe that growing and protecting our urban forests is crucial, especially if Aucklanders are to take meaningful action towards addressing climate change. As committee chair I am committed to finding ways to keep growing and protecting our forests through implementation of the Urban Ngahere Strategy."

Source: <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/articles/news/2020/07/auckland-s-tree-canopy-cover-grows-by-60-hectares/>