

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CORPORATE TREE STRATEGY AND TREE RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY (2014)

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. This report updates the Panel on the development and implementation of the above Strategy and Policy which was agreed and brought into use with effect from 2014.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The Council has a legal, moral and environmental duty to manage the trees on its freehold land, maintaining these in a safe and healthy condition. This includes trees within open spaces, housing sites (including tenant's gardens), woodland, cemeteries and around car parks. The Council has over 18,587 tree records, ranging from individual trees through to small groups of trees.
- 2.2. The Council has 7 SLA agreements with Town and Parish council's to provide tree inspection and provide access to contracted arboriculture services as part of the SLA's in place with these bodies.
- 2.3. Prior to the implementation of the Tree Strategy and Risk Management, decisions relating to trees had been made on a case-by-case basis, with the Council Officers having limited mandate and guidance beyond recommendations from national and professional bodies alongside their own experience. Due to the conflicting advice, the unique circumstances presented by each case and emotive issues that can arise from trees, members of the public would challenge the decisions, resulting in extensive Officer resources being stretched as they manage public expectations.
- 2.4. The Tree Strategy and Risk Management were drafted by June 2014 drawing upon our legal responsibilities, case law, British Standards (including BS3936, BS3998), professional guidance from industry bodies, and to deliver sections within the Council's Core Strategy. These documents were approved through the appropriate Panels and Cabinet in August 2014.

3. KEY OUTCOMES OF POLICY AND STRATEGY IMPLIMENTATION

3.1. Tree Inspections

- 3.1.1. As a result of the implementation of the Tree Strategy and Risk Management, the tree inspection regime was specified and sites were zoned on risk (as required under Risk Management Strategy - Action Plan). This established re-inspection intervals based on the Tree Officer's observations and recommendations (such as any arboriculture tree work required). As a result the tree inspection programme was re-evaluated and improved safety, staff and resource efficiencies were gained through development of geographic zonal inspections. This assists Town and Parish Councils manage workloads and public enquiries presenting to them with relation to trees within their responsibilities.

- 3.1.2. As set out within Risk Management Strategy – Action Plan, tree inspections are being completed within the specified targets, despite long term staff sickness of one Officer, with remedial works raised and the Council’s staff briefed.
- 3.1.3. Timescales to undertake the tree works recommended from inspections are outlined within the Risk Management Strategy, assisting in managing the expectations of stakeholders, assisting Tree Officers to direct the Contractor and the Council to prioritise works.
- 3.1.4. The adoption of the Tree Strategy and Risk Management resulted in the identification and subsequent prioritisation of the development of tree inspection and management software (Action Point 1). The existing software provision was unsupported by the original manufacturer and unable to deliver the information and management tools required for the important legal responsibilities.
- 3.1.5. During 2016 procurement and implementation of a new software system took place and the migration of the existing software and electronic records to the new cloud based Ezytreev software system, This advanced tree management software is used by over 100 other authorities, being hosted on a secure cloud, allowing the Council Tree Officers to update the records remotely from the field. Customer enquiries are recorded to the system, allowing comprehensive recording of issues and history relating to each tree. Electronic tablets have been procured for Tree Officers, enabling paper-less inspection of trees, recording of photographs, mapping of tree locations, recording of tree health, maintenance requirements and monitoring budget spend.
- 3.1.6. Further development occurred during early 2017 Following a competitive EU tender for tree provision services to the Council and SLA partners, the contract was awarded to Gristwood and Toms. Within the Contract improved performance indicators were included for discussion at Quarterly Review meetings. The Contract specified that the Contractor will use the Ezytreev software to update work progress. The Contractor now receives work orders, updates on work progress and indicates work completed via the software – simplifying and reducing administrative burden, enabling Tree Officers to respond to public enquiries quicker and more accurately

3.2. Responding to Public Enquiries

- 3.2.1. The adoption of the Tree Strategy and Risk Management assisted in giving formal guidance to Tree Officers, Managers, Members and the public on the Council’s management of its tree stock. The Strategy set out classification of public enquiries, based on enquiry type and stipulates response times which are being met.
- 3.2.2. The Tree Strategy and Risk Management helps manage public expectations on the Council’s actions and avoid unrealistic requests absorbing Tree Officer resource. For example; enquiries relating to trees blocking light, TV reception or creation of leaf litter can be given an initial response with reference to the Council’s Strategy. The Strategy outlines key distances, such as the clear swept envelope that will be maintained clear of foliage around buildings, access roads or paths. The provision of the Strategy greatly assists Tree Officers to prioritise those enquiries and issues relating to tree safety and completing the necessary tree inspection frequency – ensuring that expectations by all stakeholders are managed.

3.2.3. Since the Tree Strategy and Risk Management has been implemented there has been no substantial challenge to the council – reducing administrative and Member time, ensuring a fair policy is being applied evenly and accurately throughout the District.

3.2.4. The implementation and reference to the Tree Strategy and Risk Management did highlight that these documents were not readily accessible on the Council's website (see 4.1.1).

3.3. Council Tenant Enquiries

3.3.1. The provision of the Tree Strategy assists and supports the requirements set out within the Council's tenancy agreements. Tree Officers are able to direct council tenants to refer to this document to allay fears about tree safety, prevent damage (malicious or accidental), ensure that maintenance work are identified, then undertaken safely and promptly.

3.3.2. The Strategy has resulted in trees within Tenant's gardens and communal areas being better managed, monitored and protected, with records relating to each tree being held securely should these be required for further investigation (perhaps relating to a subsequent safety, legal or financial issue).

3.4. Provision to Town and Parish Councils

3.4.1. The adoption of the Tree Strategy and Risk Assessment has been warmly received by many Towns and Parishes. While this is not mandatory, many have adopted these as reference and guidance documents. This has resulted in a standard approach, ensuring consistency throughout the District at both levels of local authority. This demonstrates the support and regard in which these documents are held with our local partners.

3.5. Managing Healthy Tree Stock

3.5.1. The Tree Strategy and Risk Management strengthens the Council's provision and establishes good husbandry to identify and, where practicable, hinder the spread of damaging pests and diseases within our tree stock through managing the approach of staff and Contractors, maintaining our Open Spaces for future generations. This document identified the main tree species within the Council's care, assisting with managing future risks and threats and direct future plantings (see 3.6.1.3).

3.6. Tree Strategy Action Points – Update on Progress

3.6.1. The Tree Strategy set out 12 action points, below is a short update on progress to date:

3.6.1.1. Point 1 – Review of Tree Management Software

Review undertaken, software replaced as outlined in 3.1.4

3.6.1.2. Point 2 – Increase tree canopy cover on 10 sites within 5 years – the policy of replacing two for one trees is assisting with improved canopy further improvements are planned once management plans are adopted for the woodlands.

3.6.1.3. Point 3 – Details on canopy cover within District, meeting national benchmarking – This is assisted through the new software and is work in progress

- 3.6.1.4. Point 4 – Provision of high quality trees to boost resilience to pest and disease threats – Tree Officers have been sourcing and planting a variety of species during replanting operations to help reduce the threats against individual species. We source all our new tree plantings from reputable suppliers with disease free and resistant strains (where available) preferred. In all cases new plantings are drawn from certified healthy root stocks, are monitored and watered following planting to maximise establishment rates.
- 3.6.1.5. Point 5 – Review the Council's land in relation to subsidence risk – overall risk is low however individual trees always have the potential to cause subsidence
- 3.6.1.6. Point 6 – Undertake woodland management plans for principal sites – management plans to be completed 17/18
- 3.6.1.7. Point 7 – Explore opportunities for external tree planting funding resources have not been available to commit to external funding requirements
- 3.6.1.8. Point 8 – Encourage community involvement in tree and woodland management this process has started with housing sites being actively involved in tree planting schemes
- 3.6.1.9. Point 9 – Address fly tipping – fly-tipping identification, reporting and removal has been strengthened following increased surveillance from Tree Officers, Open Spaces Inspector, Civil Enforcement Officer and assistance from Streetscene in the prompt removal and identification of evidence to highlight and prosecute offenders.
- 3.6.1.10. Point 10 – Valuation of the Council's tree stock- valuation of tree stock is currently on hold while evaluating the many different ways of valuing tree stock
- 3.6.1.11. Point 11 – Establish procedure for trees when sites are acquired or sold – information on properties obtained through buyback is sometimes sporadic, in cases where the Tree Officer is informed they undertake the necessary inspection of trees within the property, adding these to the software, raising any works required and ensuring ongoing inspections.
- 3.6.1.12. Point 12 – Maintain register of veteran trees – this is undertaken as part of the new tree management software

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Outcomes as a result of the Tree Strategy and Risk Assessment Adoption

- 4.1.1. The implementation of the Tree Strategy and Risk Assessment has been undertaken smoothly, resulting in more efficient and focused inspections, safer tree stock, prompt remedial works, improved monitoring of Contractor, better responses to public enquiries and enhanced open spaces for residents and visitors.
- 4.1.2. The Council's web-pages relating to Open Spaces are in the process of being re-written in a more accessible and engaging tone of voice. The Tree Strategy and Risk Management documents have been uploaded in a prominent location, however navigation within the website to the Open Spaces pages is outside of the remit of this Service.
- 4.1.3. The Council is meeting the requirement to re-plant TWO trees for each tree that is felled for any reason (from disease through to malicious damage). However the identification of available areas of open space is not without challenges, especially within housing sites to replace trees removed within

housing where planting of new trees can invoke impassioned comments from tenants and private residents (both in support and against).

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. The adoption of the Tree Strategy and Risk Management has strengthened and formalised the inspection and maintenance of trees under which the Council has responsibility. This has resulted in a stronger defensive position for the Council when presented with insurance claims.
- 5.2. The Council has paid out for one insurance claim since the adoption of the Tree Strategy and Risk Management.

6. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None

7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. The adoption of the Tree Strategy and Risk Management has set in motion improved environmental provision for the residents of the Council. Through the adoption of these documents, the Council now works to reduce the number of trees felled. In the unfortunate case where trees are diseased, damaged (by weather, 3rd party accident or malicious intent) or become unsafe (such as traffic incidents) the Council replants TWO trees for each tree that is felled.
- 7.2. The policy has therefore resulted in more healthy and native species of trees growing within the District.

8. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 None

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That it be concluded that the Council's Corporate Tree Strategy and Tree Risk Management Strategy (2014) are fit for purpose, undertaking all requirements, and should therefore retained.

For further information contact:

Steve Jones
Open Spaces Manager
Tel: 023 8028 5588
E-mail: steve.jones@nfdc.gov.uk

Background Papers:

None

Report Prepared by Simon Hanney, Open Spaces Officer,
and Bernice McGrail, Tree Officer. May 2017