



Environment, Housing & Communities Scrutiny Board

Working Group Summary: Budget Consultation

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Working Group Summary: Tree Maintenance

21 January 2022

On 25 November 2021 the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing & Communities) considered a referral from seven councillors, which requested consideration be given to reviewing the Council's "tree maintenance policy." At the meeting, Cllrs Wadsworth and Richards represented the group of councillors who were signatories on the referral letter.

In response to the referral members of the Scrutiny Board requested a working group be arranged to consider the issue in more detail. The working group took place on 21 January 2022.

ATTENDEES

BOARD MEMBERS

Cllr B Anderson	Cllr P Grahame	Cllr T Smith
Cllr A Blackburn	Cllr C Howley	
Cllr K Brooks	Cllr D Ragan	
Cllr D Collins	Cllr K Ritchie	

Apologies: Cllrs Akhtar, Charlwood, Finnigan Midgley & Gabriel

ADDITIONAL ATTENDEES

Cllr S Arif	Cllr L Richards	Michael Kinnaird
Cllr P Wadsworth	Sean Flesher	Tony Stringwell



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ACTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1	Members requested further information on the number of administration fees received.
2	Members recommended that whole streets are assessed where concern is raised about the safety or shade implications of legacy woodland that is now close to homes, to avoid multiple referrals and to ensure consistency of advice for residents.
3	Members are asked to inform Sean Flesher of any sites where fencing around newly planted whips is a concern for communities in order to explore potential alternatives.
4	Officers are asked to improve signage on fences around newly planted areas to indicate the likely timescales during which fencing would remain in place.
5	Members requested an update on the introduction of processes to secure net gain for biodiversity loss through the planning system as legislation is progressed nationally.
6	Members recommended working closely with planning colleagues to prevent future problems with new woodlands for housing developments that are later approved.
7	Members requested an update on the outcome of any future discussions with other services to secure additional funding for maintenance classified as 'non-urgent.'
8	Members requested future updates on outputs from tree planting including progress towards canopy creation.
9	Members recommended that leaflets relating to tree maintenance be reviewed and if necessary updated, particularly in the context of the expected adoption of the Best City Ambition.
10	Members proposed that the risk-based categorisation of work in accordance safety management responsibilities be reviewed to establish whether any updates or revisions are required.



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DISCUSSION SUMMARY

1. Tony Stringwell delivered a presentation setting out the current policy around tree management. He noted that the service aims to strike a balance between recognising the various benefits of trees, robust safety management and taking a responsible attitude where trees are having a detrimental impact on people's lives.
2. Officers outlined key targets for tree planting included in the White Rose Forest Action Plan and the Council's woodland creation proposals.
3. The benefits of tree planting were discussed including flood prevention, creation of habitats for wildlife and improving air quality.
4. An overview of the current budget for tree maintenance was provided alongside a summary of activity, including support from specialist forestry teams for other services.
5. Resources for tree maintenance are limited and are largely committed based on risk. The only budget for discretionary work is linked to housing Leeds stock.
6. Members discussed the categories of designated risk for trees in line with statutory responsibilities for safety management, noting the required timescales within which work must be carried out.
7. It was confirmed that for 'non-urgent' categories 4A & 4B a system has been introduced to enable an interested party to directly pay for work to be carried out.
8. A proportional approach is taken to pruning to protect trees while ensuring safety.
9. Attendees acknowledged that many of the concerns raised about tree maintenance are a long-term legacy of the wrong trees having been planted in some areas.
10. Members welcomed the introduction of a tree liaison officer for members and a specific inquiry email address. The service has addressed over 500 inquiries since start of 2021. The volume of inquiries requires the service to triage and respond based on risk.
11. Internal forestry teams focus on high risk or complicated removals, with less complex work being offered to approved contractors. Officers also outlined the arrangements for an emergency response.

ISSUES RAISED BY BOARD MEMBERS

12. **Management of direct customer queries:** members sought to understand the process of managing and responding to direct customer queries. Members requested further information on the number of administration fees received.
13. Members noted the option to enable residents to pay for work directly and asked officers whether this approach could be extended to enable residents access to an 'approved' list of contractors who can provide an assurance that work will be carried out in accordance with British Standards that have been adopted by the Council.
14. **Removal on health grounds:** members queried whether there were instances where trees could be pruned or removed if they were deemed to be posing a specific risk to health due to conditions such as Pica. Officers confirmed they have worked with several families to resolve issues linked to Pica.



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15. **Proximity of legacy woodlands to homes:** clarity was sought as to the guidelines governing the management of legacy woodlands which pose concerns for residents. This includes safety concerns, shade issues and damage to footpaths and property.
16. Officers highlighted the lack of specific guidance in relation to proximity of legacy woodland to homes but also noted the standard risk assessment used in Leeds.
17. Attendees discussed the importance of working with planning colleagues to try and prevent similar issues with new woodlands in future years where the Council approves housing developments.
18. Members suggested it would be helpful for whole streets to be assessed where concern is raised about the safety or shade implications of legacy woodland that is now close to homes, to avoid multiple referrals and to ensure consistency of advice for residents.
19. Members queried whether hedgerows and shrubs could be used instead of trees in some locations to provide green infrastructure, carbon and particulate mitigation, and biodiversity benefits but with different maintenance requirements.
20. Officers confirmed a varied approach to the management of green spaces is reflected in the recently approved Parks and Green Spaces Strategy.
21. The current use of 'root pits' and flexible materials was discussed in the context of avoiding future damage to footpaths.
22. **Fencing:** Members recognised the need for protective fencing around some new areas of planting to protect against losses and damage. However, this was highlighted as a concern in some communities where communal green space is limited and significant sections could become inaccessible where planting has occurred.
23. In response officers asked for identification of sites of concern as alternatives such as relaxed mowing or tree guards could be explored in some places to protect newly planted whips from damage.
24. Members recommended improving information on signage to reflect the anticipated timescales during which fences would remain in place.
25. **Planning gain:** Members discussed the potential to access additional funding as and when national legislation makes it possible to require developers to specifically compensate the Council for the loss of biodiversity in an area.
26. **Beat up:** Officers outlined the success of current planting, which has largely been delivered by volunteers supported by Council rangers. Where losses of over 40% occur 'beat up' will replace those losses, including where this is the result of vandalism. Very little beat up has been required this year.



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27. **Funding:** Last year the service managed to secure grant funding of £290k for years of planting, with a further £124k to support the establishment costs of the first 50 hectares of woodland planting.
28. Members queried whether additional funding could be provided via the HRA account and recommended explore access to further resources from highways.
29. Members acknowledged the challenge of delivering a maintenance service within current budget constraints and asked for an update on any discussions with other services to secure additional funding for work that is not classified as high risk.
30. **Planting rates:** To reach targets for canopy creation the Council works to the forestry commission standards for planting. Only 10% of trees need to reach maturity but over planting encourages competition and faster growth. Thinning and natural losses are expected. It is hoped a canopy will be established in around ten years.
31. **Site identification:** Officers confirmed planting is not taking place on active sports pitches. Where members have identified potential sites for planting Sean Flesher outlined the process for mapping and assessing those sites – for example, by mapping services such as gas pipes underground.
32. **Risk based approach:** It was noted that Leeds has provided to support to Sheffield City Council following the well-publicised concerns raised by residents in relation to their local approach to tree maintenance.
33. Members queried whether it would be timely to review categories 4A&4B to determine whether any updates to the categorisation are required.
34. **Measuring of success:** Members requested future information about the measurable outputs from tree planting, such as the progress towards targeted canopy growth.
35. **Arium:** The benefits of having access to mass planting via the Arium were discussed in the context of supply shortages this year. Members suggested it would be helpful to understand the cost benefits of using the Arium to inform correspondence with residents.
36. **Communication:** Members recommended that tree management leaflets be reviewed, and if necessary revised, in the context of the anticipated adoption of the Best City Ambition.
37. It was further noted that additional communication about the current approach to tree maintenance is needed in some communities to alleviate concerns about the potential long-term implication of trees being planted in some location.
38. **Safety Management:** Members queried whether there were any broad common law duties in relation to the management of trees, in addition to the specific statutory responsibilities outlined.
39. **Number of trees:** Members sought clarity as to whether officers could provide approximate figure for the total number of trees on the Council estate.