

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

23 FEBRUARY 2023

**REPORT OF CRIME
AND DISORDER
SELECT COMMITTEE**

CABINET DECISION

Lead Cabinet Member – Environment and Transport – Cllr Mike Smith

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF TREE ASSET MANAGEMENT

SUMMARY

The attached report presents the outcomes of the Crime and Disorder Select Committee's review of Tree Asset Management.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S) / DECISION(S)

This topic was included on the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2022-2023. Although not explicitly crime and disorder related, this piece of work was allocated to the Crime and Disorder Select Committee in order to balance the distribution of scrutiny topics across the five themed Select Committees. The review is now complete, and the recommendations have been endorsed by the Crime and Disorder Select Committee for submission to Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) refreshes its tree and woodland management policy and procedures, and as part of this:
 - a) Reaffirms its mandatory (minimum) service requirements and where work is prioritised (e.g. high-use public areas).
 - b) Reflects within it the realistic cycle of essential maintenance of the Borough's tree stock (and that this be updated as and when required).
 - c) Emphasises a key message throughout this review regarding the planting of the correct species of tree in the right places (helping to minimise future maintenance requirements and revenue costs).
 - d) Ensures the updated policy and procedures are published on relevant Council platforms, with an appropriate communications plan to ensure the local population can read its content and understand what future service it can expect.

- e) Utilises both print (e.g. Stockton News) and electronic mediums to raise awareness of the current issues around tree management within the Borough, including responsibilities in relation to trees on private land.
- 2) Tree Preservation Order (TPO) planning procedures be reiterated to all SBC Ward Councillors and relayed to residents periodically via the Council's multiple communication mechanisms (emphasising the enforcement action that can be taken if processes are not followed).
- 3) Regular engagement continues between the SBC Tree and Woodland Management Service and other relevant Council departments (in particular the SBC Environment, Leisure and Green Infrastructure Team) regarding environmental projects and tree planting maintenance.
- 4) A detailed business case be produced for consideration by SBC management regarding a potential reinforcement team within Grounds Maintenance to undertake smaller scale routine maintenance, thereby allowing the existing Tree and Woodland Management Service specialist staff to focus on more technical operations.
- 5) Corporate funding be sourced for an ash tree survey to be undertaken as soon as possible to establish the potential extent of the looming arrival of ash dieback within the Borough, along with a plan on how this will be managed (including anticipated resource requirements).
- 6) Consideration be given to strengthening administrative support to the SBC Tree and Woodland Management Service to enhance communications between the team and Ward Councillors / residents regarding tree management enquiries / complaints (particularly around the responses to issues raised and plans / timescales to address them).

DETAIL

1. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) has a legal responsibility to inspect, maintain and manage its tree stock which is located across the Borough. There are currently many thousands of trees within parks, open spaces, woodlands and residential estates, including around 30,000 trees as part of the highway stock, for the Council to manage. During 2020-2021, over 2,000 requests for service were received – these ranged from emergency works (e.g. fallen trees or limbs / structural damage to property) through to more routine enquiries (e.g. pruning due to general nuisance factors such as shading, leaf fall, etc., which tends to be of a seasonal nature).
2. Trees can, at times, be contentious for residents who often express strong and vocal views on their presence, especially those which are in residential locations where concerns about the safety of trees, potential damage and other perceived nuisance factors are a particular issue for officers to deal with. However, as often recognised as part of the ongoing climate change debate, the wider benefits of trees cannot be underestimated and include the removal of air pollution, providing a valuable habitat for insects and birds, and acting as a natural flood defence, as well as the proven mental health benefits that a green environment brings.
3. SBC aims to operate a three-year inspection cycle where all its tree assets are checked and any routine, statutory or essential priority works are programmed – this is based upon a range of factors, primarily to ensure compliance with the Local Authority legal duty-of-care, and to ensure a high standard of tree management that delivers maximum benefits to the public in-line with best practice. Resources, though, are stretched, with a substantial growing backlog in essential and routine programmed works that have been identified through the

ongoing inspection regime. An increasing proportion of reactive work is dominating the work programme (exacerbated by major storm events and the resultant emergency call-out work) and there has been an increase in customer complaints due to lack of service and long delays.

4. One of the key themes within the Council Plan is clean and green spaces, and the recent publication of the Council's Environmental Sustainability and Carbon Reduction Strategy 2022-2032 also has implications for the future levels of tree stock, as do new tree planting schemes and land adoptions / transfers from new developments across the Borough. It is therefore important, and timely, to review the Council's existing operational arrangements and resilience levels to ensure that it is equipped to deal with both existing and planned tree assets.
5. An internally focused piece of work, the main aims of this review were firstly to ascertain the Council's legal responsibilities and its current policy for the management of public tree stock, before examining the inspection and maintenance programme, the pressures contributing to the existing backlog, and the strategy / resources in place to address this. Importantly, the Committee then considered likely / potential future demand and the impact this may have on required operational arrangements.
6. The Committee received several contributions from key officers within the SBC Tree & Woodland Management Service and SBC Environment, Leisure and Green Infrastructure Team. Information was provided by neighbouring Local Authorities, and SBC Ward Councillors were surveyed to ascertain their views, and the thoughts of their constituents, on tree-related matters.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

7. Every person within the Borough, whether resident, worker or visitor, is affected by the local environment. The benefits of a widespread and healthy tree canopy are widely acknowledged and clearly outlined within the Committee's report, but the adequate maintenance of trees is equally as important in terms of sustainability and public safety. The Committee's recommendations seek to ensure this balance is struck, and that focus is as much on the longer-term management of SBC tree stock as well as fostering the understandable desire to mitigate current climate concerns via the planting of new trees.

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

8. There are no direct implications in the report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9. Much will depend on the decisions made in response to the review's recommendations. Should the Council support reinforcements to its current tree management operations (including administration capacity), this will likely have funding implications. Similarly, the need for a survey of local ash tree coverage, as well as a plan for the future management of the anticipated ramifications of ash dieback, will almost certainly require a financial and resource commitment.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10. SBC must continue to ensure it meets its legal duty of care (as outlined within the Committee's report) and that it has a defensible system of tree inspection and maintenance for its land and premises.

RISK ASSESSMENT

11. The review is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

12. This review is relevant to all Wards across the Borough. All SBC Elected Members were surveyed to ascertain their views, and the thoughts of their constituents, on tree-related matters.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

13. None.

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