



Environment and Transport Select Committee
12 December 2013

Tree Maintenance

Purpose of the report: Scrutiny of Services and Budgets

To update the Select Committee on Highway Tree Maintenance

Introduction:

1. It was agreed at the meeting in March 2013 that the Committee receive a further progress report on Highway Tree Maintenance in autumn 2013.
2. Previous Committee discussion has raised the question about devolvement of tree maintenance and the likely potential for this to be achieved. This report aims to provide an update on progress and consider the next steps.

Update on Progress and Current Situation

3. The most positive interest from the Districts and Boroughs on the devolvement of tree maintenance during the last seven months has been from Spelthorne Borough Council. Discussions are currently ongoing and are yet to reach a conclusion.
4. In terms of utilising more local funding for tree maintenance, most of the Local Highway Areas now fund a vegetation gang throughout the year. The majority of works carried out are low level vegetation, siding footways and clearing brambles etc however some tree maintenance works are also completed by this resource.
5. The table below provides a breakdown of the current service wide budget allocations for tree maintenance;

Tree Maintenance Activity	2013/14 Budget
Maintenance on SPN1 & 2 roads	£273,000
Maintenance on SPN 3 roads	£297,000

Epicormic Growth Removal	£56,000
Pollarding	£100,000
Bus route clearance	£17,000
Street lighting clearance	£3,000
Stump grinding	£52,000
Total	£798,000

6. The existing budget allocations will continue to be targeted at managing the risk from trees, as required by our statutory duty. Given the size of the tree asset in Surrey this demand in itself is significant and increasing in scale. The budget above is fully committed and consequently there is no scope to address any non-risk related or condition maintenance issues, such as pruning etc. As has been raised previously, the opportunity to carry out condition work on trees is available within the current contract arrangements however it would need to be funded via alternative sources of discretionary funding, such as the Local Committee Highways budget allocation.
7. The limit to the scope of maintenance will impact on our ability to improve the overall condition of the tree stock. Without additional investment to bring the trees up to a certain standard, for some Districts and Boroughs the prospect of taking on tree maintenance is not appealing or a viable option. Conversations on devolvement are continuing with the Districts and Boroughs but this position is reflective of the conversations we are having with them.
8. We are also facing another challenge in terms of the necessity for tree maintenance across the county. The spread of the disease Chalara (Ash die back) across Southern England is likely to present us with a challenge in the near future. There are an estimated 80,000 Ash highway trees in Surrey. Although there are no confirmed cases in the county at the moment Surrey Highways is continuing to monitor the Ash trees for the signs of the disease and it is extremely unlikely that Surrey will remain unaffected. Ash trees require more frequent monitoring given the rate at which a diseased tree will deteriorate so in response we will need to accelerate our inspection and maintenance regimes to be able to successfully manage the disease. This additional work will put further pressure on the budget.

Conclusions:

9. On review of the current and anticipated demand for tree maintenance, it is apparent that other sources of discretionary funding, such as the Local Committee revenue allocation, will need to be utilised to fund condition works.
10. It is expected that interest in devolvement by the Districts and Boroughs will remain limited whilst we maintain service levels at the current state.

Recommendations:

11. That the Committee note and comment on the ongoing situation.

Next steps:

Conclude the discussions with Spelthorne Borough Council and keep the offer open to other parties.

Monitor the network for signs of Chalara and finalise a plan to be able to deal with any outbreak.

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Sources/background papers: Previous Environment & Transport Select Committee reports on Tree Maintenance and minutes from 19 April 2012, 8 November 2012 and 6 March 2013.

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