



Environment & Transport Select Committee  
8 Nov 2012

**Tree Maintenance**

**Purpose of the report:** Scrutiny of Services and Budgets

To update the Select Committee on tree maintenance following the recommendations given at the April 2012 Environment & Transport Select Committee.

**Introduction:**

- 1 An overview of highway tree maintenance activities was provided at a previous Environment & Transport Select Committee (ETSC) and the following recommendations were agreed by Select Committee Members;
  - a) That the devolvement of tree maintenance to Districts and Boroughs, and where appropriate, Town and Parish Councils, be encouraged and explored further.
  - b) That proactive pollarding of trees be encouraged, whereby their ongoing maintenance could be devolved (as in recommendation a)).
  - c) That an accurate tree survey on Surrey's highways be completed prior to negotiations regarding the devolvement of tree maintenance to Districts and Boroughs.
- 2 It is estimated that Surrey has a highway tree stock of around 2million trees and currently Surrey County Council maintains the highway trees across nine district and borough areas, with Woking and Epsom & Ewell having taken on responsibility for maintaining trees within their own area/locality.
- 3 Following the introduction of the new tree maintenance contract in 2011, tree maintenance activities have increased across the Surrey County Council maintained areas. This includes the introduction of routine maintenance cycles and the identification of more proactive general maintenance activities in order to improve the overall condition of the highway tree asset.

## Risk Management and Current Highway Tree Condition

- 4 To efficiently manage risk from highway trees specialist surveys are undertaken to record and prioritise defects for follow up maintenance. Examples of the data collected by these surveys are included as annexes 1 & 2. Annex 1 shows the defects identified on the network surveyed in 2011/12 and Annex 2 shows a snapshot of defects collected at a specific location. The identified high risk defects are systematically removed from the network following the survey thereby managing the risk. The survey/follow up maintenance cycle repeats itself at set intervals which are a three year cycle for Surrey Priority Networks (SPN) 1 & 2 and a five year cycle for SPN 3.
- 5 On review of the effectiveness of the risk management survey and follow up maintenance cycle, results indicate a positive trend in the reduction of high risk defects across the network. For example, the number of dead trees and dead wood defects on the principal route network has been reduced by approximately 60% since 2005 through carrying out the appropriate maintenance after being identified by the survey. The proportion of high risk defects across the entire SCC maintained network is currently estimated to be less than 5% which is considered to be representative of 'normal circumstances'.
- 6 Current SCC survey and maintenance regimes seek to identify and reduce the number of high risk defects on highway trees. The requirement to manage risk will always exist although we would not necessarily seek to increase the risk management response to reduce the proportion of high risk defects to zero. As the number of high risk defects continues to reduce the emphasis will shift to identify and resolve the lower risk defects and carry out general maintenance on a more planned basis across the network. Other lower risk defects and general maintenance such as improving visual appearance are currently being resolved on an ad-hoc basis across the network. As the risk backlog is stabilised across the network the longer term plan is to increase the planned general maintenance and manage the risk on a more preventative basis.

### Pollarding

- 7 The risk from highway trees has also been reduced by the introduction of routine maintenance programmes such as pollarding. Pollarding is the proactive removal of stems to limit growth and is applicable to trees in locations where subsidence to nearby properties or the highway is considered a risk. As advised previously the pollarding programme includes for the planned maintenance of over 1600 trees in specific locations across the county. The pollarding cycle for the majority of trees is once every four years however some trees do require an increased intervention. This includes, for example, eleven trees in Staines High Street which require more frequent intervention due to the species type and their specific function in the streetscene.

- 8 The backlog of work in this area is being addressed through a targeted maintenance programme and will be rectified once a full cycle of maintenance has been completed. The second year of the pollarding programme is due to start in November and it is anticipated that the complete cycle of the pollarding programme will be achieved by the end of 2014/15. See Annex 3 for the Pollarding programme.
- 9 Surrey has a legacy of urban planted trees some dating back to Victorian times and tree removal, particularly in urban areas, can be a sensitive issue amongst residents. In recognition of this and to protect the character and nature of the streetscene in urban locations intervention maintenance in the form of pollarding has been the desired approach rather than removal of trees. On this basis the pollarding cycle will need to be continued to maintain and manage the risk from these trees.

### **Insurance Claims**

- 10 There are three liability issues associated with trees;
  - a) Damage to buildings by tree root and/or associated subsidence
  - b) Damage or injury by root damage to highway surfaces
  - c) Damage or injury by falling trees and branches
- 11 The number of tree related claims received since 2007 to date total just under 300. Current claims data indicates that tree related claims amount to less than 5% of the total highway claims, both in numbers received and sums paid out (based on the last five year average). Tree related insurance claims are however the most expensive highway claim the authority has to deal with. The average number of tree related claims paid out over the last five years is 14 per annum, with the average annual cost being approximately £40,000. It should be noted that there are also sums held in reserve for several tree related claims which may or may not be paid out depending on the specific situation.
- 12 The majority of the claims appear to relate to tree roots or falling trees which cause damage to property or vehicles. This correlates unsurprisingly with the number of claims being higher in the more urban areas of the county. For example the highest number of claims received since 2007 have been from Elmbridge and Spelthorne areas, and the lowest number of claims has been received from the area of Tandridge. This liability is managed by the planned pollarding programme, in addition to risk management process, which is recognised by the increased volume of pollarding work across the areas of Elmbridge and Spelthorne.

<b>Devolvment of Tree Maintenance</b>
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- 13 Devolvment of tree maintenance has previously been discussed with Districts and Boroughs as part of the grass cutting negotiations and more recently as part of a regular Streetscene meeting. Officer interest for taking on tree maintenance activities has so far proved to be negative across the districts and boroughs for numerous reasons including the following;

- a) Perceived current condition of highway trees, more specifically the view is that trees have not had adequate maintenance
- b) Existing survey data is not comprehensive enough and the condition of the trees is thereby unknown and unpredictable.
- c) Perception that they would be letting themselves into dealing with a bottomless pit of work
- d) Anticipated levels of budget transfer would not be sufficient for their requirements,
- e) Transfer of customer complaints
- f) Not having adequate resources to manage a contract

14 Budget levels would obviously be a consideration for any decision on devolvement. On average the Highway Service spends approximately £650,000 per annum on carrying out tree maintenance activities. Based on current experience of devolvement of tree maintenance, it is understood that both Woking and Epsom & Ewell 'top up' the annual budget provided to them to carry out tree maintenance. This provides them an opportunity to carry out enhanced maintenance activities such as planting.

15 The following table summarises potential operational and financial considerations of the devolvement of tree maintenance;

	<b>Potential Benefits/Disadvantages</b>	
<b>Opportunity</b>	<b>Operational</b>	<b>Financial</b>
<b>Enhanced local approach</b>	<p><b>Opportunity to carry out further enhanced maintenance regimes in addition to managing risk.</b></p> <p><b>Ability to apply a more local knowledge based approach to maintenance activities.</b></p>	<p><b>Current available budget &amp; contract arrangement is sufficient for risk management and minor general condition improvement. Further improvement will potentially require additional funding.</b></p>
<b>Transfer of risk &amp; insurance liability</b>	<p><b>Need to ensure risk management liability is adequately addressed to protect other highway assets.</b></p>	<p><b>SCC insurance liability appears to be manageable under current arrangements. Minimal potential for achieving financial saving on devolvement of liability.</b></p>
<b>Reduction of staff resource and budget pressure</b>	<p><b>Transfer of the management of customer enquiries</b></p> <p><b>Transfer of survey and contract management function</b></p>	<p><b>Staff resource still required to carry out these functions for other highway maintenance activities. Minimal potential for financial saving.</b></p>

## **Future Survey and Maintenance Options**

- 16 Existing survey data has been presented to some District & Borough colleagues however the concerns remain as described. The current frequency and survey process satisfies the requirements of the code of practice “Well Maintained Highways” and has proved successful in terms of mitigating liability. Further options to improve or adjust the survey data would need to take into account the likelihood of this investment proving beneficial to any future devolvement of maintenance.
- 17 A tree by tree dataset is quickly outdated, due to the amount of growth each year, impact of high winds and other weather events for example. This short timescale obviously becomes more of a challenge for a large tree stock such as that in Surrey and would be a consideration in resource planning. To enhance the current survey significantly would require additional resource to be able to complete it within a reasonable timescale.
- 18 The feedback also suggests that further significant general maintenance would need to be carried out to improve the overall condition of the tree asset before any devolvement would be considered by the Districts & Boroughs. As described above the overall aim is to increase the level of general maintenance which would address this concern however at this moment in time this remains a longer term goal.

<b>Conclusions:</b>
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- 15 SCC currently spends approximately £650k per annum on tree maintenance related activities and based upon the review of current defect numbers and insurance claim pressure, it would appear that current SCC maintenance regimes are adequately managing the risk from highway trees and improving the condition of the tree asset.
- 16 The level of interest and benefits of the devolvement of tree maintenance appear to be limited at the current time. Further work is required to establish if, when and how this may be a more attractive option in the longer term. On this basis, investment in further survey enhancements will need to be considered and developed as engagement progresses.

## **Financial and value for money implications**

- 17 Further financial and value for money implications will need to be considered as future engagement on devolvement is progressed.

## **Equalities Implications**

- 18 No change in level of service identified within this paper, an equality impact assessment will need to be undertaken as future engagement on devolvement is progressed.

## **Risk Management Implications**

19 Having an effective survey and maintenance regime in place should mitigate the risk from highway trees.

## **Implications for the Council's Priorities or Community Strategy/Local Area Agreement Targets**

20 None

<b>Recommendations:</b>
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- (a) To continue to engage on the potential for devolvement of tree maintenance, identifying opportunities to increase levels of interest across the Districts and Boroughs and/or other potential interested parties including Local Committees.
- (b) To identify longer term actions/plans to achieve potential devolvement including enhancing the existing survey on an area by area basis or by amending current maintenance regime where feasible.

<b>Next steps:</b>
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Continue to manage the risk from trees and carry out associated maintenance programmes to improve the condition of the tree asset.

Consider the benefits and potential of enhancing the current survey process.

Consider the format of further engagement on devolvement with input from Surrey County Council Members as appropriate.

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**Sources/background papers:**

Previous Environment & Transport Select Committee report on Tree Maintenance and minutes from 19 April 2012.

"Cabinet Response Tree Maintenance" Environment and Transport Select Committee meeting held on 19/07/2012