



Environment & Transport Select Committee
6 March 2013

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 November 2012 Environment & Transport Select Committee.

Introduction:

- 1 Further information on risk management and devolvement of highway tree maintenance activities was provided at previous Environment & Transport Select Committees (ETSC) in 2012 and the following recommendations were agreed by Select Committee Members;
 - a) To more proactively engage on the potential for devolvement of tree maintenance, within contractual constraints, 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 the current maintenance regime where feasible.

It was also agreed that the backlog of work would be considered by the ETSC in March 2013.

Current Condition and Backlog of work

- 2 The management of risk from highway trees is a statutory requirement and therefore remains the priority function/purpose of tree maintenance, as was discussed at the last ETSC. It is estimated that Surrey has a highway tree stock of around 2million trees and the number of high risk defects on the network is reducing through current maintenance regimes.

- 3 Based on the nature of the changing environment the current risk management maintenance activity will need to continue for the foreseeable future. The risk management operation seeks to address high risk defects identified from the previous year's survey on the SPN 1 & 2 network and aims to resolve approximately 1200-1400 high risk defects per annum. This will continue to only address the high risk defects with the lower risk defects remaining on the network until such a time that the high risk defects are reduced adequately to allow resources to be prioritised elsewhere. Essentially there will always be a rolling backlog of defects, similar to that of potholes or other highway defects. It would not be considered practical or feasible to reduce the number of defects to zero. The ongoing statutory requirement remains that these are adequately managed to minimise the risk from highway trees.
- 3 In addition to the risk management work, tree maintenance is also carried out in response to the survey on the SPN3 network and requests from the local area teams. Over the financial year 2012/13 we anticipated to have completed nearly 600 jobs, ranging from removal of a single limb, to pruning 50 trees and felling 45 trees. Although it can vary widely, on average, each job will resolve two defects.
- 4 Although 600 jobs are forecast to be completed in 12/13 a backlog of 500 jobs will remain based on the year to date position. Of the 500 backlog, approximately half relate to the dead dying and diseased category or are causing actionable nuisance and the remaining half relate to more general maintenance requirements such as pruning, crown lifting and crown reduction. Following review of the productivity and resource availability of the contractor undertaking this work the backlog of requests appears to relate to demand exceeding capacity under the current arrangement.

Addressing the backlog

- 5 It is important to note that there is a legacy of defects and lack of maintenance on highway trees, similar to that on roads, which has continued to exist for many years. As described previously, it would not be considered practical to eradicate all tree defects entirely and so a backlog will always exist. It is however recognised that we need to understand what the backlog is across the whole of the network and determine what is considered acceptable in terms of an annual programme to manage the overall risk.
- 6 Additional resource has been introduced onto the highways contract to more effectively deal with the 500 no. job backlog in amongst the ongoing demand. As discussed at the last ETSC, we are currently prioritising the local office requests on the basis of managing the greatest risk. This means we are currently only dealing with trees that are of the dead dying and diseased category and restricting general maintenance requests. It is recognised that this is limiting service levels but it is considered essential as a temporary situation to ensure we are managing the risk from trees, as required by our statutory duty.

- 7 With the additional resource the intention is to have cleared the current backlog, amongst the ongoing SPN3 high risk defects and the area teams requests within six months.
- 8 The new survey on the SPN 3 network is enabling us to carry out a more proactive approach to managing tree related defects on an increased proportion of the highway network. In the short term this will address the high risk defects, similar to the approach on the SPN 1 & 2 network, but in the future it will target more general maintenance activities in a more proactive and efficient way. This survey should thereby see a reduction in the number of ad hoc requests the area teams need to make as the maintenance will be proactively programmed in response to the survey. This approach will ensure more efficient use of the available resource and assist in determining what would be considered an acceptable backlog of defects.

Devolvement of Tree Maintenance

Engagement

- 9 Devolvement of tree maintenance continues to be discussed with District and Borough officers as part of the regular Streetscene meetings. To date their position remains the same however we are now proactively sharing insurance data information and engaging in more detail about our current survey data and the experience of Woking and Epsom & Ewell. The aim being to address previously raised concerns and identify with more certainty at what stage, if ever, they would be interested in taking on tree maintenance. Depending on the feedback as this progresses the next step would be to put together a funding offer.

Opportunity

- 10 Within the current Highways Tree Maintenance Contract there is the opportunity to engage more resource to increase the amount of works being carried out. This is not the only option available however to enable more general maintenance works to be completed by local teams or local committees. Within the current Highways Horticulture, Ditching and Countryside Works Contract there is the option to engage tree maintenance contractors in a similar approach to that taken with locally funded vegetation gangs. This option is being used to a limited extent at the moment and could be considered by the local area teams or by the Local Committees should they wish to accelerate specific tree maintenance works outside of the main tree maintenance contract.
- 11 Similarly for scheme specific work we could also enable the local area team or local committee to use contractors engaged by the Districts and Boroughs, assuming they are competent to undertake tree works on the highway. This would be achievable by using local knowledge and funding to identify discrete packages of tree maintenance work that would complement current contractual and risk management arrangements.

- 12 Parishes, Town Councils and Residents Associations can also take on responsibility for some minor tree maintenance works via the localism opportunity. This could include for activities such as planting for example.
- 13 The above options are currently already being progressed across the county in varying degrees. The option for members to invest further in general tree maintenance is available via the Local Committee Highway budget. An increased use of Local Committee funding on tree maintenance will enable greater use of these opportunities and assist in improving the general condition of highway trees. The added benefit of this approach is obviously that improvements will be based on local knowledge and address local priorities.

Longer Term Plans

- 14 The introduction of the SPN3 survey, in addition to the survey on the SPN 1 & 2 will give us a complete picture of the condition of highway trees across the entire network. This will address some of the perceived 'black holes' in condition information and assist in future discussions about any devolution.
- 15 This increase in survey data will also allow us to identify proactive maintenance regimes more efficiently and when resources allow, this will enable an increase in more general maintenance activities across the network. In the same theme that carrying out planned resurfacing works on roads reduces risk of potholes and the likelihood of having to repair reactively, increasing planned general maintenance on trees should reduce the need for having to intervene on a risk management basis. This will not be achieved quickly without accelerated investment but will be a gradual process. None the less this approach should also help to address some concerns about the general maintenance requirements of the current highway tree stock.
- 16 The developing survey data will also assist in being able to package tree maintenance work prior to any devolution. This will enable activities to be separated out should Districts and Boroughs want to take on the maintenance of trees in a more staged approach, for example starting by maintenance activity rather than maintenance of the whole area.
- 17 The timeline for further devolution will need to align with the current highways tree maintenance contract term. The current contract is due to end in 2017 with an option to renew for a further four years. This means that we will start to consider the future contract maintenance arrangements from 2015, providing sufficient time to establish the terms of future devolution.

Conclusions:

- 18 Current maintenance regimes are primarily focused on managing the risk from highway trees and very gradually improving the condition of the tree asset. This approach, albeit necessary for fulfilling our statutory duty, allows a limited scope for general maintenance to be carried out and within the current financial year it is evident the 'demand' for general maintenance has exceeded the capacity of the available resource.
- 19 Interest in devolvement of tree maintenance remains limited from a District & Borough perspective however we are proactively discussing the potential on a regular basis and making adjustments to the survey which should address some of the issues.
- 20 The funding of additional work via the Local Committee Highway Budget would accelerate improvements to the general condition of highway trees within local areas. The use of additional resource from a choice of existing highway contracts would be an opportunity to explore with interested parties.
- 21 The indicative timeline for devolvement is intended to drive positive discussion between parties on how best to accommodate local requirements in conjunction with the necessity to manage the risk from highway trees.

Financial and value for money implications

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

Equalities Implications

- 23 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

- 24 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

- 25 None

Recommendations:

- (a) That the use of additional resource for highway tree maintenance via the Highways Tree Maintenance and Horticulture, Ditching and Countryside Works contracts, District and Borough contracts and the localism approach is progressed via the local area team and local committees as resource and interest requires.
- (b) That Surrey County Council continues to engage with interested parties on devolvement in accordance with the proposed timeline.

Next steps:

Continue to manage the risk from trees and where resources allow carry out associated maintenance programmes.

Monitor the benefit of the recent survey enhancements and consider any further enhancements requested by the Districts and Boroughs.

Identify what would be considered an acceptable 'backlog' in terms of tree maintenance and review the implications for future maintenance regimes.

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Sources/background papers:

Previous Environment & Transport Select Committee report on Tree Maintenance and minutes from 19 April 2012 and 8 November 2012.