

Tree risk improvement plan

Background

Prior to 2018 the BCA inspected trees in line with proposals contained in the Canal's Asset Management Plan. The proposal was for inspection of the entire canal estate on a 3 yearly cycle by a professional arborist. The first whole canal inspection was carried out by Parson Brinkerhoff in 2014, during procurement of this it became obvious that inspection of the canal estate to inventory standards were not a good use of scarce resources. PB therefore inspected the tree stock to a reactive standard noting only and tagging trees with observed defects.

In 2017 HCC proposed a new tree policy (CSTREES) which proposed zoning all countryside sites for risk. Inspection was then done for medium and low risk zones on reactive basis at either 3- or 5-year intervals noting defects and an overall inspection of an area, but inspecting all high-risk zones to a full inventory standard every other year by a fully qualified arborist.

The policy was adopted in September 2018 with the Canal included –but unfortunately the Canal was already due its next inspection. HCC's Environment arborists who had undertaken work on the remainder of the HCC countryside estate inspected a sample site of the canal estate in March 2019 but then declined to carryout further inspections of the canal trees stock citing disagreement with the policy and lack of resource. Contractors were instead sought to inspect the high-risk zones –with the professional services contractors for both HCC and SCC returning a very high value and long lead times.

Further attempts to employ other contractors or directly employ staff all yielded no results.

In early 2021 SCC decided it would not wait further and instructed its arboriculture service to inspect the Surrey half of the canal using their standard methodology, which differs significantly from CSTREES and is closer to the reactive standard deployed by the BCA prior to 2018.

Issues

The Canal is perhaps unusual amongst countryside sites in that it is predominately either low risk or high-risk zones with very little medium risk. The high-risk zones are high risk generally due to the potential for a wind thrown tree to cause damage to water retaining assets and therefore causing a breach leading to flooding –a secondary rather than primary consequence. This is different to the conventional reasons for zoning an area “high risk” for trees; i.e. because they over hanging a busy visitor centre, car park or very high use path where there is immediate threat to life on a failure.

The Canal is a unique site and inspecting large areas of rural high-risk zones to an inventory standard has simply not proved affordable or even possible.

Whilst it is understood that CSTREES is a defensible system –a regular inspection by a trained arborist noting defects and ensuring that there are records of the areas inspected would also be defensible.

A noted risk is that the BCA does not have a term contractor for trees relying on a panel of local contractor in frameworks prepared by Rushmoor Borough and Surrey County Councils –contractor turnaround and availability for works can therefore vary. Currently, only one BCA Ranger has advanced felling skills and none are qualified to carryout climbing arboriculture. All current BCA Rangers have basic LANTRA tree inspection qualifications.

Proposals

Policy

- The Canal should adopt a separate policy to suit the needs of the particular site and of both owning authorities.
- A revised policy taking the best of the SCC approach and HCC CSTREES should be drafted and approved by the JMC.
- The policy needs to contain proposals which are readily obtainable by the BCA or County Councils, and are an effective use of public resources. A full inventory of all high-risk zones on the canal has been demonstrated to be outside of existing resources, and is argued not a good use of resources.
- The policy should contain a defensible system for inspecting and recording the canal's tree stock.

Inspection

- An initial inspection of the whole site by a qualified arborist reporting by exception with notable trees should be undertaken in the interim to ensure that risks to the owning authorities are minimised. The Surrey half of the Canal having already been inspected to this standard the Hampshire half should be inspected to the same standard by the end of the Financial Year.
- This should be repeated at regular intervals to be determined during the development of the policy.
- Inspection records should be kept on a cloud-based IT system accessible to staff from HCC, SCC and the BCA.

Works

- All high priority (SCC standard "P2") tree works should be instructed immediately by BCA officers, with a normally expected 7–14 day turnaround from local contractors.
- All lower risk works should be packaged and tendered having first received necessary consents such as Felling Licence and Conservation Area Consent where required.
- Records of works carried out should be recorded by the contractor or BCA Ranger team carrying out the work directly into the on-line recording system.

Conservation

- Where trees are removed, they should not be replaced on the canal site where they shade the water – this is the "right tree, right place" approach.
- Not only is there a climate emergency but there is a biodiversity emergency with an unprecedented number of species extinctions; the Canal's Conservation Management Plan requires a reduction in tree shade and leaf fall into the canal channel – both are seen as key reasons for the decline in the condition and loss of botanical biodiversity within the canal SSSI.