

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

TREES AND WOODLANDS



BACKGROUND

Members of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee, at the meeting on 4 July 2016, requested that a Scrutiny Sub-Committee be agreed to scrutinise the problems associated with trees within the Borough.

The reason that Members had asked for the scrutiny exercise to take place was because of approaches received by Ward Councillors from residents who had experienced difficulties with trees or as a result of trees. The scrutiny would identify how these issues could be addressed.

Membership of the Sub-Committee was originally agreed as Councillors Cragg, Spinkes, Quenet (C) and Weston. Councillor Spinks, following his resignation from the Council due to ill health, was replaced by Councillor Chapman.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sub-Committee believe the current strategy and approach was found to be fit for purpose but requires some updating.

The Sub-Committee considered that the main failing of the strategy was in the provision of clear and easily accessible information on street tree management to the public and Councillors, especially on the website.

The Sub-Committee felt that many of the problems identified throughout the scrutiny could be addressed by the following:-

1. Clear information, including photographs or pictures, on the following common issues should be easily findable on the website:
 - Suckers and management of pruning
 - Tree pruning
 - Timescales
 - Clear instructions on who to contact
 - The term “Street Trees”, which currently has to be specified in order to obtain any information should be used on the Council’s website. The term not one many people will think of using. More example pictures of the issues should be shown
 - Current tree information could be accessed at <http://www.welhat.gov.uk/trees> but it was not signposted well nor linked well to help service users find the relevant section
 - A separate page to be created on the Council’s website showing the yearly cycle and when specific work is done on trees
 - Clarity regarding what work, if any, residents were allowed to carry out on street trees on Council land
 - Clarification on the website of the trees for which the Council is responsible are referred to as ‘street trees’
 - Consideration should be given to the consistency of the level of detail within the information contained on the website
 - Increased involvement of the communications team with the development of the Council’s website and the review of the Tree and Woodland Strategy
2. Regular monthly e-mails on tree felling should be reinstated for Councillors to help them to respond to residents’ queries, which would release Officer resources.
3. Clear reference should be contained in the street trees section of the website of the following issues and the action which should be taken:

- a. Notification of tree removal
 - b. Light being excluded from homes by trees
 - c. Root damage to pavements
 - d. Slippery paths due to tree leaves or fruit
 - e. It should be made clear that under the tree policy the removal of healthy trees was not allowed
4. The revised Tree Policy to include and publish guidance on the distance a tree should be from a property, overhanging branches etc.
 5. Life magazine should have an article relating to street trees and common issues on a regular or seasonal basis.
 6. Owners of trees on private land should be made to take responsibility when any growth affects pathways or roads.
 7. Cleaning of pathways and roads made slippery from the produce of trees should be cleared as part of the seasonal street cleansing program.
 8. An induction and training session for Members who are new to the Council.
 9. The Council continue to look at trees in relation to climate change.

SCOPING

The first meeting of the group was held on 22 September 2016.

In preparation for the first meeting and in order that the scoping document could be completed, Members received a full copy of the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy together with the Council's Business Plan of 2015-2018.

At the meeting Councillor Quenet tabled a report which detailed the issues relating to trees she had experienced since becoming a Councillor earlier in the year, either from residents or from general observations. Councillor Quenet also provided photographs of specific incidences which provided visual examples of the problems identified. (These photographs have been used in the preparation of this report).

The Sub-Committee having considered the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy, Business Plan and the issues raised in Councillor Quenet's report decided that the focus and purpose of the scrutiny was to identify, and where possible address, the impact on and main problems experienced by residents across the Borough regarding trees in residential areas (street trees).

Areas identified for discussion would also include:-

- Details of the current statistics regarding the calls into the Council's contact centre regarding tree issues. (To follow).
- How the calls to the contact centre were managed?
- How the calls to the contact centre affected the work of the Tree Officers?
- The current role of the Borough Councillors in helping residents to resolve the problems they were experiencing.
- How could Councillors help and support the work of the Tree Officers?
- How many new trees have been planted in the Borough and how many were felled?
- Why trees are considered to be so important in our environment?
- Identification of any training needs.
- Consideration be given to address and manage expectations and the education of the residents.

METHODOLOGY

At the inaugural meeting held on 22 September 2016, Members determined to hold a series of meetings to which Officers and the relevant Portfolio Holders would be invited to attend. Information and statistics would be obtained from relevant sources as the scrutiny progressed.

At the meeting held on 28 November 2016, following an invitation to attend, Officers from the Landscape and Ecology Team, responded to the concerns raised in Councillor Quenet's report and gave detailed answers to further questions from Members of the Sub-Committee.

- Head of Planning – C Haigh
- Landscape and Ecology Manager - A MacDonald
- Tree Officer – O Waring
- Tree Officer – M Hill

On 8 February 2017 Members compiled questions to be asked of the two Portfolio Holders responsible for the areas relating to Landscape and Ecology Team and the Environment.

- Cllr Perkins - Executive Member for Planning, Housing and Community
- Cllr Bromley - Executive Member for Environment

CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 Praise should be given to the Tree Officers and Tree Wardens for the fantastic work they do across the Borough.
- 2 The need for adequate staffing in the department to ensure the work on the trees continues and the environment of the Borough is maintained. (This need has since been addressed with the appointment of a new Tree Officer).
- 3 Information on street trees is not easy to find on the Welwyn Hatfield website as searching for the word 'tree' proved difficult. The website needs clearer signposting, ideally having its own street tree tab on this page <http://www.welhat.gov.uk/streets>
- 4 Good website signposting could reduce Tree Officer time spent answering the same or similar questions which would make them more efficient. Pictorial examples of common problems such as suckers would aid the service users.
- 5 It is to be welcomed that from now onwards CCTV installations and new tree plantings will each take account of the other. The installation of CCTV across the Borough would be welcomed, however both the location and ongoing care of trees would need to be carefully managed.
- 6 The high volume of calls made to the Council's contact centre, relating to trees, affects the efficiency of the Tree Officers. A high number of repeated calls related to the same issue where the resident was unhappy or dissatisfied with the answer or proposed resolution to that particular issue. Better and clearer information on the website should help reduce the frustration of some residents.
- 7 The review of the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy would incorporate an increased focus on risk assessment in the Borough which would be welcomed. Trees, although beneficial in terms of environment and climate change could be hazardous to health due to slippery footpaths as a result of the fruit and leaves. Dead or damaged branches could also pose a risk to pedestrians and vehicles. This reinforced the need to ensure professional and routine tree management.
- 8 The tree policy review and website information needs to address the issue of trees on private land. Further consideration needed to be given to trees on private land as these could also result in treacherous pathways and potential risk.
- 9 The statistics from the Lagan* information system showed the total number of calls received by the contact centre for trees related issues. What was not shown were the calls which were opened again when Tree Officers had responded to the call but residents were dissatisfied with the answer. Officers then spent a considerable amount of time following up these calls which took resource away from other areas of work.

NB *Lagan is the Council's database on which detailed records of trees and their maintenance was kept.

THE NEXT STEPS

A copy of this report will be presented to Cabinet and then to the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the first meeting of the new Municipal year.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Sub-Committee expressed its thanks to the Officers and Executive Members who took the time to attend meetings of the Sub-Committee, to respond to questions and contribute to the scrutiny exercise.

The Members of the Sub-Committee recognised the dedication and professionalism of the Tree Officers.

The Borough of Welwyn Hatfield was an exceptional place in which to live and work due to the diversity of the species of trees originally planted as part of the Garden City planting scheme. Where it was necessary to remove a tree it was replaced with a species from the original planting plan.

Tree Officers recognised that due to the heritage of Welwyn Garden City, they value the diversity of the species of trees in the Borough which make it an interesting and unusual place in which to work.

The Members of the Sub-Committee complimented the Tree Officers on how good the new trees that have been planted recently look, including the health, shape and staking.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy
- Business Plan of 2015-2018
- Street tree issues report
- Notes of the meetings of the Sub-Committee