

ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE**15 NOVEMBER 2021**

REPORT TITLE	TREE MANAGEMENT AND INSPECTION UPDATE
REPORT OF	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides Committee with an update and is not a key decision.

In April 2021 a new arboriculture maintenance contract started with Man Coed VM Ltd. This report focuses on the performance of the first six months of this contract.

RECOMMENDATION

The Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee is recommended to: -

1. Note and comment on the contents of the report on the progress being made against the Council's biodiversity commitments.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council recognises the importance of efficient and effective arboriculture maintenance to maintain a safe, healthy, taxonomically diverse, and attractive tree population across the whole of the Council's estate for the betterment of all.

A well performing arboriculture maintenance service is also essential in supporting the long-term objectives of The Council's Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy.

Other options considered could be ceasing any proactive tree risk management and maintenance operations. This option obviously carries an unacceptable high risk of another serious or fatal incident occurring caused by falling branches or windthrown trees and as such is not recommended.

2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In January of 2021 (three months before the start of the arboriculture maintenance contract) the tree survey and inspection function were internalised with the recruitment of two full time tree surveyors, whose duties would be to carry out the cyclical inspection of all the Council's tree stock across the whole of its estate. Most of the tree maintenance works comes from these cyclical inspections, with the remainder generated by the two tree officers responding to enquiries. There is some cyclical work, but this is mainly the re-pollarding programme of mature London Plane, Lime and Norway Maple planted adjacent to the highway.

From the start of the contract to the end of September a total number of **1751** individual items of arboriculture maintenance have been specified and ordered with the supplier.

The completion dates of such work are dependent on risk, with the trees posing the higher risk requiring the works to mitigate or reduce the risk carried out much sooner. One of the performance indicators for this contract is the percentage of works carried out within the designated period, the target for this KPI is set at 90%.

Below is the performance for this KP over the first six months of the contract along with the expenditure on both budget lines.

KPI	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sep-21
Carry out tree works within the specified time frame	96%	94%	85%	79%	64%	85%
Monthly Parks Spend	14,934.38	31,660.81	19,837.85	19,643.30	9,562.14	18,663.91
Monthly highways spend	10,152.92	17,829.39	13,598.82	7,521.63	21,500.20	11,571.16

It was noted that performance dropped off during high summer, this was discussed with the supplier during the contract meetings and was attributed to a spike in works ordered in July and seasonal pressure. The supplier has provided assurances that they are currently recruiting additional staff.

This autumn has seen the first of our Giant Polypore sweeps. This is a root rot fungus which attacks old beech trees and leaves them dangerously unstable. The fungi are only visible for a few weeks of the year in later summer / early autumn.

Our inventory holds records of 650 mature or veteran beech trees. All these have been checked for Giant Polypore. 12 have been found to have it and as there is likely to be significant and destabilising root rot present, they have been scheduled for removal. The largest of these was dismantled with a crane and weighed in at 16 tonnes.

During all surveys Ash trees will be assessed with regards to the four stages of Ash Die back. We remove the trees at the beginning of stage four when a significant windthrow risk exists.

This staged assessment will allow for a sweep of all Ash with stage 3 of the disease to be carried out during each July when the symptoms of this disease are at their clearest to assess.

There are three-tiers of supplier / contract management meeting in operation. I fortnightly operational meeting with contract supervisors, a monthly tactical meeting with contract managers and a six-monthly strategic meeting with heads of service and directors.

It is in during the strategic meetings that matters such as adherence to method statements are discussed along with any other supplier relationship management matters.

Each month a random selection of completed LA codes are inspected. These post completion inspections are managed through I-Auditor and assessed if the LA has been completed in full, if the site has been left clean and tidy after the works and to check if any damage has occurred.

Any failures are raised with the supplier at the next monthly tactical meeting.

In late spring / early autumn of this year the Council employed a dedicated Landscape Manager to deliver the ambitious planting aims of the tree strategy. Therefore, the substantial afforestation programme should be considered as not only mitigation but net gain planting and as such every tree removed on public and highway safety grounds is being replaced many times over with new planting. This may not necessarily be on the same site, but overall, the stem count across the borough is rising year on year considerably.

The initial survey visits to all public green space have now been completed and therefore it is expected that subsequent inspections will result in far fewer removals as all the legacy urgent tree removals have now been completed, with most maintenance works being cyclical or proactive pruning.

The tree team has reached out to all Wirral schools to offer support and guidance in managing the risk from trees on their sites, this includes technical support on precuring tree inspections and reviewing their current surveying practices.

3.0 STORM ARWEN UPDATE

Since this report was written storm Arwen hit Wirral with a magnitude comparable to the great storm of 1986, this has resulted in over 600 trees being windthrown and significantly storm damaged. The emergency procedures were stressed tested but held. The initial emergency clear up was carried out by four work crews from Mancoed, with additional resources from the park's teams.

Many high-quality timber trees were windthrown and uprooted, including around 100 mature oaks, tens of maples, beech and some walnut. We are keen to ensure that this windfall isn't left to decay on site or just used as firewood or biomass fuel therefore the team is in the process of arranging timber merchants and sawmills to provide offers for this timber (subject to procurement rules).

It has been estimated that the clear up will take until late February to complete. As many tonnes of timber require extraction from our parks and greenspaces heavy machinery will be needed which due to current ground conditions will have some cosmetic implications. Reinstatement works will be carried out in late spring once ground conditions improve.

The cost of the clear up is not yet known, however it is expected to be in the region of £100-120,000 and as such will have an impact on budgets. This cost may be offset by timber sales but at the time of writing no offers have yet been received (site meetings with timber merchants booked in for January).

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The annual budgets for tree maintenance are:

- Highways - £222,100
- Parks £140,000

From the first six months of the contract, it is forecast that the annual expenditure will be:

- Highways – £164,342
- Parks - £228,598

The £58,000 underspend on highway tree maintenance was expected as the street tree inspections are carried out on a two-year cycle, with 2021 being a non-survey year. The 2022 survey is scheduled to begin in January 2022; therefore, it is forecast that there will be additional expenditure next year as maintenance works are identified.

The forecasted overspend on parks trees of around £88,000 was expected. The budget shortfall will be paid from the reserve which was allocated for tree risk management just after the Arrowe Park fatality. It is estimated that this reserve will be exhausted by April 2023, therefore alternative funding will be required from the 2023/24 financial year to ensure continuity of service.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The Council has a clear duty of care under both civil and criminal law for the health and safety of those on or near Council land and has potential liabilities arising from the falling of a tree or

branches, therefore sufficient tree risk management and maintenance is essential in adhering to those duties.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

The tree team consists of five members of staff, 2 tree surveyors, 2 tree officers and 1 team leader / risk management coordinator. All team members use a license for the inventory system and the 2 surveyors, and 2 tree officers use a tablet for accessing the inventory in the field to log inspections and order maintenance works.

Specialist hardware used by the team for tree inspection and surveying includes arborsonic decay detection apparatus and three GNSS (high accuracy GPS) receivers.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

There are serious public safety risks from falling branches, collapsing and windthrown trees, therefore effective tree maintenance is vital to mitigate and reduce the risks of a tree related incident from occurring.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT / CONSULTATION

Twice yearly a customer satisfaction survey is carried out (one in September at the end of the summer season and again in April at the end of the winter season). The questions asked in the survey are as follows:

Please rate your experience during the works by our supplier:

1. I was not inconvenienced by the work
2. The workers were always polite and courteous.
3. The site was left tidy during and after work.
4. The quality of the work was to an acceptable standard.
5. Do you have any further feedback to provide on Tree Maintenance in Wirral?

The results of the survey were positive with only minor issues raised by customers. The survey will be developed further over the next year to take on board more aspects of service including prior notice of work.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

The report provides Committee with an update on progress of the arboriculture maintenance service provision and therefore an equality impact assessment has not been undertaken. However, the Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy was subject to an equality impact assessment prior to launch and the Pollinators Plan will be assessed in preparation for approval.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

The Giant Polypore sweep coincides with a plan to aid in carbon reduction and to be self-sufficient as a Council in timber by setting up our own sawmill to plank any quality timber we had to remove on safety and stability grounds.

Currently our waste timber is recycled in our supplier's biomass facility to renewable energy. This still obviously releases carbon when the timber is burnt, therefore planking, and milling the timber to be reused prevents this carbon from being released into the atmosphere,

The business case is in the final stages of production to fund the investment in portable planking and milling machinery (Wood-Mizer and Alaskan portable sawmills), potentially to be funded out of the climate emergency budget.

By the end of the year, it is estimated that we will have 30 tonnes of beech and oak seasoning and waiting to be processed into usable boards and planks in our depot.

Customers for the products such as social enterprises and other departments are currently being considered.

We have calculated that each mature tree we reuse as timber products prevent 2-3 tonnes of carbon being released into the atmosphere.

11.0 SOCIAL WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

The many benefits which trees accrue for a population are now universally acknowledged and celebrated. Wirral's trees are fundamentally important to the wellbeing and quality of life for the good people of Wirral; therefore, a healthy, safe and well-maintained tree stock can only reinforce this betterment and guarantee continuity of tree cover for the future.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

Wirral Council Tree Maintenance Contract Volume 2 (Services Information)
Wirral Council's Environment and Climate Emergency Policy (2021)
Wirral's Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Policy (2020)

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee Acceptance of Tender and Award of Contract Report - Arboriculture Maintenance Contract	February 2021