

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TREE POLICY TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Thursday, 1 June 2006

PRESENT:

Councillor Jamie Lane (Chair)
Councillor Lee Mason

Councillor John Caswell Portfolio Holder
Councillor Penelope Flavell Portfolio Holder

Carl Grimmer Corporate Manager
Paul Chambers Street and Environment Team Leader
Branwell Sugden Tree Inspector
Tracy Tiff

1. APOLOGIES

There were none.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 MAY 2006

Subject to the following amendment: -

*NCC pays NBC to carry out **four** grass cuts per year*

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 May 2006 were agreed.

3. FEEDBACK FROM THE SITE VISIT

Site visit

Councillor Lane advised that he had attended a site visit of Kingsthorpe Recreation Ground with P Chambers, B Sugden and T Tiff earlier that day. The location had been chosen as it has a variety of trees for viewing.

A balance must be found for public's need and the health and need of the trees.

A contract is issued to the contractors carrying out the work which details the Latin names of the trees on the site, maintenance work required and a map.

It could take three months before work commenced on a large contract: -

- One month to draw up the contract
- One month for the tenders to be submitted
- A further month before work commenced

Budget

The budget for parks is £135,000 per annum, £75,000 had been committed since 1 April 2006. The contractors that the Council is now using provide a good value for money service.

The cost of removing/maintaining a tree was approximately £150 to £180 (1/2 days work). The Council is invoiced £500 plus VAT for emergency calls. However, it had cost £8,000 to remove a large tree (once removed, four people could stand in the whole where the trunk had been). A large tree weighs approximately 7 tonne. A tree can perspire which can make a leaf weigh three times more; the excess weight this can cause a branch to fall. Branches do not tend to fall in the rain as rain runs off the leaves and does not create additional weight.

Cemeteries have an annual budget of £4,000 for tree maintenance but there is a need to use the budget for the maintenance of parks as a 'back up'.

Tree Inspectors Responsibilities

NBC is responsible for all 127 parks and open spaces in the borough and the Tree Inspectors aim to inspect parks annually. NBC is also responsible for the maintenance of all trees in the borough. Other such issues that the Tree Inspectors deal with are: -

- General queries
- Provision of information
- Reports on dangerous trees
- Insurance claims
- Nesting birds
- Unprotected bats
- Fallen leaves
- Subsidence queries and claims
- Queries from NBC, Atkins, Seaman's,
- The tree inspectors facilitate work for British Gas, Water Company and British Telecom.

Subsidence is a main issue for Northampton, longer, drier summers and shorter, drier winters have increased the problem.

Tree Inspectors must be able to demonstrate that tree inspections have taken place. A written record of housing and highways inspections is kept. The requirements are different for highways, paths and open spaces; it is more stringent for highway trees. A full written report on trees in parks is not produced, however, a map is produced together with the type of maintenance work that is required to take place. A sheet is kept detailing the date, location, condition of tree and whether there is a need for maintenance work.

B Sugden confirmed that the trees in St Giles churchyard are the responsibility of the Church and NBC Tree Inspectors have to seek permission to carry out maintenance work. The church is legally responsible for the trees on its land.

The crowns on trees situation on footpaths are lifted to 3 – 3.5 meters in excess of the legal limit which is 2 meters. Trees must clear light heads to give an adequate splay of lighting. The general standard is to clear lamp heads by 1.5 metres.

If a footpath crosses a public right of way, highways law pertains.

Tree Maintenance Staff

- Paul Chambers Team Leader
- Two Tree Inspectors
- Temporary Administration Officer

A site visit of Kingsthorpe Recreation Ground took place at 12 noon on 1 June 2006. The location was chosen as it has a variety of trees for viewing.

Abington Park

A survey was almost complete of the top end of Abington Park. 220 trees need to be worked on.

Two Pine trees had beetle infestation but there was the potential for it to affect the rest of the Pines. The situation must be monitored. It would not be known until the end of the Beetle-breeding season (end of July) the extent of the infestation. Beetle infestation is untreatable.

It was possible that all the Horse Chestnut trees in Abington Park will have to be removed due to disease. Trees have a lifespan of approximately 120 to 150 years. When they become over 100 years they can become less resistant to diseases and pollution.

Abington Park has an aging tree stock with various diseases. The aging tree stock is being investigated for public safety reasons.

Trees can look in perfect health but the stem is dead. This type of disease is air borne, ground borne and water borne.

Councillor Lane advised that the aging tree stock should be highlighted in the final report.

AGREED: That the aging tree stock be highlighted in the final report.

4. PRESENTATION FROM THE TREE MAINTENANCE INSPECTOR

B Sudgen advised that since the 1930s Northamptonshire had been proud of its plentiful stock of trees. The expansion of the area in the 1960s through to the 1990s created an expansion of the tree population and the amount of land bequeathed to the Borough. For example, six trees were planted in the Eastern District with the expectation for one to survive, but in reality five out of the six survived. Semi mature, small trees are often planted in housing areas. There has been an increase in insurance claims in the Eastern District in relation to subsidence, pathways, lighting and fallen leaves.

B Sudgen reiterated that a lot of the Borough's tree stock was aging.

Pollution can reduce the life of trees. Many of the mature Horse Chestnut trees in the borough will have to be removed over the next few years due to disease.

The Task and Finish Group heard that the Tree Inspectors were responsible for: -

- Issues raised by the public, agencies, NBC staff
- Public queries, such as legal obligations, Tree Preservation Orders, Legal rights to pruning, ownership of trees.
- Drawing up and maintaining contracts
- Health and Safety issues
- Working to British Standards and NBC standards
- All highways issues – except emergency issues out of working hours (this is the responsibility of WS Atkins)
- Insurance Claims – If a tree is within 10 metres of a property it has to be removed.
- Mayoral Tree Planting
- Provide advice on the types of trees to plant
- Order trees and maintain for the future

In answer to the Task and Finish Group's queries B Sugden advised that: -

- A plan for the future of the trees in Abington Park had been produced. The trees at the top end of Abington Park were in the worst condition and were a priority for tree maintenance for this year.
- There were minimal costs to maintain the trees outside the museum
- Tree Inspectors had a good working relationship with Planning Officers regarding conservation areas and Tree Preservation Orders.
- Most storms tended to occur towards the end of the financial year; therefore, a percentage of the budget (£80,000) is kept back 'just in case'. In the storms of 2004, 89 trees fell countywide in 22 hours.
- Often when a tree is inspected following a complaint, the tree is found to be of the required standard and maintenance work is not required.

In responses to the Task and Finish Group's suggestion that it would be beneficial for the Councillor Contact Centre to send a letter to the Councillor who had reported a complaint regarding the condition of a tree that maintenance work was not required, C Grimmer advised that with the introduction of the Customer Relationship System, all calls/emails/letters are now centrally logged and are easily accessible.

The Chair requested that the Tree FAQ sheet, circulated at the meeting, should be appended to the final report.

It was suggested that WS Atkins is sent a copy of the Task and Finish Group's final report.

ACTION:

- (1) That the Tree FAQ sheet would be appended to the Task and Finish Group's final report.**
- (2) That WS Atkins is sent a copy of the Tree Policy Task and Finish Group's final report.**

5. BEST PRACTICE TREE MAINTENANCE POLICIES

C Grimmer had carried out research and ascertained that very few Local Authorities had produced a Tree Maintenance Policy. None of the Councils in Northamptonshire had such policies. He had obtained copies of Tree Maintenance Policies from Chester City Council and Warwick District Council. Generally Tree Maintenance Policies are short and comprise one page, but both these documents were very comprehensive. Copies of the policies would be emailed to all Councillors on this Task and Finish Group for feedback to the next meeting.

C Grimmer advised that Chester City Council's Tree Maintenance Policy was very good and he suggested that it be used as a baseline for this Council's Tree Maintenance Policy.

ACTION: That Chester City Council and Warwick District Council's Tree Maintenance Policies be email to the Task and Finish Group for feedback to the next meeting.

6. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting was noted as Wednesday 21 June 2006 commencing at 5.30pm in the Gallery Room at the Guildhall.

The agenda would include: -

- Evidence from Planning and Building Control Officers
- Feedback from Chester City Council's Tree Maintenance Policy
- Feedback from Warwick District Council's Tree Maintenance Policy

The Task and Finish Group would hold a further meeting to its finalise report.

The meeting concluded at 6.45 pm