

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council

Report to Economy Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee – 4th July 2018

Title: Tree Management Operations

Author: Head of Operations – Roger Tait

Reason for Report

The following request was made by Cllr Gary White, Chair of Economy, Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee;

Arboricultural department. Review of the workload and resource. Executive summary review of the priority list and target dates to complete. Support required.'

Officer response:

Background

The Council has a digital Tree Management System (TMS) which records and maps all of its tree stock. It is estimated that the council owns around 70,000 trees at various sites across the Borough.

The trees are risk rated (either as individuals or groups/woodlands) depending on factors such as proximity to targets (eg property/roads/footpaths) and inspected on an appropriate frequency (annually for high risk to 3 yearly for low risk). This system is the Council's defence against any claims for damage or injury as a result of issues relating to its tree stock.

The TMS inspections generate a list of required work which is then prioritised according to risk and urgency, with high risk issues taking top priority and low level issues such as shading, leaf drop and casual annoyance being allocated low priority (whilst accepting that this may disappoint residents).

In addition, service requests from residents coming in via the contact centre must also be investigated/inspected and in some cases generate further required work.

At the present time there are 2573 outstanding tasks in total, with 136 (5%) generated via service requests as opposed to 2437 generated via the TMS. This includes all work generated from high to low priority and can range from pruning a limb to felling a large tree to thinning out an entire woodland. From this total, there are currently 215 tasks which have been identified as essential/desirable for completion and planned in between now and 2021. However, this total (and the overall total) will be added to each year as the TMS and service requests generate further tasks.

Resource

The Council employs one Arboricultural Officer who manages the TMS. This mainly involves carrying out inspections of the tree stock, updating the system, prioritising and programming tree surgery work and supervising work on site. This is a significant workload and support has been provided to

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the AO by seconding a Streetscene Operative with appropriate skills to assist in the survey work. The AO has been off work due to illness for a significant proportion of this year but is now back in work.

The Council has a pool of trained tree surgeons (9 operatives) in the Streetscene team who are deployed on other tasks (mowing/cleansing/parks/sports pitches etc) for the majority of the time. During the winter months (November to March), when tree work is undertaken, a team of 3 at any one time is deployed on the prioritised tree work programme. However, progress against the programme can be impacted on by a number of factors including reactive non-programmed tree work related to winter storm damage or other emergencies, deployment onto other priority non-tree work tasks, and weather or ground condition delays. The team also has an aging profile, which impacts on their ability to carry out physically challenging tasks, and the pace at which they can safely work.

Progress over the last 3 years is as follows:

2015/16 – 129 tasks completed (54 generated by service requests from public)

2016/17 – 114 tasks completed (62 generated by service requests from public)

2017/18 – 152 tasks completed (including 6 weeks work on reactive storm damage clearance and 69 generated by service requests from public), 134 tasks programmed but not completed (carried over to 2018/19 programme)

Update

Ideally, when the TMS is fully updated and all surveys are completed, many service requests from the public will be able to be investigated digitally on the system, without the need for a resource-intensive site visit. Work is in progress to complete surveys and system updates but this will potentially take 2/3 years at current resource levels.

There is currently a large backlog of tasks. However, a significant proportion are non-urgent at present, although they may become more urgent as time passes and further tasks will be added to the backlog as the Borough's aging tree stock deteriorates over time. Some of the current backlog relates to large, over mature trees in difficult to access locations. These trees are more challenging and time-consuming for the Council's in-house tree team to deal with, as they often require specialist equipment and/or heavy machinery which has to be hired in, and present more complex operational issues which the team are not used to dealing with. This drains resource away from being able to tackle and catch up with the backlog of more routine tree work, and the service requests from members of the public.

In recognition of this, as part of the recent budget service review of the Operations Service, a proportion of the efficiency savings identified was recycled back into the revenue budget for the tree team. This £30,000 per annum will be used to engage specialist contractors to tackle some of the larger, more complex jobs, thus freeing up the in-house team to progress the other tasks. It will take some time to catch up, and there will always be the reactive issues to deal with when they arise, but it is considered that this strategy will help to make some progress, which otherwise would not have happened.

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Where tree work has been requested by members of the public, but is not deemed urgent/essential, the Council is now offering the opportunity for residents to pay for it if they wish it to be done more quickly than the programme would allow. The Council will seek quotes for the work from approved contractors and then bill residents for the work if they are happy with the price offered. A number of residents have taken up this offer, and this approach helps to tackle some of the low level, casual annoyance issues which often generate requests and can cause frustration if they are not able to be completed within a reasonable timescale.

Future Issues

As mentioned earlier in this report, the current in-house tree team has an aging profile and although skilled and trained in routine tree surgery operations, are limited to an extent in their ability to deal with the more complex operational issues which the Borough's aging tree stock presents and will continue to present over the coming years.

Also, there is and will continue to be a competing demand for staff resource in the Streetscene team on the multitude of other priority tasks and activities which need to be carried out, which will make progress with the tree work programme difficult to sustain. Diverting greater staff resource into tree work would need to be balanced by a corresponding reduction in resource on other Streetscene tasks, if current staffing levels remain constant. This would then create demand issues in other activity areas.

Options which will be explored to address these issues include succession planning and training to introduce younger employees into the tree team, potentially outsourcing more of the complex work to specialist contractors, focusing the in-house team on more routine work and improving productivity, and seeking to expand on the approach to charging residents for non-essential work where they are willing to pay to bring it forward.