COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
DATE: 26th JULY 2023

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UPDATE REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TREE MANAGEMENT
POLICY

Report of: Director of Environment and Transport, Paul Jones

Cabinet Member: **Colin Horncastle, Looking After Our Environment**

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Purpose of Report

To inform this committee of progress on the development of a Tree Management Policy
for the Council, outline the draft structure for that policy and enable committee members
to make further suggestions regarding policy development.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the committee:

1. notes the progress made on developing a new Tree Management Policy.

2. consider the draft structure of the policy, provide feedback to officers on that
   structure, and make further suggestions for ideas that officers should consider
   going forward.

Link to Corporate Plan

'Tackling Inequalities' – the presence of urban trees within our towns and villages, and
access to woodlands for leisure and to enable people to connect with nature, can have
a positive impact on the health and well-being of our communities.
'Value for Money' – it is important that our arrangements for the inspection,
maintenance and management of trees and woodlands is periodically reviewed to
ensure that it is proportionate and effective in managing the risks to public safety that
some trees can pose, and that there is a clear policy framework to deal with service
requests for maintenance works to trees.

Key Issues

- The key purpose of the Tree Management Policy will be to provide a balanced
  and proportionate framework that enables the County Council to effectively

manage the risks presented by trees in the Council's ownership, as well as those in private ownership that pose a safety risk to the public.

- It is imperative that we establish an accurate spatial record of all the trees (or groups of trees) that we are responsible for and know their current condition.

- Once we have a baseline of the number of trees we manage, we can effectively evaluate different proactive inspection models and identify if there are any resource implications against each potential approach to inspections.

- The policy will outline the Council's overall approach to tree management including how we will proactively inspect and manage trees on different categories of land.

- The policy will clearly state how we will respond to different types of requests for tree works, providing a clear understanding of what we will do, but also what we will not do and what the criteria for decision making is.

- The Tree Management Policy will be a key component of the broader Tree and Woodland Strategy.

Background

- The review of the Council's Tree & Woodland Strategy has previously been undertaken by the Countryside Service, since the last review the County Council has declared a Climate Emergency and Trees and Woodlands have taken a more prominent role in supporting the Council's wider objectives, including its priority for tackling inequalities given the role that having access to trees and woodlands can play in improving the health and quality of life for communities.

- Given this along with colleagues working in the Climate Change and Great Northumberland Forest teams we have commissioned an assessment and review of NCC-woodland which will result in a Forestry professional working with the Countryside and Green Spaces Team to create a detailed overview of NCC woodland stock, through site-based visits. Once this is complete it will help us develop individual woodland management plans, it will also enable us to develop a more meaningful Tree and Woodland Strategy and provide the platform from which we will be able to apply for future grants aimed at bringing woodland into active management. It should be noted that plans are also being developed for replanting of NCC woodlands that were badly affected by Storm Arwen.

- Because of the longer timeframe for the review of the wider strategy we have begun a separate review of the Council's Tree Management Policy, which

provides the framework for how the Council responds to enquiries, and how we inspect and maintain trees we are responsible for.

- Prior to 2021 the County Council did not have a formal programme of proactive tree inspections, in 2021 a schedule was developed to ensure trees within or near to the following areas were inspected: Children's play areas; roads around the school perimeters; key car parks; leisure centres; and key pedestrian routes through parks. All these areas have been inspected in the last 2 years and the next cycle of inspections has begun, this is positive progress but given the size and rurality of Northumberland there remain a large number of trees that are not captured on our spatial records and not routinely inspected.

- Work is underway to digitally map the location, height, and canopy extents for every tree 3 meters high or taller, utilising arial photographs and a technology company who specialise in providing accurate geospatial data. Once this data exists digitally, we will use it to update our asset register of the trees (or groups of trees) in the Council's ownership and model a range of different inspection frequencies against the current inspection capacity and to identify what the resource requirement is against a number of potential inspection plans.

- Once the optimum inspection plan has been identified work can then begin to establish a condition survey for the trees and groups of trees we have decided to inspect, which in turn will identify a work plan for tree works required to address any risks identified.

- Earlier this year a neighbouring Local Authority was prosecuted by the Health and Safety Executive after admitting to failings that led to the devastating death of a young girl in 2020 caused by a falling tree in a school playground. During 2023 officers from that Local Authority have given their time to other Local Authority officers in the region, including Northumberland's and shared the approach they took in their improvement journey following that tragic accident. This has been valuable in helping shape the structure for Northumberland's Tree Management Policy.

Draft Outline of Policy Structure

The proposed section headings for the Tree Policy are detailed below, along with an update on what will be covered under each section heading and the work being undertaken to help inform this.

1. **Introduction and Summary.**

This section will give a brief introduction and summary of the key aims and purpose of the tree policy, what it covers and how it will be applied.

2. Legislative Framework

This section of the policy will outline the legislation which is relevant to the Council's Tree Management Policies and the arboricultural works undertaken by NCC staff or contractors working on our behalf.

3. Policy Scope

It is intended that the policy will apply to all trees under County Council ownership / management, regardless of their location, and to those trees in private ownership that pose a safety risk to the public.

However, under this policy there are currently 6 principal areas within the Council that have responsibility for managing trees on the land they are responsible for, these are:

- Neighbourhood Services
- Highways & Transport
- Property Services
- Planning Services (Tree Preservation Orders)
- Housing Services
- Individual Schools

In developing this policy, consideration will be given to the merits of maintaining existing departmental responsibilities and the merits of combining some or all those responsibilities into a more centralised model for managing the Council's tree stock.

4. Inspections and Proactive Maintenance

This section will set out our tree inspection regime, risk assessment methodology and service standards and approach to maintenance.

We are currently reviewing how our tree inspections are undertaken and research is being conducted into the different industry standards for tree inspections to ensure the methodology for inspections is uniform across all Arboricultural staff at the Council, and provides a proportionate, priority-based approach to decision making around risk and maintenance requirements.

We are also commissioning work to map the location, height, and canopy extents for every tree 3 meters high or taller, we will then use the data to update our existing records of trees and to use this information to model a range of different inspection frequencies against the current inspection capacity and to identify what the resource requirement is against a number of potential inspection regimes.

Tree maintenance is currently mostly 'reactive' in nature and conducted in response to reports received by the council concerning specific trees. Some cyclical maintenance is already carried out, but in future a greater level of tree maintenance work will be conducted because of information gathered during proactive inspections.

5. Service Requests

Reactionary maintenance will always form a key element of overall tree maintenance operations and normally originates from public requests for tree maintenance.

The policy will maintain our current approach to Priority 1 and Priority 2 works as follows.

Priority 1 is categorised as 'Urgent public safety work', the target for completing the work is within 7 days.

Priority 2 is categorised as 'Non urgent but essential safety work', the target for completing this work is within 12 months.

Priority 3 work is categorised as 'non-essential but desirable work', this work is currently undertaken as resources allow. Our approach to Priority 3 works will be reviewed and this will be influenced by the resource requirements of the new inspection plan.

6. Publicising, Consulting and Engaging

This section will outline when the Council undertakes tree works without communicating with others, in what circumstances we would inform local stakeholders about scheduled tree work and what circumstances would result in us consulting with local stakeholders before deciding on a course of action.

7. Trees on Private Land

This section will set out our approach to trees on private land that pose a danger or obstruction to the Public Highway, and what discretionary powers are available to us in relation to trees on private land causing a danger to an area other than a public highway. It will also set out our approach to working with other landowners and stakeholders in relation to tree management.

8. Arboricultural Standards

This section will set out the standards we will follow when undertaking tree maintenance and how we ensure the competency of our staff and our contractors.

9. Pest and Disease Monitoring

This section will set out the precautions we follow to prevent or reduce the spread of pests, pathogens or invasive species and how we respond to issues.

A key issue presently is Ash Dieback, the inspection plan will be key to identifying the scale of the problem in Northumberland but work is already underway to do this, this includes the inspection work undertaken around children's play areas; roads around the school perimeters; key car parks; leisure centres; and key pedestrian routes through parks and a formal Highways survey is underway on a number of A roads and one B road to identify the scale of Ash tree cover on those routes and its condition. From that survey we can identify the trees which require maintenance or felling and we can begin to develop estimates for the potential scale and cost of dealing with ash dieback in trees along our highway verges.

10. Damage to Private Property

The presence of trees and their roots can damage property and this section will set out how the Council will respond to someone who perceives that their property is being damaged by a tree the Council are responsible for maintaining.

11. Planning Considerations

This section will reflect existing planning policy around Tree Preservation Orders and Conservation Areas.

12. Statutory Undertakers

This section will acknowledge there are organisations who have the legal right to undertake work on trees not in their ownership to help them maintain their assets.

13. Replanting

This section will set out our approach to replanting in relation to trees felled under this policy.

Implications

Policy	The report outlines the proposed 'contents list' and works being undertaken to support the development of a new tree management policy which will provide the framework for how the Council responds to enquiries, and how we inspect and maintain trees we are responsible for. The new tree management policy will sit alongside and inform the Council's tree & woodland strategy.

Finance and value for money	There are no financial implications at this stage. Work to spatially map all of the trees which the Council is responsible for in order to review and model inspection regimes, as well as survey work to quantify the extent of ash trees suffering from more advanced stages of disease and which pose a public safety risk and need to be felled, will be used to identify any revenue budget pressures which will need to be considered by the Council when setting its budget in 2024/25.
Legal	There are no direct legal implications.
Procurement	There are no procurement implications at this stage.
Human Resources	There are no HR implications at this stage.
Property	There are no property implications at this stage.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes ☐	There are no equalities issues at this stage.
Risk Assessment	The report outlines proposals to review the council's approach to managing public safety risks associated with trees.
Crime & Disorder	There are no crime and disorder implications.
Customer Consideration	The report outlines proposals to review policy to provide clarity on how we will respond to different types of customer requests for tree works, providing a clear understanding of what we will do, but also what we will not do and what the criteria for decision making is.
Carbon reduction	There are no carbon reduction implications at this stage.

Wards	All Wards

Report sign off

	Full Name of Officer
Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer	Stephen Gerrard
Executive Director of Resources and Transformation (S151 Officer)	Jan Willis
Executive Director of Place and Regeneration	Simon Neilson
Chief Executive	Helen Paterson
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