

Environmental Scrutiny and Performance Panel

**Agenda
Item No.**

DATE: 19th April 2011

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Title of the Report : Green Space Service Urban Forestry Unit

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr Anthony Harris

Summary of report:

This report seeks to inform the Environmental Scrutiny and Performance Panel of the operation and importance of the Green Space Services Urban Forestry Unit. The report details the extensive role of the tree management function and the considerable improvement made particularly in the development of a legally defensible systematic tree management programme which is recognised as one of the leading programmes in the country. In addition it highlights the integral and integrated function of the Unit within the Green Space Service in terms of operations, activities and events and the Unit's national recognition and success in terms of service excellence, community involvement and in the furtherance of urban forestry.

Background papers:

- Grounds Maintenance – Service Level agreement between Green Spaces and Street Pride,
- Green Space Strategy and Communities Scrutiny Report 15th Oct 2009 “Grounds Maintenance Standards within the Borough's Parks”

Reason for scrutiny:

Background

The Green Space Service is responsible for the management and development of over 1,262 hectares of public open space including formal parks, recreation grounds, countryside sites, nature reserves and allotment sites. In all the Service holds management responsibility for over 286 individual sites, varying considerably in size and character and is the largest land managed within the Council.

In 2006 the newly appointed Head of Green Spaces noted the absence of any strategic tree management within the Service or within the Council as a whole and in 2007 established the post of Principal Arboricultural Officer.

Initially this post was responsible only for the management of trees on Green Spaces Service sites such as Parks, Open Spaces and Countryside sites. During this time many of the procedures for tree management were written and the standards for tree care set down as previously there had been no written structure for the decision making process.

In the Autumn of 2008 a Tree Crew was drawn together from various Green Spaces Service employees to undertake the work highlighted from initial park tree surveys and to introduce a first stage risk management procedure for the tree stock.

It was estimated, at the time, that the number of trees within the Green Space Services management remit is probably in excess of 500,000 although the exact number is still to be quantified via the on going surveys.

The Green Space Service Urban Forestry Unit is responsible for the surveying and management of all trees in the following areas:

- Parks
- Play areas
- Open spaces
- Countryside
- Highways/Verges
- Schools (not academies or foundations)
- Housing retained land

The Green Space Service Urban Forestry Unit is not responsible for trees on WHG land, academies / foundations and school sites or on privately owned land.

Tree Management Function

It is important to note that the Green Space Service has by far the largest proportion of the Council stock of trees to manage and it is likely that the number of trees it manages is well in excess of all the other Council owned trees put together. This high number of trees and its integral part of the green space environment emphasises the importance of the Urban Forestry Unit within the Green Space Service. The Unit's responsibilities include:

- All of the Council's woodlands, plantations and Urban Forest, including all grant aided plantings such as the Millennium Forest, Black Country Urban Forest and all other English Woodland Grant Scheme funded plantations.
- The management and maintenance of all trees (and other large items of vegetation) and large scale planting projects on the Council's Parks and Open Spaces.

- Implementation and delivery of an advanced proactive systematic electronic tree management and borough wide pruning programme including:
- Delivery of digital tree information to the Council's Planweb system.
- The Council's Urban Forest Strategy (USF) including tree risk management programme, claims handling protocol for vegetation related insurance claims and tree replacement procedure.
- Emergency Plan for catastrophic events causing wide spread tree failure – storms and floods.
- Root Pruning and Highway Repair protocol.
- Development and administration of Tree Council registered Tree Warden Scheme.
- Specialist Tree Management projects in partnership with Community (Friends) groups.
- The “Tree-memberance” programme, unique to Walsall Council
- Development of extensive tree related information on the Council's website.
- Consultation on Planning Applications affecting Council Tree Stock.
- Development of Tree Contractor works ordering and management systems and management of on-site Tree Contractor Safety Standards.
- Highly qualified staff compliment, providing training in the recognition of hazard trees and tree surgery, to Green Space staff ensuring a highly effective integrated service.
- Tree related projects, e.g. Country Park, Pelsall Tree Trail, Delves Common woodland thinning project, Heritage Lottery Fund Arboretum bid.
- Enforcement works for unauthorised tree works.
- Provision of a qualified in-house Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations inspection programme.
- Tree surgeon training for Countryside Staff.
- A sustainable timber management system, re-using all arisings from its operations in a green manner and providing material for the service's

log fuel burners.

In addition to the Unit's tree management responsibilities within Green Spaces, it also has a number of other wider key responsibilities including:

- Handling all Council tree related insurance claims (It is estimated by Insurance Services and the Green Spaces Service that the average amount paid out for claims has fallen by approximately £60,000 to £100,00 per annum since the Urban Forestry Unit has been handling the claims).
- The management of externalised service trees under a contract relationship, i.e. Education Service's trees.
- Planning and development implications where private and/or Council development affects the asset value of the council's tree stock.
- Consultative advice on tree issues to all other Council Departments.
- The management of trees on retained housing land.
- Highway trees.

Sustainable Tree Management Programme

The priority of the service was to introduce an equitable and robust tree management programme based on risk and safety. In order to move from a totally re-active management programme to a proactive programme the first major task was to undertake an inventory of all the Council's trees.

Within the last year the Council has surveyed approximately half of its geographical area and recorded all those trees on the management system. The process should be completed by the end of 2010/11 at which point all the Council's trees and a number of private trees will be in full management.

The importance of a sustainable tree management system is well recognised. Trees, woodlands and hedgerows make a major contribution to sustainability and biodiversity. In this respect the Urban Forestry Unit will ensure that the Council's trees stock are maintained and managed properly.

The purchase and roll out of the bespoke software (Ezytreev) has revolutionised the Council's tree management in many ways. Prior to 2008 there were no records of the Council's tree stock, trees felled, pruning works, tree complaints and tree related accidents and failures.

Subsequently the council will have a comprehensive record that will solve the shortfalls noted above but also include cyclical pruning regime, work prioritisation, tree planting programme, cost and data analysis, asset valuation of the Council's tree stock amongst other important management records.

The development and introduction of cyclical management has already reduced the cost of travel, overheads and haulage as work is now concentrated in specific geographical locations.

The Council is now able to effectively track complaints and requests from origin to completion and maintains strict response deadlines.

It is expected that the Council will achieve a six year pruning cycle for all its trees, a huge leap forward from a year ago when it only operated a reactive management system. It is identified that this cycle, once completed for the first time will reduce the number of complaints and incidents from trees and provide us with a legally defensible tree management system.

Integrated Service Delivery

As it can be appreciated trees are an extremely important and integral element of the parks and countryside environment often characterising the very nature of the open space. The Urban Forestry Unit operates as an integrated element of the Green Space Service sharing mutual support and collaboration with other operational areas within the service on a range of activities, initiatives and events in the effective delivery of the service including:

- The training of Green Space operational staff, particularly the park ranger service in tree inspections to assist the Urban Forestry Unit in identifying potential hazards and providing high levels of health and safety and quick response,
- Working closely with officers within the Green Space Improvements Team and Countryside Service in the development of management plans incorporating tree management programmes, assisting in the creation of wildlife habitats and sustainable planting programmes,
- The establishment of the Borough's first community woodland which is a ten hectare site, five hectares of which are being put under tree cover. The site is a buffer strip between Reedswood Park in the Walsall town centre and the adjacent retail park. The whole project has been delivered through volunteers and Community Forest partners.
- Tree-memberence plantings. Details of this can be found on the Urban Forestry section of the Council's website. Briefly it is a comprehensive scheme that allows for the public and other 3rd party private enterprises to plant trees in our parks (mainly the Walsall Arboretum) with the aim of funding the purchase of unusual trees. We believe it is probably unique in Local Authority terms. Details are also contained in the appendices.
- BBC Breathing Spaces world record tree planting event.
- Tree Warden organised school and community plantings. The Urban Forestry section was successful both directly and through its partners in obtaining funding from the Woodland Trust, the Tree Council, and a number of various lottery bids to fund these schemes.

- Highway (street tree) plantings, most notable the A34 corridor into Walsall from the M6 Jct7, where an avenue of Lime Trees has been established along the bus showcase route, following highway improvements. A total of 80 trees now adorn the central reservation and funding was obtained from our Highways department through European funding application. This scheme was brought to fruition using Tree Warden lobbying power.
- As a member of the Heritage Lottery Fund Arboretum Restoration Team undertaking tree surveys at the Arboretum, assisting in public consultation events, advising on planning conditions and process and on site management of the tree removals programme.
- Agro-forestry scheme. The Winter of 2010 saw the establishment of what we believe will be the first “agro-forest” in Local Authority control. All the trees and shrub will be edible in some form or another and the trees have been funded by either the Woodland Trust or the Tree Council and the planting, over three hectares, was undertaken by our Tree Wardens and our Community Forest partners. Walsall Council received press coverage for this event in all the local papers, local Television, were interviewed by BBC Radio, and had several column inches in the Guardian and the Times.
- Other related events and activities:
 - Woodland craft fairs
 - Guided walks
 - National Tree Week activities
 - Seed gathering
 - Tree Warden training
 - Consumer information brochures
 - The Country crafts fayre in the Arboretum generated around 500 visitors, yet similar events in the past have never generated anywhere near that number. It is anticipated that our 2011 Wood Fair will bring in many hundreds of visitors.
 - Coppicing courses are usually around six persons.

There are other service areas within the Council who have some tree related responsibilities. These include Street Pride, who undertake maintenance operations on the instruction of the Green Space Urban Forestry Unit and Regeneration in relation to tree preservation orders and planning applications.

Tree management and maintenance is presently being considered as part of the Public Realm Service Re-design review.

Tree Warden Initiative

The Green Spaces Services Urban Forestry Unit has established a highly successful Tree Warden Scheme, which has now received national recognition with a young and growing network of Tree Wardens and affiliates. The numbers of wardens can vary depending on the event, however over a hundred turned up for the Breathing Spaces planting day and more than one hundred and fifty volunteers for the launch of the agro-forest, including portfolio holders and the service Director. The next phase of the development of this network is the establishment of a Tree Board and it is hoped that we will be able to form this in the spring of 2011.

Service Excellence

Last year the Green Space Service was asked to present a session at the Tree Councils National Urban Tree Warden Conference in Birmingham botanic gardens in recognition of its Wardening success. The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Community Health and Green Space Service officers were invited amongst a select few to a special reception at the House of Lords celebrating the Tree Council's National Tree Warden Scheme as well as the Government's National Tree Week.

The agro-forestry planting event, which took place in the winter of 2010 at the Arboretum Extension, was attended by a Government Minister and used by the Government to launch its National Tree Planting Campaign. In an article, which appeared in the Sunday Times on the 28th Nov 2010, it was mentioned that "Caroline Spellman Environment Secretary was inspired by schemes such as a community orchard being planted at Walsall Arboretum".

In recognition of the considerable improvements and initiatives made by the Green Space Service Urban Forestry Unit in tree management, it achieved second place in the national and prestigious "Excellence in Urban Forestry" awards during Sept 2010. This was a competition open to all Local Authorities in Great Britain. The award is hosted by the Arboricultural Association, using a panel of experts.

Tree Maintenance

As a result of a restructure within Neighbourhood Services during February 2009, the recently formed Green Spaces Tree Crew was transferred to Streetpride. A service level agreement has been established between Green Spaces and Street pride which aims to define the relationship, role and responsibilities between the two service areas in the delivery of the tree maintenance service.

Resource and legal considerations:

There are acts of Parliament and associated legal requirements requiring the Authority to manage its trees. Understandably the Health and Safety at Work Act, the Planning Act, Highways Act and Environmental Act place specific duties upon the Authority. It is however the Occupiers Liability Act that is most pertinent as this specifically requires us to manage the risk associated with our assets, and the trees are certainly our assets.

In Birmingham City in both 1999 where three people were crushed to death by a fallen tree and again in 2005 when another person was also crushed to death by a tree in the principal park, Cannon Hill. The City was successfully prosecuted for the 1999 deaths but the legal action is still ongoing in the second case. Walsall has one death attributed to a failed tree when a bus driver was killed in 1989 when struck by a tree falling from Pelsall Common. It is imperative that the Council undertakes a regular and systematic inspection such as that introduced by the Green Spaces Services Urban Forestry Unit. This will go a long way to ensuring that the risk from trees is both minimal and defensible in the courts. The Service currently operates a legally defensible tree management programme and is recognised as one of the leading programmes in the country.

Citizen impact:

Extensive consultation undertaken as part of the Green Space Strategy identified the standards of grounds maintenance as an issue of key concern by local residents and one of the most important areas for improvement.

Environmental impact:

The standards of maintenance achieved or delivered have an impact on residents' perceptions and satisfaction with parks and open spaces and local environment. It is an important issue which has a direct impact on their quality of life. Deterioration in standards can lead to an impression of neglect and encourage anti-social behaviour and be a barrier to residents' use of parks.

Performance management:

The establishment of the Urban Forestry Unit and the introduction of a systematic Tree Management System has considerably improved the management and maintenance of the Council's tree stock, reducing the Council's liabilities and insurance claims.

Equality Implications:

None applicable

Consultation:

Not applicable

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