

Subject:	Update on Safety of Highway Trees
Reason for briefing note:	To provide an update to the Infrastructure Overview and Scrutiny Panel on the progress and status of the Highways Trees safety inspection arrangements.
Responsible officer(s):	David Scott – Head of Communities
Senior leader sponsor:	Russell O’Keefe – Executive Director Place
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Update Summary

1. Following a period when highways trees were not being surveyed routinely, a revised audit and condition survey of highway trees was commenced in April 2017. This survey work was outsourced to Volker Highways, who used two external arboricultural consultants, for the three-year period up to end of March 2020.
2. All trees on the public highway have been inspected and those individual trees with a stem diameter of 75mm (when measured at 1.5m above ground level) have been recorded. Groups of trees and woodlands have also been recorded.
3. Highway ‘Routes’ were prioritised based on their road hierarchy, with A roads inspected first and Unclassified roads last. The audit and condition survey inspection of trees on Highway amenity land (not designated as adopted highway but is the responsibility of the Highway Authority to manage) is due to be completed this year.
4. Where essential health and safety works were identified by the inspections, these works have been commissioned and let through the term contracts the Borough has, so that dangerous trees (or branches) are removed, and the necessary works to reduce the risk of trees falling on the highway has been mitigated.
5. Trees on the public highway need to be inspected at least once every 5 years as a default, and this recent audit and survey works has enabled this inspection frequency to be achieved. It is impossible to eliminate the risk altogether due to the nature of trees and weather, however the inspection regime has provided the Council with an up to date condition survey record which was not previously available, and will provide a basis upon which ongoing work can be identified and actioned.
6. There is some shift in thinking towards whether a shorter than five-year frequency of inspection may be required, say three years. This is in the light of global warming, and changing weather patterns, with more frequent and more powerful storms, and increased periods of flooding and higher temperatures, all of which can have an impact on the health and resilience of trees. There is also an increase in pest and diseases, mainly due to global heating and importation of tree stock which can carry disease, or fauna that can invade existing tree stock and have an adverse impact on condition and resilience. Some diseases are catastrophic such as Ash die-back. Ideally, trees could to be inspected on a shorter cycle to deal more effectively with pests and diseases and their associated implications. This would however be an increased pressure on resources, which at the current time cannot be achieved.

7. A second round of inspections has been started this year, based upon one inspector rather than two inspectors, used to undertake the catch-up inspections in the 3-year period 2017/18 – 2019/20. This has reduced the resource requirement in 2020/21, in line with the need to undertake re-inspections and ongoing inspections alone, rather than the catch-up activity following a period of non-routine inspection prior to 2017/18.
8. Re-inspections are scheduled where trees were identified as needing a condition check sooner than five years, where the condition was not so significant to require works at the time of the original inspection, but it was felt the next inspection should not be left for a full five years.
9. Progress is targeted at trees in urban areas, as this is where impacts on tree health are the most frequent and significant. In addition, the completion of inspections of trees on highway amenity land is taking up a considerable proportion of the ongoing Volker Highways inspection capacity, however this activity is important to complete the inspection process of the tree stock on or near the adopted highway.
10. Tree works are carried out in line with the policy in the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy. Works are mainly carried out for health and safety reasons, to abate an actionable nuisance (in the legal sense of the term where damage is being caused) or to comply with a statutory obligation such as under the Highways Act 1980.
11. The inspection regime has seen a total of 30,991 tree being inspected up until 16 October 2020. The number of roads inspected is 1735. Of the 30,991 trees inspected, 476 were identified as needing further inspection on a shortened re-inspection cycle. The exact frequency varies to reflect the nature of the weakness or defect which was identified, and triggered the re-inspection requirement.