

Southwark Tree Review

Report of the Environment and Community Support
Scrutiny Sub-Committee

March 2008



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1 Introduction

In 2008, members of the environment and community support scrutiny sub-committee chose to do a light touch review into the way trees are currently managed and maintained in Southwark. The sub-committee wanted to find out what policies the borough had in place and how the council could improve the service within existing funds.

Southwark has around 90 thousand trees including:

- 12,500 trees growing on streets and roads
- 15,000 trees on Southwark's housing estates
- 15,000 trees in Southwark's parks

The borough's trees are made up of over 100 species, including perennial favourites such as London plane, chestnut and oak, as well as many small ornamental trees such as cherry and magnolia.

This is a good time to have the tree review. The Tree Team has just moved under the remit of the Parks and Open Spaces section and two new members of staff have been taken on to work with the senior arboricultural officer. With this new situation it is hoped that there will be a re-evaluation of current working, which will develop stronger working practices and accommodate new ways of thinking where improvements need to be made.

The sub-committee heard from officers that there were distinct benefits to the environment from planting certain types of trees. For example; ash, field maple, larch, Norway maple, Scots pine and silver birch were all thought to be beneficial to air quality. On the other hand, some research indicated that lark willow, English oak, goat willow, poplar and white willow might be less absorbent of harmful carbon dioxide. There was also strong evidence to suggest that the larger the tree, the greater its capacity to absorb pollutants like carbon dioxide.

2 The situation in Southwark

As there is no extra budget this year for further investment, the sub-committee looked at working within existing resources to help inform improvement plans. The service has recently been brought under the Parks and Open Spaces remit and it is hoped that this will strengthen links between the tree team and the planning department. A lack of communication between all relevant departments became apparent as the sub-committee took evidence.

Currently officers are developing a three year tree plan, taking into consideration the current work programme, investigating what balances have to be struck between new planting and the upkeep of current stock. The plan will examine ways of obtaining the maximum value from the existing budget and provide greater transparency around spending.

3 Types of Trees

Council officers reported that anyone could put in a request for tree planting. Fruit trees were popular, although they had to be placed in a position where the fruit could fall safely on to the ground. They were also seen as very cost effective options in terms of maintenance. Economies of scale were an important consideration; fruit trees needed to be obtained from specialist nurseries and this could work out more expensive in the long run. However, officers were not opposed to considering fruit trees as a viable option.

4 Working with trees

There seemed to be a lack of policy when it came to dealing effectively with troublesome trees, those with overhanging or dangerously low branches. The sub-committee found that there needed to be more guidance for both council staff and the public on how to communicate with the relevant departments regarding the reporting of essential work. Currently it is difficult to find the right person to speak to without spending a great deal of time trying to locate someone who can help.

Currently trees are located by GIS map which, officers conceded, was not very helpful to contractors when locating trees which needed work. Members suggested that Southwark use GPS which officers acknowledged made identifying trees easier.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Tree Strategy

Southwark has had a tree strategy in draft form since 2006. It is understood that the strategy is still quite relevant with only a few updates needed and now it is time for its implementation. However, the draft strategy is very difficult to view. It is too big to email and the only successful method of moving it from place to place is on a memory stick. The intricate and highly polished colour graphics makes viewing the document via computer very unwieldy with some pages taking up to 35 seconds to upload. This means that navigating the document swiftly is not possible. The only way to view the document properly is to print it; however, unless departments and/or individuals have access to an A3 colour printer, the text is mostly very small and difficult to read. Printing such a large document has obvious environmental and cost implications.

Recommendation

That a user friendly, easily accessible, tree strategy be published at the earliest opportunity.

5.2 Staffing

It was acknowledged that with just four people in the tree team it was going to be hard to provide a good all round service which would include an emergency cover phone line. However, the cost of installing a facility to enable people to report breached preservation orders and vandalism would not be too costly. It was also suggested that the council could provide some preventative strategies such as providing metal guards around trees, which would help prevent damage from anti-social behaviour and dog fouling.

The sub-committee heard that there is funding for two tree officers from the highways department, two from housing and one from parks and open spaces. There has been some officer discussion regarding the planning department funding half a post within the tree team but the planning department has – at the time of this report – not agreed to this. Southwark is the only borough which does not receive resources from its planning department. The planning department needs to take trees and the related issues associated with them more seriously. It was noted that most comparative boroughs fund at least six tree officer posts.

Recommendation

That serious consideration is given to whether there are sufficient staffing levels to meet proper aspirations for tree management, maintenance and protection.

5.3 Works Contractors

Officers informed the sub-committee that the council was looking at the possibility of bringing the tree maintenance service back in house. This could have some benefits; not least, it might be cheaper and easier to coordinate. However, this needed to be balanced against the fact that any extra costs and resources for additional duties which occurred above the set work programme were currently the responsibility of the contractors. Under the current arrangements, the council was not responsible for any extra costs. Officers said that they would be looking at the procurement strategy to ascertain best value and they also mentioned that they would be looking at the Greenwich model before making a decision in July 2008.

Recommendation

That there is a best value comparison of whether tree maintenance is better outsourced or brought back in-house; the outcome to be reported back to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

5.4 Tree Preservation Orders

It was suggested that for Southwark to meet the legal requirement of bringing tree preservation orders (TPOs) up to date would cost around £20K. There was not an up to date list at the time of this report and there was significant confusion over where TPO trees were situated. Unless there was notification by members of the public that a tree had or needed TPO status it was difficult for officers to know where the trees were. This was especially apparent if the trees were not in a conservation area.

There was anecdotal evidence from Members to suggest that property and land developers had chopped trees down before checking to see if they were protected with TPOs. It was very important for the council to find a way to engage with developers and strengthen the links with the planning department to help address this problem. Likewise, utility companies had not paid due attention to proper procedures when undertaking work and there should be thorough consideration as to how council departments engaged with them.

It was thought that the compilation of a list of TPOs would be very helpful and would be very straight forward. All of the information was available electronically, making the compilation exercise, which can be performed at a single desktop, easy. No re-surveying would be necessary and it would have minimal impact on resources.

Over the course of the review it came to light that many of the problems with TPO compliance were originating in the planning department. Members were surprised to learn that, if someone wanted to report the council's non-compliance with TPOs, the first port of call was Southwark's own planning department. The planning department is in charge of policing itself in this regard and this has compounded the TPO non-compliance problem.

Recommendations

That the tree team produce a comprehensive list of tree preservation orders (TPOs) to be made accessible to the public via the council's website.

That, following examples of best practice such as the Isle of Wight, Southwark publish on its website photographs, relevant details and the history of each TPO tree for the public to view.

5.5 Schools

There have been some efforts to promote the work of the tree team in schools with a poster and leaflet campaign setting out the benefits of having trees in the environment. As yet this exercise has not produced any measured outcomes but the sub-committee was glad that there was some initial engagement with children taking place. This was raised in the context of schools not taking enough responsibility to ensure that trees were properly looked after in school grounds, ensuring they did not pose a health and safety risk.

Recommendations

That the lack of tree management in schools be brought to the attention of the council's education department, highlighting the potential dangers. The sub-committee suggests that Southwark sends an annual letter to the LEA to ask them for information regarding the status of trees in school grounds.

That there is greater encouragement of co-operation between schools and the council's tree section, to foster awareness amongst schoolchildren of the need to care for, manage and monitor trees.

5.6 Community Engagement

Other boroughs have signed up to a tree watering scheme. Southwark has now followed suit but officers acknowledged that more could be done to advertise this kind of voluntary activity within the local community. Schemes such as this could be popular with families and help foster community spirit.

Greater involvement from the community was thought to have many added benefits to the work of the tree team. Involving street leaders with tree issues could assist with the current under-resourced situation and feed into new policy making. Community councils could be more involved in developing new ideas and take part at an operational level.

Officers said that there were currently no plans to include wardens in assisting with tree work supervision. Only incidents of anti-social behaviour fell under their remit at this time.

Currently Southwark does not receive provision for tree wardens. Tree Wardens are a network of people who either volunteer or are appointed to assist in the gathering of information and encourage practical projects relating to trees in the community. Tree Wardens can also be useful in aiding the reporting of damaged trees or episodes of vandalism. In other boroughs, where they do have tree wardens, funding can come from private business which reportedly works well.

Recommendations

That there is an investigation of the possibility of a tree warden scheme in Southwark, either as a stand-alone venture or in collaboration with current street leaders and friends of parks schemes.

That there is early decision on implementing a programme of selective removal and replacement of problem trees.

5.7 Gritting Arrangements

The sub-committee discussed the damage that salt did to trees, which usually resulted in the total destruction of the tree. It was reported that other European countries were using alternative materials to minimise the detrimental effect on trees. The council's view up to now has been that the use of these materials is too expensive - salt being cheaper by a factor of 10 when compared with other synthetic materials. It was acknowledged that the cost of replacing a damaged or dead tree works out more expensive than using a programme of selective gritting with less harmful agents around the base of a tree.

Recommendation

That there is a switch to the selective use of synthetic materials instead of salt for gritting at the base of trees. To be implemented in late 2008.

5.8 Heat Islands

Heat Islands are city areas where there has been considerable urban development. As the populations of these areas increase there is a need to modify greater and greater areas of land which in turn increases the average temperature.

Members discussed the value of installing green areas in places such as car parks to help combat rising temperatures. This practice has proved to have a positive effect on carbon absorption and been successful as general environmental coolant.

Recommendation

That the tree team reviews the existing Supplementary Planning Document so that initiatives such as tree cover for car-parks in Southwark can be planned in the future.

5.9 Budget

Currently the budget is received in three strands with differing rules governing each one. It was acknowledged that there were anomalies around the

management of funds, with fixed revenues mixed with allocation monies. There is currently an overspend which, reportedly, will be resolved now that the tree team has been incorporated into the parks and open spaces section. There is a desire to get a front loaded budget in April with efforts to separate the varying financial strands to manage and monitor budgets more effectively. In general, greater clarity is needed when looking at the allocated funds according to spend, staff costs and overheads.

Recommendation

That a dedicated tree planting budget is identified.

5.10 Highway's Maintenance

A more cost effective way of planting trees would be to use the opportunities that highway maintenance work presents. If there is an intention to plant a tree where there has not been one before, costs are incurred for preliminary surveying work to ensure that no underground pipes and cables are disrupted. Further cost relates to the excavation of earth to accommodate the tree roots. When highways work is being undertaken however, the need for surveying and excavation are not necessary and so the costs for planting are considerably lower.

Recommendation

That thorough consideration is given to the added value of tree planting whilst highway work is being carried out.

5.11 Responses to Tree Vandalism.

It had been reported to Members that the public found it difficult and confusing when trying to report vandalism to the council. It was difficult to speak with relevant officers and information on the website did not show the correct procedure for reporting.

Recommendation

That the development of a proper and consistent systematic response be developed, with clear instructions setting out how members of the public can contact the council in the event of witnessing vandalism or reporting the results of vandalism.

5.12 Developers and the Planning Department

Anecdotal evidence suggested that housing developers were cutting down trees before seeking planning permission or ascertaining whether the trees had TPO status. It was reported that some developers took it upon themselves to carry out work to trees without the necessary expertise. Members heard that a developer had pruned a tree right back to the trunk which had caused significant damage. It is essential for developers and the planning department to work more closely together to try to address this type of case.

Recommendation

That there is more work and discussion on the Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) so that the council can take a firmer line with developers and utility companies who do not engage with the council.

There also needed to be stronger and more strategic practical leadership in the department for the tree team to be truly effective.

Our sub-committee

Members of the sub-committee during the review were:

- Councillor Barry Hargrove (Chair)
- Councillor James Barber (Vice-Chair)
- Councillor Robin Crookshank Hilton
- Councillor Jenny Jones
- Councillor Alison McGovern
- Councillor Paul Noblet
- Councillor Andrew Pakes
- Councillor Anne Yates