

Briefing Note

Title: Arbor Service Future Plans Update**Date: February 2022****Prepared by: Claire Walters****Job Title: Environmental Place Based Development Manager****Intended Audience:** Internal ☒ Partner organisation ☐ Public ☐ Confidential ☐

1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To update Scrutiny Panel on the progress made to increase the number and frequency of tree inspections on the highway, parks and open spaces, cemeteries, and responsible land under the Corporate Landlord.
- 1.2 To provide an update on the Expanded Arbor Project.
- 1.3 To provide an overview of current process with Councillor complaints and responses.
- 1.4 Future Inspection plans for current tree planting.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Council's Risk Management and Insurance Team had recommended that the Council escalate the requirement to review tree inspections citing that, in the event of a serious incident, the Health & Safety Executive would look back through processes in setting inspection regimes, including reviews of processes and outcomes. Health and Safety breaches which arise due to financial gain attract high culpability ratings in sentencing.
- 2.2 There has been an investment in the service to map all assets on CONFIRM, (the service area's preferred digital platform to record arboriculture activity), to support in the extended inspection programme.

3.0 Arrangements put in place by Environmental Services for expanded inspection programme

- 3.1 The number of existing highway tree inspections have been doubled and a new two-yearly Condition Survey will be introduced to routinely inspect trees in our parks, green open spaces, cemeteries, and land under the responsibility of the Corporate Landlord. This will result in at least a fivefold increase (at this point estimated to be circa 14,000 additional inspections a year) in the number of trees to be inspected. Additional resources have been identified and a review of work schedules and efficiencies is being delivered through the IT solution 'CONFIRM' software.

- 3.2 The highway tree maintenance programme has been updated and is available to view on the council's [highway tree maintenance web page](#). The web page details the two-yearly inspection schedule which also incorporates the four-yearly maintenance programme for every council street tree in Wolverhampton.
- 3.3 The Customer Services tree maintenance business rule has been revised so that tree issues reported on land maintained by the Corporate Landlord are now raised directly to the Environmental Services Arboriculture team to resolve. Previously enquiries about these trees were brought to the attention of the Corporate Landlord to resolve.
- 3.4 Customer Services' tree enquiries interface with CONFIRM is now to be configured so that emergency jobs can be raised directly to a Supervisor's handheld device, to enable issues to be dealt with whilst 'out-on-site'.
- 3.5 CONFIRM, an asset IT solution presently used in other areas of City Environment, has been configured for the Arboriculture operation. Tree asset data along the adopted highway and within our parks has been uploaded onto CONFIRM. The mapped tree asset data will, over time as inspections are undertaken, be enhanced to show all individual council trees and woodlands in situ across the city.
- 3.6 CONFIRM is also being used to schedule inspections and maintenance. The Condition Surveys, which include photographs of the trees, are being updated and recorded within CONFIRM at the time of the inspection using a remote handheld device (I-pad). Trees not yet captured as an asset/mapped on CONFIRM will be added as the Arboriculture Officers go about their scheduled Condition Surveys. In addition, Environmental Services are evaluating all Parks & Open Spaces to capture all tree assets for inclusion on the inspection programme. Once the data is captured the assets are automatically added to future scheduled inspections.
- 3.7 The Corporate Landlord service has been requested to provide Environmental Services with details of locations and land accessibility, where trees are present, for the tree asset to be mapped on CONFIRM and two-yearly inspections to commence.
- 3.8 In order to conduct the two-yearly Condition Survey for trees along the highway and in our parks & open spaces, cemeteries, and land under the Corporate Landlord, whilst also having the ability to respond to any additional works flagged as a priority, a resource equivalent to six Arboriculture Officers and an additional arboriculture maintenance team is needed. Additional technology has been purchased and resources reconfigured by increasing in-house staffing levels and out-sourcing work to a subcontractor (presently Acorn). This will enable the council to inspect all the trees (estimated 60,000) every two years.

4.0 Expanded Arbor Project

- 4.1 There has been a significant investment in the Arbor Service to both increase our inspection regime and to better use technology to support our maintenance programme. As a consequence, it will improve the information available to our residents about our trees and how/when we maintain them. This will ensure we design a service that is both best value for money and modernises and increases

transparency across the board while delivering on our Health and Safety responsibilities as the landowner.

4.2 The key outcomes of the project, which is supported by a Project Manager (started CWC on 14 February 2022) with progress reported via Verto, are:

- Understand and log all the tree assets onto CONFIRM
- Programme of digitising historical tree inspections, so the 'history' of a tree can be easily accessed
- Design the service structure and resource needed in order to inspect and maintain these assets
- Design the new structure needed to deliver this new service
- Embed this information on a front facing system, (for example Geowolf), that is easily accessible by residents to provide:
 - Type of tree
 - Last time it was inspected
 - Current Inspection regime
 - When work can be done on each tree
- Embed delivery into BAU

This will be in addition to our currently inspection schedule, required arboriculture maintenance and emergency responses as per CWCs responsibility.

4.3 Whilst this information currently exists it is not in a format that is easily accessible for those staff fielding service enquires from both residents and councillors.

4.4 Two tree inspectors have been bought into the service to start the mapping process. This needs to be done before the new service is designed

4.5 The service will experience an underspend this year, as there has been a delay in recruitment to the project manager role and bringing in the agency tree inspectors whilst the CONFIRM software has been developed.

4.6 Now the inspectors are in place, around 2000 inspections have already been completed.

5.0 Councillor Enquiry Unit, (CEU) – Current Challenges

5.1 The team have experienced an unprecedented number of enquiries since the CEU went live (prior to CEU the service would have on average 20 Councillor enquiries a year and, in the first seven months of the CEU, 176 tree maintenance enquires have been received). Since this, some challenges have been identified within the Service along with other services within Environmental Place Based Development. We have been working with the CEU team to address these challenges, in order to both better resolve the enquiries and streamline and improve the back-office systems. This will mean that the councillors have better information to advise and support their constituents in tree related matters.

5.2 The issues include:

- Enquires made around trees that can only be maintained post leaf fall remain open until the work is completed
- The balance between protecting our trees and responding to residents' requests for pruning is not always well received
- Service emergencies take priority over requested inspections
- The balance being struck between being out inspecting and responding to enquiries
- Complaints coming in around issues that will not be resolved with pruning of the tree
- Reoccurring requests that have been previously answered
- Enquires can be left 'open' for weeks beyond our 4-week SLA to respond to queries when our service response is challenged, and the enquiry escalated for a reviewed response
- Increased enquiries around leaf fall
- Repeated enquiries around trees that are not the Council's responsibility to maintain

5.3 Whilst it is not always well received, it is our position that we will not do work on a healthy tree. In fact, working on a healthy tree can increase the liability to the authority. It is always better to leave a tree in its maiden condition unless absolutely necessary. We do of course look at individual cases balancing a variety of different considerations around pruning and removal, but it does remain our policy that we only work on a dead, diseased, or dangerous tree. The team have to ensure that any work does not compromise the tree, especially when there are targets around tree planting across the city (including the Arboriculture Service's own tree planting programme replacing street trees).

5.4 Unfortunately, what we have also seen is an increase in verbal abuse and threats to our Arbor Service Officers, due to unrealistic expectations of what tree maintenance can do for the issues that some residents face. This is not acceptable and is causing distress and worry for staff who are doing their job and causing them to consider whether they want to continue in their roles. We accept that tree management can be a contentious issue, but we must always consider and respect the professional opinions of the trained Arbor staff when making decisions around tree safety and protecting our green city.

5.5 We have worked closely with CEU around the above, improving the information on the FAQs section of the CEU so Councillors have more detailed information to pass to residents when they approach them with tree enquiries

5.6 Whilst the expanded Arbor programme will not resolve all queries, by providing more information and transparency about the service it will reduce some of the CEU request we get through. The increased inspection programme will also offer residents more confidence about the safety of our Trees. We are also internally reviewing how we respond to Councillor enquiries to keep everyone updated on cases that are not quick to resolve.

6.0 Tree Planting Coordination Group

- 6.1 in 2021/22 30,000 trees will have been planted by the City of Wolverhampton Council, (CWC). All of this planting has been carefully discussed and planned through the Tree Planting Coordination Group.
- 6.2 The purpose of the Tree Planting Coordination Group is to agree, plan and coordinate tree planting on the city's parks and open spaces and any joint initiatives with other bodies. The Group is aware of the issue of maintenance and have sought funding streams which provide a level of support for maintenance and produce low maintenance projects.
- 6.3 The majority of the planting is in areas where the trees will not need routine maintenance, and if they do this will not be for many years in the future. In addition to this the Service receives an extra £10,000 per annum from our Parks, Landscape & Countryside Service to inspect new trees that have been planted.
- 6.4 It should also be added that we do not expect tree planting to continue at these levels, as it will depend on funding opportunities and available space.
- 6.5 Complementing our improved data collection is the Black Country-wide iTrees Eco survey which is mapping the coverage, species, and health of trees across the four Black Country boroughs. This will provide additional data to help plan our maintenance and planting programme.

7.0 Current Service Improvements

- 7.1 Defining our response to the 'right tree in the wrong place', we recognise that as the city has evolved some trees, whilst healthy and beautiful, are causing issues for residents who use the streets. Our new, digital service will enable us to collate intelligence on some of these trees and engage with communities to strike a balance whilst protecting our green city.
- 7.2 Additional support is being dedicated to CEU tree enquires and responses to free capacity within the service to make inspections around enquiries.
- 7.3 Our tree identification and mapping project has begun where all the trees in the city will be mapped. 1000s of trees have already been added, alongside digitising all our previous tree inspections on our new system to be able to access information quicker and build up our intelligence around all the trees in the city.

8.0 Summary

- 8.1 Our current tree inspection and maintenance programme is working, and there are clear plans in place to ensure that now CWCs responsibility has increased, due to the more frequent inspection programme, which is required, we deliver on our legislative responsibility.
- 8.2 More trees in more locations than ever before will be inspected as part of this expanded programme but getting to this point takes time. We need to ensure that

the right amount of resource is in place to deliver to ensure best value for our residents.

- 8.3 This will not solve all our residents' complaints around trees, and not everyone will be happy about our decisions 100% of time, but it will make the service more transparent and accessible with more information on the city's trees than ever before.