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MAINTENANCE OF TREES IN WARWICK DISTRICT

Is it an Effective and Value for Money Service for Residents?

TASK & FINISH GROUP REPORT FOR THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



December 2009

Members of the Task & Finish Group

Councillor Mrs Elizabeth Higgins (Chairman)

Councillor Mrs Ann Blacklock

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Acknowledgements:

The Task & Finish Group would like to thank the following people for providing information and evidence to the Group, either in person or by written response.

- Mr Ian Coker, Head of Neighbourhood Services, Warwick District Council
- Mr Chris Hastie, Green Infrastructure Manager, Warwick District Council
- Mr Tony Hemming, Arboricultural Officer, Warwick District Council
- Mr Robert Hoof, Contract Services Manager, Warwick District Council
- Mr Philip Sugden, Glendale Regional Manager
- Mr David Hughes, Glendale Contracts Manager
- Mrs Theresa Goss, Committee Services Officer, Warwick District Council
- Miss Lucy Elrick, Committee Services Officer, Warwick District Council
- Mr Roger Poole, Highways Policy Engineer, Warwickshire County Council

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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Warwick District Council (WDC) maintains 27,000 trees within its urban boundaries. Its two man team consist of Mr Chris Hastie (Cultural Services) and Mr Tony Hemming (Neighbourhood Services), both employed by Warwick District Council (WDC).
- 1.2 Maintenance of the District's 8300 highway trees is supposedly covered by investment from Warwickshire County Council (WCC) of around £55,000 p.a. WCC also contribute £9,200 to cover the cost of highways trees included in the cyclical condition survey.
- 1.3 Glendale has the contract until 2013 at £120,000 per annum, which includes work on the District-owned trees. There is currently one tree gang, and these two men cover the whole of Warwick District, which covers work on the all the District trees and all the Highway trees located in the urban areas.
- 1.4 It is hoped that the Task & Finish Group can open up new ways of accessing investment in replanting, filling gaps left by the District's more mature trees – should they fall due to storm, road traffic accidents, accidental damage, disease or old age.
- 1.5 However, trees are currently maintained on a safety-first minimalistic basis.
- 1.6 WDC & WCC have no formal contract between each other for the maintenance of trees within the urban boundaries. WCC have highway gangs who maintain other highway trees at the sides of all A and B roads in the county. This seems an anomaly.
- 1.7 Due to the high percentage of enquiries/complaints about pavement trees from householders – who are also Council tax payers – it is hoped to discover why it takes so long for action to be taken and why so many people are disappointed with the response.

The Review

- 1.8 In February 2009, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee concluded that a scrutiny review with regard to the Maintenance and Strategic Replanting of Trees in Warwick District was far too large for one group of Councillors to investigate. So it was agreed to complete a review of the maintenance of trees instead. A copy of the Group's full Scoping Document is shown at Appendix 1. However, during the course of the investigation the Group found it difficult to disaggregate the issue of replanting from the narrow focus on maintenance. Information on tree maintenance can be found at www.warwickdc.gov.uk and www.warwickshire.gov.uk

1.9 Strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats relating to the maintenance of trees are summarised in the table below:

<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attractive treescape in all four towns - Co-operation with WCC on maintenance of highway trees 	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Failure to conclude annual contract with WCC - No long term vision - Reactive not proactive maintenance of trees - No rational basis for WCC financial contribution to highway trees and no signed contract
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential to encourage residents to sponsor trees - Raise profile of 'leafy Warwickshire' and encourage planting of trees in towns and along highways 	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Credit crunch and paucity of £120,000 contract - Lack of awareness of how little money there is in the system to prune/maintain street trees - Spread of disease and viruses affecting different species - No replanting budget

1.10 The Task and Finish Group agreed that it was not appropriate to consult with the public at this stage in their investigation as it may raise expectations that trees in their neighbourhood will be pruned/restrained/replanted in the near future.

1.11 The Group could not be informed by any results of the Citizens' Panel as there was not a questionnaire being circulated at this time.

1.12 During the review the Group made the following observations:

<p>Effectiveness was defined as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of complaints, and their trend over time • Number of trees and their growth/decline over time • Frequency of tree related health and safety incidents • Contract management • Customer feedback
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Value for Money was defined as:

- Benchmarking with other authorities (£/tree ratio analyses etc)
- Would the “perfect” service cost more?
- What would a skeleton service look like?
- How is the budget spent?

Priority Areas

In the light of the information received, the Group’s key recommendations relate to:

- 1.13 **Funding:** The funding received from WCC to partly cover WDC’s expenses for WDC’s contract with Glendale (until 2013) is a dilemma. It is currently inadequate and with the economic situation encouraging both District and County to produce cuts, the Group is seriously concerned that tree care will be selected for budget reduction. Currently funding is only sufficient to provide a one-gang skeleton service providing a fire-fighting reactive service. The Council should consider whether this is sustainable position given its corporate objectives. Additional income from roundabout sponsorship is unlikely to be sufficient to materially improve the existing provision.
- 1.14 **Strategic Objectives:** County highway trees have a higher risk rating than non-highway trees, which to some extent explains the reluctance of WCC engineers in the Highways Section to replace highway trees damaged/removed by disease. Is Warwickshire to have no more highway trees?
- 1.15 WDC is at odds with WCC in being willing to balance the associated risks with the many benefits attributed to a population of healthy trees in the public realm.
- 1.16 **Communication:** Residents are not aware of the difference between WDC and WCC funding. They cannot understand how difficult it is to get money out of various budgets to prune and restrain trees in streets with recurring problems where there is no perceived damage to public safety. However, WDC’s website is excellent in answering these queries.

Recommendations

The Group recommends that:

Recommendation 1: Prior to the renewal of the contract of the maintenance of trees, which Glendale currently holds and is due for renewal in 2013, a policy document and a written Service Level Agreement be agreed between WCC and WDC, to encourage a proactive cyclical maintenance regime, rather than a continuation of the reactive service currently provided.

Recommendation 2: A Joint Strategy for Tree Maintenance with WCC be investigated through a Joint Working Party of WDC and WCC Councillors, which should include a strategy for a phased programme of planting of suitable trees on highways land.

Recommendation 3: WDC find resources for a phased programme of planting new trees of suitable species on WDC owned land. It may have to look to the private sector – business sponsorship, Business Improvement Districts, individuals, amenity societies – for some of the funding; and to Trusts and grant-giving bodies in the Third Sector.

Recommendation 4: Warwick, Kenilworth and Whitnash Town Councils be encouraged to use some of their precept to plant new trees, seeking advice from WDC's specialist tree staff, as Royal Leamington Spa Town Council already does.

Recommendation 5: Investigations be made into recruiting volunteer tree wardens across the District, in conjunction with the Tree Council.

Recommendation 6: Investigations be made into whether householders should be permitted to lop/remove branches from WCC owned trees, which touch windows or obscure light to habitable rooms, subject to approval by a WCC tree inspector and/or Glendale operative. Then a registered tree surgeon should be hired at the householder's expense.

Recommendation 7: The Planning Committee be requested to investigate possible additional planning conditions to new applications so that new developments are surrounded by new trees

Recommendation 8: A monitoring report be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in August 2010 detailing the progress which has been made with the recommendations.

2.0 Trees in Warwick District

- 2.1 Trees are an important part of the character of Warwick District, bringing with them many benefits. Warwick District Council is committed to preserving and enhancing trees and woodland within the District.
- 2.2 Warwick District Council is responsible for managing around 19,000 individual tree on Council-owned land, together with many groups of trees and small copses and around 97 Ha of woodlands. The newly acquired Oakley Wood near Bishops Tachbrook is not part of this review.
- 2.3 There is an inventory and map of all 27,000 trees, WDC and WCC highway trees. This was drawn up in 2002/3 by external consultants.
- 2.4 In addition to caring for its own trees, WDC manages over 8,000 trees in pavements and highways verges within the District's urban areas on behalf of WCC.
- 2.5 On behalf of WDC, Glendale carries out the maintenance of all the trees located in the urban areas across the District. This includes all the highway trees in the urban areas which are owned by WCC. The cost of that contract is £120,000 which covers the cost of a tree gang, of two people, together with a vehicle, chipper and equipment.
- 2.6 Trees in towns bring with them both benefits and costs. Whilst many of the costs are well known to managers of urban trees, who watch the budgets and answer the phone to disgruntled residents, the benefits can be seen as nebulous and difficult to quantify or justify. Nevertheless, a considerable and expanding body of research exists on the benefits that urban trees bring. The paragraphs below summarise some of the benefits of urban trees.
- 2.7 There are recognised economic benefits in respect of business, commerce, and consumer behaviour. Tree-lined streets encourage cycling and indirectly help to reduce street crime and road rage.
- 2.8 In environmental terms, trees reduce pollution and help to attenuate noise and they play an important part in flood prevention. Further details about the benefits of urban trees are shown in Appendix 5.
- 2.9 In addition, details about the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment's (CABE) 'grey to green' campaign can be found on their web site www.cabe.org.uk/ . This campaign focuses on the glaring lack of investment in green infrastructure relative to the very large amount of investment in grey infrastructure. Is this not unwise given the dangers of climate change and the opportunities to improve public health?

3.0 Research, Evidence and Observations

- 3.1 The first meeting of the Group involved agreeing its action plan and a list of the appropriate witnesses to invite along to the meetings to enable evidence to be gathered.
- 3.2 The Group also gathered many corporate documents with regard to the maintenance of trees, including the contract with Glendale, the pruning policy and the tender for inspection of trees under the management of Warwick District Council. These are shown in the appendices to the report.
- 3.3 A large amount of data is routinely collated by WCC and WDC and much of this was made available to the Group. Some of this data is presented in chart form below. The information within Graphs 1 to 4 was provided by WCC.

Funding

- 3.4 WCC pay WDC £55,000 for the cost of work that the Glendale tree gang carries out. If the work was to be cyclical ie. in a planned year-on-year programme, rather than re-actively, it would be at a cost of £84,000 (current prices). This would result in better time management of the men and machinery.
- 3.5 The cost of a tree gang is £122,000. By adding a half gang the cost would increase to £183,000 and 2 gangs are £244,000. That resource would deliver what is identified, other than the additional planting which is £650 per tree.'
- 3.6 Currently, WCC don't contribute towards the staffing costs for managing the highway tree element of the contract. The £55,000 is purely for the work of the tree gang. Administration costs are paid for by WDC. If, at the end of a year and the £55,000 has been spent, and some emergency work is required, it is carried out and the cost would then be recouped from WCC item by item.
- 3.7 Underfunding of maintenance of highway trees is considered to be widespread throughout the UK. Highway trees are 33% of the total trees included in the Glendale contract. However, 65% of the enquires received by WDC concern highway trees. Therefore, it became apparent that maintenance of trees in Warwick District is subsidised from Warwick District budgets because WCC funding does not cover the full cost of what Glendale do, by a 23% shortfall. So WCC must consider increasing its budget by 25%. WCC admitted that existing funding was based on legacy roll-overs of

previous budgets and was not linked to any rationale whatsoever, which seems at best unbelievable and at worst inefficient.

Recommendation 1: Prior to the renewal of the contract of the maintenance of trees, which Glendale currently holds and is due for renewal in 2013, a policy document and a written Service Level Agreement be agreed between WCC and WDC, to encourage a proactive cyclical maintenance regime, rather than a continuation of the reactive service currently provided.

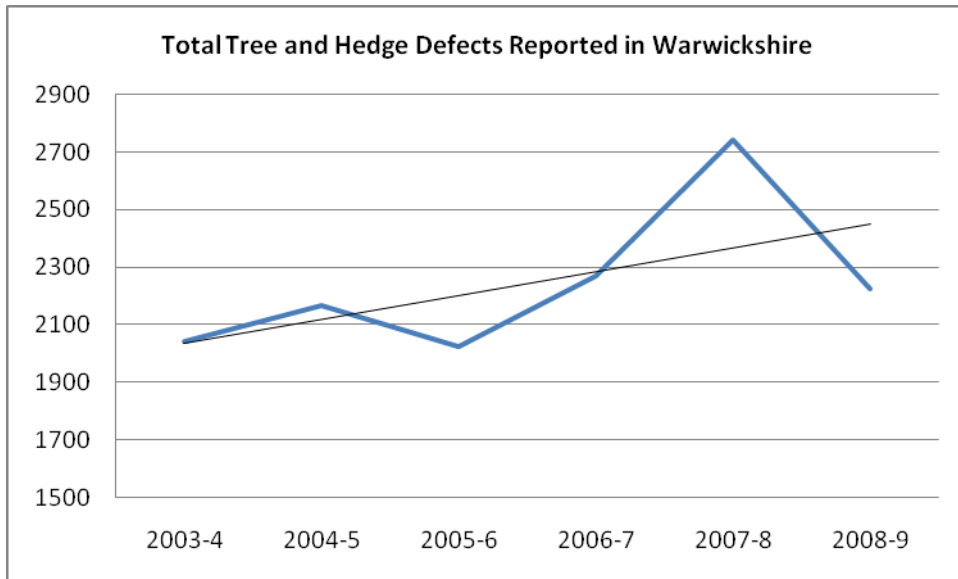
Communications

- 3.8 The Group established that complaints/requests for service are received via telephone and email, through the Customer Service Centre (CSC) at WDC, as well as through WDC and WCC staff. However, the Group established that this data comes from management information obtainable on levels of complaints/requests for service, with no historical data available because it was not previously measured.
- 3.9 Each complaint/request for service about tree maintenance is logged as to location, species and age. During 2008, the CSC received 407 complaints/requests for service, and each of these was inspected and then dealt with or not, in line with published policies (see Appendix 2).

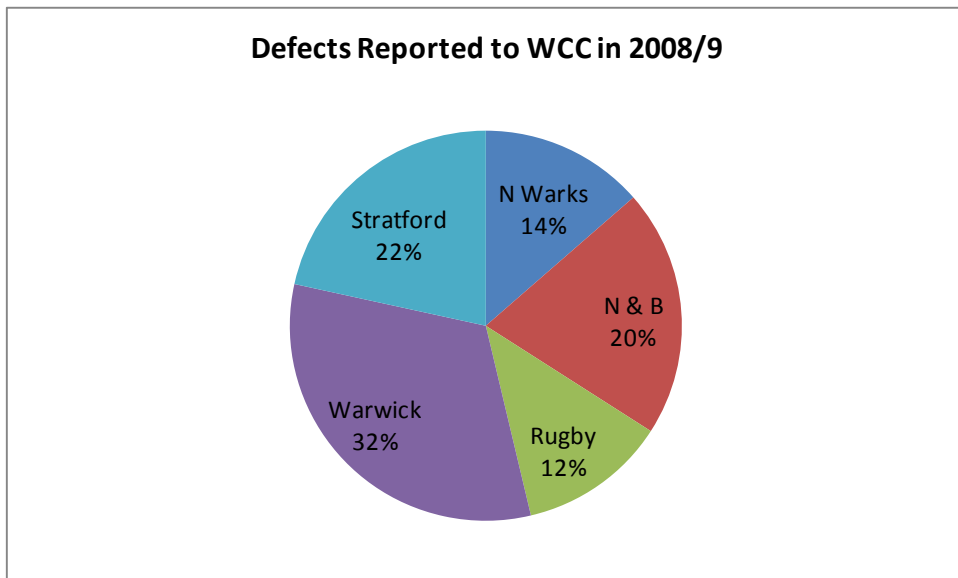
Maintenance

- 3.10 The WDC arrangement with WCC is not paralleled in other District/Boroughs in Warwickshire. Each has a different scheme in operation. The Group could see no rationale in this at all. In Stratford and North Warwickshire, all trees in the public domain are managed directly by WCC. However, the Group believe strongly that tree care should be retained locally by WDC in order to follow amenity and corporate priorities, but with appropriate funding.
- 3.11 A regular five year maintenance regime would cost £84,000 p/a, on highway trees alone; but the advantage would be that residents would be confident to know that their street trees are going to be tackled and when. A five year rolling programme would also allow Glendale to plan ahead. Work would be allocated to a particular group of streets, men and machinery moved there and apart from an emergency at the other end of the District, could work all Monday through Friday at that one task. A five year programme would cover the whole District in sequence.

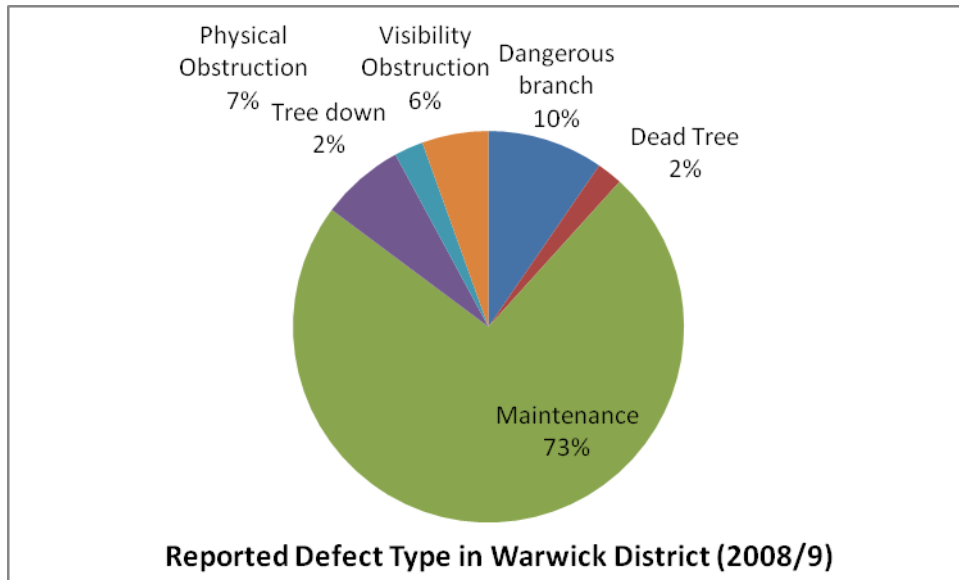
Graph 1: The trend in the number of defects reported across Warwickshire is rising (Data source is WCC's Annual Review of Public Enquiry Management 2008-2009)



Graph 2: WDC has the highest number of defects reported

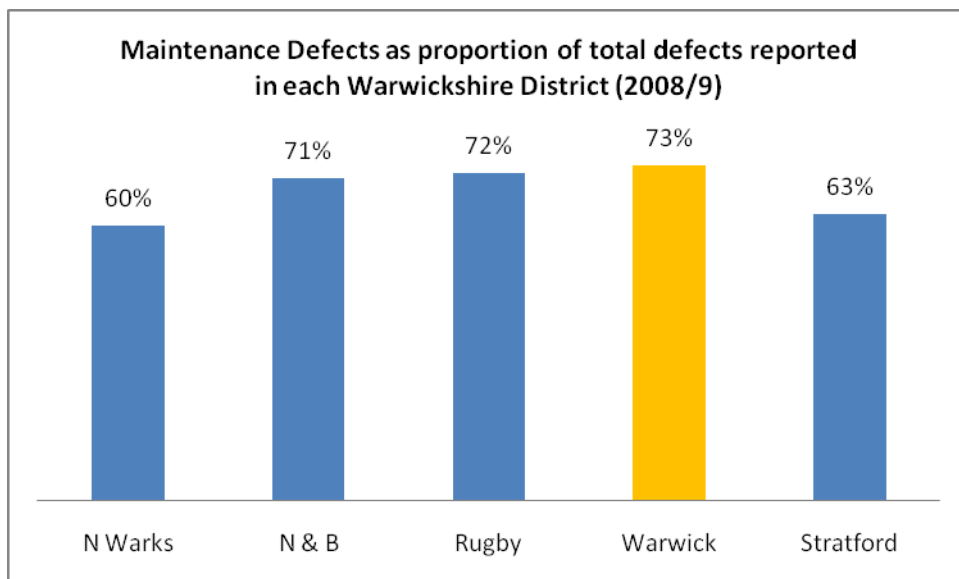


Graph 3: “Maintenance” is by far the largest category of reported defects, and this is true in all Districts. For WDC, this amounts to 73% of all County Council queries

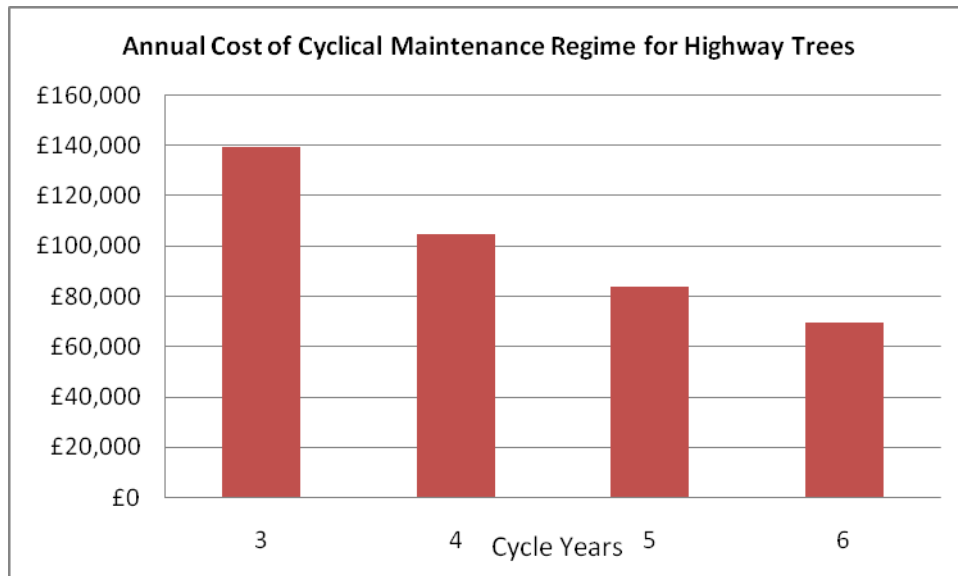


3.12 With regard to the graphs above, the Group acknowledge that further research is needed to understand the full implication of the information in these graphs to elucidate exact ownership between WDC and WCC.

Graph 4: WDC has the highest number of defects reported under the “maintenance” category. The average is 68%

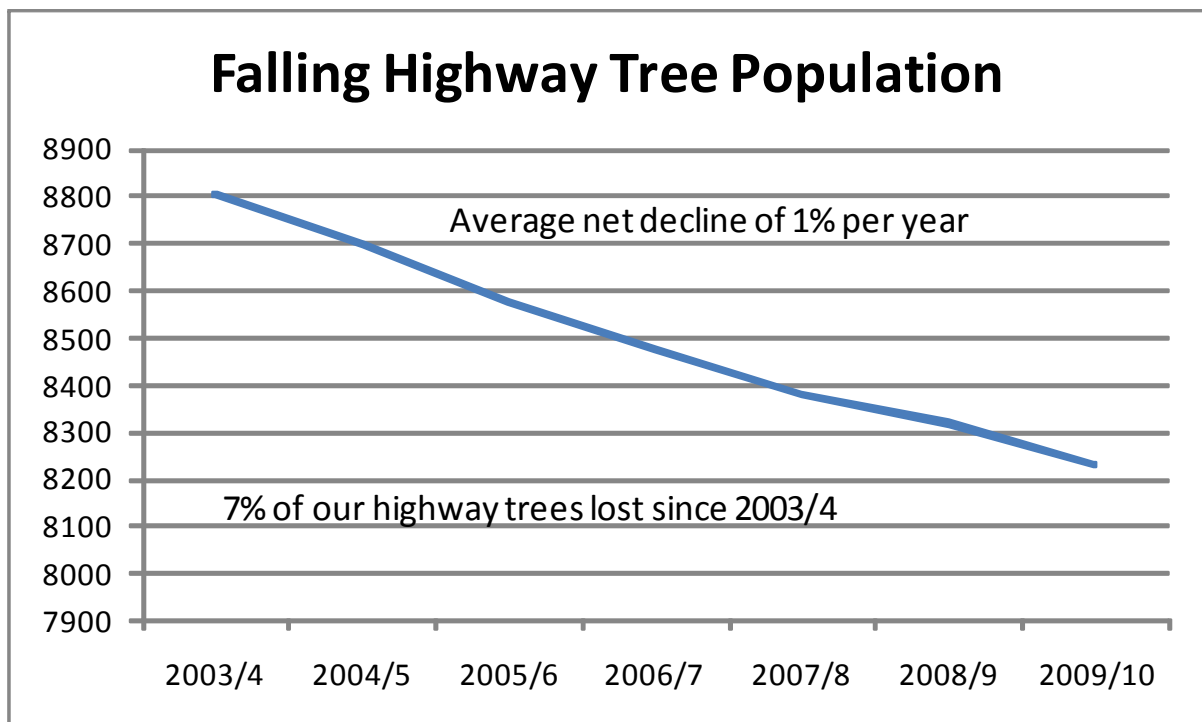
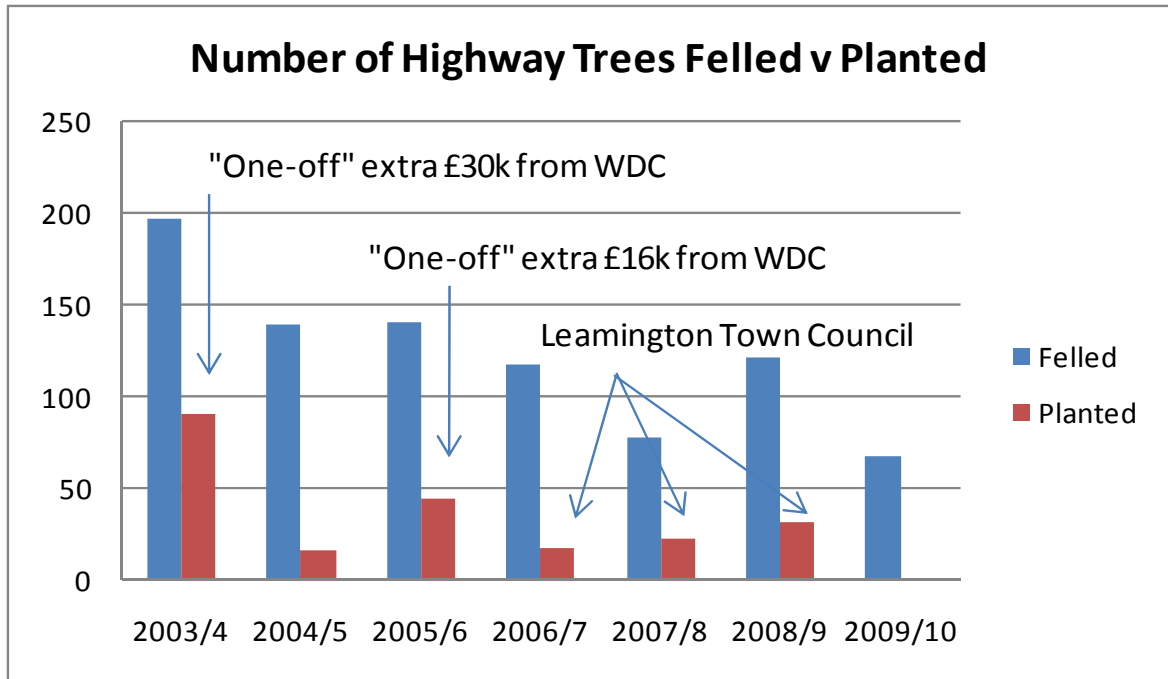


Graph 5: Cost of providing cyclical pruning for highway trees using "Street Tree Maintenance Operation" over a 3, 4, 5 or 6 year cyclical period

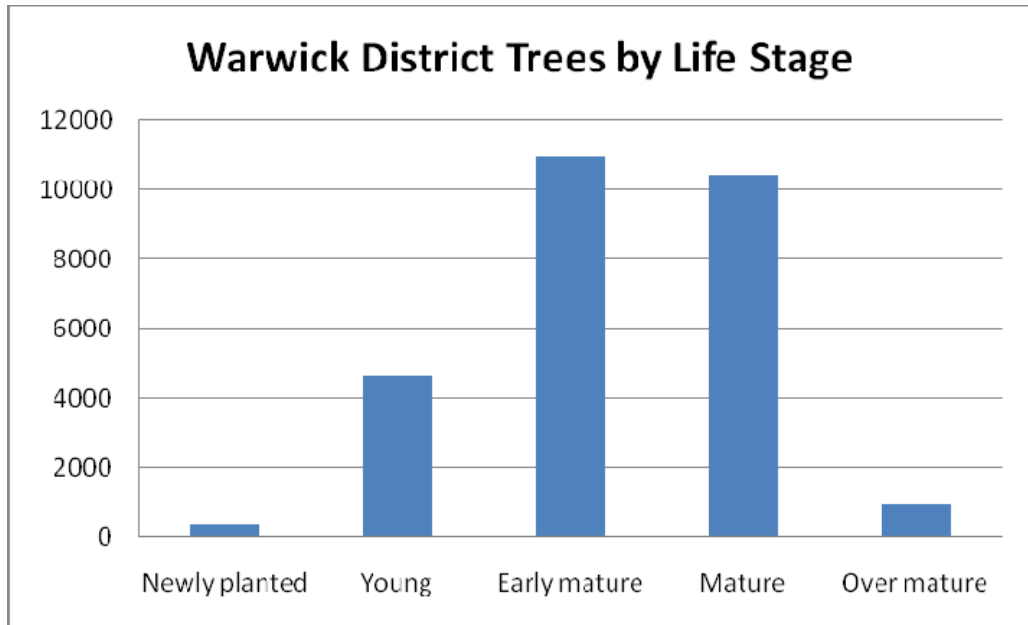
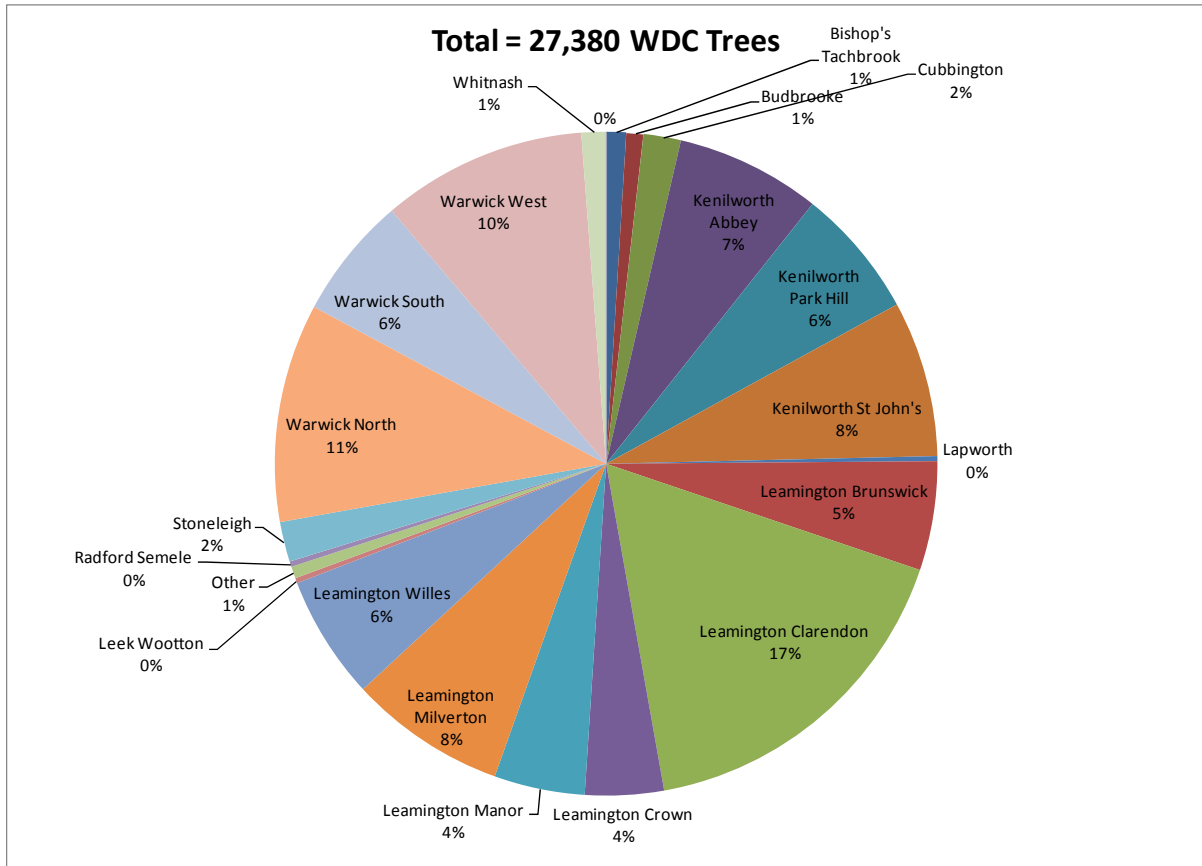


- 3.13 Highway trees have a greater daily impact on residents than trees in parks and are more challenging to care for. Public safety is paramount and it is important to keep public spaces safe from falling branches, but, it is not an exact science and branches may fall at any time. WCC bear the Public Liability insurance.
- 3.14 It is necessary to note that trees grow at different rates and are also climate dependent (summer 2009 wet and warm with a hot June, August and September means trees grow rapidly now.) WDC could fell and plant more suitable trees, for example, Lime and London Plane trees which grow well in town centres because they tolerate exhaust fumes. WDC could be more proactive instead of re-active.
- 3.15 There was hardly any re-planting during the last decade. By 2050 Leafy Warwickshire could be no more and there would be few, if any, urban or highway trees which would result in serious environmental consequences.

Graphs 6 & 7: These two graphs show the highway tree situation. There is a 7% decline from 2003/4. This is an average loss of 1% per annum.



Graphs 8: These graphs describe the age and distribution of trees by ward



- 3.16 The statistics above show that 17% of all WDC trees grow in Clarendon. Warwick North has 20% of all newly planted trees and Warwick West has 33% of all young trees. The data suggests replanting might be better concentrated in areas other than Warwick North and West.
- 3.17 The Group noted that the majority of trees managed by WDC are in the 'early mature' or 'mature' age bracket. They amount to 79% of the total stock. Another 951 trees are categorised as 'over mature'. All trees have a natural life-cycle and, therefore, it is expected that many of these trees will reach the end of their natural span in the foreseeable future.

Recommendation 3: WDC find resources for a phased programme of planting new trees of suitable species on WDC owned land. It may have to look to the private sector – business sponsorship, Business Improvement Districts, individuals, amenity societies – for some of the funding; and to Trusts and grant-giving bodies in the Third Sector.

- 3.18 The Group discussed whether householders should be permitted to lop/remove branches from Council owned trees which touch windows or obscure light to habitable rooms. The members believe this should be allowed subject to approval by a WDC tree inspector or Glendale operative and a registered tree surgeon hired at the householder's expense. We acknowledge that it would not be easy to control.

Recommendation 6: Investigations be made into whether householders should be permitted to lop/remove branches from WCC owned trees, which touch windows or obscure light to habitable rooms, subject to approval by a WCC tree inspector and/or Glendale operative. Then a registered tree surgeon should be hired at the householder's expense.

- 3.19 All 27,000 WD trees are inspected @ £2.99 p/tree to check on dead branches, overhanging branches or significant defects, which are creating a danger (See Appendix 3 & 4). It includes checking for branches obscuring road signs, traffic directions and lamp-posts – the source of many of the complaints from the public

Warwickshire County Council

- 3.20 WCC confirm that they have no formal separate highway tree policy. They rely on long established systems and practices for the inspection and remedial works, including fully qualified Tree Managers, a Forestry Team and partner contractor dealing with the highways, schools, care homes, country parks and other land. The County highways practices are:

- Tree maintenance shall be carried out in accordance with the principle of best arboricultural practice.
- Inspection of highway trees in urban areas is undertaken on a cyclical basis by WDC.
- WCC will take steps to ensure that trees in private ownership which are overhanging or endangering the highway are cut back or made safe.

3.21 WCC comment that the current arrangements with WDC allows WDC the freedom to apply local management of our trees in a way that preserves the special sense of place that would not necessarily be the primary objective of WCC.

3.22 WCC also state that the issue of funding is more complex given the unique situation with regard to the street tree population across each District in the County. The cost of providing an arboricultural service has increased nationwide due to health and safety requirements for tree work, traffic management and management costs to communicate and inform members of the public; this is also the case with the many services which Local Authorities provide. The budgets have to be considered with regard to affordability, asset value retained and risk management. The necessary balancing of tree work budgets against other priorities means that they will always be inadequate to achieve the levels of pro-active tree management the Group would ideally wish to achieve and that the public expects.

Recommendation 2: A Joint Strategy for Tree Maintenance with WCC be investigated through a Joint Working Party of WDC and WCC Councillors, which should include a strategy for a phased programme of planting of suitable trees on highways land.

Climate Change

3.23 Short-term weather changes: In addition to losing trees due to natural causes we must anticipate regular bouts of 'Extreme Weather' such as we have already begun to experience. Even in Warwickshire we will have prolonged droughts, gales and flooding, all of which will have significant impact on the tree population. Different weather events will affect different tree species. Older trees are distinctly more vulnerable. Loss of trees is likely to accelerate and the lack of new planting over recent years will become painfully clear.

3.24 Long-term climate change: The role of trees in mitigating the effects of climate change on humans is important. Tactical planting can – assist with flood prevention, provide shade and shelter in hot weather, reduce stress in

crowded urban environments and promote traffic calming. Considerable published research indicates which species are: a) suitable for public spaces in towns b) able to withstand the effect of extreme weather c) adapt to climate change and survive in predicted future climate conditions. (See Appendix 5).

- 3.25 Greater and faster losses amongst our urban tree stock are imminent. Replanting over the last few years has not kept pace with natural losses and felling for safety reasons, so there is a very large amount of new planting required if the existing number of trees in the public domain is to be upheld. To protect the public from some effects of climate change, we would argue that the existing number of trees is not sufficient, and we should be looking at increasing the total number above what we now have.

Replanting and Planting of New Trees

- 3.26 Although this is not within the remit of this Task & Finish Group the Group felt obliged to consider innovative ways of encouraging replanting of trees within towns.
- 3.27 WDC could encourage planting of trees for weddings, births, christening, deaths and important anniversaries. We have evidence that WDC officers feel obliged to discourage requests to plant memorial trees. However this is because popular locations such as Jephson Gardens already have a good supply of trees. WDC Officers will consider requests for memorial trees as long as the applicant is flexible about the location.
- 3.28 We have to change the ethos of WDC and WCC and actively encourage such planting through extensive publicity. At least over 100 trees should be planted every year to achieve a stand-still position.
- 3.29 Royal Leamington Spa Town Council plants £5000 p.a worth of trees from their precept funds, after consultation with amenity groups. It should be possible to encourage the other three Town Councils to do similar work. Bodies such as Friends of Abbey Fields in Kenilworth, work in partnership with WDC in providing new trees and this is a successful model for other amenity groups to follow.
- 3.30 The A446 in Coleshill is an excellent example of a pro-active replacement policy of young poplars stationed in front of 90 year old poplars planted as an avenue along the dual-carriageway.
- 3.31 The Tree Council is a charity working to promote better awareness of trees and their benefits is active the District. WDC should continue to work closely

with them and encourage new volunteer Tree Wardens in Royal Leamington Spa, Kenilworth and Whitnash. There are about 7,500 volunteer tree wardens in the UK reporting problems and monitoring the progress of new trees.

Recommendation 4: Warwick, Kenilworth and Whitnash Town Councils be encouraged to use some of their precept to plant new trees, seeking advice from WDC's specialist tree staff, as Royal Leamington Spa Town Council already does.

Recommendation 5: Investigations be made into recruiting volunteer tree wardens across the District, in conjunction with the Tree Council.

Recommendation 7: The Planning Committee be requested to investigate possible additional planning conditions to new applications so that new developments are surrounded by new trees

Glendale

- 3.32 The Glendale plant is housed in Solihull, in a secure compound and our team, who live in Coventry, drive to that compound, pick up the equipment and drive to WDC;. This is because Glendale has the neighbouring contract in Solihull Metropolitan Borough.
- 3.33 Telephone conversations with the Managing Director from Glendale in Solihull, have confirmed that the WDC contract is regarded by them as cost-effective and efficient. We must praise their efforts in the amount of work they achieve on such a tiny budget. Glendale manages many larger contracts in the UK, from the Midlands to Scotland, including Solihull, Liverpool and North Tyneside.

Corporate Strategy

- 3.34 One of the Council's values, outlined in the Corporate Strategy is that 'we will ensure our long term impacts are minimised and are sustainable for future generations.'
- 3.35 The Council also has objectives to 'provide high standards of environment services across the district delivering a sustainable and quality environment as well as making the district an attractive place to live, work and visit.'
- 3.36 The Group's recommendations are designed to ensure these values and objectives are met.

4.0 Conclusions

- WDC and Glendale staff carry out an efficient service within the resources which are available
- Maintenance is re-active with an already skeleton service
- A new and signed contract must be negotiated with WCC at senior level
- A small additional resource is required for a cyclical regime of planned maintenance for all WDC and WCC trees within Warwick District.
- The existing WCC funding for highway trees in urban areas is without a rational basis
- Money must be found to provide a better service with the objective of going to tender in 2013 with a realistic requirement based on need
- The current approach is unsustainable. Without replanting, deterioration in our streetscape is to be expected. This is inconsistent with Council objectives and priorities
- Tree care should remain a District responsibility
- There is fundamental ideological conflict with WCC Highways Section who view trees as a risk issue
- Issues relating to climate change must be addressed
- WDC staff bear the frustration expressed by residents.
- It is not acceptable that WCC does not pay the appropriate proportion of officers' time. Moreover, the amount received by WDC is "historical" and unrelated to real costs
- If WDC had a gold-plated service, there could be full re-planting session every autumn. Residents would also get a quicker response to complaints because currently, there is more demand than one tree gang and the current budget can deliver

Monitoring Arrangements

The details with regard to the management of the recommendations are shown in Appendix 6.

Recommendation 8: A monitoring report be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in August 2010 detailing the progress which has been made with the recommendations.

Appendices

1. Scoping document
2. Policies for Pruning Council Managed trees
3. Tender for Inspection of Trees Under the Management of Warwick District Council
4. Tree Risk Management
5. Benefits of Urban Trees
6. Management of Recommendations