

## **Procedure for charging residents for tree work**

The Council has a digital Tree Management System (TMS) which records and maps all of its tree stock.

It is estimated that the Council owns around 70,000 trees at various sites across the borough. The trees are risk rated (either as individuals or groups/woodlands) depending on factors such as proximity to targets (for example property/roads/footpaths) and inspected on an appropriate frequency (annually for high risk to three yearly for low risk).

This system is the Council's defence against any claims for damage or injury as a result of issues relating to its tree stock.

The TMS inspections generate a list of required work which is then prioritised according to risk and urgency, with high risk issues taking top priority and low level issues such as shading, leaf drop and casual annoyance being allocated low priority (whilst accepting that this may disappoint residents).

In addition, service requests from residents coming in via the contact centre must also be investigated/inspected and in some cases generate further required work.

This means that there is always a backlog of work which current resource levels cannot keep up with. However, this includes all work generated from high to low priority, urgent and non-urgent and can range from pruning a limb to felling a large tree to thinning out an entire woodland.

The Council employs one Arboricultural Officer who manages the TMS. This mainly involves carrying out inspections of the tree stock, updating the system, prioritising and programming tree surgery work and supervising work on site.

This is a significant workload and support has been provided to the AO by seconding a Streetscene Operative with appropriate skills to assist in the survey work.

The Council has a pool of trained tree surgeons (nine operatives) in the Streetscene team who are deployed on other tasks (mowing/cleansing/parks/sports pitches etc) for the majority of the time.

During the winter months (November to March) when tree work is undertaken, a team of three at any one time is deployed on the prioritised tree work programme. However, progress against the programme can be impacted on by a number of factors including reactive non-programmed tree work related to winter storm damage or other emergencies, deployment onto other priority non-tree work tasks, and weather or ground condition delays.

The team also has an aging profile, which impacts on their ability to carry out physically challenging tasks, and the pace at which they can safely work.

Ideally, when the TMS is fully updated and all surveys are completed, many service requests from the public will be able to be investigated digitally on the system, without the need for a resource-intensive site visit. Work is in progress to complete surveys and system updates but this will potentially take 2/3 years at current resource levels.

There is currently a large backlog of tasks. However, a significant proportion are non-urgent at present, although they may become more urgent as time passes and further tasks will be added to the backlog as the Borough's aging tree stock deteriorates over time.

Some of the current backlog relates to large, over mature trees in difficult to access locations. These trees are more challenging and time-consuming for the Council's in-house tree team to deal with, as they often require specialist equipment and/or heavy machinery which has to be hired in, and present more complex operational issues which the team are not used to dealing with. This drains resource away from being able to tackle and catch up with the backlog of more routine tree work, and the service requests from members of the public.

In recognition of this, a proportion of efficiency savings identified from the recent Streetscene review was recycled back into the revenue budget for the tree team. This resource will be used to engage specialist contractors to tackle some of the larger, more complex jobs, freeing up the in-house team to progress the other tasks. It will take some time to catch up, and there will always be the reactive issues to deal with when they arise, but it is considered that this strategy will help to make some progress, which otherwise would not have happened.

Where tree work has been requested by members of the public, but is not deemed urgent/essential, the Council is now offering the opportunity for residents to pay for it if they wish it to be done more quickly than the programme would allow. The Council will seek quotes for the work from approved contractors and then bill residents for the work if they are happy with the price offered. A number of residents have taken up this offer, and this approach helps to tackle some of the low level, casual annoyance issues which often generate requests and can cause frustration if they are not able to be completed within a reasonable timescale. The procedure for this approach is as follows:

1. Residents are made aware that there could be a long wait until tree work gets done
2. It is the Council's responsibility to maintain trees and to fund such maintenance. However, the resident will be informed of the option to pay for the work should they wish for the work to be brought forward.
3. A resident might then offer to pay to speed the process up. In this case we will discuss the procedure with them.
4. It is explained that the resident will not be able to specify work or to appoint their own contractor and that they would be paying for work to the specification of the arboricultural officer.
5. The work would be put out to contract in order that the programmed work of the in-house team is not disrupted in favour of non-urgent work
6. The Council's arboricultural officer will seek at least two quotes from contractors to undertake work to his specification. The contractors will be approved contractors of the Arboricultural Association. These are unlikely to be the cheapest contractors but they are trusted professionals who have been vetted by the Arboricultural Association for standards of work, safety procedures and all business procedures, qualifications and insurance. They are reassessed every two years.
7. The resident will receive the cheapest quote in writing together with a specification making it clear in layman's terms exactly what the work will comprise of. There will be no on-costs added and no profit element. The resident receives the contractor's price.
8. On written acceptance the arboricultural officer will issue a purchase order to the contractor. The contractor will invoice Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.

9. After inspecting the completed work the Council will invoice the resident for the same amount.

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