

Site visits for E&E Select Committee Members Monday 1 September and Tuesday 9 September 2014 at 5pm Hampson Park off Webb Rise

Members attending – Cllr Jackie Hollywell (Chair), Cllr Graham Snell and Cllr Pam Stuart (1 September) & Doug Bainbridge, Lorraine Bell and Phil Bibby.

Officer attending – Head of Environmental Services, Lee Myers (1 September), Services Manager Street Scene & Amenities, Paul Seaby, Green Spaces Policy & Development Manager, Julia Hill, Arboriculture and Conservation Manager, Cristian Pinta and Scrutiny Officer, Stephen Weaver.

Members of the Environment & Economy Select Committee undertook two site visits starting in Hampson Park.

Wooded area of Hampson Park

Members noted with interest the mature trees in the park that were planted in the grounds of what was previously a private garden to a large property on the site prior to the development of the new town. There were a number of large Sequoia Red Wood trees as well as Oaks, Elm, Holly, Ash, Horse Chesnut, Sycamore and Yew Trees. The Horse Chesnut tree had evidence of a leaf disease – leaf miner.

Cristian Pinta, Arboriculture and Conversation Manager explained that the trees in the park offer an important visual amenity to the area as well as offering habitat for, insects, birds and animals. On exit from the wooded area of the park Members walked through an underpass under Lonsdale Road and observed the sycamore trees lining the banks of the underpass which help to stabilise the bank from soil erosion.

During the visit on 9 September it was noted that the no cycle sign was obscured by the tree foliage and would be cut back.

Shrub beds

On exiting the underpass Members walked through to a residential area and observed the condition of the shrub beds. Due to firstly Gershon Savings then LSPG General Fund Savings and more recently Priority Based Budgets Savings the regime to maintain shrub beds has gradually been reduced to just 4 operatives who carry out the whole of the Council's maintenance programme for shrub beds, the main work is undertaken during a winter maintenance programme. 2 operatives work from North to South on the East side of town, and 2 operatives do the same on the West. . Previously the shrub beds would have been weeded during the summer months now weeds are sprayed but the residual weed growth is left in the ground which looks messy. Shrub beds that are the responsibility of SBC Social Housing are maintained via the Housing Revenue Account and consequently enjoy more regular maintenance than the non housing shrub beds. Members discussed with officers whether poorly kept shrub beds might be better served by being grassed over. It was noted that due to the limited budget available to maintain shrub beds from the general fund there was no programmes to replace dead shrubs. In the past the council operated its own nursery to propagate replacement shrubs but the funding to support this was removed so the facility no longer exists.

Members discussed the take up of Licences to Occupy which the Council can issue for residents to formally take over the maintenance of an area and Licences to Cultivate which are issued by the County Council and attract a fee. Both licences are issued infrequently as the HCC fee deters take up and the Council's Licence to Occupy still requires long term commitment from the resident if they choose to take out a licence.

HRA and general fund funded works

Members were taken to see an Ash tree next to the Almond Tree Public House that had been pruned back for health and safety reasons as branches were dropping off in a built up residential area. Very close to the Ash tree were Silver Birch trees that were on the grounds of an SBC Sheltered Housing scheme, as such they were funded by the HRA so any maintenance for the trees needed to be paid for by Housing. Maintenance of HRA trees were more ad hoc than those for public land, which is the reverse of the maintenance regime for shrub beds. Members asked if there could not be some way of pooling resources regarding the maintenance of trees, hedges and shrubs to remove anomalies about working on one area but not another depending on the demarcation of the land, as the public were unaware of the differences and it made little sense to them? Officers stated that they have requested that the HRA fund a full time arboriculture officer to address the needs of trees on HRA land.

Requests to fell trees from residents

Officers suggested that they could not cut back each tree they were asked to work on but looked at each case separately. Officers showed Members an example of a tree on Wisden Road where the resident had asked the Council to fell the tree as it was alleged to be causing damage to the resident's property lifting the patio slabs in the garden and causing a nuisance with seeds and leaves in the properties gutters. The tree in question was the only one in the grass verge area and its removal would have a detrimental impact the visual amenity of the area. Officers have offered to lift the slabs and cut the root in the surface area below the slab but have not agreed to the request to fell the tree and have suggested to the resident that the resident pay for an independent survey to identify if the tree is actually causing any damage to the property. So far the resident has not undertaken a survey.

Volunteers

Members were introduced to volunteers who had been involved in a number of one off and regular environmental projects around the town. The volunteers described how they had become involved as a volunteer, what the work was they undertook, how they were trained, what they enjoyed about the work.

Volunteers are from a wide age range but the majority tend to be retired persons. A couple interviewed said they had become involved having seen a poster Relating to a Wild Stevenage (a two year project delivered by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust in partnership with SBC) event.

The volunteers said that the work was very enjoyable, they had met new people and made new friends, acquired new skills and were keeping fit at the same time. They had cleared paths, ditches and ponds, carried out hedge reduction and planted bulbs etc. One couple help out on a weekly basis at the Town Centre Gardens. The volunteers reported that they got a lot of satisfaction from the work as they could see the benefit their work provides to an area and they often received positive feedback from members of the public.

There are around 70 volunteers in total with about 30 to 40 being regularly active. A typical session lasts 3 to 4 hours, starting in the morning at 10am and ending around 2pm. The Council provides training, all equipment and protective clothes as well as a volunteer uniform and a cup of tea and biscuits! The volunteers are always accompanied by trained Council Staff who operate the mechanical equipment while the volunteers use hand tools.

A programme of works is agreed by Julia Hill and Cristian Pinta and is informed largely by the Stevenage Biodiversity Action Plan. This is communicated to the volunteers a couple of times a year, who then confirm which sessions they can attend. The work that is undertaken is always something that will add value to the area and never to replace, or instead of, work that the Council would otherwise undertake. Volunteers are given training in the tasks they are undertaking and encouraged to go at their own pace, but it has been commented that the volunteers work very hard during the sessions. Before becoming a volunteer a short application form needs to be completed and a proof of ID and address and emergency contact details are required.

The skills acquired during volunteering have helped volunteers point out unhealthy damaged/dangerous trees which has saved the Council from potential costly insurance claims.

Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust uses the example of Stevenage volunteers, and our conservation work, as an exemplar for other areas to copy.

Members asked whether many young people became volunteers? There have been some who use the opportunity to gain experience, enhance their CV's and gain references to help with employment opportunities. Members welcomed this and suggested that it should continue to be promoted amongst young adults. Regarding recruiting more volunteers officers advised that they would prefer to offer fewer volunteers a quality experience, rather than extend the initiative beyond the capacity of the current staffing level. Julia Hill is currently working on documents and processes that will hopefully satisfy the Council's insurers, which will enable suitable volunteers to be trained to lead future volunteer activity. This would extend the opportunities available to volunteers. More volunteers would be welcome but a large influx would currently be difficult to manage.