



**Meeting:** ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Environment & Regeneration  
Economy, Enterprise and Transport

**Date:** 24 FEBRUARY 2015

## **REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE MAINTENANCE OF TREES, HEDGES AND SHRUB BEDS**

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### **1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To consider the recommendations of the Scrutiny review into the Maintenance of trees, hedges and shrub beds undertaken by the Environment & Economy Select Committee.

### **2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED**

- 2.1 Having canvassed Members for potential Scrutiny work plan items via the annual Scrutiny Survey the following issues were identified as potential scrutiny items for consideration during 2014-15:

- Energy Management of Council Buildings (from CAB)
- The future of open spaces dedicated to sporting activities and the shift from team games towards informal active recreations (from Sports Stevenage) – possibly a joint study with Community Select Committee
- Town Centre Regeneration, in its broadest terms
- Neighbourhood Shopping Centres: How can we help revitalise and re-energise them?
- Bio-Diversity Plan for the town
- Tree and Hedge Policy within the town (why SBC will not prune or fell tree's blocking light, tree preservation orders, Hedge cutting etc)
- Relationship of Housing and Environment Departments when dealing with tenant or resident's complaints
- Highway cleansing – cleansing in car parks
- Outcomes from regeneration activity

- 2.1.1 During discussions at its meeting on 12 March 2014, the Environment & Economy Select Committee considered the above potential items and accordingly agreed the topic of the Maintenance of Tree, Hedges and Shrub Beds as its subject for a scrutiny review.

## 2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.2.1 The Committee met and agreed a scope for the review which should look at the following areas:

- *Are there any current problems with the SBC service from the public's perspective?*
- *What problems (if any) do Tree Preservation Orders cause regarding maintaining the environment?*
- *Do HCC licences to cultivate and SBC licences to occupy cause conflict with the Council's pruning programmes?*
- *What can be done to encourage residents to join "friends of" groups to help promote and maintain the town's green spaces*
- *How does the service consult with residents?*
- *Is there any innovation from neighbouring authorities that SBC can learn from?*

## 2.3 Process of the review

2.3.1 Membership of the Environment & Economy Select Committee who conducted the review was:

Councillors Jackie Hollywell (Chair), Phil Bibby (Vice Chair), Doug Bainbridge, Lorraine Bell, Lloyd Briscoe, Jim Brown, Elaine Connolly, Chris Saunders, Graham Snell and Pam Stuart.

2.3.2 The Committee met on 7 occasions to undertake the review. On 18 June the Committee met to agree the scoping document and on 9 July the Committee received a presentation on the service from Environment Officers. On 1 & 9 September the Committee carried out two site visits to Hampson Park and met the Green Space Volunteers. On 7 October Members agreed their questions for witnesses and on 21 October Members carried out the interview session. Finally the Committee met on 24 February 2015 to agree its recommendations and report.

2.3.3 The Committee received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment, Cllr John Gardner
- SBC Head of Environmental Services, Lee Myers
- SBC Services Manager Street Scene and Amenities, Paul Seaby
- SBC Environmental Performance & Development Manager, Julia Hill
- SBC Arboriculture & Conservation Manager, Christian Pinta
- SBC Tenancy & Income Manager, Audley Philips
- Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Tree Officer, Oliver Waring as the reviews "critical friend"
- 4 SBC Green Spaces Volunteers

## 3 REVIEW FINDINGS

### 3.1 Conclusions of the Environment & Economy Select Committee

3.1.1 Based on the input provided by the witnesses the Committee have made the following conclusions.

### 3.2 Differences between HRA & General Funded Maintenance programmes

3.2.1 Regarding the maintenance of trees, hedges and shrub beds, Officers from Environmental Services and Housing should work together to provide a seamless service, regardless of where the budget is kept to carry out this service, whether it be paid for by either the HRA or the General Fund. To this end, Members would like Officers from Environmental Services and Housing to reconsider the current service level agreements between the two services that were drawn up at the time when the Arm's Length Management Organisation, Stevenage Homes, was established as these SLA are no longer appropriate given that it is now one service. Members are aware that the rules governing separate funding arrangements for the Housing Revenue Account would still need to be satisfied. However, Members would still like to see a one Council, uniform service, approach to the maintenance of trees, hedges and shrub beds on Council land in the town.

### 3.3 Grassing over sparsely covered shrub beds

3.3.1 During the review Members discussed the merits of grassing over poorly maintained or sparsely covered shrub beds. Members are keen for Officers to explore whether this is an option for areas of SBC non-HRA shrub beds that lend themselves to this solution. Members are aware that this solution recommendation may not be practical in every location, so consideration would be required regarding its use, as in some areas shrub beds were used to provide a natural barrier to boundaries, which would be lost if grassed over. There could also be a loss of visual amenity, but in some cases it might be argued that grassing over would be an improvement. Members have asked if such an option would be cost neutral, with the expense of more grass cutting against the current maintenance costs of maintaining the shrub beds. Could there be any other unintended consequences in doing this? Officers reported that they would have to undertake a full survey of the shrub beds and do a cost benefit analysis to see which sites would be suitable to be grassed over and which sites would be cost effective.

### 3.4 Help for residents who can't manage gardens

3.4.1 Members were pleased that the Council currently directs residents who require help with maintaining their gardens to a list of trustworthy and affordable local Gardeners.

3.4.2 The review found that Groundwork Hertfordshire, an Environmental Campaign Charity offer a free "Green Aiders" project, run by the charity and funded by Hertfordshire County Council, which helps vulnerable and elderly people take back control of their gardens by making them more manageable, safer and more pleasant to spend time in. This scheme helps 60 vulnerable householders in Stevenage benefit from their gardens being renovated.

3.4.3 North Herts CVS also operates a "Time Bank" volunteer garden service that operates during the spring through to the Autumn. The Team aims to help people that are unable to look after their gardens for a variety of reasons to restore them to a manageable state. The Team provides a free one off visit which can be for up to five hours depending on the task.

3.4.4 Age UK are currently unable to extend their "Help in the Home" service to offer gardening services but recommend people to view their lists of useful services and providers.

### 3.5 Play areas in parks

- 3.5.1 A specific issue that was of concern to Members was the condition of the play areas in parks with broken glass in these areas being a recurring problem. It was noted that there were no specific park keeper officers any longer but Environmental Services officers roam around the park play areas to monitor and deal with issues like broken glass. The play areas are routinely litter picked twice a week. However, there is a list of 20 hot spot areas which have particular litter problems and these are visited on Saturday and Sunday mornings. The hot spot play areas have specific signage in the play area to deter littering. The list of 20 hot spot areas are subject to change so that the areas that are worst affected can be dealt with most frequently.

### 3.6 Tree stock numbers & species selection

- 3.6.1 Members considered the tree stock numbers in Stevenage that have been on a long term decline from the number planted when the new town was established to the current tree numbers of 29,000 amenity trees (excluding woodland). If the Council continues to fell trees at the current rate, 100 – 200, and replace 20-30 per year there will be a declining number of trees (in 10 years down approximately 1800 trees).
- 3.6.2 However, the Council's Arboriculture & Conservation Manager was not overly concerned as the main loss of trees over the years has been due to the stock maturing. Some trees have also been lost to development as the town has grown and the present numbers were manageable with trees often self-setting adding to the tree stock but sometimes it was necessary to remove them if they were causing a problem. What was more relevant was that the current approach to replacing trees focuses on the diversity of the tree stock which in time will offer better protection from disease than just a monoculture. The type of replacement trees is also thoughtfully analysed to ensure the right tree in the right location. In the long term climate change could have an impact on tree species selected, so this would be taken into consideration.

### 3.7 Shrub bed species

- 3.7.1 It was noted that the choice of species was largely determined by location and how hardy the plant was to disease, for this reason monocultures are avoided. Species have been chosen depending on what purpose they are serving beyond the primary reason of providing an improved visual amenity. Therefore, in some locations shrubs may have been selected in the past to offer added security to a site with thorny species or offering a screen from ball games to elderly residents. Over time the need for this selection of species may have changed and in some cases certain species act as a litter trap, so careful consideration needs to be taken when choosing particular species.

### 3.8 Green Space Volunteers

- 3.8.1 During the review Members carried out two site visits to Hampson Park, at these visits Members were introduced to Green Space 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.

- 3.8.2 Green Space Volunteers are drawn from a wide age range but the majority tend to be retired persons. Some have got involved after volunteering for the Wild Stevenage project, this was a two year project delivered by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust in partnership with SBC.
- 3.8.3 Green Space Volunteering appeals to people who have the time to volunteer, are interested in meeting new people, making friends, acquiring new skills and keeping fit in the process ranging from moderately through to vigorous physical work. Green Space Volunteers have carried out work including clearing paths, ditches and ponds, carried out hedge reduction and planted bulbs etc. Some help out on a weekly basis at the Town Centre Gardens.
- 3.8.4 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. The volunteers are always accompanied by trained Council Staff who operate any mechanical equipment that is required while the volunteers use hand tools.
- 3.8.5 A programme of works is co-ordinated by Julia Hill working with Cristian Pinta, Gordon Drake and Jerry Hunter and is informed largely by the Stevenage Biodiversity Action Plan. This information 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 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.
- 3.8.6 The skills acquired during volunteering have helped volunteers point out unhealthy damaged/dangerous trees which has saved the Council from potential costly insurance claims.
- 3.8.7 Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust uses the example of Stevenage volunteers, and SBC conservation work, as an exemplar for other areas to copy.
- 3.8.8 Members stated that they are keen that young people are given the opportunity to become volunteers. Some young people have used 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 have 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 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. Members suggested that perhaps an occasional volunteer's roadshow at events like Stevenage Day and family park events or an annual volunteer's seminar could be beneficial to further promote the work of the Green Space Volunteers.
- 3.8.9 Members suggested that the Campaigns Officer who visits schools to promote Eco Schools could also promote the opportunity to become involved in volunteering for those interested in working in Environment based jobs which they could use in their

CVs. However, Eco schools links are currently with primary schools not secondary schools so work experience is not a current consideration.

- 3.8.10 Members undertaking the review were very impressed with the work that the officers had established with the Green Space Volunteers and are keen that this excellent work can be maintained. To this end, Members have suggested that officers should take every opportunity to publicise the great work that the volunteers are doing.

### 3.9 Promotion of Biodiversity via external funding opportunities

- 3.9.1 Members carried out some desk top research into various National and European funding streams for local authority Biodiversity work. However, having liaised with the Council's External Funding Officer it was confirmed that there were no current live funding opportunities available. There had been a DEFRA funded scheme that may have been suitable as a funding stream to support further work with volunteers but the funding had all been used up.

### 3.10 Equalities & Diversity

- 3.10.1 As part of the review Members considered how the service impacted people with disabilities. Members raised the issue of the adequacy of the lighting on paths and in parks, as this was important to users feeling safe especially in the winter months. Also Members raised the issue of the lights being often out in Fairlands Valley Park. Members also raised the issue of providing wheelchair and buggy access to green spaces in the town.

- 3.10.2 Members asked Officers what efforts there had been are made to provide sensory experience for blind and partially sighted people in our parks and open spaces? The Town Centre Gardens has a sensory garden, designed to provide interest for a range of impairments, but this is currently the only accessible provision within Stevenage). Tree roots in pavements and paths can cause access issues for mobility scooters, buggies and prams, accordingly, Members stated that they were keen that when designing future paths and planting schemes in green spaces that officers do all that can be done to minimise this issue, as the Council wishes to make the town's open spaces accessible to all.

### 3.11 Licences to Cultivate and Occupy

- 3.11.1 Notwithstanding the complications of entering into Licences to Cultivate and Licences Occupy, Members are keen to promote these as an option for residents but the current system appears to have a number of disincentives including entering into a legal agreement with the Council and the fee (for HCC licences to occupy). During the review Members suggested that perhaps with better publicity using the Council's resident magazine, Chronicle, it might encourage more residents to take on areas adjacent to their property to smarten its appearance. Members discussed with Officers whether it would be possible to take away the green waste for people who took on licences to cultivate, but it was considered that this would not be practical or economic.

### 3.12 "Critical Friend"

- 3.12.1 The Committee were keen to compare the service with another District in Hertfordshire to see how the Stevenage service compared to a similar local authority. Although a direct comparison with Stevenage is difficult the Tree Officer at

Welwyn Hatfield kindly attended a meeting of the Committee to offer his opinion of the local service and draw parallels and contrasts between the two services and authorities.

3.12.2 Given the current staffing ratios of SBC and the reduction in staff due to the Savings Options of the past few years, staffing levels were comparable. While the number of trees was similar, Welwyn and Hatfield have more woodlands areas to manage. However, Welwyn and Hatfield have 4 Trees and Woodland Officers (2 full time and two part time), Stevenage only has one full time Officer. The urban area tree stocks were very similar in numbers and species. Like Stevenage, Welwyn Hatfield had a number of volunteers involved in tree and plant conservation work. The Tree Officer from Welwyn stated that overall his impression of the town regarding its trees and green spaces was favourable.

### 3.13 Portfolio Holder

3.13.1 The Committee asked the portfolio holder what the impact had been on the service following the service cuts. Cllr John Gardner suggested that inevitably there has been an impact from the cuts to the service brought about by a number of savings options, which in turn has an impact on the number of staff employed and the volume of work that the remaining staff can manage. Therefore in places the town and its green spaces would not look as tidy as previously, so litter picking and public bin emptying in certain places has dropped from once a week to every two weeks. There was also an impact on the resilience of the service. The Portfolio Holder is very keen to support the work that the Green Space Volunteers are doing as this offers a great deal of added value to the work that Environment Officers provide.

### 3.14 Overall Service

3.14.1 Members were pleased with the level of service that the Council's Environmental Services Team provides especially considering the reduction in staffing levels over the past few years, and were particularly encouraged by the work that officers are doing with the Green Space Volunteers and where it is possible Members would look for developments regarding the different standards of maintenance between HRA and General Fund grounds along with a number of other recommendations below that Members hope will further improve the excellent service.

## **4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.1 That the Environment & Economy Select Committee considers the findings of the review, contained within this report and the recommendations below be presented to the Environment & Regeneration Portfolio Holder and the Strategic Director (Environment) and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report;
- 4.2 That Officers from Environmental Services and Housing reconsider the current service level agreements between the two services (that were drawn up for the former ALMO, Stevenage Homes), whilst still complying with the rules governing separate funding arrangements for the Housing Revenue Account, in order that a one Council, uniform service, approach to the maintenance of trees, hedges and shrub beds on Council land in the town can be achieved;
- 4.3 That Officers undertake a full survey of the shrub beds on Council land to provide a cost benefit analysis to see which sites would be suitable and cost effective to be grassed over;

- 4.4 That Officers consider ways that the service could further promote gardening services to those residents who are unable to maintain their own gardens, be this through directing residents who require help with maintaining their gardens to a list of trustworthy and affordable local Gardeners, to promoting Groundwork Hertfordshire's "Green Aiders" scheme or North Herts CVS "Time Bank" volunteer garden service;
- 4.5 Regarding Volunteering: (i) That Officers negotiate with the Council's insurers, ensuring that sufficient safeguards are in place, so that suitable volunteers can be trained to lead future volunteer activity, which would extend the opportunities currently available to volunteers; (ii) That the Campaigns Officer work on linking up with a local secondary school to become an Eco School so that in time the Officer could promote the opportunity of become involved in volunteering for those interested in working in Environment based jobs which they could use in their CVs; and (iii) That Officers should take every opportunity to publicise the great work that the Green Space Volunteers are doing;
- 4.6 That Officers look to access any external funding linked to biodiversity work that the Green Space Volunteers are undertaking;
- 4.7 That when designing new planting schemes or developments to the town's green spaces that Officers give consideration to and make adequate provision for making these spaces accessible to all; and
- 4.8 That notwithstanding the complications of entering into Licences to Cultivate and Licences Occupy, Members are keen to promote these as an option for residents but the current system appears to have a number of disincentives including entering into a legal agreements with the Council (for licences to cultivate) and the fee (for HCC licences to occupy). Members suggested that perhaps with better publicity using the Council's resident magazine, Chronicle, it might encourage more residents to take on areas adjacent to their property to smarten its appearance. Also Members wish Officers to consider the current issuing of licences to see if it is possible to simplify the process in any way and take away some of the perceived bureaucracy that may put off potential take up from residents.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

There are no specific financial implications to this report.

### **5.2 Legal Implications**

There are no direct legal implications for this report.

### **5.3 Equalities Implications**

The Equalities and Diversity implications have been directly addressed in the report.

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS & APPENDICES**

Notes of the Committee meetings held on 18 June, 9 July 1 & 9 September, 7 & 21 October are available for inspection.

Appendix A – Scrutiny Scoping Proforma