

Meeting Note and suggested way forward for street tree planting in Epsom and Ewell Borough from 2017 onwards.

A meeting between Borough officers and Nick Healey – Area Highway Manager at Surrey County Council was held at the Town Hall in Epsom on Monday 20 February 2017. Borough officers present were: Mark Berry, Ian Dyer, Gillian McTaggart, Sam Whitehead and Jeremy Young.

The meeting was called to consider what arrangements, if any, there could be for an on-going programme of street tree planting in the Borough following the termination of the agency arrangements with SCC for the maintenance of trees within the highway on 31 March 2017.

The meeting had been prompted by a letter from Mike Ford of the Epsom and Ewell Tree Advisory Board to Borough Councillors (attached).

Description of the current mechanism by which street trees are planted in other boroughs and districts

The arrangements are as follows:

There are two mechanisms:

1. A private party pay for the planting of a tree/trees and the work is undertaken entirely by SCC. This typically costs c. £600+ per tree although the precise cost would be based upon a case-specific quotation, not on the fixed tariff implied on the SCC website. The figure cited on the website is in order to manage expectations as the costs are quite prohibitive although the precise quote could be lower than stated.
2. The Borough produce a funded proposal and implement the work with SCC's approval, using their own contractors. This is a much more cost-effective mechanism. The Borough is responsible for procuring the work and assessing the risks associated with undertaking it. SCC are only interested in protecting their asset and will give consent for the work if they are satisfied that the tree/s would be suitable in terms of such things as their location, bed size, species and planting specification.

Insurance Risk

Under Option 1, SCC bears all of the risk. Under Option 2, the Borough is responsible for public liability in terms of the tree planting process itself. Beyond that, it has no on-going liability for any damage that the tree may cause. This would be entirely borne by SCC. An exception to this would be where the planting had been undertaken without SCC consent.

Utilities Searches

An important element of the risk associated with implementing the work is associated with subterranean services. Under Option 1 SCC take full responsibility for

undertaking the search. Under Option 2 the Borough can procure the information from SCC but this may have a cost associated with it and might be difficult to resource if a large number of proposals come at once. Alternatively, the Borough can undertake its own utilities search using the same methods undertaken by SCC to access information that is freely available on the web. Details of this process have been supplied by SCC.

The search is only for the Borough and their contractor's benefit to ensure that all reasonable measures have been taken to identify any potential hazards to the contractors and the public in advance.

Managing expectations

When SCC undertake tree planting in the highway, funded by individuals or other groups, they explain that they are paying for only one "attempt" at planting a tree. If it dies or is subsequently damaged SCC does not guarantee that it will be replaced or that a tree will be maintained in that location thereafter.

Local "ownership" of the tree is to be encouraged so that local people take responsibility for protecting and nurturing the tree where possible (including periodic watering). The procurement may include a limited number of watering events but beyond that, the tree must survive by itself. Survival and general health may depend on a degree of attention from local residents.

SCC's on-going support for new planting in the highway

SCC does not undertake the planting of new trees in the highway except when privately funded under Option 1. They will, however, support the Borough Council as they do other Districts, Boroughs and Parishes in the county in the planting of new trees through Option 2 above. They only have 40p to spend on each highway tree annually and so their resources are severely constrained and will continue to be so. Nonetheless, they aim to turn-around decisions on new planting proposals within 2 weeks. The longest turn-around would exceptionally be up-to 28 days in duration.

At present, this consenting process would be undertaken by Graham Banks (Tree Officer) and Gavin Smith (Highways Inspector).

We could procure work from SCC's framework contractors and details of these have been supplied to Borough officers.

The Borough's Objectives

The Borough Council does not want to re-assume on-going liability for street trees. However, it does want to ensure that the Borough remains green. This is part of a key priority in the Corporate Plan. The Borough has historically undertaken street tree planting at a rate of between 150 and 200 trees per annum. This has maintained the street tree stock and enhanced it in places. The result is a Borough that remains green and consequently a sought-after and attractive place to live. To meet the Council's priority it is desirable to ensure that there is no diminution of the tree stock within the highway as a result of removals, damage, disease and natural decline.

The Borough does not have identified funding for the purpose of new street tree planting. It would, therefore have to find that funding or identify new sources of funding from the community.

With sustained interest in new tree planting in the highway it is desirable to find a way to continue to plant new trees without incurring sustained additional cost to Council's budget based upon public expectation that it would do so. Funding streams from the community could be explored and a street tree planting capability developed in the event that fund is available.

Proposal for future street tree planting arrangements – a proposal

It makes sense to use option 2 for the future delivery of street tree planting in the Borough as this would be easily the most cost-effective way of doing so.

We can develop our own tariff for undertaking the work based upon a clear understanding of the costs. This might be as follows:

Item	Cost per tree
Administration: Carry out utilities checks and administer funds. Liaise with funding partner. Secure approval to location from SCC	£28
Tree Officer input	£50
Procure and plant tree and provide aftercare.	£173.95
Total	£251.95
N.B. See attached detailed breakdown of estimated costs	

This figure may seem high to a resident that may think it's simply a case of buying a tree for £70 and digging a hole to put it in. Nonetheless, it represents good value compared with the rates charged by Surrey County Council.

Possible sources of funding:

1. Tree Advisory Board
2. SCC Members' personal allocation
3. Individual residents/ resident's groups
4. A prepared and costed programme of multiple sites might attract funds from other sources.

Administration:

Members have rightly identified the need for additional administrative support. Given the uncertainty of the funding as a steady stream of income it would be necessary to identify a flexible resource that could provide support to the Tree Officer. A model for this was created for the administration of the Civic Investment Fund (CIF) which had to be flexible and responsive in a similar fashion. For that, we seconded an

officer from Elmbridge Borough Council on roughly one day/week. If the CIF is to be revived we could double-up the role. If not, we could, nonetheless, seek to identify some officer capacity from within EEBC or from another authority that could be deployed on an ad hoc basis. The cost of the relevant time would be charged to the funding partner through the new scheme.

Alternatively, we could have a standing arrangement with a contractor who would carry out the administrative tasks. This is likely to be significantly more expensive and will add to the unit cost of the scheme. It might also be more difficult for us to ensure adequate quality controls and performance standards.

Tree planting can be carried-out when resources allow and outside of the planting season preparatory checks can be made and proposals assessed. It is, by its very nature a very variable demand, although some residents have high expectations of timely delivery.

Way forward:

1. Firm-up details and discuss with Tree Advisory Board
2. Secure Member approval
3. Confirm intentions to Surrey County Council
4. Identify required additional admin support
5. Promote scheme
6. Implement
7. Review
8. Improve