

<i>ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL</i>	Agenda Item No.
6 NOVEMBER 2008	Public Report

Report of the Director of City Services

Report Author – Mike Heath, Director of City Services

Contact Details – 01733 425301

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF A TREE?

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 In recent months, there has been pressure on the council to cut down a number of mature trees which were causing structural damage to properties in their vicinity. The trees in question have been several hundred years old, in good health and with a future lifespan of up to 200 years. They pre-date the properties significantly and provide a valuable local amenity. Currently the council has no methodology for placing a value on the tree and there is almost an automatic assumption that the tree should be removed in favour of the development. The report sets out some considerations that may be used to decide whether it is appropriate to remove trees or retain them when they impact on structures and the cost of doing so.

2. LINKS TO CORPORATE PLAN, SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT

- 2.1 This links to Priority 3 of the sustainable community strategy – creating the UK's environment capital, in particular "making Peterborough cleaner and greener".

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 From time to time officers are asked for permission to remove street trees and those growing on public amenity areas and hedgerows that neighbour privately owned properties because they are either in the way of development, creating an obstruction or are in a poor condition. The normal response is that if there is an obvious problem the tree can be removed on the basis that two new semi-mature specimens are provided as replacement. This ensures that whilst there may be a local loss of a tree, the council's tree stock continues to expand, offsetting carbon emissions and continuing the greening of the authority.
- 3.2 On occasion there are requests to remove trees which do not appear sustainable when considered against the broader context of the type of tree, location and its anticipated future life. This can be particularly relevant where a large specimen tree may be (allegedly) causing structural damage, which soil sub-structure investigations confirm may be the case.
- 3.3 The council as owner of a tree has a duty in law to remediate any damage that has been caused by the action of its tree above and below the surface e.g. by extracting moisture from the soil and damaging building foundations, and is obliged to abate (cease) the nuisance and recompense the owner.
- 3.4 As an example of a recent case, officers were asked to remove an oak tree in the North Bretton area because it was causing structural damage to the foundations of a property. The property had been built approximately 30 years ago, whereas the oak tree is estimated at 200-300 years old. The council's insurers agreed that they would pay to remediate damage to the property but unless the tree was removed, the property would also require under-pinning that would protect against future root impact, which would cost £45,000 and this liability would fall to the council. In addition our insurers would not cover for any future claims arising from the same cause.

- 3.5 The simple solution would have been to remove the tree which would have cost approximately £500. However, this specimen, whilst not in perfect condition, formed part of an ancient wood and there was no reason to believe that it would not survive for another 40-50 years and possibly longer.
- 3.6 The council has no financial provision to fund work that is required to retain trees. However, on this occasion money has been secured from a number of budget sources to allow the tree to be retained and the underpinning work to be undertaken to the property. The question remains, however, as to whether the council should retain trees that are causing damage to property and at what cost?

4. KEY ISSUES

- 4.1 If the council is to have an objective system of deciding whether it should retain trees it needs a system for valuing in terms of pricing its trees against a set of defined quantitative measures. The London Tree Officers Association has produced a guidance system for valuing trees. This is known as CAVAT (the capital asset value for amenity trees). It is designed to aid decision making as to the tree stock as a whole but is applicable to individual cases where the value of a tree needs to be expressed in monetary terms. The CAVAT guidance uses a number of variables to assess the worth of the tree, but basic value is calculated using the trunk area of the key measure of size. This then has the community tree index (CTI) factored in, which assesses the relative accessibility to the public of the tree. The crown size and condition is considered and the tree's appropriateness to the location is factored in. Finally the value is adjusted for the safe life expectancy of the tree.
- 4.2 This system has been used widely in London and a very large plane tree in Mayfair was valued at £750,000. This figure was significantly impacted by the high CTI of the area and the limited number of trees in the locality. However, as a rule, most street trees are worth between £8,000-£12,000 but quality specimens may be valued at up to £250,000.
- 4.3 This would then give the council a value that the tree has which can be considered against the cost of making safe or restoring damaged property.

5. IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The council will have to consider the financial implications of retaining some street trees should their CAVAT value exceed the value of work necessary to remedy any damage they may be causing.
- 5.2 Also there is a potential likelihood that the council would not be able to obtain insurance cover for the increased cost of claims associated with retaining trees known to be causing subsidence or any future claims arising from the same tree, ie in the example that was quoted in paragraph 3.4. The tree has currently only impacted on one property but if it was to affect other houses in the area then none of these claims would be covered by insurance and costs would have to be met from Peterborough City Council's own budget. This potential risk needs to be taken into account against the assessed value of the tree.

6. CONSULTATION

- 6.1 No formal consultation has taken place, however the Woodland Trust and the London Tree Officers Association both support the valuation of trees in this manner.

7. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The Scrutiny Panel considers whether the CAVAT evaluation system for trees is one that could be applied in Peterborough City Council.

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 That the Scrutiny Panel requests the Cabinet Member for City Services to consider whether the use of a valuation method to assess individual trees value, where there are good reasons for retaining the amenity, would be appropriate for the work undertaken by City Services.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

CAVAT Method Users Guide

Times article: Put that axe down – this is Britain’s most valuable tree

www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article3792556.ece

10. APPENDICES

CAVAT Method Users Guide

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