

“It all starts with having a Tree & Woodland Strategy”

NETs, Land & Countryside Services

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Introduction

Eirwen Hopwood and I'm the Parks and Woodland Manager for WLC. I joined West Lothian Council, as Countryside Manager in 2009 and became Parks and Woodland Manager in approximately 2016 as part of a re-structure of the of Operational Services including our service - NETS (Neighbourhood Environment Teams), Land & Countryside Service

Aim of the Presentation

- To provide an overview of the West Lothian Council's Management Plan for Trees and Woodland
- To share our journey in putting this into practice and some of the hurdles experienced so far
- To encourage any local authorities, who have yet to do so, to make a start on planning and implementing a risk based, proportionate tree management plan

We all love to plant trees!



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We all love to plant trees and over the years West Lothian Council and its predecessor organisations have been responsible for planting 100s of hectares of new woodland and 1000s of individual trees along streets, roads, in parks and other open spaces.

The current push from both Westminster and the Scottish Government (which has jurisdiction over such matters in Scotland) to increase woodland and individual tree canopy cover, for climate change mitigation, has been discussed by earlier speakers, and is great news!

However, there is a big **BUT** ...

This needs not to be at the expense of caring for the **existing** tree assets, for which the council is responsible.

And that adequate provision must be made for the maintenance of new woods and specimen trees to ensure that they survive to maturity and beyond.

West Lothian Council's Trees and Woodland



West Lothian Council's Trees and Woodland

West Lothian Council is a medium sized council to the west of Edinburgh, with a population of almost 150,000.

The largest town in West Lothian is Livingston (population >57k) with the rest of the area being made up of numerous smaller towns and villages, as well as more rural areas.

When the “new town” of Livingston was being developed in the 1960s and 70s, many areas of existing woodland, rows of beech trees lining the former fields and other individual mature trees were retained. In addition 100s of hectares of new woodland and tree belts were established, as well as many individual trees along the roads and within its parks. Within the bounds of Livingston there are now well over 500ha of woodland.

When the Livingston Development Corporation wound up in 1979 approximately 250ha of woodland was passed to the Woodland Trust and the remaining 250ha was transferred to West Lothian Council, along with the majority of the smaller tree belts and 1000s of individual trees!

The council owns a further 750ha of other woodland areas, which form a significant part of its 3 country parks, and also many other woods, some created as part of the

reclamation of former coal and shale “bings”.

All of these woodland areas are well used by the public with both local visitors and those from the surrounding areas, including the City of Edinburgh.

Some of West Lothian’s smaller towns and villages have rather a dearth of tree cover, particularly within the former mining villages in the west of the county.

Others, like the old county town of Linlithgow and larger towns, like Bathgate, have significant populations of mature trees in their long-established parks and roadsides.

Tree and woodland management

- “Managing” a large, public tree and woodland asset with very limited resources – a familiar story?
- Trees and woodland come with obligations



Tree and Woodland Management

Back in the day the woods in Livingston alone were planted and maintained by a 40 strong Forestry Team. Today over 1,000ha of well-used public woods, many of which bound the gardens of houses, schools etc are now cared for by just a handful of staff.

This is on top of the arboricultural work required to maintain individual trees in public open spaces, school grounds and in the gardens of council houses, as well as providing advice to Planning on tree matters.

These limited staff and budgets to deal with the, sometimes over-whelming, task of juggling priorities and the expectations of the public resulted previously in much of the woodland and tree management in West Lothian being undertaken on a reactive basis.

We are well aware that many local authorities are in the same situation of “managing” a large, public tree and woodland asset with very limited resources.

Tree and woodland management, along with the management of other open space, is not a statutory duty for councils and so, as funding has reduced, the care of trees has often slipped to the bottom of the pile. **However**, there are other legal obligations and national standards, which come with tree and woodland ownership and need to be considered.

Towards a pro-active approach



Tree Risk Management Review
**West Lothian
Council**
November 2014
V1.2

GALLAGHER
BASSETT



Towards a Pro-active Approach

Council staff had written a Tree Safety Policy back in the 1990s but due to day to day demands this was not fully implemented.

As and when grants or other funding became available, periodic surveys had been undertaken by arboricultural consultants of trees within school grounds and of some of the old, mature specimens in the country parks.

In 2011 we were able to take advantage of a budget underspend to have all the “high and medium risk” areas within the country parks and woods surveyed and remedial work undertaken in a prioritised and planned manner.

West Lothian Council’s insurance broker provides a “free” report each year, on a topic which they feel is pertinent to the council, and in 2014 they undertook a review of the council’s tree risk management.

The insurers advised that, to ensure it meets its public liability obligations as a landowner, the council should have a risk based system for managing the safety of its trees. This was to cover the whole of the council’s landholding, regardless of department. (this did also helped to raise tree management up the senior management and political agenda).

Tree and Woodland Team

Parks & Woodland Manager		
Tree & Woodland Team Leader		Tree & Woodland Officer
Tree Inspectors x2	Tree & Woodland Operatives x5	



Tree and Woodland Team

Just prior to this, staff involved in the operational side of tree and woodland work, which had previously been within separate sections of Operational Services, were brought together as part of the new Parks & Woodland Team.

This team was charged with producing a Tree Safety Management Plan and its implementation thereafter.

Tree Management and Safety Policy 2016

Aims

- To manage the risks associated with trees at acceptable levels and in a balanced a proportionate manner.
- To reduce the level of risk and potential liability to West Lothian Council resulting from tree failure.
- To develop and implement a systematic approach to tree inspections and risk management for trees and woodland under the ownership and responsibility of West Lothian Council.
- To satisfy the Council's legal responsibilities as a landowner under current legislation.
- To manage tree related incidents in the event of extreme weather.



Tree Management and Safety Policy

A Tree Management & Safety Policy was agreed at Council Executive in 2016.

Representatives from various sections of the council with landholding responsibility for trees and woodlands, including Openspace & Cemeteries, Roads, Property, Housing and Education were consulted and a way forward agreed.

The policy included a requirement for officers to further develop a Tree and Woodland Management Plan.

The aims of the plan relating to tree safety are given here, with the full document being available on the website
(it is due a review and update)

Thanks and credit go to various councils who allowed their own Tree and Woodland Strategies to be used to guide our one!

Tree and Woodland Management Plan 2017



“ Safety is but one of the many goals to which we aspire; the mistake that is often made is to focus on safety as if it is the only goal ”

PROFESSOR DAVID BALL

Centre for Decision Analysis and Risk Management

Middlesex University



Tree and Woodland Management Plan

The likelihood of a tree collapsing onto a member of the public is small however the impact could clearly be great if it were to happen. This is particularly the case on fast roads where vehicles can crash into a fallen branch or tree, as well as dropping onto a vehicle or person.

Without huge resources it would be impossible to inspect **all** the council's trees and neither is this sensible or necessary.

Our plan was based on the “Common sense risk management of trees” produced by the National Tree Safety Group in 2011. We understand this may be due to be reviewed and will be keeping up to date on this via the NTSG's website.

It is also important to remember that tree safety is not the only consideration.

First steps

Threat Level	Potential Target Zones	Council Sites at risk: Examples	Inspection Frequency
High	Occupied buildings Main roads Car Parks Playgrounds School grounds Other high use pedestrian areas	Schools across West Lothian with mature trees within the boundary or nearby Housing Properties with mature trees within gardens or nearby Public footpaths within town centres and residential areas with mature trees nearby Roads with verges with mature trees Car parks by areas of mature woodlands e.g. Beecraigs Country Park Play areas with mature trees nearby	3 yearly and after severe storms*
Medium	Country roads Well-used footpaths Public areas	Main rural paths and trails within parks and woodland areas. Minor "C" and "U" Class Roads with verges with mature trees Public open spaces such as sports pitches by areas of mature woodlands	5 yearly and after severe storms*
Low	Low level use areas Field boundaries Footpaths Woodland near footpaths	Rural footpaths with low pedestrian usage	Reactive only when issues arise

First steps

Additional new resources were not made available, other than ring fencing of a proportion of the existing sustainable woodland management budget.

Efforts need to be focussed on those trees which present the highest risk by virtue of their location and then their size and condition.

It can be the case that arborists and other "tree people", with their knowledge and understanding of tree diseases, are often tempted to home in on the tree first rather than appraising the "target" ie the person / structure which would be harmed should a tree fail.

A process of "zoning" the tree population was therefore the first step.

The timescales we have agreed on, are a balance between the ideal and what we believe is achievable. (There is the pro viso that any particularly good mature specimens which are beginning to show signs of certain decays may be recorded for additional annual monitoring.)

Inspections



One of the more complicated cases –
Phytophthora cambivora



Inspections

The 2 Tree Inspectors undertake most of the tree condition inspection work by way of a Visual Tree Assessment (VTA) from ground level. They will occasionally request additional climbing inspections and on rare occasions, where a particularly fine specimen merits it, further decay investigation may be undertaken by consultants.

Currently we are using the Mathenay Clark scoring system.

The Inspectors record the results of their assessments and create work instructions on digital tablets, using the council's asset management programme. This enables jobs to be sent directly to the Team Leader for allocation to the team of in-house operatives, who on occasion are supplemented by contractors.

There have been some issues with the “clunkiness” of the system and periodic connectivity problems.

Asset Management Systems and Record Keeping



Record Keeping

A key requirement of any tree safety management system is that the inspections and remedial work undertaken are recorded and stored in a user-friendly and easily retrievable format.

Producing adequate reports from our current system has proven difficult. This has led us to look at other more bespoke systems and it is anticipated that our Service Manager will take a proposal to make a change to the IT Review Board.

Records are also kept where trees have failed so that areas where there may be problems can be followed up on.

Where the tree population is not large a simple map and excel spreadsheet will do the job!

The consequences of not taking action!

Council fined £150,000 after falling tree branch killed woman's unborn baby

Pregnant mum Liz Stear was driving her children to school in the Wirral, Merseyside, when a tree branch suddenly crashed down on her car out of nowhere ..



 West Lothian Council

The consequences of not taking action!

The press article on the above court case makes sobering reading and is a reminder of the possible legal consequences of not taking what the courts would consider to be “reasonable” measures to safeguard the public Over and above the trauma to the family affected and also the council staff involved.

Keeping on track!

Shade

Bird droppings

Leaf litter

Tree has lost its leaves (Winter!)

Too tall

Honeydew dripping on car

Roots coming into garden

etc etc.....



It is also a timely reminder of the need to get back on track and continue to push forward with the pro-active work.

Not allowing the team to become totally submerged under the constant barrage of requests for service from the public regarding trees causing annoyance!!

Sustainable tree and woodland management



We continue to progress planned woodland management, which in turn will reduce the amount of work done as part of tree safety surveys. This is particularly the case in Livingston where Sitka spruce, planted to the rear of people's gardens is now reaching 30m in height!!

But that would be the subject for another day!!

Resources



We are progressing on a journey to improve the safety and care of what is a fantastic natural resource, which is already sequestering carbon, providing beauty and in turn improving people's wellbeing.

For anyone who would like further information we have produced a resource list which will be made available through APSE.

Thank you for listening!