EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT COVER SHEET

Title of Report:	Assessment of ESBC Tree stock	To be marked with an 'X' by Democratic Services after report has been presented
Meeting of:	Corporate Management Team 15th November 2023	x
	Pre Cabinet 23rd November 2023	x
	Leader's / Leader of the Opposition's Advisory Group 30th November/6th December 2023	x
	Cabinet 18th December 2023	
	Audit Committee / Scrutiny Regeneration, Development and Market Hall Committee / Scrutiny Health and Well Being Committee [Scrutiny Climate Change and Environment Committee / Scrutiny Value for Money Council Committee	

Is this an Executive Decision:	No	Is this a Key Decision:	No
Is this in the Forward Plan:	Yes	Is the Report Confidential:	No
		If so, please state relevant paragraph from Schedule 12A LGA 1972:	[ ]

Essential Signatories:

ALL REPORTS MUST BE IN THE NAME OF A HEAD OF SERVICE

Monitoring Officer: **John Teasdale**

Date ………………….   Signature ………………………..

Interim Chief Finance Officer: **Stephen Fitzgerald**

Date ………………….   Signature ………………………..

EAST STAFFORDSHIRE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Cabinet

Date: 18th December 2023

REPORT TITLE: **Assessment of ESBC Tree stock**

PORTFOLIO: **Cllr Dennis Fletcher**

CHIEF OFFICER: **Mark Rizk**

CONTACT OFFICER: **Michael Hovers   Ext. No. x1776**

WARD(S) AFFECTED: **All**

1.   **Purpose of the Report**

1.1.   This report provides an examination of the condition of East Staffordshire Borough Council's (ESBC) tree stock. Beyond this examination, the report looks at the impact and consequence of climate change on trees and considers alternatives to their management. The report then examines Woodland Management and concludes with a commentary on tree planting.

2.   **Executive Summary**

2.1   Trees, and the planting of them, has been at the forefront of efforts to reduce carbon. However, management of existing tree stocks is of equal (if not more) importance. Climate change and extreme seasonal events place these existing trees under new and unique stresses. Many of these we do not completely understand nor how they will manifest themselves in forthcoming years. Further complexity arises when each individual tree responds differently to the environmental factors around it. Therefore, predicting the future impact is challenging- particularly as historical data becomes increasingly irrelevant.

2.2   Subsequently, in an effort to provide some form of baseline a full inspection of the Council's entire tree stock has taken place. These inspections have provided a "snap shot" in time of the health of trees and provide a rough proxy for potential future budgetary pressures. As a result, a £60,000 budget uplift is

recommended for the next two years with any underspend automatically carried forward into the following year and used specifically for Woodland Management.

2.3   With existing tree management polices potentially leading to increased budgetary pressures, there is scope to evaluate these and adopt a revised practice that could be more nature friendly. A review of the Tree Management Policy is recommended in 2024/25.

2.4   Finally, the report advocates for the establishment of a tree nursery at the Go Garden (Uttoxeter) and the Horticulture Centre (Burton). Should the creation of the nursery be endorsed, there is the potential for this to provide the Council with a £99,500 saving on the purchasing of trees.

3.   Background

3.1   ESBC have over 6,500 trees encompassing a range of native and non-native species with varying degrees of maturity, health, and size. Locational context is another additional important factor. As a result the Council has categorised all trees into Category 1 (highest risk), Category 2 (medium risk) and Category 3 (lowest risk). Determining the categorisation of each is dependent on a multitude of factors. However, as a basic rule of thumb, an old large tree, near to a road or footpath is likely to rest within category 1. Whereas a small immature tree assessed as category 3. This category allocation subsequently requires category 1 to be inspected annually, category two bi-annually and category three every 36 months. Details and findings of inspections are recorded on the Council's OTISS tree database. A sample extract of findings and how data is recorded is provided in Appendix 1.

3.2   Subsequently, to provide a complete analysis a third-party contractor was commissioned to inspect the entire tree estate. Aside from being independent, liabilities associated with the inspections rest with the contractor. Although that risk transfers to ESBC if recommendations are not undertaken nor actioned within recommended timeframes.

3.3   Inspections took place in early 2023, critically, they are regarded as a "snap shot" in time and should not be seen as a predictor of the future health of a tree. Throughout this period ESBC officers continued to carry out their own inspections programme on trees.

4.   Contribution to Corporate Priorities

4.1   ECC09- Undertake an assessment of the Borough's tree stock to determine the future impact of environmental factors such as Climate Change and 'Ash die' back
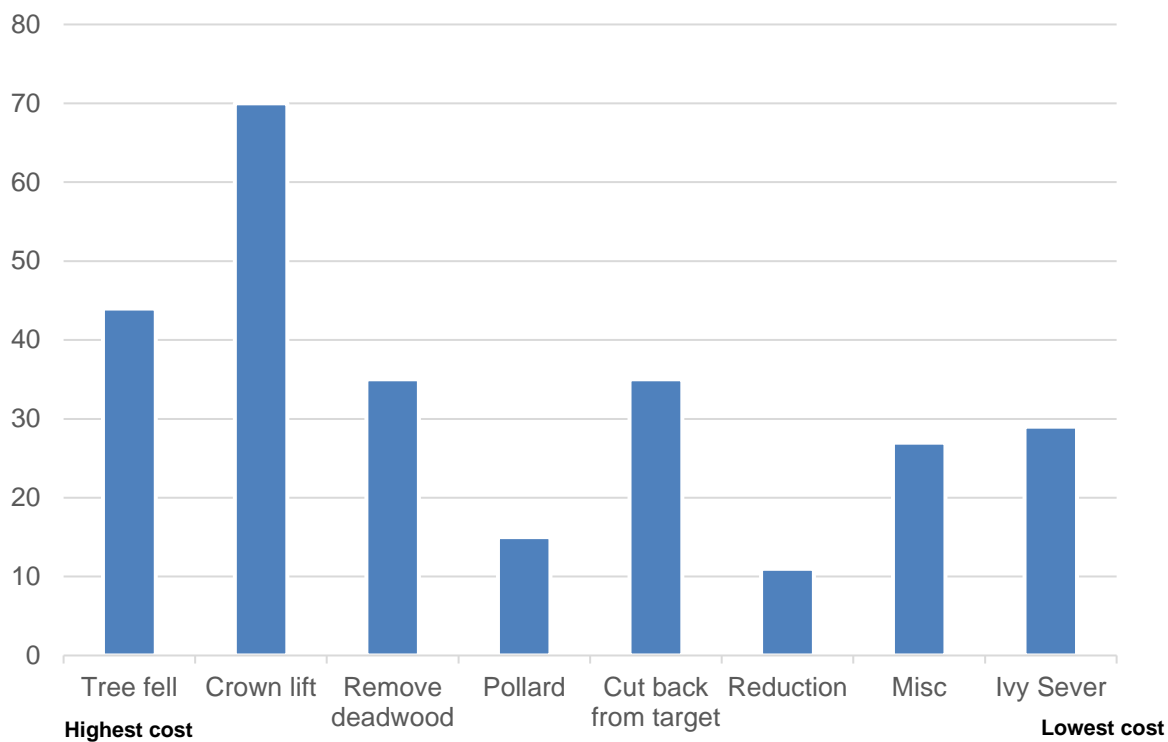
5.   Tree Inspection findings

5.1   As set out above, the entire Council tree stock was inspected in early 2023. The inspections yielded a total of 5,602 records. Crucially, this does not mean

there are 5,602 trees. Standard practice is to group trees (as one entry- and sometimes termed compartments) and record species that require further attention as another entry. These records range from observational notes through to recommendations for intervention. Due to the nature of these inspections interventions are loaded towards year one. Time horizons that are further into the future make predicting spend more difficult, simply because it is not known how the health of an individual tree will hold up given the weather conditions and possible future climatic events. Subsequently, year two spend is significantly higher than those beyond three years. Examples of year one interventions include removing of deadwood, crown lifting, lapsed pollarding and ivy severs, and total 266 actions. Amounting to a financial out lay of £80,196 which exceeds the entire budget available for managing tree stocks. Based on these and those jobs raised by officers (in the first six months of 23/24) an over spend of £101,000 is currently predicted. The following two charts illustrate predicted spend over the forthcoming years (based on inspection findings) and breakdown in relation to work types. Given this breakdown it is proposed that the tree budget is uplifted by £60,000 for the next two years and reviewed again at the end of 25/26.

Figure 1- Recommended interventions post-inspection by year and estimated cost.

	Total number of jobs	Estimated cost
2023/24	266	£80,196
2024/25	263	£57,459
2025/26	47	£9,412

Figure 2- Jobs by frequency and ordered by total cost (Year 1)

5.2 Although the sum in figure 1 is based on the schedule of rates (SOR) for the tree management contract it is liable to variation. Some of the jobs listed have applicable day rates – rather than a set SOR- and the officers include an estimation of how long a task should take as a guide. Clearly, until work commences it often not possible to estimate the scale or difficulty of such jobs. Equally, it is important to stress that these figures are not the sole limit of Council's work or expenditure on trees. ESBC officers are also inspecting trees. The next paragraph will utilise a simple case study to illustrate the scale of works and the snap shot nature of inspections.

5.3 When originally inspected 2 Austrian pines at Scalpecliffe Woods were shown to be healthy. However, a routine officer inspection in October highlighted that the trees had a disease called red needle band blight (Dothistroma Septosporum). Subsequently, the trees have been felled. Factors attributed to this rapid decline in health are the onset of climate change. Although not native to the UK, Austrian pines are native to Central and Southern Europe and are part of the same Pinaceae family as the Scots pine. Although very tolerant, these trees prefer cold snowy winters and milder dry summers. Recent hot summers, droughts and wet, mild winters have placed the health of the trees at risk and made them more susceptible to disease. Officers expect this situation to worsen over the next decade and 'on the ground' evidence supports this supposition.

5.4   From the simple example set out above it is possible to see how climate change already has a negative impact on the Council's tree stock and has the potential to lead to further cost pressures. However, alternatives do exist in relation to the management of tree stock.

Management of trees

5.5   Historically the ESBC policy towards the management of trees has been to only action if dead, diseased, dying or dangerous. Although very strong in protecting tree stocks, Health & Safety has often trumped the environment and the support for wildlife. However, there are trade-offs and nuances to consider that may have benefits to wildlife and the environment. For example, a tree defect of a partially snapped limb can provide good habitat to bats and owls. Under the existing policy this would be removed due to the risk potential. An alternative approach, would be to leave the limb in situ but remove the public from the target area by either closing a footpath or diverting it away. Dead trees themselves support eco systems but the traditional view has always been to fell due to risk. Ivy is another controversial topic. Many would advocate that ivy is removed from trees as it can pose a risk once it gets into the canopy. However, others espouse the fact that ivy itself is great for supporting different types of wildlife and should be left alone.

5.6   The above paragraph could be described as letting "nature takes it course" and reducing the number of human interventions. In some regards, it flips the thinking of moving trees out of way of people to moving people out of the way of trees. Such a step would require a radical change in the tree management policy and a cultural and political mind set shift. Should Cabinet wish to undertake a review of the Tree Management Policy to this effect, then it is recommended that this is a corporate target for the Open Spaces Team in 24/25.

Woodland Management

5.7   ESBC budgets are organised to undertake reactionary works and have little or no provision for proactive works such as Woodland Management- although where spend has allowed, officers have undertaken small woodland type works. Woodland Management has numerous benefits that are closely aligned with the Council's ambitions around climate change, nature recovery and increasing bio-diversity. Rather than create an additional budget, it is recommended that any future underspend from tree budgets are automatically carried forward into the following year and are specifically designated for Woodland Management. In addition, that Woodland Management is incorporated within the proposed review of Tree Management Policy.

Tree Planting

5.8   Budgets for the purchase and planting of trees are currently set at £5,000. A good standard sized tree specimen is around £90, which equates to 55 trees per year. However through their partnership contacts, officers have been able to source free trees or collaborate with others to significantly boost this number each year. Whereas, an uplift in tree planting budgets may seem desirable there is a potentially innovative alternative.

5.9 Across both the Horticulture Centre (Burton) and GO Garden (Uttoxeter) there is an opportunity to use existing space to create tree nurseries. Although this will take 2-3 years to realise full potential the concept is simple. Officers from the Horticultural team- working alongside volunteers- will buy in small low priced tree whips (1,100 at total cost of £1,000), plant them into containers and grow them at the two sites. Once the trees reach a level of maturity they would be used for planting across East Staffordshire's parks and open spaces. Capacity for growing these trees may increase further in coming years with unused Cemetery expansion land available for containerised planters. However, it is recommended that this is revisited once the Cemetery phase one expansion is complete.

5.10 Estimated costs for the planters/containers are £600. Additional equipment is also required for the watering of these junior trees. Costs for a rainwater harvesting structure and storage tanks are calculated to be at around £5,000. Such a move would reduce the reliance on tap water making the tree growing more sustainable- both environmentally and financially. Furthermore, supply lines would be shortened which provides additional sustainability benefits.

6.   Financial Considerations

This section has been approved by the following member of the Financial Management Unit: James Hopwood.

6.1.   The 2023/24 Quarter 2 Finance Monitoring Report forecasts an overspend of £101,000 for contracted and other tree works.

6.2.   If the revenue growth bid is progressed as part of the 2024/25 budget setting (per recommendation 13.1), and approved by Council, there will be a £60,000 base budget increase in 2024/25 and 2025/26.

6.3.   Recommendation 13.3 is to fund a tree nursery at Go Garden and Uttoxeter. The £5,600 cost will be funded from a pre-existing revenue budget.

7.   Risk Assessment and Management

7.1.   The main risks to this Report and the Council achieving its objectives are as follows:

7.2.   **Positive** (Opportunities/Benefits):

7.2.1. Introduces a more nature friendly approach to managing tree stocks

7.2.2. Careful management of tree stocks is essential in combatting carbon emissions.

7.2.3. Proposed tree nursery provides the Council with a regular stock of new trees to be planted on parks and open spaces.

7.3.   **Negative** (Threats):

7.3.1. The impact of climate change is difficult predict and making budget assumptions based on historical data are less relevant as a result.

7.3.2. Climatic events can vary across a year, therefore there is not a linear expectation that costs will increase each year.

7.3.3 Complaints or enquires regarding trees are one of the most frequent form of customer contact. Any revision to policy and works may these increase.

7.4. The management of trees are referenced in the Risk Register. Any financial implications to mitigate against these risks are considered above.

8. **Legal Considerations**

This section has been approved by the following member of the Legal Team: Glen McCusker – Locum Solicitor

8.1. There are no significant legal issues arising from this Report.

9. **Equalities and Health**

9.1. **Equality impacts:** The subject of this Report is not a policy, strategy, function or service that is new or being revised. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

9.2. **Health impacts:** The outcome of the health screening question does not require a full Health Impact Assessment to be completed. An equality and health impact assessment is not required.

10. **Data Protection Implications – Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)**

10.1. A DPIA must be completed where there are plans to:

- use systematic and extensive profiling with significant effects;
- process special category or criminal offence data on a large scale; or
- systematically monitor publicly accessible places on a large scale
- use new technologies;
- use profiling or special category data to decide on access to services;
- profile individuals on a large scale;
- process biometric data;
- process genetic data;
- match data or combine datasets from different sources;
- collect personal data from a source other than the individual without providing them with a privacy notice ('invisible processing');
- track individuals' location or behaviour;
- profile children or target marketing or online services at them; or

- process data that might endanger the individual's physical health or safety in the event of a security breach

10.2   Following consideration of the above, there are no Data Protection implications arising from this report which would require a DPIA.

11.   Human Rights

11.1.   There are no Human Rights issues arising from this Report

12.   Sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures)

12.1.   Does the proposal result in an overall positive effect in terms of sustainability (including climate change and change adaptation measures) Yes/No or N/A

12.2.   Please detail any positive/negative aspects:

12.2.1.   Positive (Opportunities/Benefits)

Tree planting and the proposed nursery has the potential to contribute towards reducing the Council's carbon footprint and assist with nature recovery.

Proposed tree nursery would also reduce supply lines and thus be more sustainable.

A review of the tree management policy and having a more nature friendly approach could benefit local ecosystems.

12.2.2.   Negative (threats)

Revising the tree management policy may increase the risk posed from trees or the number of complaints received.

13.   Recommendation(s)

13.1.   A revenue growth bid is submitted to uplift tree works budgets by £60,000 from 24/25 and reviewed again at the end of 25/26.

13.2.   Underspend from tree budgets is automatically carried forward into the following year and designated specifically for Woodland Management.

13.3.   Approval is given for the establishment of the tree nursery at Go Garden (Uttoxeter) and the Horticulture Centre (Burton).

14.   Appendix

14.1   OTISS database sample extracts.