

Highway Tree Inspections – Customer Care

A report by Alan Riley, KHS Landscape Manager, to the Highways Advisory Board on 4th March 2008.

Introduction and Purpose

1. At Highways Advisory Board (HAB) on 1 May 2007, a paper on highway tree management was presented and the following adopted by Members;
 - Tree management procedure.
 - Preparation and adoption of a tree policy.
 - Purchase of the Confirm tree modules system.
 - Use of preferred arboricultural contractors by all KHS partners
2. At HAB on 18 September 2007, a paper on a highway tree policy was presented and adopted by Members.
3. The purpose of this paper is to propose the adoption of a change in procedure when dealing with customer enquiries and complaints in respect of highway trees which will result in improved service delivery across a number of areas.

Tree Management

4. The adoption of a Highway Tree Policy has provided clarity in a number of areas of highway tree management and has provided a consistent approach to making decisions ensuring that priority is always given to safety issues.

Customer Care

5. From 1 April 2007 the arboricultural team took over the responsibility for all aspects of tree management including routine safety inspections and customer enquiries. Work is ongoing with the KHS Contact Centre to ensure that customer calls are directed to the right place and are properly dealt with within the appropriate timescales.
6. 437 Priority 1 (P1) calls have been received from the KHS Contact Centre and dealt with. P1 calls involve trees that have failed or are in imminent danger of failing and average response time has been well under two hours.
7. Approximately 2500 Priority 2 (P2) calls have been received. P2 calls relate to general, rather than legal nuisance issues. Safety issues are always dealt with as P1. Approximately 25% of the P2 calls have resulted in some form of remedial works on site. General nuisance issues include leaf and seed fall, sap deposition, blocking of light and interference with television reception.
8. The total volume of calls for 07/08 is anticipated to be in the region of 4000.

The Process

9. A number of calls are filtered out by the Contact Centre but generally all tree related calls come through to the arboricultural team for attention. A number are dealt with immediately by letter or by telephone with an explanation that the type of problem indicated is not one that a responsible tree owner is required to deal with or that the works do not fall under the remit of KHS e.g. clearance of overhead services. The remainder of calls require an inspection. These are grouped into geographical areas to

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ensure best use of time and travel resources. An analysis of figures from April 2007 shows that in 75% of cases the inspection results in a decision not to carry out any works. The main reasons are that the complaint or enquiry has been overstated or is a general nuisance issue, as outlined above, that KHS is not required to deal with. The 25% requiring works is generally related to trees in decline, vehicular damage, vandalism and other non predictable events.

10. This process of managing calls is a drain on the resources available to manage and enhance the highway tree stock. Due to the volume of P2 enquiries and the need to prioritise P1 visits and works there can be a delay before a response is given to the enquirer. The delay often leads to an expectation that works will be undertaken. Customer feedback in the event that no works are undertaken is often critical of the delay rather than the decision.
11. KHS meets its duty of care by undertaking regular safety inspections of all highway trees based on the classification of the road. Current inspection frequencies are two years and five years. The asset database is an ongoing project and as it is developed it is likely that inspection frequencies will be refined to align with an identified risk.
12. Current information recorded relates only to trees requiring works but all trees are inspected and the inspection date recorded.
13. The asset database will include information on tree characteristics and dimensions and actions will include an assessment by an inspector that, under normal circumstances, will take the tree through to the next inspection cycle.

The Proposal

14. The current and future inspection processes are robust and defensible and take into account the period until the next inspection.
15. There should be no need, under normal circumstances, to undertake tree works between inspection cycles except for emergency and programmed cyclical maintenance works. On the same basis there should be no need to carry out additional tree inspections between inspection cycles. Customers should be given details of the inspection frequency and the date of the last inspection along with a copy of the 'Understanding leaflet – How we look after trees on the highway'.
16. Where an enquiry relates to a changed circumstance, such as disease or physical damage to a tree, then an interim inspection will be undertaken and the records updated.
17. It is likely that some customers will, despite the justification of the process, complain about the lack of an inspection linked directly to their enquiry. Some customers will exaggerate the safety aspects of an enquiry to ensure that an inspection is undertaken. Both these issues exist within the current system of enquiries and should have no significant impact on the revised process. Overall the level of customer satisfaction is expected to increase with a quicker decision making process that still takes into account safety of the highway.

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18. Based on a typical year the revised process will reduce the reactive calls requiring a visit or action from 4000 to 1000. The 3000 calls will receive a prompt response and call closure. The savings in resources will be diverted to the safety audit process, programmed maintenance and replanting programme and in particular the requirements of the New Roads and Street Works Act from 1 April 2008.

Decision

19. This Board is asked to approve the adoption of the revised process for dealing with customer enquiries and to approve the use of savings from the revised approach for other elements of the tree management and enhancement programme.

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