



Final Internal Audit Report

Three Rivers District Council Tree Surveying 2014/15

2 January 2015

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Report Status: Final

Reference: T4060/14/001

Overall Assurance: Moderate

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Internal Audit provides Three Rivers District Council ('the Council') with an independent and objective opinion on the organisation's governance arrangements, encompassing internal control and risk management, by completing an annual risk-based audit plan. This audit was not part of the original 2014/15 Annual Audit Plan for the Council as approved by Audit Committee on 18 March 2014, but has been included on the request of the Director of Community and Environmental Services and the Head of Community Services. Audit Committee approved this plan change on 25 September 2014.
- 1.2 The Council owns 720 hectares of park and open spaces of which 240 hectares are woodlands. The remainder is a mixture of Local Nature Reserves, common land, parks, open spaces, playing fields and play areas.
- 1.3 There are an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 trees under the Council's management. The service is also responsible for looking after protected trees and giving landscape input into the planning process. The Council introduced the Ezytreev system in 2013 as the tree stock database.
- 1.4 The audit focused on reviewing how the tree surveying programme is risk assessed to minimise the potential for serious incidents to affect people or property in the district. In addition, a benchmarking exercise was requested by management to provide comparative data on tree surveying activities against a sample of other SIAS clients.

Overall Audit Opinion

- 1.5 Based on the work performed during this audit, we can provide overall **Moderate Assurance** that, whilst there is a basically sound system of control, there are some areas of weakness, which may put some of the system objectives at risk.
- 1.6 It is recognised that management both requested this review and were already aware of a number of key issues faced by the tree management service as included in this report. This is reflected in both the overall assurance opinion given and individual priority levels of recommendations made as the outcomes are designed to support delivery of a robust tree management service.
- 1.7 The Ezytreev database has not been populated with accurate and complete baseline survey data as insufficient surveying activity has been carried out by the service since the system was introduced in 2013 and the system is not always updated with the survey results. Also, works orders are not yet generally raised through Ezytreev. There is a key opportunity for the service to utilise more of the functionality of the system to ensure all processes are as efficient as possible. Although the Council has a planned three-year cyclical programme for tree surveying, this has not been fully achieved. The authority has two Arboricultural and Landscape Officers who, in addition to delivering a programme of tree surveying, also cover Tree Protection Orders (TPO's) and surveys required as part of the planning application process. It was noted that during the previous two years there has been a significant increase in planning applications compared to 2006 levels. This has placed increased demand on officers' time. It is therefore critical to have a tree management strategy that is risk based in order to

align with the workload demands of both an increase and decrease in planning applications.

1.8 For definitions of our assurance levels, please see Appendix B.

Summary of Recommendations

1.9 We have made five recommendations, four classified as ‘Medium’ priority and one as ‘Merits Attention’ priority, to support management in improving processes and controls within the tree management service.

1.10 The recommendations cover the following areas:

- a) Development of a Tree Management Strategy / Tree Management Policy,
- b) Compiling baseline data on the Ezytreev system,
- c) Documenting risk assessment criteria for the prioritisation of surveys,
- d) Raising works orders through Ezytreev, and
- e) Provision of system training on Ezytreev.

1.11 Please see the Management Action Plan at Appendix A for further details.

Annual Governance Statement

1.12 This report provides moderate levels of assurance to support the Annual Governance Statement.

2. ASSURANCE BY RISK AREA

2.1 Our specific objectives in undertaking this work, as per the Terms of Reference, were to provide the Council with assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of internal controls, processes and records in place to mitigate risks in the following areas:

Risk Area	None	Limited	Moderate	Substantial	Full
Risk Identification and Prioritisation – Risks associated with the tree surveying process are identified and priorities reviewed by the service on a regular basis to ensure there is an adequate prioritised mitigation strategy and action plan in place.					
Overall					

2.2 See definitions for the above assurance levels at Appendix B.

3. RESULTS OF BENCHMARKING EXERCISE

3.1 As requested by management, a benchmarking exercise has been completed to compare the approach to tree management across a number of different local councils in Hertfordshire. The results of this work are detailed in the table below and key themes arising are included in suggested actions as part of the Management Action Plan at Appendix A.

Council	Frequency of Tree Surveying			Surveys In-house or outsourced	System Database
	Cyclical	High priority	Low priority		
Three Rivers District Council	Every 3 years.	As per cyclical except for some areas (main highways, schools, play areas etc) which are subject to inspection annually or as determined from last survey.	As per cyclical.	In-house. The team also survey trees under TPOs and Planning Applications Works orders raised in-house.	Ezytreev Partial baseline data only on database.
Hertsmere Borough Council	Every 2 years for medium risk trees	6 months to a year for high risk trees	5 years for low risk trees	Outsourced In-house team raise works orders and update the tree database.	Ezytreev Full tree stock survey undertaken and recorded on tree database.
Dacorum Borough Council	Every 18 months to 3 years	Annual inspection of trees in high risk areas, varied according to the species and condition.	3 years	In-house (one tree surveyor post) In-house team raise works orders and update the database.	Ezytreev Full tree stock survey undertaken and recorded on tree database.

Council	Frequency of Tree Surveying			Surveys In-house or outsourced	System Database
	Cyclical	High priority	Low priority		
Watford Borough Council	Every 3 years	Annual	As per cyclical	Outsourced (including raising works orders and updating the database). .	Ezytreev Full tree stock survey undertaken and recorded on tree database.

No.	Finding / Associated Risk	Priority	Recommendation	Management Response	Target Date
1.	<p>Tree Strategy / Tree Management Policy</p> <p>The service does not currently have a Tree Strategy or Tree Management Policy in place. This would normally be key in providing clarity over how tree surveys are risk assessed and prioritised and resources deployed.</p> <p>The strategy would also include any key performance indicators against which the success of the service can be measured.</p> <p><u>Associated Risk:</u></p> <p>The tree surveying programme as the defined aims and objectives are as per the Council's Strategic Plan. There is no overarching framework that sets out roles and responsibilities and how the tree stock is surveyed, resulting in increased likelihood of tree failures and financial and reputational loss to the Council.</p>	Medium	<p>The Council should develop and introduce a Tree Management Strategy setting out the aims and objectives of the service together with the Council's responsibilities. The Strategy should cover how the tree stock is risk assessed thereby determining the frequency and intensity of inspections.</p> <p>Other councils should be consulted to obtain guidance and best practice models from existing strategies or policies.</p> <p>The Tree Management Strategy, once introduced, should be subject to periodic e.g. annual review and updating where necessary.</p>	<p>Responsible Officer: Principal Landscape Officer</p> <p>Agreed</p>	End July 2015

No.	Finding / Associated Risk	Priority	Recommendation	Management Response	Target Date
2.	<p>Tree Surveying – Baseline Data</p> <p>The Council acquired the Ezytreev tree management system in 2013. Previous records held on the Confirm Arb system could not be migrated across to Ezytreev. In addition, the service used manual records for a time and these have not been fully transferred to Ezytreev.</p> <p>The existence of accurate and complete baseline data, recorded on the main tree database is a vital requirement for the service to move forward. This process has commenced but not yet been completed.</p> <p><u>Associated Risk:</u></p> <p>The lack of base data may adversely affect service delivery leading to surveys not being completed on a risk assessed basis and failures occurring.</p>	Medium	<p>The Council's tree stock should be surveyed and details recorded on the Ezytreev system to provide a baseline from which the Council can take forward tree surveying activities.</p> <p>*1/3 tree stock to be surveyed each year. This may be supplemented with external support for the initial baseline survey (subject to funds being made available)</p>	<p>Responsible Officers: Landscape Officer (North) and Landscape Officer (South)</p> <p>Agreed</p>	End March 2018*

No.	Finding / Associated Risk	Priority	Recommendation	Management Response	Target Date
3.	<p>Tree Surveys – Risk Assessment and Prioritisation</p> <p>The frequency and intensity of tree surveys should be linked to the risk of danger to the public and property.</p> <p>Inevitably, in view of limited resources it is not possible to survey all trees on a regular basis. However, currently there is no clear documented risk assessment process that ensures resources are focused on areas of highest priority, in terms of both geographical area and type of tree.</p> <p><u>Associated Risk:</u></p> <p>Resources are not allocated to areas of highest risk, leading to unexpected tree failures and potential financial and reputational loss to the Council.</p>	Medium	<p>The Council should define parameters for the categorisation of the tree stock into high, medium and low risk, taking into consideration location, type and condition of trees.</p> <p>A targeted programme of tree surveys should be initiated in accordance with the results of the risk assessment.</p>	<p>Responsible Officer: Principal Landscape Officer</p> <p>Agreed</p>	End July 2015

No.	Finding / Associated Risk	Priority	Recommendation	Management Response	Target Date
4.	<p>Raising of Works Orders</p> <p>Works orders for the treatment of issues identified during tree inspections can be raised directly through the Ezytreev system.</p> <p>However, it was noted that although works orders are being raised in response to issues identified, only one works order has been raised via Ezytreev. In most instances, orders raised by the Service or the Customer Service Centre are not subsequently logged on Ezytreev resulting in incomplete records.</p> <p><u>Associated Risk:</u></p> <p>The authority lacks up to date knowledge on the condition of their tree stock and this may lead to inefficiencies in service delivery.</p>	Medium	Works orders should be raised directly through the Ezytreev system.	<p>Responsible Officers: Landscape Officer (North) and Landscape Officer (South)</p> <p>Agreed</p>	End December 2014

No.	Finding / Associated Risk	Priority	Recommendation	Management Response	Target Date
5.	<p>Ezytreev System Training</p> <p>The Council acquired and introduced the Ezytreev system in 2013 as the main database for tree records.</p> <p>System training has been provided and a helpdesk is available to officers during normal working hours. Refresher training can be requested at additional cost.</p> <p>As part of the on-going development of the service, there is however, an opportunity to benefit from the experience of other Councils who have been using the system for longer as noted in the benchmarking table at section 3 of this report.</p> <p><u>Associated Risk:</u></p> <p>The service does not derive full benefit from the system and as a result, efficiency gains are not achieved.</p>	Merits Attention	Updated training on the Ezytreev system should be scheduled for relevant officers. This could be achieved through liaison with other local councils who have been using the system for longer and are more experienced in using the various functions available.	<p>Responsible Officer: Principal Landscape Officer</p> <p>Will fully review training requirement.</p>	March 2015

Levels of assurance	
Full Assurance	There is a sound system of control designed to achieve the system objectives and manage the risks to achieving those objectives. No weaknesses have been identified.
Substantial Assurance	Whilst there is a largely sound system of control, there are some minor weaknesses, which may put a limited number of the system objectives at risk.
Moderate Assurance	Whilst there is a basically sound system of control, there are some areas of weakness, which may put some of the system objectives at risk.
Limited Assurance	There are significant weaknesses in key control areas, which put the system objectives at risk.
No Assurance	Control is weak, leaving the system open to material error or abuse.

Priority of recommendations	
High	There is a fundamental weakness, which presents material risk to the objectives and requires urgent attention by management.
Medium	There is a significant weakness, whose impact or frequency presents a risk, which needs to be addressed by management.
Merits Attention	There is no significant weakness, but the finding merits attention by management.