

PARKS, TREES AND THE GREEN ESTATE

STORY SO FAR

The service manages over 30,000 street trees across the city, as well as a significant green estate including woodlands, Victorian parks, wildflower meadows, roundabouts and grass verges.

Trees

As part of the Plan for Trees delivery programme, we have recently received funding from the Woodland Trust and People's Postcode Lottery to complete an i-Tree Eco survey. This nationally recognised survey, and the report due in December, will enable the make-up of the trees across the city to be described. This work is being supported by all of the Plan for Trees partners – Plymouth Tree Partnership, Plymouth Open Spaces Network, Woodland Trust, National Trust, Plymouth Community Homes, and Plymouth City Council.

During 2019/20, the teams have been able to successfully review and implement improvements to work planning, which addresses many of the issues with the use of powered machinery and the risk of exposure to vibration leading to Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS). All equipment has been tested and unsuitable equipment has been removed from the service. Budgets are being allocated for equipment updates to reduce the risk of exposure to further vibrations and training requirements of the team have been reviewed to ensure that they have attended appropriate training courses.

Grass Cutting

The grass cutting for the city is covered by six teams, which cut specific areas of the city on either a four weekly or 10 weekly rotation, dependent on the nature of the site. The council's wildflower meadows receive an annual cut.

A new schedule of work was put together during winter 2018/19, which allowed the successful roll out of a planned programme of work across the city using five dedicated grass cutting teams in specific areas. This has given the teams the autonomy to complete programmes of work in a timely manner but also to report if delays occur. This has come alongside the roll out of the new digital Street Services Information Management System (SSIMS) to provide a more comprehensive approach to green estate management.

Green Estate Management

Dedicated additional support has been brought to the Green Estate through the successful Future Parks Accelerator, which is a programme jointly delivered and funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund, National Trust, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This project is now working with all of the grounds maintenance teams to develop a more sustainable model for managing the green estate of the city. The council has also recently been awarded nearly €4 million as part of the EU Innovation Fund. The 'Green Minds' project will further develop a new approach to how the city cares, values and uses green spaces.

Phase two of the playground improvement programme is currently underway, which will improve a minimum of 38 playgrounds.

In July, the city was successfully awarded seven Green Flag awards for parks across the city, which was a reflection of the efforts of both Friends groups and also Plymouth City Council staff in working to manage and maintain these sites in excellent condition.

Plymouth City Council was also recently shortlisted for an IEMA Sustainability Award for the work done on the biodiversity net gain as part of the Forder Valley Link Road project.

KEY FACTS

The service has 71 FTE staff, broken down across the service delivery areas of trees, grass cutting, green estate management, playgrounds and sports pitches. Of these, 62 staff members are carrying out practical estate management as part of their daily jobs. Seasonal changes in demands mean that there is often cross working between teams.

Additionally, the Green Estate team from the Environmental Planning Service (in Strategic Planning and Infrastructure) and through the Future Parks project is currently supporting this service with an additional 3.5 FTE staff. Therefore, the breakdown below is indicative as follows:

ASSETS

- Almost 500 hectares of grassed land across the city
- 13 local nature reserves
- 5 sites of special scientific interest
- 8 county wildlife sites
- 22 formal parks and 127 playgrounds, sports grounds and bowling greens
- 123 wildflower sites
- Over 30,000 street trees
- Grounds maintenance fleet and equipment

PEOPLE

- 62 FTE parks maintenance staff, including Arborists, Horticulturalists, Senior Operatives, Specialist Drivers and Apprentices
- 9 FTE operational leaders, including Operational Manager, Team Leaders and Senior Tree Officer
- 3.5 FTE additional support from Environmental Planning division (SP&I) towards operational leadership

FINANCES

The budgets for staff costs and vehicles for trees and grass cutting are as follows, with the actuals for 2018/19 and the budget for 2019/20:

	2018/19 ACTUALS	2019/20 BUDGET
Total staff costs – Basic, NI, Super, pension, overtime, and temporary agency staff	£2.83m	£2.49m
Vehicle/plant maintenance costs	£63K	£151K
Vehicle/plant hire costs	£377K	£44K
Trees contractors budget (emergency/out of hours)	£165K	£110K

KEY STATS – PERFORMANCE

- 62 grounds maintenance staff completed training by toolbox talks in HAVS
- 1,252 complaints received about trees in 2019 to date (1 January to 31 August) – 957 trees that needed pruning and 295 fallen tree reports
 - This is an 84% increase on the 680 complaints received during the same period last year (610 trees that needed pruning and 70 fallen trees) and already more than the number of complaints received in 2018 as a whole (1,123)

- 270 grass cutting reports received in 2019 to date (1 January to 31 August) – 251 reports of overgrown grass and 19 reports of damage to property caused by grass cutting crews
 - This is a 30% decrease on the 385 reports received during the same period last year (367 overgrown grass reports and 18 damaged property reports). There were 492 complaints via the Grass Cutting Enquiry Form in 2018 as a whole
- There have been 30 upheld complaints for grass cutting and 24 for trees in this financial year (April to August, 2019).

CHALLENGES

- Winter works were completed by the council's arboricultural team and external contractors, and suitable tree work has continued throughout the summer months but the backlog of work now stands at a total of 1,255 jobs.
- The significant increase in numbers is a result of an increased survey effort in the spring and summer, an increase in customer enquiries and inspections, as well as the storms in July. Winter work planning is now in place, which will prioritise dealing with the highest priority trees first. A review of the team's working arrangements has been conducted and changes implemented to ensure that the team is working safely and effectively to deal with the highest priority trees.
- Initial Ash Dieback (fungal tree disease) surveys have been completed internally, in line with best practice and other local authorities across the country. We are currently reviewing the findings and the results and implications will be reported in due course.

OPPORTUNITIES

- The autumn will see the roll out of the new digital asset management system – Alloy – as part of the SSIMS to provide a more comprehensive, safer and efficient approach to tree management in the city. This has been after the testing of a range of options over the last three months.
- After trials, this autumn will see the service begin the use of some electrical equipment to reduce the risk associated with vibrating machinery and noise.
- Plymouth's Plan for Trees was produced by the partners and this was approved by Cabinet in March. This has led to initial funding from the Woodland Trust and People's Postcode Lottery of £40k and a bid put forward to the Urban Tree Challenge Fund for over £500k to take forward plans for increased canopy cover in the city in the coming two years.
- Over £600k of funding has been secured as part of the Future Parks programme with the Heritage Fund, National Trust, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as well as nearly €4 million from the Urban Innovations Fund for the Green Minds project to work towards a sustainable model of parks and green space management.
- After extensive trials, this autumn will see the grass cutting service begin the use of three remote controlled mowers, which eliminate the risk associated with vibrating machinery and working on steep slopes. This will also allow redeployment of staff to target other priority work in this service area.

DELIVERY AGAINST KEY PRIORITIES

Progress has been made this year in delivering against key priorities, included in both the Corporate Plan and pledges. In terms of the priority of tree audits, the inspection regime is currently under review alongside the recently approved implementation of a new digital asset management system.

Progress against the two pledges relating to trees and grass cutting are given below:

NO. PLEDGE

95 We introduced bee corridors and wildflower meadows to help bees and butterfly populations to thrive. We will expand these habitats across the city.

98 We will tackle the backlog in tree maintenance across the city, with residents' views given more consideration.

UPDATE

This pledge was signed off as complete in March 2019.

We have introduced four new sites and enhanced a further three. We plan to introduce another four over the winter and enhance the management of all sites.

This pledge was signed off as complete in March 2019.

We completed an engagement exercise with communities to gain their views on trees and how they should be promoted, protected, valued and enhanced. Using the feedback received from the engagement exercise and working with our partners, we produced the Plymouth Plan for Trees and a suite of supporting documents, which included a delivery plan and tree principles document. We have committed to continuing this collaborative approach to delivering the Plan for Trees with the signing of a partnership agreement with Plymouth Community Homes, the Woodland Trust, Plymouth Tree Partnership, the National Trust and Plymouth Open Spaces Network.

The previous winter work schedule included investment of external contractors to address the backlog in tree maintenance but the backlog continues. A recent review and reorganisation of the working arrangements of the arboricultural team will provide extra resource, using the existing team to reduce the backlog further over the course of this winter, prioritising trees that have been assessed as posing the greatest risk.

For more details, see <http://plymouthnewsroom.co.uk/say-plymouths-plan-trees/>