SOUTH KESTEVEN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 10 November 2025

Report of Councillor Rhys Baker, Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

Review of Tree Management Policies

Report Author

Andrew Igoea, Tree Project Officer

andrew.igoea@southkesteven.gov.uk

Purpose of Report

To present the results of analysis and modelling on the potential costs associated with changing the Council's approach to managing tree related risk, through the adoption of the updated Tree Management Policies.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

1. **Recommend that Cabinet approve the adoption of the updated Tree Management Policies, inclusive of relevant amendments suggested by Committee members.**

Decision Information	
Does the report contain any exempt or confidential information not for publication?	No
What are the relevant corporate priorities?	Sustainable South Kesteven
Which wards are impacted?	(All Wards);

1. Implications

Taking into consideration implications relating to finance and procurement, legal and governance, risk and mitigation, health and safety, diversity and inclusion, safeguarding, staffing, community safety, mental health and wellbeing and the impact on the Council's declaration of a climate change emergency, the following implications have been identified:

Finance and Procurement

1.1 A revenue budget bid is currently being prepared for 2026/27 that would help to meet the demand for tree works currently categorised as 'desirable' and would avoid the need for more expensive works in future years. However, if additional budget allocation is not approved, then the Tree Management Policies will help prioritise the most safety-critical work using the available budget.

1.2 Future costs may vary due to factors such as the adoption of new land containing trees, growth in the Council's planted tree stock, and potential increases in contractor rates. Changes in industry standards or inspection requirements could also affect long-term expenditure. It will therefore be important to review costs periodically to ensure the budget remains aligned with service needs.

Completed by: Richard Wyles, Deputy Chief Executive and s151 Officer

Legal and Governance

1.3 There are no significant legal or governance issues.

Completed by: James Welbourn, Democratic Services Manager

Risk and Mitigation

1.4 From a risk management perspective, the proposed policy represents a clear improvement on the existing inspection regime. It aligns with recognised industry standards for defensible tree risk management and would strengthen the Council's ability to demonstrate that it is meeting its duty of care. While the Council's overall exposure is also influenced by its capacity to act on identified risks, implementing a proportionate, risk-based inspection system is an essential first step. Failure to adopt an improved regime, when the limitations of the current one are already known, would weaken the Council's position in the event of an incident or claim.

Completed by: Tracey Elliott, Governance & Risk Officer

Health and Safety

1.5 The proposed policy represents a positive step in strengthening the Council's approach to managing health and safety risks associated with trees. By

introducing a risk-based zoning system, SKDC would be adopting a more proportionate and evidence-led method of inspection, which aligns with general principles of good safety management. It ensures that higher-risk areas receive more frequent attention and that the Council can demonstrate a proactive stance in preventing foreseeable harm. While the ability to act on identified risks remains essential, the establishment of a robust inspection regime is a fundamental component of the Council's overall health and safety framework.

1.6 The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASWA) Section 3.1 states the following: **It shall be the duty of every employer to conduct his undertaking in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in his employment who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their health or safety.** This places a clear legal responsibility, along with the moral obligation, to ensure that proactive measures are introduced to remove entirely or reduce the risk posed to persons not in our employment.

Completed by: Phil Swinton, Head of Service for Health, Safety, Compliance and Emergency Planning

2. Background to the Report

2.1. A new draft policy document, Tree Management Policies, was presented to EOSC in June 2025 (Item 9, EOSC, June 10th 2025). This new policy will replace the existing 'Tree Guidelines' (TG) document, adopted in 2019. The draft tree management policy document sets out a clearer, risk-based and proactive framework for managing trees under SKDC's control, defining responsibilities, procedures, and priorities across council land, tenanted properties, and closed churchyards to improve clarity, safety, and long-term resource planning.

2.2. No concerns were raised with the draft wording of the policies during the meeting, but to better understand the impacts of the proposed policy changes to the management of Council trees, further detail was requested on the costs of implementing the proposed policies, particularly section 4, which introduced a comprehensive risk management strategy (key changes to existing strategy are summarised in the table below).

2.3. Separately, a revenue budget is being prepared for the 2026/27 financial year onwards requesting an increase to the existing budget for maintenance of SKDC trees in General Fund Open Spaces from £37,800 to a total of £103,950 (175% increase). In addition, an increase of £11,000 is requested for Grantham SEA budgets (204% increase including Grantham SEA). The need for this requested budget increase is driven by the large volume of work recommended in surveys conducted under the current regime. In order to more proactively manage the Council's stock of trees, there is an ambition to complete more recommendations which are currently categorised as 'desirable'. These recommendations include works such as pruning away from property boundaries to prevent encroachment

issues, crown lifting for maintenance and access, and the removal of ivy to facilitate future inspections and reduce wind loading, amongst others. The completion of these types of desirable work has proved difficult in previous years due to budgetary constraints, nevertheless, the completion of desirable works is advantageous to avoid the need for more expensive, extensive and intrusive works in future years.

2.4. The survey protocols proposed in the Tree Management Policies will help to better differentiate between safety critical and general management recommendations, which will help to prioritise work to trees and manage according to the available budget across the year. Consequently, even if the budget bid referenced above does not proceed, the Tree Management Policies will give a stronger footing to prioritise the most safety-critical work using the available budget and will also demonstrate the Council is implementing a survey strategy which accords with industry guidelines.

3. Key Considerations

3.1. In order understand the projected cost implications of changing the regime of surveys to manage risk from trees, modelling has been completed. The cost modelling presented in this paper is based on a series of standardised assumptions relating to tree numbers, the distribution of trees across the Council's land holding, and the survey cost per tree. While these assumptions introduce some uncertainty around the absolute figures, the same parameters were consistently applied to both the existing and proposed systems. For this reason, the focus of the analysis is on the relative difference in cost between the two approaches, rather than on the absolute totals. Presenting results as percentage differences provides a more reliable indication of the expected change in expenditure, given that the key variable is the inspection frequency rather than the base cost inputs themselves. However, in the interests of transparency, the figures used in the modelling are provided in the appendices.

3.2. The cost estimates presented are based on current tree numbers, survey rates, and known land holdings. However, several factors could influence overall costs in future years. These include the adoption of additional land containing mature trees (for example, through new developments or transfers of public open space), and the Council's ongoing tree planting activity, which will gradually increase the number of trees requiring inspection as they mature. External market factors, such as inflationary pressures or changes in the availability and pricing of qualified survey contractors, could also affect survey costs. In addition, changes in national guidance or industry standards for tree risk management, or the emergence of new pest and disease threats, could require adjustments to inspection frequency or scope.

3.3. The expected cost differentials reported below relate solely to the costs associated with changing the Council's approach to **identifying** tree related risks. They do not include any projected increases in spending on tree work itself.

3.4. The costs associated with changing the Council's approach to identifying risks should be considered separately to increased spending on tree works for the following reasons:

3.4.1. The council's duty of care requires both an adequate inspection system and the resources to act on identified risks. These are complementary but distinct responsibilities.

3.4.2. Implementing the new inspection policy is about ensuring the Council meets the minimum legal standard for identifying risk. The availability of works funding then determines *how quickly* and *to what extent* we can respond to those risks.

3.4.3. Deferring improvements to the inspection regime until the additional tree works budget (referenced in paragraph 2.3 above) is confirmed would delay the implementation of a more modern, risk-based approach that better reflects current industry practice.

3.5. Key areas for potential cost implications:

3.5.1. **Service provider** – Survey timings and protocols need to be updated and may not to be compatible with the current service provided. As a result, the Council may need to procure survey services from an alternative provider, potentially at a higher cost.

3.5.2. **Tree record management** – The council's tree records are currently held in software under another authority's licence. Implementation of zoning will require the Council to have its own tree record management system.

3.5.3. **Inspection frequencies** – zoning decreases inspection intervals in some areas but increases them in others, changing the overall inspection workload.

3.6. To provide clarity on the financial implications of implementing the new risk management strategy, the team has:

3.6.1. Estimated a projected cost of implementing the existing system over the next 10 years, using set parameters for the number of trees, their distribution across the Council's estate, and the survey cost per tree.

3.6.2. Created a draft zoning map covering all land under the Council's control to test the practical application of a risk-based zoning system.

3.6.3. Modelled costs of the proposed zoning system, applying the same parameters (tree numbers, distribution, survey cost) over the same period, allowing direct comparison with the existing system.

3.6.4. Investigated the annual cost of accessing North Kesteven District Council's (NKDC) tree database.

3.6.5. Explored alternative database systems, specifically investigating the cost of migrating the Council' tree data into its preferred system, OTISS, and the associated annual licence fee.
3.6.6. Investigated the potential cost of outsourcing tree surveying to a private company (in light of the potential need to move away from NKDC as the current provider).
3.6.7. Investigated the potential for a proportion of Zone 3 areas to be surveyed internally.

3.4. Results: A comparison of existing versus proposed

EXISTING	PROPOSED
Strategy for managing risk from trees – RESULT = COST NEUTRAL	
• All council-owned trees are split into 3 geographical groups and inspected on a 3-year cycle. Surveys take place in the autumn/winter each year. • Recommendations for remedial work are prioritised based on a binary system: 'essential' and 'desirable'	• A system of zoning based on occupancy/likelihood. • Areas with high rates of use (or high value targets) combined with large trees will be classed as 'Zone 1' and be surveyed every 18 months. Lower occupancy areas will be Zone 2, surveyed every 30 months, and Zone 3 areas will be surveyed every 54 months. • Recommendations for remedial work will be prioritised based on a framework of safety critical and general management recommendation types. Safety critical work will be scored from 1-3 and general management recommendations will be placed in 1 of 5 categories.
Costs of the service provider – RESULT = COST NEUTRAL	
• All surveying is outsourced	• Most Zone 3 areas, where there are only a small number of trees in low-risk situations, could be surveyed internally.
• Current survey provider currently charges £3.50 per tree.	• Market engagement has indicated a local arboricultural consultant would match our current per tree rate for a multi-year contract.
Costs associated with the inspection frequency – RESULT = COST INCREASE: 16% over a 10-year period	
• All council-owned trees inspected on a 3-year cycle	• Modelling suggests that, using the same parameters (tree numbers, distribution, survey costs), a zoning system would increase survey costs by ~16% over a 10-year period. This increase reflects more frequent inspections in Zone 1 and Zone 2 areas.

EXISTING	PROPOSED
Database costs – RESULT = COST SAVING: -55% over a 10-year period	
• Currently £1,250 (ex VAT) for an annual fee to cover our use and access to the database	• An alternative system (OTISS) would cost £670 per year, with an initial £600 setup fee for data migration.
Combined impact of inspection frequency and data base costs – RESULT = COST INCREASE, 10% over a 10-year period	
• The existing system costs £8–10K per year.	• Factoring in the database saving into the 10-year model reduces the overall cost increase of the zoning system to **~10%**.

3.5 Benefits of adopting the proposed system:

3.5.1 **Zoning is risk-based and proportionate:** The inspection frequency reflects actual exposure to harm (occupancy and use of space); Zone 1 areas are inspected more frequently reducing the likelihood of serious harm. More frequent inspections mean that potential hazards are identified sooner and can therefore be addressed in a timelier manner (subject to available resources). This gives the council the ability to shorten the period during which defects remain unmanaged, reducing public exposure to risk and improving overall safety outcomes.

3.5.2 **There is built-in flexibility:** The Council would not be locked into a rigid inspection cycle, so could escalate risk controls when needed; with three inspection interval options available, areas can be "upgraded" to a higher-frequency zone if circumstances change (e.g. plant health threats, new housing developments, increased footfall, or climate/storm impacts).

3.5.3 **The proposed strategy is more defensible (legally):** If harm occurs, it will be easier to justify in court that the Council's management of risk is reasonable and proportionate (based on legal precedents; aligns with industry best practice guidance such as the National Tree Safety Group Common Sense Risk Management of Trees).

3.5.4 **Adoption of these policies will demonstrate strategic leadership:** It will show that the Council is proactively modernising tree risk management, not relying on a legacy system and ignoring changes in the industry.

3.5.5 **Improved efficiency and value for money:**

3.5.6 Zoning avoids over-inspecting low-risk areas, reducing wasted effort.

3.5.7 Control of our own tree records allows a hybrid model of internal resourcing and outsourcing.

3.5.8 **Better detection of hazards:** The proposed inspection intervals will ensure that inspections alternate between in-leaf and out-of-leaf, which improves the chance of spotting defects, and enhances monitoring of decline or disease progression (e.g. for ash dieback). This approach is more defensible in court. It may lead to an initial increase in recorded recommendations, particularly for lower-level management works. However, this reflects better visibility and data accuracy rather than an actual increase in underlying risk, and the trend is expected to stabilise over time.

3.5.9 **An improved prioritisation system:** Adoption of the proposed zoning policy provides an opportunity to move away from binary priority system (essential vs desirable) to a framework of safety critical and general management recommendation types. This will provide a clearer audit trail showing how work undertaken is prioritised and integrates risk management with broader tree and woodland management objectives.

3.5.10 **Strategic alignment:** The South & East Lincolnshire Council's Partnership and Rutland County Council have published policy documents showing a commitment to manage tree risk through zoning, so the proposed policy will align with some other neighbouring authorities.

4. Reasons for the Recommendations

4.1. The implementation of the proposed risk management strategy is expected to require a ~10% increase in spending for surveys and associated data management, compared to the existing system. Due to modest sums of money involved, it is believed this would not create a significant financial burden for the Council and would deliver many benefits.

4.2. Although the costs associated with changing the Council's approach to identifying risks should be considered separately to increased spending on tree works, (due to the modest sums of money involved) it is expected that the overall cost increase associated with risk identification can be covered by the budget bid for tree work, so no additional budget will be requested to cover the implementation of the policy document.

4.3. Adopting the new tree management policy will improve risk management, clarity, consistency, and accountability in tree care, strengthen relationships between people and trees, and support more efficient, evidence-based use of resources.

5. Background Papers

5.1. EOSC, June 10th 2025
Item 9: Update on Draft Tree Management Policies
Paper
Appendix 1 (draft policy document)
Minutes

6. Appendices

6.1. SKDC Tree Management Policies (updated draft)