

Tree Management and Maintenance in Ruskin Park Lambeth Council Parks and Leisure Services (Tree Service) August 2020

1. Recent background

There have been a number of major developments in the last 18 months with regard to long-term tree management in the borough which will have a direct impact for trees in Ruskin Park.

The park was proactively inspected by an external consultancy in February 2019 and a number of works were recommended including felling and pruning for health and safety reasons. Most of the necessary and more urgent pruning and felling works have taken place however we were not in agreement with all of the recommendations and have made amendments to those inspections accordingly but not to the detriment of public safety.

In April 2019, the Council brought tree maintenance operations in-house. As part of the restructuring of the service, we recruited two new tree officers in November 2019. One of these officers will cover the east of the borough which includes Ruskin Park. This tree officer has already made contact with the Friends of Ruskin Park (FORP) and will be working closely with them to deliver and develop the tree element of the masterplan.

During spring 2020, the tree officer arranged for the 'extension' to be re-inspected by himself and a fellow tree officer in reaction to the recent partial tree failures on the perimeter ash trees. Further works have been raised including primarily aerial inspections and decay detection.

2. Why are the trees failing?

There are numerous reasons why the trees are failing, which include:

- **Age:** many of the trees within Ruskin Park are mature and over mature. Like humans they have a limited life so another aspect of the masterplan should be to start thinking about how trees are replaced (species, locations, etc.) and having a plan in place going forward as trees obviously have a massive impact on the landscape.
- **Historic mismanagement:** poor pruning practice and unnecessary pruning of trees by contractors going back over many years has caused significant wounding of trees, resulting in physiological dysfunction and increased susceptibility to pests and diseases.
- **Previous lack of resources:** this has led to irregular and reactive inspections and a lack of strategic tree planting.
- **Pests and pathogens:** this is an emerging but very real risk to trees in all environments. There are a plethora of new diseases and the proliferation of some existing pathogens are undermining the structural stability and physiological stress of

more and more species of tree, for example horse chestnut bleeding canker. The selection of species for any replacement trees will need to bear this factor in mind.

- **Climate Change – soil desiccation/drought and unseasonal/extreme weather:** stress induced by reduced water availability can not only have a direct physiological impact but can also increase the trees susceptibility to pests and pathogens. More regular strong winds can damage branches and uproot trees.
- **Soil compaction:** heavily compacted shrinkable soil is shown to reduce a trees ability to respire (exchange oxygen through its roots) and uptake nutrients. Heavily compacted soil can also inhibit a trees ability to create new fibrous roots. The stress factors can not only have a direct physiological response in relation to root dysfunction, but also dysfunction within the canopy, which in turn can increase the trees susceptibility to pest and pathogens. Increasing footfall in our parks as a result of higher population density and the impact of the pandemic has added to this condition.

3. Can we expect this to continue to happen at this rate?

Yes for the reasons stated above. The mature Ash trees in the extension are of particular concern. These trees are infected with a fungal pathogen called *Inonotus hispidus* which is resulting in the loss of large limbs and a risk to health and safety. Following recent inspections, works have been recommended however the degree of infection is such that many of these trees will require further heavy crown reduction or removal in the short to medium term. Heavy crown reduction although it reduces the risks, will cause further physiological dysfunction to trees. There will be a significant loss of amenity and environmental benefits provided by these trees over the coming years. Our plan would be to work with the FORP to develop a plan for long term replacement and replanting of this area.

Through the undertaking of cyclical tree inspections, we aim to identify tree related risks that are above its risk threshold. With works being recommended as required to reduce any increased risks back to within the threshold if possible through pruning but if necessary through felling. It is possible therefore that more works will happen in a short period of time to address the safety critical concerns, as a result of the further aerial inspections and decay detection that is scheduled to take place within Ruskin Park.

Our tree service manager has met with FORP representatives during a walk by of potentially threatened trees in the park and explained the reasons for their condition and measures required.

4. How are the trees being replaced?

Historically, there has not been a tree planting budget for parks. As a result of the new service, some funds will be available however these will be spread thinly across the entire service. During Winter 2019/20 several new trees were planted within Ruskin Park, through a combination sponsorship from FORP, members of the public and existing Council budgets – these trees were not replacement trees and were situated in the area around the bandstand and the “wheat field”.

Some of the historically removed ash trees within the “extension” have been replaced by alternative species - poplar, alder and tulip trees (although the tulip tree has now been vandalised and will also be removed). Some of this planting has been haphazard and not executed as part of a long term landscaping plan to maintain the character of the park. We will work with the FORP to achieve this.

It is the aim of tree officers not to remove trees where possible, but to manage them through pruning works, which includes the creation of monoliths (i.e. just leaving the trunks standing as ‘totem poles’) where appropriate and agreed as part of the master plan, to produce ecological benefits. However, for those trees that have to be felled, we will look to replant providing there is funding to facilitate their replacement.

5. Are resources an issue?

Each tree officer is responsible for between 5 and 6 wards within the borough, including not only highway and park trees but also housing (both single properties and estates), vegetative subsidence claims and other tree related enquires. There are 6 arborists to undertake works from the 4 tree officers, both scheduled proactive works but also emergency works. Whilst also attempting to clear the historic back log.

6. Can FORP fund raise?

In relation to sponsored trees, we actively encourage fund raising by the local community as witnessed with FORP recently contributing to the planting of trees within Ruskin Park. This will need to be addressed strategically within the masterplan. The fundraising as processed previously can be arranged either directly with our tree officer covering the park or colleagues in parks

7. Possible to keep tree character of Ruskin?

Due to embargos on the purchase of certain trees (Oaks and Ash) and the susceptibility of certain trees to invasive pest and pathogens (Horse Chestnut) which can reduce their survival rate and establishment rate, it is likely that over time the character of Ruskin Park will change. Also due to the poor age diversity within Ruskin Park, the loss of large mature trees will be noticed, with the planting of “instant impact” large established trees not having a high survival rate (and also posing several biosecurity concerns, regarding pest and diseases and provenance).

That being said, we will aim to retain as many trees as is safe to do so through sensitive pruning, to reduce the impact of tree loss. Additionally, where Ruskin Park is presented as a local “arboretum” the replacement of trees provides the potential to install some interesting or rare species (in the right locations) and increase biodiversity, which can reduce the spread of certain pest and pathogens.

8. What is the risk to personal safety & prediction of risk?

We take public health and safety very seriously and as a result of the recent partial tree failures, reactive re-inspection of the trees within the extension were undertaken, which resulted in requesting further aerial and decay detection be undertaken as well as other

scheduled works. All scheduled fells provide Lambeth with the opportunity to apply notices to the trees to inform park users of the works which are to take place.

Additionally, one tree was dealt with, pre-emptively due to conditions that were present, this was unable to have a notice applied due to the fact that it was undertaken on the same day it was identified.

Whilst certain tree structural or vitality issues present external symptoms that can be detected both visibly or audibly from the ground level, such as fungal fruiting bodies or decay within the lower stem, some structural defects cannot be easily detected from the ground (such as the internal cavity within the horse chestnuts crown) or the issue known as Sudden Branch Drop means that there is no such thing as a completely safe tree. Statistics show however that the risk of harm from trees is very low. In-line with industry best practice, the borough's highway trees are inspected in relation to occupancy zones. This is also in the process of being applied to parks as part of a borough-wide Tree Risk Management Policy. Ruskin Park will be surveyed on a 3 year cycle and based on a tree risk assessment system known as QTRA (<https://www.qtra.co.uk>), individual trees will be inspected more or less periodically depending on their individual risk score. Trees will be inspected from ground level, using an acoustic hammer as a method for investigating decay. Where individual trees require more detailed inspection such as aerial inspections or decay detection, these will be recommended however these are both costly and time consuming and only recommended as part of best practice where there is an initial identification of a "potential" flaw.

9. Large quantities of wood?

Standing and lying deadwood can be an important habitat for insects and for natural play. Some habitats can be left in shrub beds where they can rot down without causing a visual impact. We are happy to discuss this matter with the FORP so that the use of deadwood is managed as part of strategic planning.

10. Next steps from a Council perspective

We will be carrying out aerial inspections with a view to completion within 3 months.

Our tree operations will continue with the current list of recommended works subject to bird nesting.

We would suggest a walkabout to look at the trees that are likely to need replacing such as the ash trees in the extension.

We are happy to arrange some basic tree inspection training for nominated volunteers to recognise common tree defects which can then be reported to the tree team.