

7. The Forestry Commission will take account of the Council's comments when deciding whether or not to grant a Felling Licence. The Forestry Commission can impose enforceable conditions on a Felling Licence, for example that require new trees to be planted.

Other Material Considerations:

8. This application is in or affecting the Central Conservation Area.
9. Christ Church Meadow is listed grade 1 in the English Heritage 'Register of Historic Parks and Gardens and is therefore of national significance.
10. A bat roost has been found in one of the trees that it is proposed to fell. Several of the other trees have potential to contain bat roosts.

Proposals

11. New Walk was planted by Christ Church as an avenue of regularly planted trees (probably a mix of elm and lime) in the 1860s. No original trees remain and the avenue now contains 59 trees of mixed species (2 poplar species and 4 lime species) and age and variable spacing.
12. Christ Church is concerned about the safety of the hybrid black poplar trees in the avenue; 2 trees have been removed for safety reasons and others have decay. 2 trees have lost very large branches which have broken and fallen into the heavily used area near the thatched barn during the past year or so and which could have caused severe injury.
13. Christ Church also considers that much of the character of the original regular avenue has been forfeited by the current mix of species, ages and spacing of the trees in the avenue and that this should be restored.
14. Christ Church has taken expert arboricultural and historic landscape advice and has consulted with English Heritage, the Garden History Society and officers. The resulting 'Christ Church Meadow Tree Management Strategy' recommends that the long term aim for the New Walk Avenue should be "to achieve an avenue in mature lime with regularly spaced trees to create the Gothic arch intended to reflect the Meadow Building."
15. The management strategy considers a range of options for achieving this aim; for example, by clear felling the avenue and replanting, or by felling one side of the avenue and replanting first, or by removing sections of the avenue and replanting, or by continuing the *ad hoc* removal and replacement of trees as they become dangerous. It recommends the phased removal and replacement of the poplars in the avenue over a 10 to 20 year period beginning in the year 2014/15. It is considered that this approach:
 - Prioritises safety;
 - Reduces on-going management burden and safety concerns;
 - Maintains existing mature lime trees in mix of species;
 - Improves conditions for retained and newly planted trees;
 - Maintains informal outline when seen across the Meadow;
 - Works towards a more regular feature in line with regular spacing;

- Replaces short lived brittle poplars with longer lived limes, which are excellent avenue trees.
16. The proposal is therefore to fell 10 trees (marked by broken circles on the plan at Appendix 1), including 9 hybrid black poplars and 1 balsam poplar, and to plant 18 heavy standard common lime trees (marked by black dots on the plan), as the first phase of a plan to replace all of the poplar trees in the avenue over a 20 year period with common limes planted at regular 32 foot spacing (which is common in historic avenues) to restore the avenue to its former character.
 17. In this first phase 4 hybrid black poplars are to be removed from the southern end of the avenue near to the river; 7 lime trees will be planted in this part of the avenue. Also, a group of 4 hybrid black poplars and one balsam poplar are to be removed from near to the northern end of the avenue near to the thatched barn and 9 lime trees will be replanted in the gap created. An additional 2 new lime trees will be planted to fill an existing gap in the mid part of the avenue on its eastern side.
 18. The new heavy standard sized trees will be between 3 and 4 metres tall when planted. Felling and planting is intended to take place before April 2015.
 19. Christ Church has publicised its proposals by a press release.

Officer Assessment

20. It seems that the hybrid poplar trees in the avenue were planted during the 1920s, probably as replacement for elm trees that will have died of Dutch Elm Disease. It is not a long lived species, so these particular trees are considered to be in late maturity. The trees have become very large and characteristically for trees of this species now have very substantial side branches. Poplar wood is relatively brittle and this, combined with the great weight of the large branches, means that as the trees get bigger they become vulnerable to branches breaking. Sometimes branches break as a result of the forces acting on them during windy weather, but branches can also break without warning on still, windless days during the summer; a phenomenon known as 'summer branch drop'. Two very large branches have broken and fallen suddenly and without warning from different trees standing near to the thatched barn in the past year or so during windless days, and given the size, condition and age of the trees there is justified concern that this will happen again with more serious consequences; Christ Church Meadow attracts over a million visitors each year and so New Walk is often very busy with pedestrian traffic and people sitting underneath the trees.
21. For these reasons officers concur with arboricultural advice that was given to Christ Church in 2013; that although the hybrid poplar trees might be retained for up 50 years, for safety reasons they would require intense management in the form of substantial stem and branch reduction within the next 5 to 10 years which would have to be continued regularly until they are removed. This advice will need to be acted on soon if the hybrid black poplars remain.

22. 2 the hybrid poplar have already been removed (their stumps remain) from the avenue because they had become dangerous as a result of extensive decay in their main stems. Detailed investigation (resistograph testing) of the remaining trees has provided evidence that some of them also have internal decay in their structures. This decay will be progressive and is likely to further increase the risk of the affected trees breaking in the future.
23. The balsam poplar tree that it is proposed to remove appears to have been planted in the 1970s. Its growth has been affected by an adjacent hybrid black poplar (one of those that was removed for safety reasons) so that it leans to the north, supressing the growth of one of the more desirable lime trees in the avenue. Its removal is therefore proposed to promote the better growth of the lime and officers support this regardless of the works to the hybrid black poplar trees.
24. Although the proposed removal of the poplar trees will undoubtedly alter the appearance of the avenue both in views from within Christ Church Meadow and in external views from along the river towpath to the south, officers consider this option to be the least harmful, in visual and landscape terms, of the management options (refer to paragraph 11 above) that might deliver the desired replacement of the existing poplar trees with limes. It will also least affect the visitor experience of walking through an avenue of mature trees.
25. The greatest change on the landscape within Christ Church Meadow will be in views currently enjoyed from the Broad Walk, standing between Merton Field and the Meadow Building looking south west towards the thatched barn. In this view the group of 4 hybrid black poplar trees near to the thatched barn are tall and prominent in the skyline. However, there are other trees in the background of these views that should ensure that intrusive built elements outside of the meadow are not introduced into the view as a result of the removal of these four trees. Otherwise, views of the avenue from within Christ Church Meadow are either relatively long distance or have many other trees in either or both the foreground and background of the view.
26. The significant effects on public views from outside Christ Church Meadow are limited to the view looking north from the part of the river towpath which is near the south end of the avenue and again there are many other trees in both the foreground and background of this view. Views of the avenue from further east or west along the towpath are obscured by trees in the foreground that also stand within Christ Church Meadow.
27. On balance, officers consider that the reasons given for the proposed tree felling and planting justifies the short term changes to visual amenity in the area. New planting will help restore the avenue and sustain it as a coherent landscape into the future, which will ultimately enhance both the appearance and character of the historic landscape and the conservation area.
28. By contrast officers are concerned that should the hybrid black poplar trees be retained, the substantial stem and branch reduction pruning that is necessary to make them safe and the continued *ad hoc* felling and replacement of trees

as they become dangerous will have a long term detrimental effect on the character of the avenue, which would harm both the appearance and character of the historic landscape and the conservation area.

29. A bat survey has been undertaken which has identified a bat roosts in one of the hybrid poplar trees standing near to the thatched barn. Several other trees have been identified as having potential for bat roosts. Recommended mitigation includes installing bat boxes on some of the retained avenue trees prior to felling, detailed climbing inspection for bats prior to felling and 'soft felling' parts of the tree which might contain bats roosts. A licence from Natural England will be required prior to felling the tree with a roost if a Felling Licence is granted by the Forestry Commission. Officers consider that in addition felling should take place outside of ecologically sensitive spring and summer months unless there is a clear over-riding justification to otherwise.

Conclusion:

30. For the reasons set out in this report officers consider the proposal to remove 10 poplar trees and to plant 18 heavy standard trees to be good tree and landscape management.
31. Although the hybrid black poplar trees are very large and their removal will have an effect on some views from within Christ Church Meadow, most significantly on views from part of the Broad Walk, and also on some views from along the river towpath outside of Christ Church Meadow, there are many other trees in these views. Officers consider that the effect on visual amenity in the area is adequately justified by the reasons given for the proposed work. The benefit provided by the proposed new planting outweighs any harm that will be caused by felling of existing trees.
32. Having special regard for the effect on the appearance and character of the Central Conservation Area and on the historic landscape, which is listed grade 1 in the English Heritage 'register of Historic parks and Gardens', officers consider that it is not expedient in this case for the Council to use its powers to make a Tree Preservation Order.
33. Officers advise that the Council should raise no objection to the grant of a Felling Licence and should ask the Forestry Commission to impose enforceable conditions that require replacement planting to take place and for tree felling to be undertaken outside the ecologically sensitive spring and summer months without a clear over-riding justification.

Background Papers:

Contact Officer: Kevin Caldicott

Extension: 2149

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