

SUBJECT: BR 15/06/21 - MAINTENANCE OF STREET TREES UNDER AERIAL POWERLINES

REPORT BY: INFRASTRUCTURE AND PROPERTY
CONTACT: ACTING DIRECTOR INFRASTRUCTURE AND PROPERTY / ACTING MANAGER ASSETS AND PROJECTS

PURPOSE

To action Council's Resolution from the Ordinary Council Meeting of 23 March 2021 (**Attachment A**) specifically Part 7:

That Council:

Writes to Ausgrid's CEO Richard Goss requesting that he provide Councillors with a briefing on current practice for street tree maintenance and management under aerial powerlines, including the use of alternative transmission line technologies that reduce the extent of and need for tree pruning such as insulated bundled wires and underground transmission lines. Council request the briefing explain the advantages, the limitations, and the cost of these technologies, and the criteria on which Ausgrid decides where and when these technologies will be rolled out.

BACKGROUND

City of Newcastle (CN) began receiving customer requests in 2020 regarding the harsh pruning of street trees located under powerlines by Ausgrid's contractor. Many of the community's concerns reflect those of CN, including the loss of benefits and services that our urban street trees provide, which then directly and indirectly affect the health of our residents and the general public. Community concerns have also been around the perceived increased risk of tree failure given severe asymmetric pruning.

This level of community concern replicates a previous era from 2015 where the method and intensity of public street tree pruning under powerlines by Ausgrid and their contractor generated widespread community concern. In response to this, Council resolved to escalate the matter at its meeting of 28 July 2015 through the Lord Mayoral Minute *Ausgrid Tree Pruning Practices*.

In 2016-2017, CN in conjunction with Local Government NSW and many other Council's, prepared a joint pruning submission. Round table consultations were held and for the following few years Newcastle experienced improved outcomes from Ausgrid's pruning cycle. During this period CN was also proactive in updating the Street Tree Selection Manual to accommodate appropriate tree planting under powerlines and extended establishment maintenance to six years.

Unfortunately, Ausgrid returned to pruning practices that reduce the vitality and health of street trees under powerlines in 2020. In response, CN committed to working with Ausgrid and have reviewed the impacts on both the established trees and new trees. Currently CN proposes to undertake a program of proactive and additional formative pruning for new trees under powerlines at ten years, to limit line and tree interactions.

Commitment was also made to provide an independent arboricultural review of Ausgrid's recent pruning works. The review currently indicates that a majority of Ausgrid's activity does not deliver tree pruning line clearance activities that protect tree vitality and meet clearances, as is expected from the delivery of work to the AS4373 standard and Ausgrid's management guidelines.

The extent of pruning activities can be fully appreciated through analysis of CN's urban forest tree data. This reveals that of the 63,116 public street trees and 28,000 vacancies for street tree sites, over 38% of them are located under powerlines. As a result, an estimated 20,000 street trees and 4,000 vacancies are potentially impacted by Ausgrid pruning practices, and may not be able to develop the full benefits for the community, addressing such issues as climate change, capturing stormwater, purifying air by screening small particles, and loss of amenity.

The multiple pressures on the health of Newcastle's urban forest have focused discussions with Ausgrid staff and their contractors during CN brokered workshops commencing January 2021. These sessions have proven productive in developing shared perspectives, processes, and language in managing both electrical line clearances and tree canopy to build a mutually beneficial forward plan.

The outcomes of the sessions to date are as follows:

- i) Agreement to share data for strategic scheduling of the forward program (CN awaiting Ausgrid data),
- ii) Identification of sites which prioritise Ausgrid's essential service lines and CN's significant tree stands. These scope works options such as:
 - a) Removals and replacements,
 - b) Pruning changes, and
 - c) Engineering options (TBC).
- iii) New standards will be delivered through Arboriculture Australia in 2021 and CN has brokered a local training opportunity for CN, Ausgrid staff, and contractors to ensure best practice is rolled out as soon as practical, and
- iv) Commitment to providing factual and relevant details to the community, engaging them in the delivery of secure energy supplies whilst ensuring the benefits of a healthy and expansive urban forest.

Community interest groups have also been successfully agitating for NSW Parliamentary questions of the responsible Minister on the matter, as well as petitions calling for changes to Ausgrid's practices. Their ongoing interest in these matters continues.

CN and Ausgrid have worked in good faith to refine the points of agreement and actions needed to prepare mutually agreeable forward works programs. These works will require data sharing, and changes to pruning processes and methodologies in the application of new standards. In addition, an appropriate funding model is required and

further work and understanding of potential cost and impact is necessary. The demonstration of our commitment to work together at priority locations for a changed practice is currently underway.

With such actions in place the collective benefits derived from our public street tree canopy can be enjoyed by our current and future communities.

RECOMMENDATION

The briefing be received.

REFERENCES

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Council Resolution – Notice of Motion 23/03/21 – Maintenance of Street Trees Under Aerial Powerlines

Attachment A: NOM 23/03/21 – maintenance of street trees under aerial powerlines

RESOLVED: (Councillors Mackenzie/Clausen)

That Council:

- 1 Notes the contribution of Newcastle's street tree population to the city's urban forest, an intergenerational resources that provides multiple community benefits, and the need to improve practices and capacity to ensure these benefits.
- 2 Notes the responsibility of Council for the holistic management of urban forest assets owned or controlled by the City of Newcastle, as outlined in the Newcastle Urban Forest Policy.
- 3 Acknowledges the need for line clearance to ensure consistent and uncompromised electricity supply for our communities
- 4 Notes that numerous complaints have been received from the Newcastle community, including photos showing a significant loss in visual amenity, tree canopy benefits, and in some instances, increased risk of tree failure following Ausgrid's pruning activities, due to recent heavy pruning of a large portion of public trees under Ausgrid's powerline network (see attachments). Photos have been submitted showing the recent impact of Ausgrid pruning on street trees in Maryville, Wickham, Stockton, New Lambton, Waratah, Georgetown, Wallsend, Hamilton, Hamilton North and North Lambton.
- 5 Notes that this is not unique to Newcastle, including contact from Councils elsewhere in Ausgrid's network area who are experiencing similar issues with Ausgrid tree pruning practices.
- 6 Notes continued advocacy from the City of Newcastle, including motions submitted to and adopted by the LGNSW Annual Conference, and City of Newcastle's joint advocacy and participation on the Ausgrid Vegetation Management Working Group along with LGNSW, Sutherland Shire Council, Parramatta City Council, Willoughby Council, City of Sydney Council, Ku-Ring-Gai Council, Inner West Council, Strathfield Council, Burwood Council, Lake Macquarie City Council, Canterbury-Bankstown City Council, Woollahra Council, Mosman Council, Randwick City Council, North Sydney Council and Northern Beaches Council.
- 7 Writes to Ausgrid's CEO Richard Goss requesting that he provide Councillors with a briefing on current practice for street tree maintenance and management under aerial powerlines, including the use of alternative transmission line technologies that reduce the extent of and need for tree pruning such as insulated bundled wires and underground transmission lines. Council request the briefing explain the advantages, the limitations, and the cost of these technologies, and the criteria on which Ausgrid decides where and when these technologies will be rolled out.

- 8 Formally requests that Ausgrid:
 - a. Review current Ausgrid pruning practices,
 - b. Implement measures to prevent the current practices from continuing,
 - c. Compensate for street tree removal and replacement where current practices have been excessive, based on agreed public tree asset arboricultural assessments,
 - d. Understand and acknowledge the public value of our urban forest and requirement for ongoing collaboration with CN in developing long-term solutions, and
 - e. Create effective communication and notification for customers that confirms what they can expect and why, and where to direct their concerns if this expectation is not met.

- 9 Offers genuine collaboration to resolve this issue, including by making available staff and data sharing to achieve the above requests, and seeks Ausgrid's immediate attention to resolve the negative impacts on the management of the public urban forest.