

Mature Lombardy Poplar replacement programme FAQs

Why are you proposing to replace so many trees?

The borough's mature Lombardy Poplars are reaching the end of their natural lifespan and the likelihood of them falling or breaking has increased.

Lombardy Poplars are very brittle, tall, short-lived trees. Their wood has become weaker and more prone to breakage over time and external and internal inspections are not detecting all health and structural issues.

Replacing the borough's 356 mature Lombardy Poplars is essential to help protect residents from future incidents.

The trees are set to be replaced by species more suited to the borough's environment that will preserve Welwyn Hatfield's distinctive tree landscape for the future.

Why are you not just replacing the diseased trees?

Lombardy Poplars are short-lived trees and many are approaching the end of their natural lifespan. They were planted during the post-war development years in part because they establish quickly, but this fast growth has compromised their strength.

In response to an incident in 2009 where a mature Lombardy Poplar fell across Bessemer Road in Welwyn Garden City, we began combining external and internal checks during inspections. Internal testing involves the use of specialist equipment to detect health and structural issues. However, sometimes even the most specialised checks are not highlighting internal issues which can cause the tree to fail.

Could you inspect them more frequently?

A more frequent inspection regime would not do enough to protect residents from future incidents.

Even meticulous internal testing cannot be relied upon to detect disease and fully assess the risk of a mature Lombardy Poplar falling or breaking.

What incidents are you referring to?

Since 2009 there have been a number of incidents affecting mature Lombardy Poplars: a tree fell across Bessemer Road in 2009 and was found to be rotten at the base; a tree fell on a car in Howardsgate in 2009 and was also found to be rotten at the base; a large branch fell in Parkway in 2017; a tree fell in Longmead in 2017 and was found to be rotten at the roots; and most recently a tree crushed three cars at Howicks Green and was found to be rotten at a height of 3 metres.

Tree officers began to combine visual and internal testing as a result of the 2009 incidents, but in all cases since then there has been no indication that the tree was decayed or diseased.

Does this affect other tree species?

No, these issues are confined to mature Lombardy Poplars, which represent around 2% of the borough's total tree population.

How old is a mature Lombardy Poplar?

A Lombardy Poplar tree is said to be mature at around 50 years old.

I have a mature Lombardy Poplar near my home, should I be concerned?

Please do not be alarmed or concerned if you have a mature Lombardy Poplar close to your home.

Although the number of incidents has increased, they are rare.

We are planning to complete the work programme as soon as possible, but if do you do have any queries or concerns, please email contact-whc@welhat.gov.uk

When will I know when you're working near me?

Officers will prepare a detailed 12 month schedule of work, most likely starting from the east of the towns and progressing westwards. This will be available on the council's website, or you can email contact-whc@welhat.gov.uk for further information.

Is this a way of the council saving money?

The cost of felling and planting new trees is more expensive than maintaining existing trees.

We share residents' passion for trees, and highly value their contribution to the borough's green and pleasant environment, but the safety of residents must come first and it is essential we act now to protect residents from future incidents.

Has the council taken independent advice?

The proposal has been put together by professionally qualified tree officers, with a combined 40 years' experience in arboriculture, in consultation with a specialist contractor.

Will the new trees be planted in exactly the same place?

We will be following the borough's original planting layout wherever possible. As Lombardy Poplars are very narrow trees, it may be that we need to change where some new trees are planted to give them the best chance of establishing fully.