



Christmas Tree – 2023 Arborist Report

Council Member Information

The Norfolk Island Pine on Smillie Street has significant historical and community value as a memorial planting and through its long-standing use as the town Christmas tree. The 2023 arborist report recognised the tree as having high significance and a high retention rating. At the time of inspection, its health and structure were both assessed as fair.

The report identified a number of factors that may affect the tree over time, particularly the raised soil level around the trunk, accumulated organic material, the constrained root zone, surrounding road pavement and the ability for water to adequately reach the root system.

Root zone and soil levels

The report recommended exploratory excavation to establish the tree's natural ground and root levels and to assess the condition of the trunk before determining whether further soil removal would benefit the tree.

Some work has been undertaken in this area. In 2024, a limited amount of soil was carefully removed by hand under the supervision of Council's Gardens Crew to better expose the trunk flare. The work was limited when fine feeder roots were encountered.

Council's Gardens Crew has also previously investigated around the tree using a water-spear method while checking irrigation infrastructure.

The more extensive exploratory excavation contemplated by the report has not been undertaken. The report itself cautions that soil cannot simply be removed by machinery, as root loss or excessive exposure of roots could worsen the condition of the tree. It recommends careful hand excavation or an air spade, with the work progressively assessed to avoid over-excavation.

Council has therefore taken a cautious approach to further disturbance of the root zone.

Irrigation

The report recommends subsurface irrigation or scheduled deep watering, particularly during drier periods. It recommends that watering penetrate beyond the upper soil level and favours less frequent deep soaking rather than frequent small amounts of water.

Irrigation has been installed within the garden beds and beneath the tree. Council's Gardens Crew maintains the irrigation system, with pre-season checks undertaken in September 2026 to ensure it is operating properly.

Routine maintenance

Council's Gardens Crew periodically removes accumulated pine needles and organic material from around the base of the tree. This was most recently undertaken prior to Anzac Day 2026.

A small amount of soil was also removed by hand in 2024 as part of the work to better expose the trunk flare. More extensive soil removal has not been undertaken because of the fine feeder roots encountered and the potential for unnecessary root disturbance.

Fertilising

The report recommends applying a slow-release fertiliser to accessible soil, together with Super Phosphate at a rate of 25 grams per square metre.

The garden beds have received NPK fertiliser containing nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.

Council has therefore undertaken fertilising within the garden area; however, based on the information currently available, it cannot be confirmed that the specific slow-release fertiliser and Super Phosphate treatment identified in the 2023 report has been applied to the tree's accessible root zone.

Arboricultural advice

Council engages a local arborist for the management and maintenance of the Norfolk Island Pines within the foreshore precinct.

The local arborist also provides arboricultural advice on tree management matters, including the Christmas tree and other Norfolk Island Pines. This provides Council's Gardens Crew with access to specialist advice where required.

Christmas lighting

The arborist report considered the potential effects of the Christmas lighting and concluded that the lighting was not likely to be causing immediate adverse health effects. It nevertheless recommended measures to minimise potential impacts, including appropriate positioning of lights, use of timers or dimmers, regular inspection and consideration of light-emitting diode lighting.

Since the report, Council has installed light-emitting diode (LED) lighting and timers.

The fitting supporting the star at the top of the tree has also been changed to prevent the restriction or "choking" of the trunk that had previously occurred.

These changes address a number of the practical lighting matters identified in the arborist report.

Monitoring

The report recommends a detailed monitoring program involving photographs of the canopy every two weeks or monthly from a consistent location using consistent camera settings. It also recommends selecting particular branches and monitoring new growth and any signs of decline.

This specific formal photographic monitoring program has not been implemented.

Council's Gardens Crew does, however, continue to monitor the general health and condition of the tree as part of Council's broader management of trees throughout the township, with local arboricultural advice available where required.

Recommendations not fully implemented

The main recommendations from the 2023 report that have not been fully implemented are:

- the more extensive exploratory root excavation and any subsequent specialist soil removal or remediation;
- confirmation/application of the specific slow-release fertiliser and Super Phosphate treatment recommended in the report; and
- the formal fortnightly or monthly photographic and selected-branch monitoring program.

Cost and benefit

The report recognises that the available remediation options need to be considered having regard to their costs and benefits, with the appropriate level of intervention ultimately being a matter for Council as the tree owner.

The report also calculated an arboricultural amenity value for the tree of approximately \$91,083, noting that the valuation may assist Council in considering the allocation of funds, if any, towards works intended to support the tree's vitality.

Overall position

The 2023 arborist report has not been left unactioned. Council has undertaken work relating to irrigation, routine removal of accumulated organic material, limited hand removal of soil around the trunk flare, fertilising and improvements to the Christmas lighting arrangements.

Council's Gardens Crew continues to monitor and maintain the tree, and Council has access to local arboricultural advice as required.

The more invasive root-zone works and the formal photographic monitoring program have not been fully implemented. In considering these recommendations, it is relevant that the arborist report itself recognises the need for Council to consider the cost and benefit of further intervention.