

EXETER CITY COUNCIL
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – COMMUNITY
20 JANUARY 2009

EXECUTIVE
27 JANUARY 2009

TREE AND WOODLAND STRATEGY

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To present to Members the final draft of the Exeter Tree and Woodland Strategy and to recommend the strategy for adoption by the Council.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 On 4 March 2008 the first draft of the proposed Tree and Woodland Strategy was presented to Scrutiny Committee - Community which recommended that the draft strategy and action plan was published for consultation before being brought back to committee for further consideration in light of comments received.

- 2.2 The consultation included:

- a wavelength survey
- a questionnaire which was widely distributed and made available on the web site and at reception points across the council and
- a focus group of corporate stake holders including representatives from Devon Wildlife trust, Exeter University, Devon County Council and the Environment Agency.

- 2.3 There was general agreement on the structure, aims and objectives of the strategy but some key points were identified and incorporated into the action plan. These were the need for:

- Long term sustainable funding sources
- Publicity, education and promotion
- Planning ahead for street tree schemes, noting the limited scope for planting in the highways environment
- Recognising the importance of biodiversity
- Land mapping to identify the suitability and priority of tree planting schemes, and suitable locations for changes in habitat management (biodiversity and quality mapping)
- The creation of a strategic purchase fund.

- 2.4 A further report was presented to this committee at its meeting on 2 September 2008 detailing the results of the consultation and a revised draft of the Tree and Woodland Strategy and action plan amended in light of the consultation. It was agreed that prior to the formal adoption of the strategy this further draft should be placed on the website for a final round of consultation and shared with stakeholders. This was also reported in the press. No significant or adverse comments were received indeed all comments were positive and supportive

- 2.5 Throughout the development of the strategy the cross directorate officer group has been supported by a Member working group who have guided process by acting as a critical friend. The officers appreciate the input of Members to this strategy.
- 2.6 The strategy has been made available on the intranet for Members to review whilst the action plan has been attached as Appendix I.

3. KEY CHALLENGES

- 3.1 The strategy is intended to provide a framework within which a number of key challenges can be addressed. These include:
- Managing the estimated 74,000 trees on Council owned land.
 - Working with other landowners to achieve a beneficial influence on the retention and management of trees in and around Exeter.
 - Producing a fully developed database of trees in the city on which informed management decisions can be made. The previous lack of detailed information about the condition and age of the tree stock has made it difficult to develop sound management plans for Council owned trees.
 - Identification and management of problems caused by trees, both in relation to the built environment and by “weed” trees and the co-existence of trees and people.
 - Effective involvement of communities in the future management of Exeter’s trees.
 - Changing the age profile of the trees in Exeter as many trees which appear healthy are in fact over mature and need to be replaced.
 - Working with other organisations such as the Tree Council for a wider benefit in tree management.
 - Promoting the benefits of trees, and the pro-active management of trees that are perceived to be “problems”. Public perception differs greatly from those who see trees as a nuisance to those who would preserve trees at all costs.
 - Recognition that cities are a harsh environment in which to establish new trees. Trees tend to be less healthy and shorter lived than those growing in rural environments.
 - Changing climate, and the need to increase the biodiversity of the tree stock.
 - Ensuring planning permission for developments makes proper provision to protect existing or planting new trees.

4. TREE WARDENS

- 4.1 A major plank of the strategy is the introduction of a tree warden scheme. Tree wardens are volunteers trained by the City Council and supported by the Tree Council, a national charity dedicated to conserving and enhancing the nation’s trees and woodlands. They are not tree experts but enthusiasts who see the benefit of trees to the local community. This might include:
- Helping to develop a local tree plan,
 - Caring for young trees whilst they establish
 - Developing ideas for tree improvement projects
 - Generating local interest by engaging with local groups and schools for example.
- 4.2 Early interest in the scheme has been promising and it is intended to launch the scheme to coincide with the adoption of this strategy in April 2009.

- 4.3 Nineteen people have confirmed their interest in becoming tree wardens. Their reasons for doing so vary; some wish to help keep an eye on trees in their area and inform the council of any problems, whilst others are more interested in direct involvement in tree planting schemes.
- 4.4 The development of the Tree Warden scheme relies on education and good communication. Proposals therefore include
- A networking link for the wardens so that they can communicate with Parks & Open Spaces staff and each other.
 - Training and information meetings
 - A “pick and mix” list of tasks and interests so that people of differing background and skills levels will be comfortable with what they are asked to do.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 In 2004 the Council approved the funding of a tree management plan to enable the Council to determine the extent of its tree stock, and produce a sustainable and defensible management framework. The production of a Tree and Woodland Strategy is another part of that framework.
- 5.2 The development of the tree management plan has, as expected, identified the need to undertake considerable remedial work to some trees but also recognised that once a plan was in place, and remedial works completed, the annual cost to the Council would lessen. It would then be possible to set an annual budget that adequately catered for the estimated cost of tree care (bearing in mind that storm damage is beyond planning), and to continue a programme of tree planting to enhance existing stock and replace losses.
- 5.3 Trees in all the identified high risk areas have now been surveyed and we have a better understanding of the scale of the task. These are on a cyclical system of inspection relative to the risk they pose. This includes such areas as street trees, formal parks, play areas etc. Areas of estimated medium to low level risk are currently being surveyed. Any higher risk trees identified can be categorised as such, but it is anticipated that few trees will meet this criteria (eg trees adjacent to a path through woodland, but not the trees making up the bulk of the woodland). A cross check is being made of the land in ECC ownership to ensure no parcels of land that may have trees on them is excluded from the survey.
- 5.4 The original budget approved for this work was £390,000 spread over several years. To date a total of £200,000 has been spent leaving £105,000 as an earmarked reserve with a further £85,000 unallocated. The unallocated £85,000 is not needed and will be returned to the Council’s reserve.
- 5.5 The management of our trees is carried out by two staff, the Arboricultural Officer, a permanent post, and the Assistant Arboricultural Officer. The latter is a temporary post funded from the tree management budget. Both posts are currently vacant.
- 5.6 Staffing will be reviewed. The current situation, with arboricultural expertise being provide by the contractor who carries out remedial work to trees, is working well at present. This is supported by a temporary administrator who keeps records of trees and work done and responds to enquiries from the public. Once the tree management software that we have is fully functional we will be in a position to assess the appropriate level at staffing for the longer term.

7. RECOMMENDED

- 1) that Scrutiny Committee Community supports and Executive approves the adoption of the Tree and Woodland Strategy

HEAD OF CONTRACTS AND DIRECT SERVICES

S:LP/Committee/109SCC6 v2
16.12.08

COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report:

None