

Exeter City Council
Tree and Woodland
Strategy
2009 – 2014



Exeter City Council

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FOREWORD

by Cllr Kevin Mitchell, Portfolio Holder Environment & Leisure

The City Council acts as custodian for many of the city's trees, and influences the management of many others in and around the City. The importance of trees is recognised now more than ever for the role they play in reducing the effect of greenhouse gasses, providing a green foil to the ever increasing urban development, providing screening and shade, soil stabilisation and reducing the effects of flash flood storm water.

Trees as individuals and groups also host a wide range of other native flora and fauna. They mark the seasons on a scale unrivalled by any other life-forms.

While these days a building can be constructed in a matter of weeks, and demolished after a few years, we rarely live long enough to see the real benefits of planting a tree. It is our children and grandchildren who will thank us for planting the trees and woodlands they will be enjoying, no doubt in a greatly changed world. As a tree can take thirty years to grow to near maturity, and then live on for a further three hundred years, it is essential we take the correct measures to preserve and maintain the trees we currently have.

It is right therefore that Exeter has a planned approach to the management, retention and enhancement of our trees. This strategy will frame the key management decisions for our benefit now and for future generations.



Cllr Kevin Mitchell
Portfolio Holder for Environment & Leisure

VISION

To protect, care for and enhance our trees, hedges and woodlands for the benefit of our people our wildlife our city and future generations

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Trees

Trees are one of the most important and impressive features of the English landscape, and here in Exeter our topography and climate encourages a wide range of species.

Views into and out of the city are dominated by this rich treescape, and it makes the City a green and pleasant environment in which to live and work.

Trees and woodland bring many benefits to urban environments. In addition to the visual splendour provided, trees form the basis of many food chains, providing vital habitat for many bird, insect, fungal and lichen populations.

Trees and woodland moderate climate. Research has shown that the urban forests of the world absorb more atmospheric CO₂ than the Amazon rainforest, and trees filter many other pollutants and irritants that can exacerbate conditions such as Asthma and Eczema. They really are the green lungs of our city. Other research highlights the positive effect of trees and woodland on local and regional prosperity, reductions in stress and anti-social behaviour, and increases in property values.

However, growing trees and woodland in urban areas is becoming increasingly difficult. The life-span of an average urban tree is probably less than 50 years. Trees need space above ground, and good soil and nutrients below. Increasing development and re-development means that the available tree space above ground has declined, while urban soils can often be compacted, contaminated, excessively free-draining or even non-existent. Add to this the stresses of pollution, salt, vandalism, root damage resulting from ground works and it becomes evident why in some areas trees fare poorly, or are completely absent.

These physical problems have been further compounded by a historic lack of planning for trees and woodland when developing new areas, and a lack of financing and expertise to manage the existing treescape.

The people of Exeter want more trees and woodland in the city, and better management of all our trees. The challenge facing Exeter today is to provide the right space and conditions for successful growth and establishment of new trees, care and protection for all trees, and to ensure the continuation of tree and woodland cover in perpetuity.

Sustainability

In 1994 the Government published "Sustainable Development – the UK Strategy", its response to the 1992 UN Conference Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Arising from this was "Agenda 21", which encourages Local Authorities to produce action plans in consultation with local communities. In recent years government departments have encouraged local authorities to develop specific tree strategies.

Trees are one of the most sustainable and long-lived aspects of the landscape. However, the suitability of a tree to its location can be compromised by changes to its immediate environment by actions such as drainage, construction, or long term changes to the climate. The choice of species of tree needs to be matched to the need or function, whether it is for forestry, where non-native monocultures meet commercial demands, or amenity planting of individual trees in streets or parks.

Trees do require an adequate amount of investment in purchasing, planting and aftercare. This aspect has frequently been overlooked in the past, where large numbers of small, bare root trees can be planted for a few pounds each. This approach is the only practical way to plant forests, but in urban locations the survival rate is extremely low. It is better to plant fewer, high quality trees, with a high probability of survival. For a relatively low initial investment, trees will provide a very long-term resource.

Biodiversity

Trees and woodlands support highly diverse environments for a wide range of flora and fauna. Even a notionally monoculture commercial forest provides valuable habitats. In the urban setting the importance of trees is magnified. The average back garden is now recognised as providing the most valuable habitats for birds. Biodiversity audits of Parks and Open Spaces consistently show the high value of their biodiversity, and trees form the largest component of habitat provision.

BACKGROUND

General

Exeter is a compact city, encompassing 4774 Hectares in total, with a population of 119,000 in 2008. However, there are more than 100 Hectares of public open space throughout the City. Together with local Valley Parks, this open space makes up 9.5% of the total area of the city. The Valley Parks and River Exe form green corridors reaching right into and through the heart of the city, and this, combined with the higher land to the north, gives the city a pleasingly green and rural feel. 40% of the land within the city boundary is green space or fields.

There are an estimated 74,000 trees on Council land, with many thousands more in the grounds of the University, hospital and larger business premises.

There is a great diversity of both native and exotic tree types, due in no small measure to the horticultural heritage of the city left by Luccombe, Pince, Veitch, and others. This diversity has become more important in the light of climate change.

There was relatively little development of heavy industry in Exeter, and whilst the Victorian expansion in Alphington, St. Thomas and Heavitree saw little street planting, the establishment of formal parks in this period had a very beneficial effect in providing recreational areas of grass and trees. Post war development into the surrounding farmland was able to retain large tracts of woodland and hedgerows, much of which was later designated as Valley Parks.

The soils in Exeter range from clay to sandstone shales, with additional alluvial deposits from the Exe. The natural climate vegetation would be Oak, but the soils are able to support a wide range of species.

Scope of the Strategy

The City Council is one of the largest tree owners in Exeter, and the one body that the public see as the guardian of the treescape, both in its role as landowner and through planning controls. As such it is the key organisation in seeking a framework to protect and sustain the city's trees. To develop a meaningful long-term plan, it is essential that other major stakeholders are involved in the strategy development. As the influence of the City's trees extends beyond the city boundaries, so the city is influenced by trees outside its boundaries. The relative strategic importance of woodlands and green corridors is vitally important. It is not intended that this strategy controls tree management throughout the area of its influence, but provides guidance on how the actions of various designated stakeholders will influence their landscape and that of their neighbours.

Why have a Strategy?

Nick Eden, director of the Arboricultural Association explains why it is important to develop a tree strategy.

“Trees. Almost everyone has something to say about them. Perhaps more than ever before, we recognise how essential they are to our survival. But what a challenge: living things as big as houses that can’t be moved. They can’t speak. They are sensitive to their environment. They have the potential to outlive us – and the potential to be a source of trouble. A strategy this attempts to recognize the complex technical, scientific and human issues that arise when trees and people inhabit the same area. It provides a framework for managing these issues and this huge living resource to bring about the best possible solutions for all.”

A planned approach to tree and woodland management will support Exeter’s Vision and contribute significantly to strategic objectives. A comprehensive tree strategy should be seen as a key part of management planning for the wider environment. To ensure that trees remain a defining feature of the city there needs to be a clear understanding of their value and a commitment from all the many landowners to retain and enhance sustainable tree cover in and around the city. A strategy that promotes and expresses that commitment and provides sound practical direction is therefore fundamental in achieving this goal.

Furthermore, in order to demonstrate that we are responsive to the needs of the community, a strategy provides a means of involving the community directly in setting the framework of the strategy, and being a part of its implementation and continuing development. A tree strategy will also provide easily disseminated information on management standards, events and tree and woodland projects.

The overarching aim of the strategy is to determine a long-term programme to deliver specific goals. In more detail, a strategy;

- provides a framework for the management of all trees within the city and the surrounding areas,
- lists the strengths and key challenges of the present approach and managing the tree stock,
- recognises the differing needs of the various stakeholders,
- provides a vision for the future,
- and sets out how this can be achieved through the Action Plan (Appendix I).

Benefits of the Strategy

The benefits the strategy can deliver to the City can be summarised as;

- An agreed and co-ordinated approach to tree management
- High quality, efficient tree management, with work undertaken to the highest standards of planning, planting and tree care
- A community with a greater understanding, awareness and empathy leading to a greater involvement with tree management in their locality.
- A tree population that is surveyed and mapped to improve our knowledge and ability to manage issues such as biodiversity, changing and conflicting demands, and social and economic benefits
- Improved health of the tree population resulting in a more sustainable tree stock.

Status of the Strategy

The strategy will have differing levels of status for the various stakeholders. Clearly for the Council it will have significant importance as it will be the framework for all aspects of tree management. For others, especially if tree management is ancillary to their main aims and objectives, the strategy will not have the same importance. However the value of the strategy will not be diminished.

Consultation on the Strategy

In 2007 the Council consulted the general public and major stakeholders about trees and woodlands in Exeter, how they would like to see trees and woodland develop in Exeter, and the Council's role in this development.

Of 1500 public questionnaires, 126 were returned (12%), which is the average return rate for a "non-targeted" survey. Unfortunately, responses from targeted stakeholders were extremely poor, and this was addressed by direct canvassing.

In general, the people of Exeter have an appreciation of trees and are aware the benefits of trees in the local environment and

1. Would like to see more trees and woodland in Exeter;
2. Would particularly like to see more trees on streets, in industrial areas, and on public open space,
3. Would like the Council to play an active role in encouraging others to plant and carefully-manage their trees,
4. Would support the Council acquiring land in order to plant woodland,
5. Would like the Council to invest resources to ensure successful tree establishment on difficult sites,
6. Would like to the Council to invest in sustainably re-using timber and other arisings from tree maintenance.

Additionally, the City Council undertook a further survey using the same questionnaire through the 16th Wavelength panel. Since 2001, this Exeter citizens' panel involves 1,000 people representing all sections of the community. They are asked their opinions about a range of issues and Council services. Their views are analysed and taken into account when the Council makes decisions. These results are weighted so that a more representative result can be obtained. The two sets of results have a great deal of uniformity, though statistically there will always be some diversion. Those who chose to respond to the public consultation might be considered to be more interested in tree issues than those on the Wavelength panel for example.

The detailed results of the consultation are contained in Appendix 3.

A similar but much more focussed consultation exercise was undertaken to seek the views of a range of bodies that could be considered to have an interest in or influence on tree issues in and around the city. This culminated in the first stakeholders meeting in May 2008, attended by members of Exeter City Council, Exeter Wild City – Devon Wildlife Trust, University of Exeter, Devon County Council and the Environment Agency.

There was general agreement within the group regarding the aims and objectives of the strategy.

Key points arising from the meeting were the need to address:

- Long term sustainable funding sources
- Publicity, education and promotion
- Planning ahead for street tree schemes
- The importance of biodiversity
- Land mapping to identify the suitability and priority of tree planting schemes

These points are incorporated in the Action Plan (Appendix I).

The stakeholder group will continue to meet in order to assist the delivery of a range of initiatives arising from the strategy.

EXISTING STRENGTHS & KEY CHALLENGES

From the consultation, research and strategy mapping the strengths and key challenges have been identified and have been summarised below.

Strengths

- Large areas of existing green corridors
- Legacy of Victorian tree planting throughout the City
- The rural influence of adjacent districts
- River Exe corridor
- Major stakeholders are committed to retaining good tree cover
- Public support and approval of trees as being beneficial

Key Challenges

- Managing the estimated 74,000 trees on Council owned land, and those estimated to be in individuals gardens
- Achieving a beneficial influence on the retention and management of other tree owners
- Producing a fully developed database of trees in the city on which management decisions can be made
- A 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. 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. Many trees are over mature
- Resources to work with other organizations such as the Tree Council for a wider benefit in tree management
- Resources to promote 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
- 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
- Changes in climate, and the need to increase the biodiversity of the tree stock
- To ensure planning permission for any development makes proper provision to protect or plant trees

AIMS OF THE STRATEGY

The aims of the strategy build on the strengths identified and meet the key challenges.

The Council has identified the following five key aims in producing this strategy which are addressed in the Action Plan:

- A:** To enhance the city's natural environment
- B:** To achieve a better co-ordinated approach to the management of trees, woodlands and hedgerows
- C:** To improve the overall standard of tree care and create a healthier, safer tree population
- D:** To inform and involve local people
- E:** To increase the number of street trees in line with the Exeter Vision

KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGY

These inform the action plan and seek to:

1. Influence the wider landscape in strategic terms
2. Improve management of trees in council care
3. Provide advice and education for residents and other stakeholders ("Protection through advice")
4. Provide a clearly defined role for the Council in the management and protection of trees,
5. Recognise the differences, and the common ground, between the urban landscape and the rural landscape
6. Provide a long-term structure plan for the retention and enhancement of trees, woodlands and hedgerows in and around the city

DELIVERY FRAMEWORK & ACHIEVING OUR GOALS

Having agreed the aims and key objectives of the strategy, the outcomes are delivered by means of the Action Plan (Appendix I), which is reviewed annually over the five year lifespan of the strategy (2009-2014).

Clearly some key objectives will take longer than others to achieve, and may be very long term in their implementation. The Action Plan will allow achievements and performance to be measured, and an annual review will chart progress and allow evolution of the strategy should circumstances require.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Action Plan

This document will be published on the website with targets, dates and measurable outcomes.

Appendix 2 Tree Management

General Principles, Protection, Standards of work, etc

Appendix 3 Consultation

Details and outcomes of the Public Consultation undertaken in Autumn 2007

3.1 Public and Wavelength questionnaire

3.2 Stakeholder questionnaire

3.3 Breakdown of public questionnaire by postcode

Appendix 4 Strategy Map

Appendix 5 Glossary Of Terms

An explanation of terminology and meaning

Appendix 6 Legislation and Policy Guidance

All the relevant legislation and policy guidance with a brief description

REFERENCES

ECC strategies

- Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 2005
- Biodiversity Action Plan 2005
- Environmental Strategy 2007

Arboricultural Association

CABE Space

Newcastle City Council Tree Strategy

Norwich City Council Tree Strategy

East Devon and Exeter Fringe Green Infrastructure Strategy – Draft Methodology 2008

Countryside in and Around Towns. Natural England. 2008

Management of the Risk from Falling Trees. HSE Enforcement Liaison Committee Sept 2007

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CONTACTS

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Greenspace

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