Northampton Borough Council
Overview and Scrutiny
Report of the Tree Policy
Task and Finish Group

1 Purpose

The purpose of the Task and Finish Group was to review the Tree Policy within Northampton Borough Council and achieve a consistent Urban Landscape Management Policy within the Council.

2. Context and Background

2.1 In 1993 the Department of the Environment (DOE) published the document `Trees in Towns (HMSO). This was the result of a study carried out by land use consultants, to investigate the character and distribution of trees in towns in England. The principle conclusions were:-

`the need for each Local Authority to examine the tree stock in its towns; discuss their findings, formulate a long term strategy for maintenance of existing trees, their eventual replacement, and planting of new trees within an overall landscape plan`.

2.2 Regular requests from residents and Councillors have come into the Landscape Maintenance Sections of the Council regarding, trees, shrubs and further environmental work affecting the equality of life within the wards. This is further highlighted with the work of the Community Safety Unit and CASPAR who view the landscape as an area where changes can be made to address anti social behaviour issues.

2.3 There are common issues of concern, Nationally it is recognised that the following issues need attention as part of a Tree Policy:-

- Large shrubs providing poor sight lines
- Trees blocking light
- Trees too big for their environment
- Shrubs affecting car bays
- Fly tipping
- Fear of crime because of vegetation
- Shrubs affecting paths and access to the front and rear of properties

A standard maintenance programme and tree inspection schedule is carried out. A contract is put together which is then put out to tender. The contract is offered to the contractor who submits the lowest priced tender document. Works that are deemed as urgent, such as, trees that are dead, diseased, pose a health and safety risk or are causing structural damage are prioritised.
The development of Northampton in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s saw a landscape infrastructure which was at the time award winning, but the last 30 years has seen this landscape grow, forest type trees are now reaching maturity, higher levels of cars in parking areas, usage and expectations of the areas are no longer compatible with the design of the landscape which was designed with a different social usage in mind. Today the effects of the landscape are causing increasing concern with an unrealistic expectation of what can be achieved within the routine maintenance cycle. This in itself adds to the frustration of the residents and Councillors and gives a poor impression on Council services.

High quality public spaces are essential features of successful neighbourhoods where people want to live, work, play and invest. Though it should be understood that neighbourhoods have different needs, wants and expectations, public space must be fit for purpose and safe.

2.4 The Council continues to spend revenue funds with little overall impact due to the size of the trees that Northampton Borough Council has to manage.

2.5 The Group agreed that the following needed to be investigated further:
- Whether Northampton Borough Council had a Tree Policy
- The current situation with regards to tree maintenance
- The number of trees involved
- Comparison of other Local Authorities’ Tree Policies
- Issues of concern regarding tree management

3. Evidence Collection

In scoping this review it was decided that evidence would be collected from a variety of sources.

3.1 Planning Officers and Building Control Officers

The Planning Policy and Conservation Manager and the Interim Development and Building Control Manager attended our meeting on 21st June 2006 (the minutes of this meeting are attached at Appendix A). The key points of evidence were: -

- Development Control is concerned with planning issues
- Building Control is primarily concerned with the safety of buildings
- It is ensured that trees with ‘greedy roots’ are not planted too close to buildings and fast growing trees are not planted on new development sites.
- Generally, trees are not contained within Greenfield and Brownfield sites.
• The Planning Policy and Conservation Team have the authority to implement Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) if it is perceived that a proposed development could harm or damage the trees.
• TPOs are made under delegated authority and if a tree has a TPO, formal consent from the Council is required to carry out maintenance work or cut it down.
• There are around 200 trees in the Borough with TPOs.
• Good justification is required to implement a TPO.
• A TPO can be revoked for reasons such as the health of the tree.
• If a tree with a TPO is on private land it is the responsibility of the landowner to maintain it at their cost.

3.2 Tree Maintenance Inspector

The Tree Maintenance Inspector attended the meeting of 1 June and gave the Group a very thorough briefing on trees and the issues he deals with in his job. A very useful Fact Sheet on Frequently Asked Questions was circulated. A copy of this sheet is attached with the minutes of this meeting at Appendix B and Appendix C.

The key points of evidence from the interview were:

• A balance must be found for the public’s need and the health need of the trees.
• The budget for parks is £135,000 per annum, £75,000 has been committed from 1 April 2006 to 1 June 2006 for work to be carried out in parks in the Borough.
• The contractor that the Council is now using appears to provide a good value for money service.
• The cost of removing/maintaining a tree is approximately £150 to £180 (half a day’s work).
• The Council is invoiced £500 plus VAT for emergency calls.
• Cemeteries have an annual budget of £4,000 for tree maintenance but there is a need to use the budget for the maintenance of parks as a ‘back up’ Strategy.
• Northampton Borough Council is responsible for all 127 parks and open spaces in the Borough and the Tree Inspectors aim to inspect parks annually.
• Northampton Borough Council is responsible for the maintenance of all trees in the borough.

• The Tree Inspectors deal with other issues:
  • General queries
  • Provision of information
  • Reports on dangerous trees
  • Insurance claims
  • Nesting birds
  • Unprotected bats
• Fallen leaves
• Subsidence queries and claims
• General queries

• Subsidence is a major issue for Northampton, longer, drier summers and shorter, drier winters have increased the problem.
• Pollution can reduce the life of trees.
• Tree Inspectors facilitate work for other agencies, such as, British Gas, the Water Company and British Telecom.
• Tree Inspectors must be able to demonstrate that tree inspections have taken place. A written record of housing and highways inspections is kept. The requirements are different for highways, paths and open spaces; it is more stringent for highway trees.
• A full written report on trees in parks is not produced; a map is produced together with the type of maintenance work that is required to take place.

3.3 Looking at best Practice from other Local Authorities

Tree Policies from two Local Authorities were considered, Chester City Council and Warwick District Council, as part of the evidence collection. Warwick District Council’s Tree and Woodland Strategy is in final format and published on their website. Chester City Council’s draft Tree Policy is currently published on its website but it is envisaged that the final Tree Policy will be published shortly. The Group felt that Chester City Council’s draft Tree Policy was similar to the way that tree maintenance is currently carried at Northampton. Chester City Council’s draft Tree Policy was therefore felt to be a suitable model on which to base Northampton Borough Council’s model.

3.4 Site Inspection with a Tree Inspector

A site visit was organised to Kingsthorpe Recreation Ground. Many different species of trees were shown, how they grew, what problems they faced as they grow older was explained and suggestions as to how the Council could safeguard itself against accidents that may occur. The Group also learn about Tree Inspection Reports and how they are compiled.

The key points from the visit were mainly concerned with issues that comprise maintenance work. The following points were noted as significant: -:

• Crown lifting is essential for meeting statutory requirements
• Removal of deadwood is important for reducing the likelihood of falling branches
• Removal of basal suckers to the first major unions to prevent them from overgrowing paths and to keep the site open
• Clearance of buildings and properties by 3 metres is necessary to prevent damage to walls, roofs and gutters
• Trees must legally be one metre away from properties but the Council ensures that there is a three-metre clearance
• To date there is no legal right to light with regards to trees, though the Council does have a responsibility to adequately clear lamp columns and streetlights.
• Concerns have been received from residents regarding tree roots and potential subsidence. In these incidences, residents are informed they should contact their insurers who will facilitate a trained operative to carry out a survey. If after this, it is felt there are genuine grounds for complaint, then the relevant information should be forwarded to the Council’s insurance department for further investigation.

3.5 Information about Abington Park

Information was collected about Abington Park to give the Group more information for its review:--

• A survey is almost complete at the top end of the park. 220 trees require maintenance work.
• Two Pine trees have beetle infestation and there is the potential for it to affect the rest of the Pines. The situation must be monitored
• Trees can look in perfect health but the stem is dead. This type of disease is air borne, ground borne and water borne.
4. Conclusions

After all of the evidence was collated the following conclusions were drawn:

4.1 There was no comprehensive Tree Policy for the Borough and there is a need to design one as a matter of urgency to inform planning and resource allocation.

4.2 The age of some of the trees within the Borough will mean a heavy investment of funds over the next five years, in particular the trees in Abington Park. The current budget of £135,000 is inadequate for the number of trees, as approximately 15% of this money needs to be ‘held’ for emergency work such as damage caused by storms.

4.3 Currently, the Tree Inspectors inspect each tree within two years but this should be carried out annually, which indicates a lack of resources as seen in Section 3.2. Claims from damage caused by Council owned trees are very rare but in the case of a claim the Council would have to prove that maintenance had been carried out on that tree over the last 12 months. The Group felt that there was a need for an Administration Officer to deal with tree related complaints so that the Tree Inspectors are freed up to undertake their inspections so that every tree within the borough is checked every twelve months for safety.

4.4 Northampton Borough Council carries out grass cuttings on the highways verges and Northamptonshire County Council undertakes shrub maintenance. Northamptonshire County Council pays Northampton Borough Council to carry out four grass cuts per year; but significantly more cuts are done to ensure that these verges are maintained to a high standard. This is heavily subsidised by Northampton Borough Council.

4.5 If the Council wants healthy trees in the Borough a common sense approach needs to be taken. Trees need to be managed in such a way that they maximise their contribution to the landscape and environment but also minimise their conflict with other urban and rural activities. This is what the draft Tree Policy (Copy attached at Appendix D) aims to do, it seeks solutions to common conflicts not just in the short term but also in the long term so that future generations inherit an attractive healthy tree resource which requires the minimum of maintenance.

4.6 As the review was a short, focussed piece of work that concentrated on the maintenance of trees, we did not look at the maintenance of hedgerows. However, the Task and Finish Group felt that there is a need for the maintenance of hedgerows to be investigated further.

4.7 After gathering all the evidence it was felt there is a need to engage and consult citizens in tree maintenance policy development.
5 **Recommendations**

The Task and Finish Group ask the Cabinet to:-

5.1 Consider the draft Tree Policy (copy at appendix D) as the basis for a Northampton Borough Council Tree Policy.

5.2 Seek public consultation on the draft Tree Policy.

5.3 Give consideration to further resources to ensure the thorough maintenance of trees and the delivery of the Tree Policy.

5.4 Require tree related complaints to be dealt with by an Administration Officer to free up the Tree Inspectors to undertake their inspections so that every tree within the borough is checked every twelve months for safety.

5.5 Review the agreement with Northamptonshire County Council regarding tree cuttings be undertaken.

5.6 Carry out further work on involving citizens in awareness raising in tree maintenance.

5.7 Consider including the maintenance of hedgerows in a future Policy.