

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMISSION
14 SEPTEMBER 2006

DRAFT FINAL REPORT OF SCRUTINY WORKING GROUP ON TREE POLICY
(Tree Policy Review Group)

1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This paper covers a draft final report of the Tree Policy Review Group, established by the Environment and Leisure Overview & Scrutiny Panel, which has worked with officers in preparing a new tree policy. Having considered the report at its meeting held on 4 September 2006, the Panel recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Commission refer it to the appropriate Executive Members for consideration.
- 1.2 The report acknowledges that trees are an important feature of Bracknell Forest's landscape and visual environment, but considers the existing policy is due for review. It proposes changes to the Council's current strategic and operational policies to meet the demands of the community, to provide appropriate tree protection, to meet national best practice and to better reflect quality of life issues. It also includes a draft action plan for the tree team to take forward the proposals.

2 SUGGESTED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission refer the report to the Executive Members for Planning and Transportation and Leisure and Corporate Services for their consideration.**

3 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Context

- 3.1. Bracknell Forest is very fortunate in having a very rich natural environment that contributes in a positive way to the image of the Borough. The attractive visual environment is much appreciated by residents and this is evidenced by public opinion surveys. Trees are a very important feature in creating this attractive landscape.
- 3.2 The Council has been very pro-active in preserving trees through management of its own land and influencing private landowners via development control processes and Tree Preservation Order Procedures. The existing policy (which is in part a legacy of the New Town designation) is that no trees will be removed unless dead, diseased or dangerous. However, in the case of development sites this is not feasible. There are also issues relating to the proximity to buildings that would benefit from review. It was felt that the scrutiny review group could helpfully consider these issues with a view to making recommendations for developing future policy.

Approach Taken

- 3.3 The review group (Councillors Browne, Adams, Finch, Miss Haydon and Leake), was set up by the Environment and Leisure Overview & Scrutiny Panel to work with officers in preparing a new tree policy for consideration by the Executive Members for Planning and Transportation and for Leisure and Corporate Services. The group first met in September 2005 with a wide range of council officers involved in all aspects associated with tree management.

- 3.4 The review group looked at documentary evidence, sought external challenge to current policies, considered national best practice, visited problem areas within the borough and heard resident's views and opinion's. They also tested public opinion via consultation leaflets and public meetings (detailed in the draft final report).

Findings and Conclusions

- 3.5 The review group recognised that trees contribute a visual, social, conservation and physical aspect of quality of life which previous tree policy had not taken into account. They acknowledged that quality of life issues needed to be balanced with the need for tree protection, safety and subsidence issues and conservation. They also noted that trees that affect quality of life are primarily in private gardens or on Council land next to gardens.
- 3.6 The group observed that the public generally have a great affection for trees and will tend not to remove them unless they are significantly affecting their quality of life. They also noted that whilst it is common practice for the council to consult with the community about a wide range of general and specific issues, this was not always the case in relation to trees and many home owners were demanding a voice to determine what happens to trees within and near to their property.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- 3.7 The working group concluded that changes to the Council's current strategic and operational policies are essential if it is to meet the demands of its community, to provide appropriate tree protection where justified and to meet national best practice (full details of their conclusions are at p.11 of the draft report).
- 3.8 They agreed that four fundamental principles that should guide future work on tree related matters:
- The right tree in the right place
 - Quality of life counts
 - Give residents more influence
 - Resources need to match workload
- 3.9 The review group also considered how best to deliver the proposed changes to strategic policies and set out an extensive action list (Appendix A to the report) which effectively provides a five-year work programme for the tree team. Delivery of this action plan will achieve a good balance between protecting trees and the quality of life of individuals. It will also make our tree services a leader in the field by adopting cutting-edge working practices and policies.

Financial Implications

- 3.10 Some of the actions can be implemented within existing resources. A bid will be submitted in the next budget round for those that require extra resources.

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