

ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30th September, 2011

PRESENT – Councillor Long (in the Chair); Councillors Carson, Harman, L. Hughes and Lawton. (5)

APOLOGIES – Councillors Baldwin, Cossins, Coultas, Lewis, E. A. Richmond and Wright. (6)

OFFICERS – Ian Thompson, Assistant Director, Community Services, Steve Petch, Planning and Economic Strategy Manager, Brian Graham, Head of Environmental Services, Phil Hayes, Arboricultural Officer and Abbie Metcalfe, Democratic Officer.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillor H. Scott and Cabinet Member for Leisure and Local Environment Portfolio Councillor Wallis.

EE12. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS – Councillor Harman declared a personal non prejudicial interest as a member of the Durham Wildlife Trust.

EE13. DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL TREE AND WOODLAND STRATEGY 2011-2020 – Consideration was given to a ‘call-in’ from the Cabinet held on 13th September, 2011 (Minute C46/Sep/11) in relation to its decisions in respect of Darlington Borough Council Tree and Woodland Strategy 2011-2020. The ‘call-in’ was taken in accordance with the Council’s Constitution and had been signed by three Members of this Council.

A report (previously circulated) of the Member who had requested that the decision be ‘called-in’ outlined the reasons for that decision and requested further information from the Officers on the reasoning behind the decisions made to ensure a more detailed understanding of the issues.

A report (previously circulated) of the Director of Place which was considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 13th September, 2011, gave the background to the development of the Strategy and its key aim which was ‘to proactively manage and enlarge the tree population of the Borough of Darlington in order to protect our historical heritage of trees and provide a valued environmental amenity for future generations.’

Councillor H. Scott outlined the reasons behind why the decision has been taken to call in the approval of the Tree and Woodland Strategy 2011/20. The call in was requested to include the protection of the public and property in the Strategy, as the relevant Members do not feel assured that the Strategy is being proactively managed. Their concerns were based around a number of Ward incidents in the west end of Darlington and a number of complaints received from residents about tree roots causing damage to properties, falling trees and tree limbs causing damage to properties. Officers responded to the comments and concerns raised.

The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Local Environment Portfolio Councillor Wallis added that the Tree and Woodland Strategy has been established for many years to protect not only the trees but also the public and their properties. The Council has adopted a proactive and sensible approach to inspecting trees, particularly mature trees, while acknowledging that there are many problematic mature trees within the town. Councillor Wallis also thanked this Scrutiny Committee for considering the Strategy on two occasions prior to its submission to Cabinet.

Discussion ensued on how the Strategy is managed by Officers; how regularly tree inspections are carried out; how flexible tree inspections are; whether members of public should take into consideration the position of trees when buying houses; how risk management issues have been addressed by the Strategy; the councils insurance company Zurich have been fully consulted and are happy with the approach taken by the Council; the difficulties of managing the tree stock within the Borough and whether this Scrutiny Committee should be further involved in monitoring the Strategy.

Members present provided anecdotal evidence of numerous Ward issues they have experienced from residents about trees.

RESOLVED – (a) That the Scrutiny Committee has thoroughly scrutinised the ‘call in’ and acknowledges the concerns put forward in respect of protecting the public and private property, but feel assured by Officers that the protection of the public and property is fully encompassed within the Tree and Woodland Strategy and therefore agree that no further action should be taken to amend the Strategy.

(b) That a briefing/members training session be arranged to invite all members of Council to meet with the Arboricultural Officer to ascertain how trees are inspected and provide assurances of the practices in place.