



Barrell On... Residents let down by tree loss in Sheffield

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I heard that more than 1,000 street trees had been felled over four months in Sheffield, with many more for the chop in 2016, so I visited to see for myself. It sounded bad, but the reality was beyond belief — managers blatantly disregarding community views and a failure to factor tree value into highway decision-making.

I saw evidence of many high-value trees recently removed with dubious justification, residents being consulted after felling, extreme interpretations of the risk to people and infrastructure, decades of life left in trees scheduled for removal and irreplaceable heritage trees under threat.

All this was made worse by poor communication between the residents, the city council and its private finance initiative (“PFI”) partner, Amey, the company carrying out the felling as part of a street “improvement” programme.

It seems to have been decreed that trees causing any damage to infrastructure or inconvenience to highway maintenance will not be tolerated. Perhaps understandable in the past, but such lame justification for mass felling in this modern age of feasible solutions is no longer credible.

The multiple benefits of trees are well documented, with London’s i-Tree canopy valuation confirming and quantifying the importance of existing trees.

It is unusual for ordinary people to take to the streets protesting over trees, but it is happening in Sheffield. In November, 400 residents attended a rally to voice dissent about tree loss and last week more than 100 people turned out on a wet Saturday morning to support a single tree.

In this case it was an elm tree that survived the ravages of Dutch elm disease only to be tagged for removal because of “highway damage”.

Something is seriously wrong in Sheffield and any other British cities considering entering into a PFI agreement would be well advised to take a closer look at how not to do it.

Jeremy Barrell is Managing Director of Barrell Tree Consultancy