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Highways, trees and people: Sheffield's secret shame

The AA ArbNews (Spring 2016)

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In Jeremy Barrell's previous article on trees and highways, he focused on barriers to planting new trees, concluding that a simple cost/benefit model was needed to credibly articulate that tree benefits over time significantly outweigh the costs. In this follow-up article, he turns his attention to the premature removal of street trees to reduce short term maintenance costs at the expense of long term benefits to local communities. It seems that unscrupulous urban managers around the country may be ignoring government advice to be tolerant of low levels of infrastructure damage and, instead, are using the merest hint of damage or inconvenience as justification for wholesale tree removals. There is accumulating evidence from around the UK that such a "zero-tolerance" approach may be more widespread than first thought, and that premature street tree felling as a standard means of balancing the books could be turning into a national trend!



Two mature trees on Rustlings Road scheduled for felling due to highway damage (see Photo 2 for a close up).

To address any concerns about conflicts of interest relating to this article content, for the record, I state that I have no personal or financial connections with any of the Parties that I know to be involved in the current management of Sheffield's street trees. I have not worked in the City, I was not paid to visit and I am not acting on behalf of any Party; I visited out of professional interest to see what was going on. For completeness, I clarify that I have no engineering expertise and all my observations of such matters are from a lay perspective.



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Rustlings Road and the minimal highway damage cited as the justification to fell this tree.

During the last few months, there has been an increasing amount of negative publicity surrounding the way that Sheffield City Council ("SCC") and its Private Finance Initiative ("PFI") partner, Amey, are managing the street trees, so I decided to go and look for myself. I spent a day walking the City streets meeting residents and looking at sites where trees have already gone, or are proposed for felling, as part of the street "improvement" programme. I was shown these by members of the Sheffield Trees Action Group ("STAG"), which is co-ordinating a public campaign from its Facebook Page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/392913244219104/>.

It seems to be a matter of public record that over 1,000 street trees were felled in the last few months of 2015, with more identified for removal in 2016. During my visit, I saw road and pavement surfacing damage caused by trees, ranging from visibly severe to hardly noticeable. However, I also saw evidence of many high value trees recently removed or to be 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 (see photos and captions). From local press coverage, there is tangible community dissatisfaction at how the tree removals are being managed, evidenced by a rally at City Hall, attended by more than 400 people in November, and a further public meeting in January, where over 100 locals turned out on a wet Saturday morning to demonstrate against the removal of a single tree.



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Over 100 locals protesting at the proposed removal of the Chelsea Road Elm.

The history and politics of the situation is clearly complex and is not for me to unravel in this article, but the impact on local people and the trees they want to retain in their community is obvious for all to see. I can only speak to what I saw, but I came away with a perception of a council in turmoil and unable to manage the publicity disaster unfolding around it, a contractor apparently not making any serious effort to consider tree value when deciding to fell trees and a community that has lost confidence in both the council and the contractor to manage its trees responsibly. I saw an obvious communication failure between all the Parties, with an ongoing result of good trees being felled without the benefits they provide to the community being properly or fairly accounted for in the decision-making process.

Although balanced accounting does not seem to be happening in Sheffield, there is very strong research evidence and government guidance that it should be. The recent London i-Tree project identifies the significant value that street trees have, so there can be no credible case to adopt an automatic presumption to remove trees causing low levels of damages. At the strategic level, the Climate Change Act 2008 clearly articulates the need for agencies to assess the risk and adapt the urban realm to reduce adverse impacts on communities. Indeed, recent international climate change endorsements of that broad principle rules out any argument that this is not an important or relevant management consideration. At a practical level, in *Well-maintained highways*, the



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highway managers' government-endorsed bible, these broad principles are distilled into clear advice in Section 9.6 *Safety Inspection of Highway Trees*.



The Chelsea Road elm, thought to be over 100 years old and one of the few trees that has survived Dutch Elm Disease, under threat of felling because of surfacing damage. It is a significant visual feature in the locality as well as a scientific heritage asset.

“9.6.1: Trees are important for amenity and nature conservation reasons and should be preserved ...”

and:

“9.6.4: Extensive root growth from larger trees can cause significant damage to the surface of footways, particularly in urban areas. A risk assessment should therefore be undertaken with specialist arboricultural advice on the most appropriate course of action, if possible to avoid harm to the tree. In these circumstances, it may be difficult for authorities to reconcile their responsibilities for surface regularity, with wider environmental considerations and a reduced standard of regularity may be acceptable.”

Furthermore, in the recent Trees & Design Action Group's publication *Trees in Hard Landscapes*, the Foreword by Baroness Kramer, the 2014 Minister of State for Transport, leads with this statement:

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"Urban trees can make a significant contribution to a sustainable, integrated infrastructure approach, promoting value and economic development, climate change adaptation and human health and wellbeing. However, changes are taking place which need to be understood and incorporated in decision-making."

This provides obvious government-endorsement, supported by the Institution of Civil Engineers, the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation, and the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers, that trees should be an important consideration in modern highway management.



Professor Ian Rotherham and Rob McBride with a plane that is to be felled because it is restricting disabled access along the footway!

From what I saw, the level of tree removals in Sheffield seems hard to justify on any reasonable arboricultural, highway management or sustainability grounds. Of course, some trees will need to be removed for valid reasons, but nothing like the numbers that are being felled. Strategically, the City has no tree strategy, so it is deficient in political leadership on trees. It does have a consultation process on tree removals, but even a low level of scrutiny reveals some subtle flaws. For example, 50% of residents in a street have to object to proposals to trigger a review, but one of the roads I saw (Rivelin Valley Road) was about a mile long with hundreds of trees and only a few residential properties fronting it. Add in that some of those could be rented and the superficial façade of credibility fades rapidly; is it really reasonable that a few disinterested residents could dictate the fate of hundreds of trees seen by thousands of people every day? Finally,



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there does not appear to be any published protocol for deciding how much infrastructure damage is required to trigger felling, which is an essential element of any responsible approach, unless it is "zero-tolerance", in which case, no such guidance is needed!



Many of the trees in Ladysmith Avenue are under threat of felling because of surfacing damage.

Sheffield currently has the benefit of thousands of trees that have taken the best part of the last century to grow into an enviable environmental asset, making its urban communities healthier and better places to live. I saw that green resource being rapidly eroded through recent management, contrary to government and professional guidance, and to the detriment of the people of Sheffield. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that this problem may not be confined solely to Sheffield, with reports of similar approaches in other councils across the UK.

If such unjustified tree losses are found to be widespread, then that is an important matter for the Arboricultural Profession to be aware of and acting on, so what can be done? Some obvious points of an action plan might include:

- All organisations representing built-environment professionals with an interest in trees should begin to work more collaboratively towards assessing the risks of unjustified tree loss and taking action where necessary.



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- A proactive research project should be set up to identify if unjustified tree loss is widespread.
- Sheffield does not have a tree strategy, which seems to be an underlying cause of confusion over tree management, so the issue of barriers to councils adopting tree strategies needs to be explored.
- Specific guidance needs to be developed for engineers on the management of infrastructure damage caused by trees, with a focus on factoring tree value into the decision-making process.
- If PFI arrangements are found to be a source harm to our national climate change adaptation effort, then the representative bodies of all built-environment professionals should bring it to the attention of national government.



Heritage trees at Westways Primary School (foreground left) under threat of felling because of surfacing damage. They were planted about 100 years ago in memory of former pupils of who failed to return from the Great War.

More urgently, returning to the issue of “zero-tolerance” to damage from trees, I know that The Woodland Trust (www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/) has been following the situation in Sheffield closely and seems to have found some balance and wisdom in its recent statement:

“We would like to see a pause in all but dangerous tree removal until a Trees and Woodland Strategy has been finalised; and we want an independent arboricultural



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consultant to survey and report on a sample of the trees which are proving most controversial. There seems to have been a breakdown of trust between the Council, Amey and some local residents and getting an independent external view would be a positive way forward. For each street tree lost, a minimum of two should be planted. Preferably as close to the original site as possible; with species which mature to provide significant canopy cover. Over time, this should ensure the value of the Council's trees is maintained, both for people and wildlife."

From what I saw, something has gone badly wrong in Sheffield and it is in the best interests of all built-environment professionals to support the Woodland Trust's lead in urging Sheffield to return to managing its valuable green asset sustainably, to deliver the best long term benefits for the community and the environment.

Stop press: As this article was going to press, SCC announced that it has set up a new Independent Tree Panel ("ITP") as part of an improved consultation process (https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/in-your-area/report_request/trees/independent-tree-panel.html), which has five members, including an AA Registered Consultant. However, my anxiety remains that this does little to address the fundamental failures of not having a tree strategy, or a credible public consultation process or a published protocol on tolerable levels of damage. Until these underlying problems are addressed, I suspect that the ITP is unlikely to amount to anything more than superficial window-dressing.