



Barrell on...Unjustifiable tree felling

Barrell on ...

Unjustifiable tree felling

Wandsworth London Borough Council is going to fell an historic avenue of horse chestnut trees on Tooting Bec Common based on 696 responses to its public consultation. Yet 4,790 people have signed the 38 Degrees petition to save the trees. From the outside it didn't make much sense, so I went to see for myself.

Wandsworth explains that its decision reflects expert advice that fell-and-replace is good management, and claims that the public supports it. In contrast to the official line, I found all the mature trees alive, most had decades of life left in them and none had sufficient defects to justify safety felling.

Contrary to Wandsworth's assertion, none of the expert reports advocated felling and replacement as the best or only management option. Although I am no expert on public consultation, the technical justifications offered to the public seem grossly misleading to say the least.

Across the country, councils are increasingly framing the loss of a few local trees as insignificant in the wider context, an approach that might have some traction if the instances were isolated, but they are not. Every day, valuable public trees are being felled with no credible technical justification.

For example, Sheffield City Council continues to fell thousands of healthy street trees, ignoring condemnation from local communities and professionals. Another is Birmingham City Council felling its oldest city centre plane tree to install security improvements, despite viable alternative solutions.

Growing trees to fell and replace at maturity is a forestry concept to optimise the volume of harvestable timber. It works well in the forest, but that is where it belongs, not in the urban environment, where the objectives of management are very different.

When trees in towns reach maturity it is not the end of their cycle, it is the start of their peak benefit delivery, which can often last decades if not centuries. Maturity and beyond is where trees pay back all the investment it has taken to grow them. It is financial incompetence to fell urban trees at the point of maximum return, yet politicians around the country are sanctioning just that by hijacking this technical principle as justification to fire up the chainsaws.

Like public parks, public street trees are community assets and it is about time local politicians stopped squandering our natural capital to furnish their own personal short-term ambitions.

