

SHEFFIELD TREE ACTION GROUPS

Press Release

28 June 2017

Rare Mature Elm Tree and Critically Endangered Butterfly Colony Face the Chop

In a shocking move that has stunned wildlife charities, tree experts and campaigners alike, Sheffield City Council has ignored its own independent advisory panel and proposes to fell the Chelsea Road Elm, England's runner-up in the Woodland Trust's 2016 'Tree of the Year' contest. Felling could happen at any time. Scores of local residents are braced to defend an iconic tree in the heart of their community.

The healthy elm tree is not only a rare survivor of Dutch Elm Disease; it is also host to a professionally verified established colony of the critically endangered White Letter Hairstreak Butterfly.

Local campaigner Paul Selby has been in regular contact with the council over the tree's fate for the last two years. Over the course of three meetings, and numerous emails with councillors and council officers, he had reached a tentative agreement to retain the tree using engineering solutions that are available at no extra cost to the council.

"They have reneged on that agreement, and have gone back to arguing that the cost of keeping the tree is too great. The Council claim that it would cost tens of thousands of pounds to retain the tree, yet an independent highway engineer said it would only cost £3500 at the most."

In 2016 the council's planning department refused to apply a Tree Preservation Order to the Chelsea Road Elm on the grounds that the tree is "under good arboricultural management" and therefore not under undue threat.

"This is clearly not the case" said Paul. "Decisions are being made by people who have no interest in the ecological value of this tree, and no appreciation of how rare and valuable it is. Instead they are only looking at whether they can make the pavement around it level."

Over 60 million elm trees were wiped out when Dutch Elm Disease swept through the UK in the 1970s. The majority of elm trees in the UK are less than 25 years old: as repeated waves of DED spread through the country, they succumb to the disease. There are less than 2000 mature elm trees left in the UK - mostly in Brighton and Edinburgh. The Chelsea Road Elm has survived three waves of DED passing through Sheffield.

Ian Dalton, a local authority tree officer who has taken a strong interest in the Sheffield street tree campaign, said

“In Brighton, they have a team whose job is just to look after the elm trees. The difference in approach is unbelievable. To fell such a rare, valuable tree just because the pavement is a bit wonky is absolute madness.”

The Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust has also condemned the proposed felling of the rare elm and the impact that will have on an endangered butterfly colony.

Between five and eight felling crews are operating in Sheffield every day. Sheffield Tree Action Groups (STAG) have mounted a strong public campaign to save healthy street trees from the PFI-fuelled ‘treemageddon’. STAG will continue to work with experts to expose the deep folly of the Sheffield Streets Ahead contract that has caused the ill-evidenced destruction of thousands of healthy street trees since 2012.

The shock decision arrived on the same day that prominent street tree campaigners were served legal papers threatening an injunction and exclusion from wide areas of the city. Amongst those served were Councillor Alison Teal, a Green Party councillor in Nether Edge, Sheffield. Campaigners are seeking further legal advice and have renewed a successful appeal for financial support as a court date of 12th July has been set.

Within 24 hours of setting up the appeal, the fund has reached two thirds of its £5000 target. STAG Co-Chair Chris Rust said:

“The speed of the response, and the generosity of people from Sheffield and further afield, is testament to how strongly people feel about this issue. The council think they can bully us, rather than sitting down and talking to residents about their concerns. We are looking forward to having the opportunity to present our case in court.”

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