

Sheffield Tree Action Groups

PRESS RELEASE

Friday 31st March 2017

Experts Slam Sheffield City Council Survey as a ‘denial of democracy’

Sheffield City Council's intensive spin operation against tree protestors has plumbed new lows this week. They have consistently been embarrassed by professional condemnation of their felling programme, including the withdrawal of international charity Trees for Cities from partnership working.

The Council now claims that only 7% of Sheffielders oppose their felling plans. This false assertion is based on manipulation of their disastrous residents' survey, which saw less than 5% response rates in 88 of the surveyed streets.

Richard Ward, a resident of Nether Edge stated:

“The 93% support for felling being quoted by the Council (claim repeated in The Star) seems to derive from adding together those in every street who supported felling and those in each street who did not respond. It is assumed that a non-response is support by default. There is no defensible basis for that assumption and it would be possible to construct the same argument in reverse, albeit equally wrong.”

The widespread use of survey response rates in an attempt to discredit campaigners against the , which have been described as “farcical” by research experts, reveal an appalling lack of grasp of research methods and statistical analysis. The spin doctors are out of their depth, or perhaps they are knowingly seeking to manipulate public opinion by promoting very questionable conclusions.

Professor Greg Brooks, who has studied the City Council's street tree survey methods, says that the survey fails all four of the important tests of reliability: Not enough people were included, not enough was done to ensure that residents knew about the survey, it was not straightforward for residents to respond and the very small response rates make the results very unreliable.

The full text is presented in the accompanying notes below

Sheffield Tree Action Groups

PRESS RELEASE

Notes to Editors:

Background data

Comments on Sheffield tree surveys

Emeritus Professor Greg Brooks, University of Sheffield, February 2017

It is a fundamental requirement of a valid opinion survey that it must be representative of the target audience or population.

There are at least four aspects to this:

1. Those approached must be either the whole of the target audience or population or a suitable sub-sample. In the case of small populations (e.g. the residents of a single street) it is obvious that they must all be approached (100% sample).
2. It must be clear to the target population that they are being approached.
3. The means of responding must be as clear and simple as possible, and preferably the same for all respondents.
4. The number replying (response rate) must be large enough to represent fairly the range of views in the population.

Sheffield's tree surveys appear to have met none of these requirements.

Requirement 1: The target population in each street should be all adult residents; limiting responses to one per household, even if every household responded, could not constitute a 100% sample.

Requirement 2: Given that so much of unfranked and unrequested mail is immediately discarded, official messages from central and local government (e.g. electoral registration) are routinely highlighted as important, with enough explanation on the outside of the envelope to ensure that they are attended to. Delivery of a survey letter in anonymous plain envelopes makes a nonsense of this.

Requirement 3: It is still not the case that every household or person has access to the internet, and even fewer might be comfortable with answering a survey online, given the security rigmarole. It is also known from research that differing response modes affect response rates (percentage who answer at all) and response biases (whether people are more likely to answer positively or negatively), so having two ways of responding (online or by phoning up for a paper form and returning it), which may have seemed responder-friendly, was actually certain to cloud the outcome. Since paper response forms are available, they could have been enclosed with the initial request. The actual way survey responses were requested could hardly have been better designed to confuse, and to ensure the response rate was low.

Requirement 4: For the sake of illustration of adequate response rates, let us suppose the target population numbers 100. A response rate of less than 50%, even if as many as 49 out of 100 and unanimous, cannot be taken as representative

Sheffield Tree Action Groups

PRESS RELEASE

without further evidence, since it is logically possible that all those who did not respond had the opposite view. If 51 people out of a possible 100 were unanimous, that would be a fair representation – but responses are rarely, if ever, unanimous, so higher numbers/percentages are essential – preferably at least 75%, since then the chances of a rogue unrepresentative result, or one that is hijacked by special interests, is substantially reduced. Where a response rate is low, it is essential to take steps to boost it, for example by sending a repeat mailing or knocking on doors – the latter being eminently feasible in the case of single streets. The response rate of 5.8% in one recent street survey is farcical, and basing any policy decision on such tiny response rates is a denial of democracy.

One survey response per property does not allow for different views within one household.

(A higher resolution version of this diagram is available in the accompanying booklet, and is available for use, credited to *Save Crookes, Western Road and Walkley Trees*.

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