

STAG progress report on Negotiations with Sheffield City Council

We met with Council Leader Julie Dore and Chief Executive John Mothersole last week and requested a planned process of negotiations to see if trees can be saved. They have promised to give the request serious consideration and reply as soon as possible. This week they confirmed that they are continuing to consider the plan.

Our framework for discussions with SCC

1. **Mediation is necessary** since previous meetings have not been productive and there has been a loss of trust between us. An independent mediator will give confidence to both parties that they will be heard and their questions or proposals properly considered.
2. **Our single aim is to save healthy trees**, nothing else is significant from our point of view and a separate arrangement should be made to deal with any secondary issues that either party wishes to discuss. It is important that SCC acknowledge our aim and accept that it is worth pursuing.
3. **This should be a planned process, over several meetings** at close intervals to allow full discussion and proper consideration of ideas. Single meetings or meetings with long gaps between will not be productive.
4. **We have a number of areas of discussion** using examples of fellings where we do not believe the rationale or decision process is clear.
5. **We also have questions about some of the policies** adopted by Amey and SCC.
6. **Although we may focus on specific streets or trees** as examples in our discussion, the aim is to come up with principles that can be applied across the city.
7. **By enquiring into the fine detail** of some decisions and policies, we may uncover opportunities for a rethink of some felling plans and help to change SCC's understanding of the situation.
8. **STAG wishes to be open and keep supporters informed of progress.** SCC will have the opportunity to see and suggest changes to any reports that we publish to our supporters and individual council officers will not be named.

Proposal for a 'co-working' process made to SCC on 8th November.

At the meeting on 8 November SCC said they were not open to a direct request to change the approach to fellings. They saw no alternative but to carry on with the plans, given the terms of the contract and their belief that the fellings were necessary.

So we needed an approach that SCC might accept and could lead them to see ways to change their plans.

Many of the proposed fellings do not make sense to informed observers, including experts in arboriculture and engineering so we felt that, if those decisions were subjected

to careful questioning and requests for evidence, that process might reveal factors that could lead to a change of mind.

This approach is used in many fields of work under the title of 'Root Cause Analysis' (RCA) and we proposed to SCC that RCA could be used as a framework for working together to understand what has gone wrong. SCC understood the principle of this and said they would consider it seriously.

Properly done, Root Cause Analysis will dig down to the 'bedrock' of a decision or policy to reveal whether it has any foundation in fact. We believe that RCA will reveal faulty decisions and/or processes. If so, SCC have the opportunity to acknowledge flaws and consider changing decisions and policies.

One way of describing the process is that you keep asking 'why?' (in an intelligent and informed way) to each response you receive until you reach the point that all the evidence and reasoning is out in the open and the 'root cause' can be seen and agreed. If that root cause is a misinterpretation of data or rules or principles etc it will be visible.

Experts say that it can take five rounds of questioning to arrive at an agreed reliable result. Doing the questioning properly will usually require time in each round for reviewing the previous answers, gathering information and working out the next question. It will require a good team of knowledgeable people to support this work and STAG is consulting with member groups to see who might be able to help.

Because there has been a breakdown of trust between the two parties, the process of setting up and progressing a Root Cause Analysis will require independent mediation/facilitation.

Next steps

On 8th November, SCC promised to give careful consideration to our proposal and respond as quickly as possible.

If agreed, we expect the initial actions will be to agree with SCC the timetable and arrangements for mediation/facilitation and invite an experienced professional mediator to take part.

Meanwhile we are continuing to work on our plans including:

1. Setting up a team of people to carry out the co-work process with SCC and any negotiations that might arise. Local groups are invited to suggest members to take part.
2. Agreeing with STAG member groups how to ensure clear communication, consultation and inclusion in any negotiating process.

While it is not certain that SCC are ready to take up our offer yet we will continue to be positive and plan for this work.

Chris Rust & Rebecca Hammond
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