

STAG Feedback about the current SCC/Amey approach to tree felling

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October 2019

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Background context

- PFI contract includes the following obligations:
 - To fell 17,500 trees over the 25 years of the contract, with a minimum of 200 a year (SCC have admitted that the intent of felling such large numbers was to even out the age of the tree stock)
 - Missing kerb stones is not allowed (SCC values an unbroken kerb line above street trees)
 - Curving the kerb line by anything greater than 50mm over a 2 metre length of kerb is not allowed (SCC values near perfect straight kerb lines above street trees)
 - Altering the layout of roads (eg to add “build outs,” or to narrow a road) is not included in the maintenance contract, and comes at an extra cost to SCC
 - The existing strategy documents in the contract include a key aim of reducing the maintenance costs of Sheffield’s street trees by the time the contract ends in 2037 (ie by replacing felled large “woodland species” with smaller, slower growing species)

High level SCC/Amey tree felling decision making process (pre March 2018) – Process Step 1 (Amey)

As a result of the contract aims and obligations, in its original survey/audit of all Sheffield's 36,000 street trees, Amey identified trees which needed felling for the following reasons:

- **Dead, Diseased, Dying** – STAG has only rarely had any disagreement with Amey assessments in these categories
- **Dangerous** – STAG is mostly okay with this category, but it does need to be debated whether the best way to deal with historically pollarded trees is always to fell them, rather than canopy thin or re-pollard
- **Discriminatory** (narrow pavement or leaning into carriageway) – Context is key with this category, so STAG does not always agree (eg in quiet cul-de-sacs where alternatives to felling are available)
- **Damaging** – STAG has always disagreed with the majority of trees identified in this category, as the strict straight kerb line (and similar) requirements were what drove this category. Way above what is legally allowed by the Highways Act
- **Subjective judgement about the likelihood of death or decline over the remaining length of the contract, and the 10 or so years after the contract ends, in order to meet the 17,500 contract obligation** – STAG always suspected this category and fundamentally disagreed with it, but it was denied by SCC. Recent talks have confirmed it was indeed an original category in its own right, but when the “controversy” came to wide public attention in about 2014/2015, this category was subsumed into the Damaging category to hide it.

High level SCC/Amey tree felling decision making process (pre March 2018) – Process Step 2 (SCC)

SCC retain “ownership” of the street tree “assets” of Sheffield, even if Amey have 25 year “custodianship” of them, through the contract. As a result, SCC have final say over whether to agree to Amey’s felling recommendations, or reject them. However:

- **The contract obligations I set out two slides ago constrain SCC scope to disagree, even if they wanted to.** Deviations from contract specifications would cost either SCC or Amey extra money (contract penalties)
- **In reality, SCC don’t want to deviate from the contract obligations** as they inserted them into the contract in the first place. They want perfect straight unbroken kerb lines, and believe that felling half of Sheffield’s street tree stock over 25 years is a good thing
- In pure monetary and balance sheet terms, **none of Sheffield’s street trees have an asset value, only an average annual maintenance cost** – on that basis, the cost benefit decision will always be to fell
- The PFI contract is a “modern self monitoring contract” and so **only a small % of Amey’s work is monitored/measured/reviewed**

As a consequence of all the above, STAG is not aware of SCC ever having rejected an Amey felling recommendation in the pre-March 2018 period

Hope – Lessons learned from the Joint Investigation process

- Joint Amey/STAG investigations of trees that were identified for felling “as a last resort” but remain standing, (305 trees), began in January 2019
- An SCC/Amey/STAG “Review meeting” was held in August looking at a sample of the investigated trees, aiming to learn lessons
- Nearly all the threatened trees that have been investigated so far have resulted in Amey recommending that the trees can now be retained, with SCC agreeing
- The report is still in draft, before publication on the SCC website. But the draft lessons so far include:
 - Not just assuming that humped cracked pavement by a tree is a root problem – instead excavate all the tarmac to usually reveal it is 1 metre of 4 layers of tarmac from 30 years of shoddy repairs
 - Increase the transparency of the evidence and decision making relating to felling recommendations
 - Ensuring that the right people with the right skills and capabilities, working toward a clear outcome, are the ones doing the work around trees
 - Use of thin and modified kerb stones, sometimes quite innovatively, and crafted with specialist skills, can be used to retain trees, keeping within the terms of the contract
 - Curving kerb lines, even within the terms allowed under the unnecessarily strict contract specification allows more space for the trees to grow, reducing future costs to SCC and Amey
 - Future repairs around trees should consider removal of soil/substrate to minimise future damage as trees continue to grow
 - Enlarged tree pits can also help to minimise future damage as trees continue to grow
 - The use of flexible pavement materials can be helpful
 - The Council could retain more trees by considering whether to provide Amey with “relief” from contract obligations for individual trees, by allowing them to leave kerb stones out, curving kerb lines by greater than is allowed in the contract, and changing road configurations

Key issues that need dealing with in the Tree Strategy document

- **Ensuring the draft lessons learned on the previous slide are formalised in the new strategy**
- **Full transparency** to the public in relation to all future Amey recommendations to fell (including photographic evidence why), **and** how and why SCC agreed or disagreed
- **A sufficient time period between a felling decision and the actual felling** (except for emergency fellings for safety reasons) – to allow community groups such as STAG to scrutinise and ask questions