



SHEFFIELD TREE ACTION GROUPS (STAG)

Press Release

14 October 2020

Ombudsman: Sheffield Council Not Open or Accountable Catalogue of Failures and Deception Second Damning Report from Local Government Watchdog

**Council used deliberate 'subterfuge'
Lack of openness and honesty led to public opposition**

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman issued its decision on complaints against SCC by Alan Robshaw, of Endcliffe, Sheffield. The 25 page report details extremely serious failures including deception, particularly relating to the notorious 'night raid' on mature healthy trees on Rustlings Road in November 2016 but relevant to the large scale street tree felling programme over the whole city.

In a previous report in January 2019 the Ombudsman criticised how SCC worked with its own Independent Tree Panel dealing with tree fellings in Totley. As in the new report he stated that SCC had misled the citizens by misrepresenting technical reports. This new report goes further, cataloging a very long list of failures by the Council.

The Ombudsman's 25 page report was issued on 14 October 2020. He required Sheffield City Council (SCC) to make an unreserved and wide ranging apology to citizens. Unfortunately Alan Robshaw died before his complaint was resolved but the Ombudsman felt that the complaints and their findings were of much wider interest so they have gone ahead with the publication.

The report's catalogue of failings by SCC includes:

- Failing to require proper reporting from council officers and contractors
- Secrecy about decision making
- Making untruthful statements about advice received from the Police
- Using selective quotes from experts to mislead the public about the experts' advice
- Misleading their own Independent Tree Panel about technical options available to the council, effectively making the work of the ITP pointless and a waste of public money.
- Misleading the public about technical options available within the highways contract
- Engaging in deliberate subterfuge to confuse citizens about tree felling plans

Referring to the night tree felling raid by contractors and the Police in November the Ombudsman stated that

“it appears the Council’s focus was entirely on removing the trees it had identified without considering the distress such an operation might bring with it. Nor the outrage that would inevitably greet it.”

This was compounded by deliberate deception using false and misleading notices and publishing an official report in the small hours, just before the night fellings started.

Chris Rust, representing STAG, said:

“Sheffield Council resists calls for a proper inquiry into the disturbing felling of thousands of healthy street trees. The Ombudsman has done us a big favour by making public some of the most significant facts with his authority behind them.

It’s shocking that so much deception took place. At one point a Police Officer commented that SCC had ‘thrown the Police under a bus’ over the Rustlings Road night fellings. I believe the deceptions described here are only part of the story.

It’s great that we now have a more sensible and cooperative way of dealing with these trees, letting the contractors show how they can use their skills to conserve our Urban greenspace instead of being subjected to dogmatic and ill-thought schemes by the Council. The Ombudsman is quite right to say that recent developments show very clearly that openness and willingness to listen are the keys to good government.

It is very sad that Alan Robshaw, who worked so hard to save our trees, should have died without seeing this report. We owe him a huge debt.”

Deepa Shetty, who worked closely with Alan Robshaw in the tree campaign said:

“Alan Robshaw was a founding member of the SORT (Save Our Roadside Trees) campaign, which lobbied for SCC to adhere to urban forestry good practice as it repeatedly claimed to do. Alan campaigned tirelessly for SCC to acknowledge the value of mature street trees. I hope that Amey & SCC pay attention to Alan’s wishes”

Rebecca Hammond, former Co-Chair of STAG said

“The Ombudsman has told SCC to make an unreserved apology. The mealy-mouthed statement published on the Council’s website today is not an apology. There have now been two damning rulings by the Local Government Ombudsman. It is very clear that an inquiry is needed into what happened, and SCC must learn lessons rather than expecting us to move on without evidence that anything will change in the future.”

Rosie Robshaw, one of Alan Robshaw’s daughters said:

My Dad was a very professional, and committed man who, even during cancer treatment was determined to ensure the Ombudsman had every single bit of information needed. Hearing the roars of the chain saws outside his house in the early hours that morning began the determination to seek the truth! He believed in honesty and fairness and knew that what was being done was wrong and unfair. I’m so glad the Ombudsman has proved him right. He is our hero and I’m proud to call him my Dad.

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Link to the Ombudsman's report

[https://www.lgo.org.uk/information-centre/news/2020/oct/council-should-apologise-for-tree-contr
oversy-ombudsman-says](https://www.lgo.org.uk/information-centre/news/2020/oct/council-should-apologise-for-tree-controversy-ombudsman-says)

Link to previous Ombudsman's report on similar failings by SCC

<https://www.lgo.org.uk/decisions/environment-and-regulation/trees/17-017-004>

Link to SCC's statement

<https://sheffnews.com/news/council-apologises-for-street-tree-complaint-handling>