

# DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

## COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

FRIDAY, 19TH FEBRUARY, 2021

A MEETING of the COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL held a VIRTUAL MEETING THROUGH MICROSOFT TEAMS on FRIDAY, 19TH FEBRUARY, 2021, at 10.00 am.

### PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Mark Houlbrook  
Vice-Chair - Councillor Nigel Cannings

Councillors Mick Cooper, Martin Greenhalgh, David Hughes, Tosh McDonald and Ian Pearson

### APOLOGIES:

There were no apologies for absence.

- 2 To consider the extent to which the public and press are to be excluded from the meeting.

None

- 3 Declarations of Interest, if any.

There were no declarations made.

- 4 Public Statements.

#### **Public Statement 1 - Richard Needham, Doncaster Resident and Member of the Green Party speaking for the Middlefield Road Tree Protesters:**

We are pleased that DMBC are undertaking a much-needed review of the Tree Policy following the Middlefield Road issue where 64 healthy mature trees were removed on mass. Decimating an important wildlife corridor depriving bees of a rich source of pollen and causing division and upset amongst residents. This should never be allowed to happen again. It is simply not acceptable or sustainable. Middlefield Road illustrates everything that is wrong with the loopholes in the current Policy.

We know that alternative engineering solutions are available and should be used. In the past trees have been felled because they have been seen as a danger or as a nuisance when in most cases a clever solution is available, making felling unnecessary. For example, flexi pave can be used allowing water to drain through helping to water the tree and prevent flooding.

We need to remember the real danger that threatens everyone is the Climate and Biodiversity emergency. Unless this is tackled head on, it will cost us dearly. There is no room for complacency and thinking, "it is just a tree", each and every tree needs to be valued.

The spirit of the updated policy is good. It aspires to increase the value of trees in their role in tackling climate and biodiversity emergency, help prevent flooding, improve local air quality and make Doncaster a healthier and more attractive place to live, work and visit.

DMBC has stepped up to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency and if the spirit of the tree policy is acted upon, DMBC will succeed and will lead the way tree by tree, ensuring minimal tree removal is adhered to. If the spirit of the policy is not adhered to then rest assured we are here and will challenge poor decisions and raise public awareness. DMBC do not be another Sheffield.

Thank you.

**Public Statement 2 - Kate Needham, Doncaster Resident, Member of the Green Party and a Middlefield Road Tree Protestor:**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> February 2021, I wrote to Tim Newton following the previous meeting about the draft policy. I raised the issue that although the spirit of the policy is good some things were not explicit enough to ensure that the spirit is acted upon. I also congratulated him on the progress and work that had been done so far.

For example in page 16 of the planting trees section, there is no mention of location which should be as close to the removed trees as possible, otherwise urban areas where trees are removed will be left bare.

A public record should be kept of the location, numbers and survival rate of replacement trees.

Page 17 Bio-security section, there is no mention of planting a variety of species rather than identical trees in order to prevent disease spreading.

In Middlefield Road all the replacement saplings were identical which is not good for disease prevention and not best practice.

Page 30 decision pathway, it is good in terms of better notification and investigation but the process does not allow for the decision to fell a tree to be scrutinised or disputed. Surely, there should be some mechanism by which decisions are made in house can be scrutinised, for example, joint inspections or independent experts. There should be an opportunity to object. Trees in avenues should be assessed individually and decisions to fell them not based merely on aesthetics and the way it looks.

Tim Newton has written to me to say that the short answer is yes and that these issues are all intended to be covered as you suggest and questioned whether the wording was explicit enough in the policy and something he is checking. So, clearly Tim still has to check and add whatever wording is needed to make these things explicit enough and the Scrutiny Committee needs to be told this. It's all about closing loopholes.

Thank you very much.

5 The Independent Review and Re-draft of Doncaster Council's Tree Policy and Tree Risk Management Plan for Doncaster Council's Trees and Woodlands

The Panel received a presentation from Council Officers and Professor Ian Rotherham, which provided detailed information about findings and how these have been translated into the revised Policy.

Key areas considered by the Panel during it's review of the Policy included:

Establishing Tree Wardens to work with the Local Authority –It was recognised that Tree Wardens had been operating nationally for some time and there was a strong interest for them to be established in Doncaster. It was recognised that roles would

need to be clear, meshing with the Local Authority to deliver the wider service. In addition to partners, for example Parish Councils and local businesses, it was noted that Tree Wardens would not remove resources from the borough but provide additional and increased enthusiasm and support in the community. If a scheme was established it would make a good platform for external funding for the initiative.

How would the Tree Policy complement the Authority's Environmental Strategy – It was noted that it was an essential part to support and complement delivery, ensuring the best use of trees in the Council's care and that they were used to support the net increase in carbon stored with the right trees being planted in the right place. It was acknowledged that hedges were more appropriate and useful in certain situations creating better environmental benefits.

It was stressed that all officers would need to be aware of the policy and decision pathway.

Local Authority's commitment towards equality - Members were reminded that due regard and equality duty was embedded in the Local Authority's daily work. It was stressed that the approach taken would include risk management, for example for people who used mobility scooters, a considered approach would be taken towards tree management including creative and alternative methods. It was noted that officers had met with local access groups to address this specific issue. Members stressed the requirement for a balanced approach and risk assessment that ensured residents were able to use safe level pathways in areas that were affected by tree growth and roots;

It was also stressed that it was important, particularly for everyone's positive mental health during the current pandemic restrictions, that all people had access to nature.

Tree management – It was explained that resources available including practices and equipment had been identified in Street Scene to ensure that vegetation was correctly maintained and would not create a nuisance.

Members highlighted the importance of expanding the Council's tree stock (planting and establishing the right trees in the right places), including current and proposed housing and industrial developments. The Panel stressed that the benefit of trees and hedgerows particularly for wildlife habitats and bird population but also "greening up" the Borough's high streets.

Targets for tree planting – it was noted that the Policy does not include a set tree planting target. It was acknowledged that the climate commission looked at two levels of tree planting that needed to be translated locally. One was to follow the Government's target to plant, which for Doncaster would require planting 70 hectares per annum to 17%, a 4% increase on the current coverage levels which resulted in massive tree planting requirements. The Local Authority currently has 160 hectares of land available that was being surveyed for potential tree planting, however some of that land would not be suitable. It was outlined that the difference the local authority could make was modest therefore private landowners would need to be engaged to address offset carbon emissions, particularly those set aside the M18 corridor.

Other comments and areas of discussion included:

- National Tree events undertaken in past years;
- Use of Tree Preservation Orders in appropriate circumstances and impact assessments if trees required removing;
- Communication with Doncaster’s residents when addressing tree management – the different mechanisms in addition to traditional notices, social media and websites, included articles in free magazines, talking newspapers, information in different languages and signing channels;
- Maintenance of trees within Council Housing boundaries and the need to ensure how they should be maintained to stop creating a nuisance. There was regular engagement with St Leger Homes of Doncaster when issues required addressing;
- Possible tree and hedgerow asset register identifying those with a Tree Preservation Order; and
- Partnerships with, for example, Network Rail and Highways Agency to ensure proper tree management on their land;

To conclude the officers and Professor Ian Rotherham thanked the Panel for the useful and helpful discussion.

The Chair on behalf of the Panel stressed that tree management was much more than what was set out in the review and thanked Professor Ian Rotherham, Dan Swaine Director Economy and Environment, Tim Newton Cleaner Green Programme, Jonathan Bucknall Service Manager Business Partner and Programmes and Bethany Haley Senior Project and Programme Manager for the report and responding to questions asked by Panel Members.

**RESOLVED** that:-

- The independent review, be welcomed;
- The pace and urgency with which the Tree Review has been undertaken, be noted; and
- The initial findings of the independent review and how they had been translated into the revised policy, be noted.

CHAIR: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_