

REPORT TO ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

ENDORSEMENT OF CHESHIRE TREES ALLIANCE

LETTER



Report Reference ET-24-03
Meeting Date 24th June 2024
Agenda Item 9
Prepared by Town Clerk

1.0 BACKGROUND

The council has previously lobbied for Cheshire East Council to change its policy on tree planting in the highway to enable planting to take place. Working with borough councillor Dean and former borough councillor Abel, a notice of motion was put forward to a meeting of the Full Council of Cheshire East Council in March 2023 and then referred to the CEC Highways and Transport Committee which resulted in it committing to develop a policy which would enable highway tree planting.

The CEC Highways and Transport Committee workplan lists approval of a policy for its November 2024 meeting.

The Cheshire Trees Alliance is a body comprising representatives from Cheshire East towns which comes together to discuss and take forward measures which promote tree planting and ecological improvement across the borough and Knutsford is represented by Kevin Griffiths and Malcolm Thomas (members of the council's Nature Action Plan working group).

Messers Griffiths and Thomas have sought the town council's endorsement of a letter being issued to Cheshire East Council following publication of a draft policy. The letter is contained in the appendix and sets out the case.

2.0 DECISION REQUIRED

The committee should consider being a signatory to the letter.

APPENDIX: LETTER

In January 2024, Transition Wilmslow Tree group (TWTG) formally wrote to the CEC Highways and Transport Committee expressing their grave concerns regarding the new policy for Highways Tree maintenance and inspections, and the Code of Practice for Highway Tree safety inspection (see e-mail attached). These had been unanimously approved at the Highways Committee meeting held in March 2023. The minutes of that meeting also noted the intention to develop a Highway Tree Planting Policy by September 2024.

The principal concern raised by TWTG in January 2024 was that the new interim policy, which included 13 stringent criteria for Highway tree planting, includes 2 particularly onerous requirements, namely:

- Trees must be planted within a minimum of 1.1 m verge width
- The tree must be a minimum of 3m from the edge of the carriageway.

TWTG pointed out that adoption of such a policy would effectively make 84% of existing Highway trees within Wilmslow fall outside of the policy (as assessed by an audit of over 400 trees in Wilmslow). A reduction in highway trees has already been evident across the town in recent years. Wilmslow's trees are predominantly a heritage of the Victorian period and are reaching the end of their lives. A consequence of CEC's current policy will be that, within a generation, Wilmslow's trees will be lost en masse, resulting in a dramatic change to the character of this leafy town as set out in the Neighbourhood Plan. This is a matter therefore of major concern to our residents.

Whilst TWTG's email was acknowledged by the council, our 3 requests have not been specifically addressed:

1. A discussion to be scheduled at the next Highway Committee regarding our concerns so that all members of the committee are fully aware and to give the public an opportunity to put their views across.
2. To receive confirmation from CEC Highways that our concerns regarding the current "interim" policy have been duly noted.
3. To make an immediate amendment of the interim policy allowing replacement of existing trees whether or not they meet the 13 criteria.

We support the proposal made separately by Wilmslow Town Council to CEC for an amendment whereby the stringent list of criteria does not apply to replacement of existing street trees. In the case of replacement, they requested that a new tree of suitable species be planted at the same location as the tree to be replaced, or that the Town or Parish Council be consulted on the new placement.

We need trees. Not only for the health and wellbeing of our people and environmental reasons, but more urgently to combat the climate change emergency that our world faces. The current Highways policy with its 13 stringent criteria appears to have been created and approved in a silo by CEC's Highways team, without referral to policies or expertise on trees from other parts of CEC, such as on Environment and Net Zero. We also refer you to The Statutory Instrument 'The England Trees Action Plan 2021-24' which makes clear that the UK government intends streets to be tree-lined.

As you'll be aware, the desire to plant more trees by the public, for all the reasons given above, is growing. There is now a combined organisation representing tree groups across Cheshire, all seeking urgent attention to be given to our stated concerns - before we lose more trees. A selection of the Cheshire organisations involved are listed at the end of this note.

Please do let us know how the Highway Committee intend to respond. If cost associated with managing trees and insuring liability is the real and underlying issue, we ask you to declare this openly and not hide behind criteria designed to prevent tree planting. Salford City council has adopted a Tree Replacement Policy allowing planting up to 45cms from the carriageway. CEC Highways' policy of 3m distance is therefore demonstrably excessive and lacking any evidence-base.

We ask again for CEC Highways Committee to work with us to create policies that are progressive and will address the points made above.