



Hands off our trees!

PHOEBE SEYMOUR MEETS BOTH SIDES IN THE BATTLE THAT IS PITTING RESIDENTS AGAINST SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL AND THE CONTRACTORS WHO MAINTAIN THE CITY'S STREETS.

When residents of Rustlings Road in the leafy S11 postcode were roused from their beds at 5am on a dark November morning last year by the sound of chainsaws and a knock on the door from the police, a small local issue became national news.

Home owners in this most law-abiding of suburbs were bluntly told to remove their cars immediately or have them towed away.

Three members of the public were arrested, and Sheffield Hallam MP Nick Clegg and Green Party leader Natalie Bennett rushed to the scene to show their support.

For many Sheffield residents this was the tipping point – the moment when they realised this was not just a matter of a few tree-huggers making a lot of noise.

And now, for many of them, the issue is bigger than the trees. It's about the kind of city they want to live in. They see the secrecy surrounding the 25-year PFI (Private Financial Initiative) deal between Sheffield City Council and contractors Amey and ask: what do they have to hide?

Westside spoke to the key players as the battle was set to enter a new phase.

Helen McIlroy, coordinator of Save Nether Edge Trees



"Trees are a frontline between us and vehicle exhausts. The majority of them are healthy and there's no reason for them to come out, except for the disturbance of the pavement.

"They've maintained street trees in other cities and they've got the means to do it here. Many techniques are included in the contract, so they wouldn't cost the taxpayer, but they would cost Amey more. They are taking out the trees to protect their profits and that's wrong.

"The PFI contract means the council have handed over accountability. We can't vote Amey out because they are never up for election.

"The council say for every tree they cut down, a new one will be planted, but they aren't being planted properly. They are planting them on top of the roots of the old ones.

"The council should make sure Amey work to national best practice, and at the very least, enforce solutions that wouldn't cost the city another penny.

"They are still looking at it from the point of view of highway engineering and seeing the trees as a problem, rather than an asset."

Shaffaq Mohammed, Lib-Dem leader, Ecclesall Ward

"I've not seen the whole contract. Even Nick Clegg, who was involved in securing the money when he was deputy prime minister, hasn't seen it.

"Sometimes there's good reasons for a tree to come out and the protesters at STAG (Sheffield Tree Action Groups) understand that. But even when The Independent Tree Panel has suggested trees be kept, they've not been. With Rustlings Road, they were ignored.

"My understanding is that the Rustlings Road trees were healthy and could have been saved. The council sat on the report from July and published it half an hour before they started the chainsaws.

"The Rustlings Road trees have gone, but the campaign moves on. Now, we have two big issues. One is Western Road's war memorial trees (dedicated to Westways Primary School pupils who fought in the First World War).

"The other is Rivelin Valley Road. That petition is close to 5,000 signatures. If they get that, they can debate it with the council. We're proposing a cross-party working group for Western Road. It's a new year and a chance for us to reset the dial.





Alison Teal, Green Party councillor for Nether Edge and Sharrow Ward

"I've been looking at whether road signage is being done legally.

"When they've used "no parking" signs, they haven't applied to the Department of Transport in the way they were supposed to.

"The cabinet member for infrastructure and transport, Mazher Iqbal, has now admitted there were never any signs on Rustlings Road. At the time, Bryan Lodge, cabinet member for environment at Sheffield City Council, said there were signs and officers had taken photos to prove it.

"I don't think we can move on while the issue is still current. I recently met with Simon Green, the director of Sheffield's Place Management Team, who signed off on Rustlings Road.

"He said 6,000 trees are meant to come down in the core investment period, 2012 to 2017. The core investment period ends in September 2017, so 2,000 are to be felled between now and then.

"I asked what happens contractually if they don't manage to fell them all and he said, "I don't know."

"The council are looking at ending their contract with Veolia, which they were supposedly locked into until 2036. So perhaps the roads can be under council control again soon."



Luke Seed, member of SORT (Save Our Roadside Trees)

"I live on Rustlings Road. On 17 November at about 5am, I heard a knock on the door. A policeman was there saying, "You've got to move your car. If you don't move it, it'll be towed."

"I protested, "This can't be legal!" and he said, "It is." So I got dressed and sent a text to the others.

"After I'd moved our cars, the police said that if I went into the area where they were working, I'd be arrested. So my neighbours and I stood on the wall of my property, which is underneath the canopy of the tree.

"A representative of the council came up to us and said: 'This is a perfectly legal traffic regulation order. It's been posted on the road.'

"But if someone had posted an order seven days in advance, somebody would have noticed.

"After that, my wife found it difficult to sleep because she was concerned they were going to come back.

"I wrote to the police commissioner. He replied: 'The police hadn't intended on being involved, but Amey didn't have enough people to knock on doors, so they felt a moral obligation to get involved.'

"The arrogance, particularly of the Labour group, is breathtaking. They're not acting as representatives of the people."



Bryan Lodge, Sheffield City Council cabinet member for environment

"Streets Ahead is the biggest investment ever seen in roads, street trees and infrastructure in the city we all love. This represents our opportunity to replace trees where necessary so that they don't just last for the next ten years, but for the next hundred years. For our children and our grandchildren.

"We are announcing a series of new commitments to the people of Sheffield for 2017. It's important to be clear that this is not necessarily about replacing fewer trees, although we will continue to listen to the views of residents regarding the trees. This is about working in a clear, transparent and collaborative way, and working to regain the trust of people in Sheffield.

"We reiterate our apology for the mistakes that we have made, and we understand that we need to show that we have learned from what happened. We have already promised that no work will begin before 7am and that we will publish the Independent Tree Panel advice well in advance of any work beginning on trees."



The scene outside Luke Seed's house the day Amey' workmen – and the police – arrived