

Dear Members of Cambridge City Council Planning Committee,

Re: Felling of trees 105-year-old trees on Alexandra Gardens

You will be aware that the Council's Principal Arboricultural Officer, Diana Oviatt-Ham, is considering the felling of up to three healthy 105-year-old Plane trees in Alexandra Gardens, facing on to Carlyle Road. I hope it is OK to write directly to you over this matter; I feel very strongly about it and want to make sure you receive a balanced view of it before you make your recommendations to Mr Cantrill for a decision.

I was absolutely shocked to receive the letter from Mrs Oviatt-Ham dated 3 September, which stated her opinion that it may be pertinent for the Council to consider removing these two trees (and irretrievably damaging another and heavily pruning two more).

I wish to state my strenuous opposition to the proposed felling. Every attempt should be made to protect these beautiful, magnificent trees, rather than to cut them down without full and balanced consultations of expert opinion, not merely structural engineers and insurance companies.

We residents have only been allowed 10 working days to mount any objections we may have in order that our points may be heard at Wednesday's Planning Committee meeting. I received a subsequent letter from Mrs Oviatt-Ham, refuting objections raised and letting me know that I could attend the meeting, but that only **one** person was allowed to speak in opposition to the proposals, so Chair will normally ask for one person to act as spokesperson for the group. I have no idea how many people will be at the meeting, wanting to speak. There is no organised group. We are simply local residents. How could we possibly organise a group, consider complex options, choose a representative and present alternative solutions in 10 working days? The problem has been known to the Council since 2008. Why have residents only been informed in the last three weeks? I consider this insufficient time for any opposition to be prepared. I strongly object to the seemingly summary decision to go ahead with the cull and feel that the Council has not given due democratic process so far. Moreover, why has Mrs Oviatt-Ham only informed councillors in the Castle ward of her opinion? The trees are on the outer border of Arbury ward and adjoin West Chesterton ward. Have these councillors been informed?

In her report to the Planning Committee, Mrs Oviatt-Ham provides an Option B in which the trees can be retained/not reduced, but the property would be underpinned to prevent further structural damage. However, later in the report, this appears to be rejected on the grounds that the Council **may** be responsible for covering the costs because their own insurance company might not cover tree root damage, stating that the Council's duty to comply with the terms and conditions of the Council's insurance policy and to manage the Council's financial resources responsibly. She also states that whilst the engineers and arboriculturalists were prepared to negotiate a regime of regular tree management, the (house) owners and loss adjuster would only consider either the removal of one tree and substantial reduction of two adjacent trees which would not require the property to be underpinned or the retention of the trees and the underpinning of the property, the costs of which would be recovered. My own research, albeit anecdotal via a third party, is that the house owners **DO NOT** wish the trees to be felled, but are at the mercy of their insurance company, which is searching for a way to avoid paying for anything.

The problem

Cracks seem to have been occurring in the rear extension and garage of one house for the last 7-8 years. I certainly understand the owners concerns. It must be very worrying, but I fear they may have been given only one side of the argument. The local subsoil is riverine clay. Any geologist will advise that clay shrinks and expands with changing moisture content, with or without trees. Plane trees reach effective maturity at around 60 years; some 40 years ago in this case. The water requirements of these trees will not have increased much since around 1970. If the trees are to blame, why has the problem only occurred recently? The last decade

has been an exceptionally dry one on historical time scales. Shrinkage would be expected. Moreover, it is one of the few hilly areas of the city. Many properties in the area, mine included, have suffered from subsidence, slippage or settlement due to poor foundations rather than trees. Trees will, of course, contribute to loss of soil moisture, but they may not be the major cause. Botanists and tree technologists will tell you that, in drier conditions, trees actually withdraw **less** water from the soil than in wet periods.

Background

Even if these trees are contributing to the subsidence, we should consider alternatives. Mature trees in the prime of their lives like these cannot be easily and rapidly replaced, certainly not within our lifetimes. These magnificent Plane trees were planted by people with a communitarian vision for the future. They generously gave these trees to us.

The trees are a huge asset to the city. They belong to and are enjoyed by the community. Unfortunately, despite Mrs Oviatt-Ham's assessment that they are trees of exceptional quality, stature and history they are not subject to Tree Preservation Orders. In my opinion, their amenity value is priceless, but even on the Council's own national CAVAT system for assessing the asset and amenity value of trees, **each** of these trees is valued at between £115,000 and £140,000. Surely, if these assessments are to mean anything, to chop down communal assets to the tune of up to £300,000-400,000 for the sake of the price of underpinning or similar, would be carelessly profligate, at the very least. These trees are healthy and would probably last another 100-150 years if they were left alone; that is another 4-6 generations of residents.

Without these trees the character and feel of park, the road immediately next to, and under, as well as the wider area will be significantly changed. The impact on the park will be to reduce its current seclusion and separation from the surrounding urban residential environment. Such an attractive space bounded by mature trees is a rare thing in modern cities. I cherish it. So should the council.

Solutions

I am concerned that the decision to blame the trees for any particular structural problems may have been too hasty and if councillors are considering drastic action I would urge them to consider other possible causes and solutions.

I would urge the Council to assist property owners to take other action such as underpinning, root cutting or alternative, modern alternative reinforcements (e.g helical bar technology) which are cheaper and more sympathetic to movement.

Right Now

I would implore you to please consider at least delaying any decision until a balanced set of opinions is received (including experts like the National Trust, soil experts and specialist builders). I wouldn't mind contributing to the costs, if necessary. Moreover, it would be useful to have extra time to allow the house owners to be apprised of **ALL** sides of this argument. I would urge you to consider the opinions of the insurance companies as, at the very least, partial. These trees are a beautiful asset to the local environment, enjoyed by many. Please do not allow them to be chopped down for the want of informed opinion. I urge this generation of local governors to adopt the far-sightedness possessed by their predecessors.

Yours sincerely

Andy Davey