



Tree removal by local authorities in London

Why local authorities remove trees a part of good urban tree management

Summary

This position statement sets out some of the reasons why London boroughs remove trees and whilst new trees are usually planted, there are good arboricultural reasons not to replace trees in some instances. Counting numbers of trees which have been removed or planted is short sighted and canopy cover provides a more reasonable measure of our tree population. Professional local authority tree officers and adequate resourcing are key to the success of the urban forest.

Trees are an emotive subject. Most people care about trees and tree removal by local authorities can be contentious. Sometimes the proposed removal of trees results in local controversy or even national media attention. Whilst this can result in reasoned debate and useful public engagement, when professional local authority tree officers recommend tree removal, the reasons are based on good tree management practice and the recommendation is made in the interest of the public.

Tree management in local authorities in London is usually undertaken by tree officers. Tree officers are professionals who have specialist knowledge, training and experience in tree management.

Local authority tree management is based on legislation, common law and legal precedents, good practice guidance and local plans, strategies and policies.

Legislation includes the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), the Highways Act (1980) and the Occupiers Liability Act (1984)¹. The Town and County Planning Act (1990 as amended) controls tree management on private land and in relation to development.

Common law and legal precedent concern matters of tree safety, neighbours trees and subsidence.

Good practice guidance includes the National Tree Safety Group's 'Common Sense Risk Management of Trees'² which provides advice on reasonable and proportionate management of the risks posed by trees. Additional relevant guidance includes Principles Of Tree Hazard Assessment And Management (David Lonsdale, 2013), and Massaria disease of London plane³.

Some Councils produce a tree strategy, tree policy or management plan. Additional information can also be found in the Council's Local Plan, supplementary planning documents or other adopted plan

¹ <https://www.trees.org.uk/Trees.org.uk/media/Trees-org.uk/Documents/GuideToTreesAndTheLaw-Web.pdf>

² <http://ntsgroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/FCMS024.pdf>

³ <https://www.ltoa.org.uk/massaria-disease-of-plane/193-massaria-disease-of-plane-practical-management-guidance/file>

or policy. Different Councils take different approaches, subject to particular issues which are relevant to each authority. These documents can help to inform the reasons for removal or retention of trees.

Local authorities frequently receive requests for tree removal that are prefaced by '*I love trees but ...*'. Trees can create all sorts of concerns for residents and businesses, such as shading, damage or concern about safety, and it is the role of the professional tree officer to assess the wider benefits of the trees against the reasons for the suggested removal of the tree. Sometimes the reasons put to authorities for suggested tree removal are justified, but sometimes they are not. A tree policy can be useful in these circumstances to explain the reasons for removing or retaining trees.

The majority of tree removal by local authorities in London is because trees are dead or dying, unsafe or demonstrated to be causing subsidence damage. The urban environment is a challenging place to plant and maintain trees. Lack of rainfall, pollution, poor soils, and the urban heat island effect combine to make life difficult for trees, especially street trees. Removing dead or dying trees is part of the proactive tree management of a tree officer and in any given year this will make up a substantial portion of trees that have to be removed.

Trees in woodlands in London may also be removed on the grounds of good woodland management, for example to ensure appropriate spacing between trees or to remove invasive species in an ancient woodland in order to benefit the native ground flora and trees.

Councils sometimes allow trees on development sites to be removed. Most local authorities in London have planning policies that refer to the protection of trees in relation to new development although policies can sometimes conflict, for example, where there is a need for more housing. The planning judgement in these cases is carefully balanced by local authorities, and even when trees have to be removed for the wider public benefit, planning permission is often conditional on the replacement of trees. In many cases however, developments are refused permission or are or modified in order to retain valuable existing trees.

The numbers of trees removed by local authorities often make headlines. Focusing purely on numbers of trees removed is a short-sighted and inaccurate way of measuring tree populations. Trees are not static; they are living, dynamic, ever changing and susceptible to events. A far more reliable way to understand tree populations and create targets is through measuring canopy cover⁴. As an example, London's canopy cover stands at 21% and the target in the London Environment Strategy (2018) is to increase canopy cover by 10% by 2050⁵. Rather than focusing on numbers, this target also includes the increasing canopy size of existing trees, not just a given amount of trees removed or planted. When it comes to tree removal, focusing on numbers is unreliable as each year and season is different with events such as drought or development influencing tree loss. It also fails to account for woodland thinning figures which is an essential part of responsible tree and environmental management.

Making a comparison between trees being planted and trees being removed over a set time-frame is again a short-sighted approach. In many cases local authorities will plant new trees to replace trees that have to be removed and many will seek to increase tree canopy cover⁶. However, in some circumstances trees may be removed and not replanted, for example in the restoration of important chalk or acid grassland habitats⁷. Immediate tree planting might not always happen in order to allow

⁴ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/measuring_tree_canopy_cover_2015.pdf

⁵ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_environment_strategy_0.pdf

⁶ https://www.ltoa.org.uk/docs/London_Tree_Officer_Association-Position_Statement.pdf

⁷ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/habitats/grassland/lowland-dry-acid-grassland>

natural regeneration to occur - something that does not count toward tree number figures but does contribute to canopy cover.

Pests and diseases contribute to tree loss and there are increasing numbers of new tree diseases introduced into the UK. Diseases such as sooty bark disease of sycamore will see an increased death rate following a drought year⁸. A notable example of the catastrophic impact of a tree disease is Dutch elm disease, killing an estimated 20million elm trees over a ten year period in the UK⁹. If a dead or diseased tree is unsafe or likely to result in infection of other trees it may have to be removed. Tree pests and diseases can result in greater numbers of trees removed in short periods of time but in order to protect public safety local authorities have to react by removing trees. However, tree officers also have an important role to play in identifying and monitoring pests and diseases to control or sometimes eradicate their spread.

In order for local authority tree management to be at its most effective, tree officers need to be supported and adequately resourced in order to proactively manage their trees. This enables trees to be inspected, risks to be identified and works undertaken to the tree that may prolong its life or remove a potential hazard or obstruction. Proactive management prevents avoidable loss; it leads to tree retention in development projects; it identifies future planting opportunities; and it enables the right tree species to be planted in the right place through better species selection and planting design.

Problems arise however, when local authorities do not have the resources to adequately support tree officers and tree management. A decade of austerity has seen staff levels and budgets reduced and some council services have been out-sourced so lack the oversight of local democracy. When fewer tree officers with reduced resources have to manage tree populations, the capacity to deliver proactive tree management diminishes. In order for the urban forest to be managed responsibly and for the benefit of the public as a whole, it is vital that tree officers are adequately supported and resourced.

⁸ <https://forestpathology.org/canker/sooty-bark-maple/>

⁹ <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/pest-and-disease-resources/dutch-elm-disease/dutch-elm-disease-history-of-the-disease/>