

Michael Gove Seeking Way To End 'Bonkers' Felling Of Sheffield Trees

Environment secretary hopes for 'decent conversation' with council, but says he is also exploring 'legal or policy avenues'



Michael Gove visited Sheffield on Wednesday where he met people arrested while trying to stop the tree-felling. Photograph: Chris J Ratcliffe/AFP/Getty Images

[Michael Gove](#) has asked government officials to explore ways of stopping the “bonkers” felling of thousands of roadside trees in Sheffield.

The environment secretary said the government would examine “legal or policy avenues” to end the scheme that has triggered months of protests by residents.

On a visit to the city on Wednesday, Gove said he hoped a “decent conversation” with [Sheffield](#) city council would help solve the dispute. But he added: “It is also the case that we will explore what legal or policy avenues we have.

“In some respects time is marching on and with every week that passes more trees are designated for felling but I’ve asked the [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] lawyers and policy officials to let me know what we can do either now or in the future to cause the council to pause, think again and go down a different route.”

Gove’s intervention comes a month after [Sheffield city council dismissed his demands to halt the programme](#), which involves 6,000 trees being chopped down as part of a 25-year £2bn highway maintenance scheme.

It also [emerged on Thursday](#) that the council has spent £250,000 on legal fees in defending its tree-felling operation, including £149,660 on costs connected to a high court order barring people from standing inside safety zones erected around doomed trees.

Council bosses say the programme is essential if the city's 36,000 street trees are to be managed for future generations. It insists the trees earmarked for felling are dying, diseased or dangerous – a claim disputed by residents and campaigners.

Gove met two pensioners and a Green party councillor who are among those who have been arrested while trying to stop council contractors chopping down trees.

Speaking after the meeting, he told [the Yorkshire Post](#): “Having listened to people who have been on the frontline, it seems to me clear that the council has no adequate defence for continuing to cut down trees in the way that it has been.

“Sheffield is losing, we are losing, an amazingly valuable natural resource and the justification for it seems as flimsy as an autumn leaf. The idea that because tree roots might potentially cause a kerbstone here to be slightly out of alignment or might theoretically pose a risk to someone's mobility and therefore that justifies felling trees that have been here for generations is bonkers.

“What the council should be doing, I think, is trying to work with the contractor, Amey, to find different solutions rather than cutting down trees.”

The council pays me to protect trees from destruction – but for how long?

Sheffield city council has been approached for a comment. Speaking before Gove's statement, Bryan Lodge, the council's cabinet member for the environment, said: “We hope that following his visit, Michael Gove will now have a more informed understanding of the work we are doing, in partnership with his government on the Streets Ahead programme, which will transform our roads and pavements and ensure long-term benefits for the people of Sheffield.”

Last month the council [obtained a high court injunction](#) in an attempt to prevent protesters from standing in the way of tree-felling contractors – a new legal avenue following a spate of arrests in [scenes compared by Nick Clegg](#), the former Sheffield Hallam MP, to “something you'd expect to see in Putin's Russia”.

Campaigners have vowed to continue their opposition, [blockading a council depot](#) to prevent tree-felling workers from leaving hours after the injunction came into force last month.

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Sheffield trees dispute prompts 'scenes you'd expect in Putin's Russia'

Five people have so far been arrested in bitter battle, with Nick Clegg criticising the police for detaining peaceful protesters

It was, said Nick Clegg, “something you’d expect to see in Putin’s Russia, rather than a Sheffield suburb”. Council contractors and police had descended on a particularly desirable street in his Hallam constituency under the cover of darkness, “dragged” people out of bed to move their cars and detained peaceful protesters – “all to chop down eight trees”, [he wrote](#) in a local paper.

So far five people have been arrested in relation to a long-running and increasingly bitter battle over the fate of Sheffield’s trees, including a 70-year old emeritus professor and a 71-year-old retired teacher, both women. On Thursday two men will become the first of the city’s tree protesters to appear in court, charged under trade union legislation, following a protest on 2 November.

One of them, the author and university lecturer [Simon Crump](#), 56, a local Green party member, said he was arrested for protecting a 100-year-old London plane tree on Marden Road in Nether Edge. He said he was locked in a cell for eight hours and that he would have been released sooner but, he claimed, officers could not find the offence he had allegedly committed on the police computer. “It was quite Kafkaesque. I was being imprisoned because they couldn’t work out what to charge me with,” said Crump.

He was subsequently charged under [Section 241 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations \(Consolidation\) Act 1992](#), which criminalises anyone who persistently stops someone from carrying out lawful work – in this case tree surgeons contracted by Amey, an outsourcing company, to chop down trees under a controversial contract with the city council.

Crump has vowed to plead not guilty at [Sheffield](#) magistrates court on Thursday, along with the self-described tree campaigner Calvin Payne. “The way I see it, our case has implications for the right to peaceful protest against anything,” said Crump.

The fight for Sheffield’s trees has its roots in a 25-year private finance initiative (PFI) deal signed by the Labour-run council in 2012, which Amey pledged would “see Sheffield’s roads transformed from some of the worst in the country to the best in the country within the first five years”.



Nick Clegg speaks with members of the public after the tree felling in Rustlings Road, Sheffield. Photograph: Danny Lawson/PA

The council says many of the trees are diseased and that their roots have ruined pavements, making them impassable for wheelchair users and buggies.

But the Save Sheffield's Trees group argues that Amey works without proper consultation and is motivated by profit rather than any desire to protect the trees. "If they blitz the city's trees in the first five years of their 25-year contract, they can spend the next 20 years with much lower maintenance costs," [the group argues](#).

They have formed a sort of arboreal neighbourhood watch scheme to keep tabs on any tree that is suddenly adorned with a "felling notice" by Amey, scrambling a protest group as soon as the men with chainsaws turn up.

When contacted by the Guardian on Monday, Amey passed the request on to the council, which [previously said of Amey's work](#): "If a tree is damaging or obstructing we will make all reasonable practical attempts to try and retain this tree in situ by applying one or more of over 20 sensitive engineering solutions. If these cannot be applied then the tree will be replaced. All trees that are removed as part of this project will be replaced on a one-for-one basis."

But the protesters are not convinced. It is a scrap that threatens the Labour party's future in the city, according to Jim Lafferty, the chair of the Sheffield Central constituency Labour party. On Friday he wrote to Julie Dore, the council leader, warning her that many local party members had quit over the tree dispute and that many council seats could be lost.

“This is not synthetic outrage by a privileged minority of politically motivated opponents of the Labour party, unaffected by the harsh realities of Tory-imposed cuts. Neither is it a desperate attempt by an environmental lobby to block the essential road improvement schemes being carried out across the city,” wrote Lafferty. “This is a rejection by the grassroots membership of the party.”

So far 4,000 trees have been felled, the campaigners claim, with a further 36,000 still standing — most of which are not under threat, the council insists.

The biggest fight so far has been over eight lime trees which have shaded the well-heeled residents of Rustlings Road opposite Endcliffe Park for more than 100 years. As referenced in Clegg’s piece in the Sheffield Star, a team from Amey turned up at 5am two weeks ago to warn car owners that they should move their vehicles if they did not want them to be crushed by breakfast.

Freda Brayshaw, a retired French teacher, was having none of it. Though warned by police not to approach the trees, she stepped over a barrier of tape and moved towards one trunk. The response was swift: for the first time in her 71 years she found herself under arrest and was put into a police car, along with her friend Jenny Hockey, a professor emeritus of sociology at Sheffield University, and a man.



Jenny Hockey, left, and Freda Brayshaw. Photograph: Danny Lawson/PA

Currently awaiting a court summons, Brayshaw insists she has no regrets, despite spending eight very cold hours in a police cell. “I am passionate about Sheffield’s trees. This is a very polluted city,” she said. “They are doing a job for free: you can work out the value of these

trees in terms of flood defences and countering air pollution. That is why we decided to take non-violent direct action to try to save them.”

Save Sheffield’s Trees claim that PFI contracts are bad for democracy because private companies are not subject to freedom of information laws, “so there’s no scrutiny and no accountability”. Many residents, including Clegg, have tried and failed to get hold of an unredacted version of Amey’s PFI contract with Sheffield city council. “We’ve tried so many times that the council has now deemed our requests to be ‘vexatious’,” claimed Crump.

At the weekend the council finally issued a statement on the Rustlings Road situation.

“We would like to offer an apology to the people of Sheffield who were affected by the way in which we took the trees down on Thursday of last week, and particularly those living on Rustlings Road, who will also receive an apology in the post. We are sorry for the disruption and distress caused by the work starting at 5am,” Bryan Lodge, cabinet member for environment at Sheffield city council, said in a statement.

“As we continue to carry out work as part of the largest investment there has ever been in the city’s street trees, and to protect the city’s 36,000 street trees for generations to come, it is important that we take necessary measures to ensure that we protect the safety of our workforce, and the public. But we know we got it wrong last week with the way the work was started. We have listened and are sorry for the mistakes that we made.”