



**SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL
LOCAL COMMITTEE IN EPSOM & EWELL
16 September 2019**

MEMBER QUESTIONS

**Question 1: Cllr Eber Kington
Re: Highway Tree Planting**

Responses from SCC to questions from residents' and Members' in regard to SCC's existing and future policy on the planting of trees in our urban streets often end with the comment "I cannot comment on what other authorities are doing by way of tree planting, other than to say that they would need to take into account the same national guidelines that form the context of our own policy".

Given SCC's current policy on street tree planting is so restrictive that virtually no new trees have been planted along the highway in Epsom and Ewell's for several years can Surrey Highways explain why, in developing their new policy:

1. they are not engaging with other local authorities to understand how they are able to plant trees in their urban streets, so as to learn from their knowledge and experience
2. they are refusing to seek input from residents and relevant voluntary groups "until the draft is signed off"

Officer Response:

The full text of the correspondence, from which the Area Highway Manager's comments have been cited in this question, is as follows:

"I am the Area Highway Manager responsible for the Epsom & Ewell Borough area, and also responsible for the countywide Highways Arboriculture service. We are very much aware that there is a desire for new and replacement street tree planting across Surrey in the context of the recently declared climate emergency, and also in response to trees needing to be removed as they come to the ends of the lives and become dangerous for road users and residents. We are currently drafting a new tree planting best practice guide, which is currently being reviewed by the Cabinet Member for Highways.

We are aware that the Highways Arboriculture Service has been criticised for turning down requests to plant new trees in locations where residents and councillors believe that trees could be planted. The main considerations when selecting sites for new tree planting are that we need to ensure there is space for a tree to grow without causing an obstruction to road users (including visibility), that the tree is clear of underground and over ground utility services (including streetlighting), and that the species is appropriate for the location. There are national guidelines that set out how wide an unobstructed pavement should be to maintain accessibility for less able members of the community. There are also national guidelines on clearances between trees and underground utility services - pipes, cables, etc. Unfortunately this means that many locations where trees were previously planted, in the

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context of previous guidelines, are not feasible for replacement tree planting. Furthermore the density of underground utility services has increased substantially since many of the larger specimen trees and mature ornamental trees (for example flowering cherries) were planted.

The other factor that has changed over the years is that residents have become much less tolerant of the inconveniences that come with living near trees; we receive far more requests for trees to be removed than we do for new trees to be planted. As a matter of policy, we would only remove a tree when it is dead, dying, diseased, or otherwise in poor condition so that it presents a significant risk of harm to road users or residents.

Up until now we have endeavoured to adhere to the relevant national guidelines, which has meant that a high proportion of sites that have been suggested to us for new tree planting have had to be turned down. We have also encouraged residents to work with Parish, Borough and District Councils for tree planting projects, rather than Surrey County Council working directly with residents.

It is expected that the new best practice guide that we are developing will make it easier to facilitate tree planting projects by enabling residents and residents' groups to approach the County Council directly to facilitate community funded tree planting projects, rather than having to go through the Borough, District, or Parish Council. It is also expected that the new guide will make it easier to identify tree planting sites by introducing some flexibility to enable carefully selected smaller trees and woody shrubs to be planted nearer to underground utility services than would be feasible for larger species.

We would still need to maintain minimum unobstructed pavement widths of 1.6m, which is already less than the 2m that national guidelines would require. Obviously we would not be able to plant new trees or shrubs directly on top of underground utility services, as this could damage the service, and the tree would need to be removed to maintain the service.

We are hoping that the new best practice guidelines will be finalised in time for the 2020-21 tree planting season. The deadline for new tree planting projects for the 2019-20 season was the end of September, which we extended to the end of October as we were aware that there were a number of community funded tree planting projects that were very nearly ready. This means that the earliest any new projects could be delivered would be the 2020-21 planting season.

Towards the end of this year we have had resource available to engage with residents and residents' groups, and to adapt the draft best practice guidelines. This year we expect to facilitate the planting of 50 to 60 new trees, but we have had to turn down another 30 to 40 requests for planting due to site constraints. We will continue to work with community groups to identify suitable planting sites as resources allow. The new best practice guidelines will be published on our website when they are finalised.

I cannot comment on what other authorities are doing by way of tree planting, other than to say that they would need to take into account the same national guidelines that form the context of our own policy."

It has been reported to us that other authorities are planting trees in Highway locations, which those making the reports believe are equivalent to sites that have been turned down in Surrey. We have discussed tree planting with land managers within Surrey but to date we have not discussed tree planting plans with organisations outside Surrey. We do engage with other authorities in relation to arboriculture across the South East. For example we are aware that the level of budget provision for tree maintenance in the Greater London Area is substantially greater than in Surrey. With sufficient funding for root containers and

appropriate aftercare tree planting and management would be feasible in more challenging locations. Outside of the Greater London area, Surrey County Council has one of the most comprehensive Highways Arboriculture Services of any that we routinely engage with in the South East. Surrey County Council's Highways Arboriculture Service is focussed on managing the risk from dead, dying and diseased trees. Over the past few years we have been working to reduce a substantial backlog of dead, dying and diseased trees – although if the level of budget provision remains the same this backlog may begin to rise as Ash Dieback takes hold. Surrey County Council's Highways Service has no regular budget for tree planting and aftercare.

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