

Letter to Cheshire East Council (CEC) Highways Department

To: Tom Moody (Director) (Thomas.Moody@cheshireeast.gov.uk)

Cc: Cllr Mark Goldsmith (Mark.Goldsmith@cheshireeast.gov.uk)

Date: 13th June 2024

In January 2024, Transition Wilmslow Tree group (TWTG) formally wrote to the CEC Highways and Transport Committee expressing their grave concerns regarding the new policy for Highways Tree Maintenance and Inspections, and the Code of Practice for Highway Tree Safety inspection (see attached). These had been unanimously approved at the Highways Committee meeting held in March 2023. The minutes of that meeting also noted the intention to develop a Highway Tree Planting Policy by September 2024.

The principal concern raised by TWTG in January 2024 was that the new interim policy, which included 13 stringent criteria for Highway tree planting, includes 2 particularly onerous requirements, namely:

- Trees must be planted within a minimum of 1.1 m verge width
- The tree must be a minimum of 3m from the edge of the carriageway.

TWTG pointed out that adoption of such a policy would effectively make 84% of existing Highway trees within Wilmslow fall outside of the policy, as assessed by an audit of over 400 trees in Wilmslow. Further audits in towns across Cheshire are being undertaken and first reports are that these figures are even worse than for Wilmslow. A reduction in highway trees has already been evident across the town in recent years. Wilmslow's trees are predominantly a heritage of the Victorian period and are reaching the end of their lives. A consequence of CEC's current policy will be that, within a generation, Wilmslow's trees will be lost en masse, resulting in a dramatic change to the character of this leafy town as set out in the Neighbourhood Plan. This is therefore a matter of major concern to residents.

Whilst TWTG's email was acknowledged by the council, our 3 requests have not been specifically addressed:

1. A discussion to be scheduled at the next Highway Committee regarding our concerns so that all members of the committee are fully aware and to give the public an opportunity to put their views across.
2. To receive confirmation from CEC Highways that our concerns regarding the current "interim" policy have been duly noted.
3. To make an immediate amendment of the interim policy allowing replacement of existing trees whether or not they meet the 13 criteria.

We support the proposal made separately by Wilmslow Town Council to CEC for an amendment whereby the stringent list of criteria does not apply to replacement of existing street trees. In the case of replacement, they requested that a new tree of suitable species be planted at the same location as the tree to be replaced, or that the Town or Parish Council be consulted on the new placement.

We need trees. Not only for the health and wellbeing of our people and environment, but more urgently to help combat the climate change emergency that our world faces. The current Highways policy with its 13 stringent criteria appears to have been created and approved in a silo by CEC's Highways team, without referral to policies or expertise on trees from other parts of CEC, such as on Environment and Net Zero. We also refer you to the Statutory Instrument 'The England Trees Action Plan 2021-24' which makes clear that the UK government intends streets to be tree-lined. With climate change expected to make occurrences of excessive heat and flooding far more frequent, street trees can help soak up 43% of rainfall and reduce surrounding air temperature by 3°C. Furthermore, they sequester 5.5Kgs of carbon per tree per year as well as removing around 0.2Kg of Nitrogen Dioxide and 0.1 Kg of particulate matter (*Reference: Greater Manchester Combined Authority's Ignition Project*).

As you'll be aware, the desire to plant more trees by the public, for all the reasons given above, is growing. The Cheshire Tree Alliance (CTA) represents tree and wildlife groups across the County. The CTA wishes to be named as a Stakeholder in any consultations held on tree policy by CEC. A selection of the CTA's organisations are listed as co-signatories at the end of this note. Other members across the County are taking this issue to their local Town and Parish Councils with a view to gaining their endorsement and involvement with this issue.

Please let us know how the Highway committee intends to respond. If cost associated with managing trees and insuring liability is the real and underlying issue, we ask you to declare this openly and not hide behind criteria designed to prevent tree planting. Salford City council has adopted a Tree Replacement Policy allowing planting up to 45cm from the carriageway. CEC Highways' policy of 3m distance is therefore demonstrably excessive and lacking any evidence base.

We ask again for CEC Highways Committee to work with us to create policies that are progressive and to address the points made above.

Signatories:

Cheshire Tree Alliance

Alsager Urban Wildlife Initiative

Crewe Town Council

Goostrees (Goostrey)

High Legh Climate and Environment Working Group

Knutsford Town amongst Trees

Macclesfield Wild Network Trust

Nantwich in Bloom

Sustainable Nantwich

Transition Wilmslow Tree Group