



Dear Local Residents,

Re: Complaints Re Trees in St. John's C.E. Primary School

Many thanks for the emails and feedback we have received regarding the potential work to the Poplar Trees on the site of St John's C.E. Primary School. We felt it would be beneficial to ensure that those with an interest in the developments on the school site have a full understanding of the situation.

As you may well be aware, the school was rebuilt, funded and designed by central Government and was completed in January 2020.

The rebuild was a tricky project due to the complexities of the sub layers of ground (previously being landfill) and the challenges of access with it being situated at the end of four cul-de-sacs. As part of the planning stage of the project, the impact of the trees on the design and school site was discussed but the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA – Government department responsible for the design, build and funding) were clear that this would need addressing after the project was completed by the Local Authority, who have since made it clear it is the school's responsibility to deal with the associated issues.

As part of the long-drawn-out planning process, 3 tree surveys were commissioned in 2013, 2016 and 2019. The findings of these suggested the unsuitability of Poplar Trees on a school site due to their liability to shed branches, being susceptible to decay and that the school should plan for their removal and to be replaced with something more suitable.

The school has the following concerns in relation to the Poplar Trees:

1. Our most major concern is for the safety of the children, parents and staff. Regularly we have to clear branches which have fallen from the Poplars, some of these branches can be as long as 7 foot and have a tendency to stick into the ground. We worry that one day, a branch will strike a child or member of staff. This is increasingly worrying now that the proximity of the playground and school are closer to the trees due to the design process being led by which areas of the school site were suitable to be built on.
2. Previous tree reports have stated that due to the age of the trees, they are coming towards the end of their life span and that potential problems over the coming years will only be exacerbated.
3. The bank outside of the school grounds towards the cricket pitch, seems to be becoming increasingly eroded due to wildlife activity, with large areas of earth being moved. In some places the land has collapsed exposing not only the foundations of our perimeter fence but also potentially undermining the root structure of some of the trees and therefore their stability.
4. The proximity of the trees to the building also causes us some concern. Whilst we are fully aware the trees were in place before the positioning of the new school, we have been left with the situation where a falling branch or in the worst-case scenario a tree could significantly damage the building or facilities. As some of you will be aware a tree did previously come down on the old school building several years ago, fortunately at a weekend.

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5. There is also the issue that newly laid paths around the new school are developing cracks in them due to the root systems and potential movement at the base of the trees, damaged paths again will lead to further health and safety concerns for the school.
6. Due to the volume of leaves generated by the trees, the new school has already experienced several failures of the roof due to the drainage gully on the roof becoming blocked by leaves. These failures have resulted in a major ingress of water on a number of occasions causing ceiling tiles to collapse into occupied classrooms and in the staffroom during the school day. We acknowledge this is a design issue with the school, but this is the design we have been left with and a solution must be found to reduce the impact leaves on the roof can have.
7. The school acknowledges the risk of the trees could be reduced, although not eliminated, with regular maintenance. This work would involve annual tree inspections, removing dead wood, ground surveys and the removal of leaves from the roof. Given that our school budget has never been tighter, the school can afford to fund all the associated costs including regular cherry picker hire, repairs to paths, tree surveys and removal of dead wood on an annual basis as these works would approach the £10,000 mark. We attempted to seek financial support from the Local Authority, but we have been unable to access any further funds.

We completely understand the strength of feeling to protecting wild life, the importance of trees to the environment, ensuring that green spaces are protected and that our children grow up understanding the importance of appreciating their surrounding environment. Many of these issues have been reiterated in the correspondence school has received in the last couple of weeks.

As a school, we would agree with all those comments raised and would hope that our commitment to working to develop and support the environment has not been overlooked.

- Over the period of the school being rebuilt we have secured a grant to provide the children with a poly tunnel and eco garden to allow the children the chance to learn about and experience the joy of growing their own produce and looking after plants,
- We have developed outdoor classroom spaces to allow the children to be able to work surrounded by greenery and connect with their surrounding environment,
- We have developed a large Forest School area, turning an area of field into a young woodland. This has comprised planting over 700 saplings supplied by the Woodland Trust as well as some more mature trees funded by our Parent Teacher Association.
- The children have been integral in planting and developing the forest school area and are involved in its maintenance and are aware of how we use this space sustainably such as coppicing the hazel trees on a rotation and the fact that many of the dens etc. they have built have been from reused materials from the rebuild.
- Also, although some trees were lost as part of the rebuild process, approximately 25 mature trees were planted around the school site to provide screening and help soften the landscape. The contractors actually removed less trees than planned as they (and us) had a desire to preserve as many trees as possible.



St. John's C.E. Primary School

'High standards – through a caring community'

- The school has also engaged with several community projects to support the children's appreciation of the environment such as planting crocus bulbs in the grass verges on Didsbury Road, helping with gardening at a block of flats and planting a fruit tree as part of a project to get every school in Stockport to plant fruit trees.
- Our curriculum and other wider opportunities, such as our School Council, Eco Club and forest school activities, provide children with learning and experiences based around growing and caring for plants, animals and the environment, both locally and nationally, including writing to the Prime Minister and Government to highlight children's concerns regarding climate change.

We would hope that the school's commitment to developing the children's understanding of environmental issues is apparent and that it can be seen we are keen to play our part in developing the area of Heaton Mersey for the benefit of all children, our families and the wider community.

Some comments questioned the school's willingness to work and communicate with the local community. As many of you will be aware the school agreed to meet with several local residents to discuss the issues. It was at this meeting that the school agreed to half fund a fourth tree survey. This report focuses on simply the condition of the trees, which is why we felt it beneficial to provide further background information on all the associated considerations with the Poplars on site. We have also met with 2 of our local councillors to ensure they are fully informed regarding the situation and safeguarding concerns the school has.

We hope in providing the above information you have a clearer understanding of the school's position, attitude towards the environment and how we aim to develop our children's appreciation of the environment and encourage them to be respectful towards it.

Whilst we would not want to lose trees unnecessarily our primary priority must be the safeguarding of our children, families and staff.

Mr P Rayner

Headteacher

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