

Item 11 - Sheffield City Council's Corporate Complaints Performance Report & Annual Ombudsman Report 2024- 2025 and Update on apologies following publication of the Sheffield Street Trees Inquiry Report

Appendix 5 - Update on apologies following publication of the Sheffield Street Trees Inquiry Report

Background

As noted in Sir Mark Lowcock's Inquiry Report, the Sheffield Street Trees Dispute was a dark period for the city of Sheffield and for Sheffield City Council in particular. As we develop and move forward as an organisation and begin to achieve the ambitions set out in the Council Plan, it is important that we ensure that we are doing all that we said that we would to learn from and avoid any repeat of the dispute. As Sir Mark said in his report: 'identifying a lesson is not the same as learning it'. By agreeing actions, the Strategy and Resources Policy Committee at its meeting on the 19 June 2023 sought to ensure that we truly learned the lessons of that period.

Updates on progress against the agreed actions from the 19 June 2023 report were taken to Strategy and Resources Policy Committee on 21 December 2023 and 29 August 2024. They also recognised that whilst good progress has been made, the most critical lessons of the street tree dispute are the importance of listening to the people and communities of Sheffield, to hearing different points of view, to reflecting on mistakes and to being open to feedback at all times, and committed to an ongoing dialogue with the people of Sheffield.

Those reports provide the background and detail on progress against the totality of the recommendations agreed by the Committee, this report updates specifically on progress regarding the outstanding apologies to those identified in that report as suffering harm from the Council's actions. It does not provide an update on the installation of a plaque, the progress for which will be separately reported.

As paragraph 3.2 of the 29 August 2024 report sets out, at that time, with the exception of those who were subject to legal action during the dispute, all apologies from members of the public that were requested through the process agreed by the Committee had been made and provided by the Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive or the then Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement.

VWV Investigation

The apologies that were outstanding were some of those who the Council has issued or threatened court proceedings. In the process of issuing those apologies in 2023, it became apparent that notwithstanding the finding of the Inquiry, those apologies could not be effectively given unless a small number of complaints received before the Inquiry were resolved. Those were complaints under the Council's corporate Complaint process. The Council agreed to progress those outstanding complaints and appointed VWV, a firm of solicitors, as an independent investigator to report back on those complaints. That investigation has been received, and its recommendations were accepted. An action plan to implement those recommendations was considered and approved by Finance and Performance Policy Committee on 21 July 2025, and that committee will monitor progress against those recommendations.

Progress on Complaint's Apologies following the VWV Report

There were four complaints owed apologies (one of the original complaints did not wish to proceed) following the compliant findings. They were issued with draft apologies that reflected the findings, and the process started to ensure the final wording reflected their own personal experiences.

The wording of the apologies has been agreed with two of the complaints and they have now been issued.

The Council remains in dialogue with another two complainants around the apology wording and that is being actively progressed.

Other apologies following the report

Whilst there were four complaints it was recognised that the complaint and findings would be applicable to others still awaiting apologies (in some cases revised). Following the meeting of the Finance and Performance Committee, at the end of July revised draft apologies were issued to nine further individuals. A similar process was invited to ensure that the final wording reflected the personal circumstances of each person. To date one person has responded with comments and a revised draft will be issued to them.

The Council also issued a revised draft to an individual who has been engaging with the Council since the apology process was started. Discussions with that person remain ongoing.

It is right that we give people time to reflect on the investigation report findings and consider the terms of any apology they would wish to receive from the Council.

Concluding the Process

The Council remains committed to ensuring those identified in the Street Tree Inquiry report as suffering harm receive the appropriate apologies. This is a process that has taken longer than expected but is hoped can now proceed to a conclusion. We will continue to actively work with those who have had draft apologies with the intention that apologies can be issued that reflect the harms identified in Sir Mark Lowcock's report and the findings of the VWV investigation, but that also properly reflect those in a personal way for each apology recipient.