

Llanfihangel Rhydithon Community Council

Serving the community of Dolau, Radnorshire

www.llanrhydithon.wordpress.com

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Dear Minister,

Resilience Tree Felling by Western Power

At the May meeting of Llanfihangel Rhydithon Community Council a group of local residents expressed grave concern at the felling of a number of mature trees in the village by Western Power subcontractors. Details of the concerns raised by the group is attached in Appendix A.

The Council Members expressed sympathy with the concerns raised and thought there might be breaches environmental legislation by Western Power subcontractors. It was resolved that I should write to you with a copy of the concerns raised by the local group in the hope that this matter can be examined to ensure Western Power can be held accountable if they are in breach of environmental protection legislation.

Yours faithfully,

Dan Price

Clerk, Llanfihangel Rhydithon Community Council

Resilience Tree Felling Western Power

Points of Concern

The Issue

Western Power seem to have changed their policy from one of prune and pollard every few years, which has minimal environmental impact and is a continuation of an ongoing maintenance programme to one of clear felling any tree/bush near the line. A contractor spoke of being able to clear trees 'up to a mature tree's length, or 100 foot either side of the lines.'

Whilst none of us are against reasonable maintenance to keep the lines clear, this leaves a trail of devastation behind, changing the face of the countryside forever, and having a massive impact on wildlife.

This policy is also being carried out at this moment, at peak bird nesting time, without the necessary environmental surveys and mitigation being carried out. Western Power provided the residents of this community, Dolau in Powys, with a copy of their 'survey' which was done from a desk and addresses none of their environmental responsibilities in law, identifies no at risk species despite bat colonies locally, and evidence of otter along the brook. Felling was only stopped when it was pointed out tree felling where there were nesting birds was unlawful. The felling stopped in this community, but just moved on elsewhere from what we understand.

On speaking to an ecologist – Dr Stephanie Harper of Ecology Associates – she expressed concern at the policy and was good enough to pay a fleeting visit to this community to see what was happening.

She very quickly identified potential bat roosts in many trees near to where the felling had already taken place (those already felled it was, of course, impossible to inspect), and in others to be targeted, and failed to understand why such a wide swathe was needed, as well as why the brook bank had been totally cleared of all its undergrowth, shrubby vegetation etc, which posed no threat to overhead lines, and cleared all wildlife habitat.

She also expressed concern that if this level of felling was to continue across the countryside it would lead to tree-felling across the countryside on a scale greater than that caused by HS2 – and all with no oversight or impact assessments.

She felt that if this scale of work was being rolled out across all of Western Power's region, which is huge, then a National Environmental Impact Assessment was the least that should have been done due to the scale of works. This work is being pushed through as maintenance, but in her opinion it goes far beyond this and is tantamount to redoing the construction phase of the lines and verges on illegal clearance if they have not done the necessary surveys and impact assessments.

This work has already been completed in South Wales and, according to a local resident who has seen it, has devastated the countryside there.

We estimate that for Western Power alone (and there are other power distribution companies who may or may not be doing the same) this policy covers a 55,300 square mile area across England and Wales and a conservative, back of the envelope sum, given the number of trees felled, or to be felled, in this area alone, will see the clearance of over 300,000 trees in Western Powers area alone, many of them mature trees, many decades if not over a hundred years old.

Clear felling of this sort across the country should have been assessed as a whole, not just at individual landowner or community level.

Western Power (WP) are taking the tack that it is between them and the individual landowners to settle what is done. Several landowners have been told they will be liable for costs should they stop WP taking down the trees they wish, and a power interruption occur in the future. This is enough of a threat to make most landowners acquiesce without asking further questions.

One or two locally have said a clear 'No' to Western Power though, despite this, and being offered considerable sums of money. One has asked for and says he has been promised a written note that he that he is not liable for power interruption should a mature tree he does not wish felled some way from the line come down. This would seem to imply that the threat being used against landowners is untrue.

Western Power have been asked about this. Their reply is awaited.

There is also the issue that although trees may reside on individual landowners land they also have amenity value for the whole community and can be seen as a community resource at various levels, their visual impact and enhancement of the local landscape being only part of this. There is often windbreak value to properties, and privacy value and of course there is both their part being played in helping to clean air of local pollution and produce oxygen, as well as carbon capture – a big issue given current climate instability.

Legally there seem to be various issues

1. Felling during nesting season without any of the necessary surveys being done of with attendance by and Ecological Clerk of Works who can identify nests and habitat and direct away accordingly.
2. A change to national policy (from pruning to clear felling) which has wide impact ecologically and to communities without any National Environmental Impact Assessment or consultation.
3. None of the necessary wildlife surveys for bats, otter holts and couches, dormice etc being carried out on the ground, by independent ecologists. Horseshoe bats have been seen locally as well as many other bat species, and signs of otter along the brook bank on occasion. Near to where the trees were felled Red Kites have nested in the last few years.
4. Visual impact assessments have not been carried out.
5. Western Power have a statutory duty to maintain and enhance biodiversity and ecosystem resilience under s6 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. No mitigation measures or sign of this duty being carried out are to be seen, nor have landowners been informed of any.

We also, of course, have the issue of Climate Change and the governments stated aim of planting 143 million trees by 2035 in a bid to mitigate carbon emissions. The loss of over 300,000 mature trees within Western Power's area alone seems to fly in the face of this and be in direct contravention of Government Environmental Policy.