



KYLEA TINK MP

Independent Federal Member for North Sydney



The Hon Mr Ron Hoenig MP
Minister for Local Government
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

7 December 2023

Dear Mr Hoenig

Urgent need to help Councils prevent environmental vandalism

I am writing to you in relation to a matter of significant concern in the federal electorate of North Sydney: the illegal clearing of hundreds of mature trees, and the lack of any effective way to prevent it and preserve our vital tree canopy.

Around the world cities are working to protect, maintain and restore precious urban ecosystems which are critical for mental health, biodiversity and sustainable development. Yet here, in North Sydney, we have lost many hundreds of mature trees as they have been pushed aside to make way for large infrastructure projects with opaque to nonexistent, disconnected business cases.

On top of this profound loss, in recent months we have had two devastating instances of illegal tree decimation. Two hundred and sixty-five trees with poison, drills, and chainsaws in Castlecrag, and approximately two hundred and eighty-five with handsaws in Longueville. According to ecosystem and forest science expert, Greg Moore, the size of the massacres in recent months are "almost unheard of" and Lane Cove Council has described it as the worst act of environmental vandalism in Lane Cove's history.

This is not a new problem. But it is now critical. More than half of Sydney's councils have lost urban forest cover since 2013, leading experts to warn that suburbs lacking sufficient trees may become unlivable as the effects of the climate crisis bite.

Despite years of lobbying by local councils, we have not seen any appropriate, effective response where it is most needed: the State government level. University of Melbourne ecologist Dr Moore has described tree protection laws in Australia as "completely inadequate". Last September, Ku-ring-gai mayor Jeff Pettett wrote to then Planning Minister Anthony Roberts lobbying for an increase in penalties for the illegal removal of trees. As of 23 February 2023, no response was forthcoming.

By way of contrast, in recognition of the crucial importance of trees in the urban environment, the ACT government has recently undertaken significant legislative reform to provide greater protection for Canberra's trees, repealing and replacing the *Tree Protection Act 2005* with the *Urban Forest Act 2023*. Similarly, in South Australia, 16 local councils in Adelaide have recently collaborated with the state government to undertake a regional tree canopy assessment of Metropolitan Adelaide providing state and local government representatives with a robust benchmark dataset that can assist in the management of Adelaide's urban forests for years to come.

Arguably, in view of the greater urban density of many of cities in New South Wales, our need for urgent legislative reform is even greater. The NSW Local Government Association undertook a study in 2018 indicating widespread interest among local governments to integrate natural asset vegetation assessments. I call on you, as the current Minister for Local Government, to act now to protect our precious urban tree canopy.

Specifically, I call on the NSW State Government to:

(A) investigate specifying 'natural capital' or 'natural assets' under the IR&R Guidelines under Section 2 of the *Local Government Act 1993* along the following lines:

406 Integrated planning and reporting guidelines

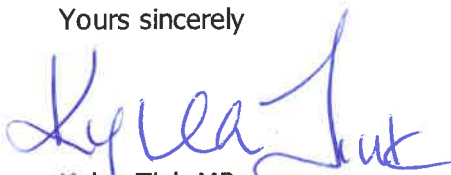
(1) The regulations may make provision for or with respect to integrated planning and reporting guidelines (referred to in this Chapter as the guidelines) to be complied with by councils.

*(2) Without limiting subsection (1), the regulations may impose requirements in connection with the preparation, development, consultation on and review of, and the contents of, the community strategic plan, resourcing strategy, delivery program, operational plan, community engagement strategy, annual report and environment [**and natural capital**] reporting of a council.*

(B) develop and encourage uptake of standardised natural asset data capture and management standards, as part of Office of Local Government guidance to Local Governments on IR&R implementation and integrated asset management; and

(C) Allocate a modest budget for a collaboration of councils to undertake pilot projects to integrate natural capital / asset reporting in Council balance sheets, including specifically relating to tree cover, similar to the project in Adelaide.

Yours sincerely



Kylea Tink MP
Independent Member for North Sydney