



England's community forests

Urban Forest Vision Workshop

The annual conference of England's Community Forests saw the launch by Forestry Commission's Urban Forest and Woodland Advisory Committee of "A Vision for a Resilient Urban Forest"

<http://www.merseyforest.org.uk/news/new-vision-launched-at-largest-ever-englands-community-forestry-conference/>

The document is available on line: [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/urban-forest-final-v4.pdf/\\$FILE/urban-forest-final-v4.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/urban-forest-final-v4.pdf/$FILE/urban-forest-final-v4.pdf)

The launch presentation by UFWAC Chair, Jane Carlsen, is available here – http://communityforest.org.uk/resources/ECF_Conference_2016a.pdf

Our workshop looked at three specific questions raised in the Vision;

- 1 Do you know the scale and value of your urban forest? Are you harnessing the power of new tools, big data and volunteer commitment to measure the true value of your trees?
- 2 How well do you support the care of our existing urban forest? Are you engaging with the enthusiasm of local communities and businesses for the protection, improvement and expansion of their urban forest?
- 3 Do you have a target to increase tree and canopy cover in your town or city? Will you be planting more trees?

But as workshops sometimes do, we got a lot more than simple answers to these three questions!

We have tried to distil the workshop discussion into some recurring ideas and also some challenging issues that we face if we are ready to take this Vision forward.





1 Do you know the scale and value of your urban forest? Are you harnessing the power of new tools, big data and volunteer commitment to measure the true value of your trees?

Discussion on this issue varied widely across the groups, from the current work that FC Research are undertaking on identifying the value of the urban forest, to tools that may help to attribute value such as GI-Val, CAVAT and Itree, through to the more fundamental questions of ‘what is value’? And ‘who decides what is valuable’?

Big data is not yet fully embraced by the sector; it is difficult to see how smaller organisations can access this data and at present there is large gap between research and practitioners.

So tackling the first big question from the Vision is being left mainly to large organisations such as Woodland Trust, some of the Community Forests as project funding allows, academia, and to Forest Research. The challenge is how to communicate the information gained by the use of big data to practitioners more quickly and more widely, particularly from academia.

Citizen Science was seen as a positive development; engaging people in the assessment of the urban tree population. The increasing sophistication of apps provides an excellent opportunity to extend this work further - if resources are available. Whilst citizen science provides a cohort of field workers, there is a need for volunteer training and for data verification if we are to get good data and achieve sound science to support wider investment in Urban Forests.

2 How well do you support the care of our existing urban forest? Are you engaging with the enthusiasm of local communities and businesses for the protection, improvement, and expansion of their urban forest?

Funding for urban forestry has declined over the past 15 years and has seen a rapid decline in the last five years. There was concern that the skills to manage our urban forest, as well as the resources, were in decline and that the call for increased professionalization of the sector, as called for at the Conference by the ICF, was welcomed. Making it happen however will be a major challenge.

It was felt that there was a need for ‘Trees in Town III’; that the excellent work of the last document had not been put into practice and the targets set out were all likely to have been missed. The recent publications by TDAG provide a sound basis for future delivery of the urban forest.

Recognising that the sector also had to make changes to its practice there were several examples of new ways of working, increased use of volunteers to assist in creating and managing the urban forest, new structures such as Community Interest Companies and Community Interest Organisations that could hold assets for long-term community benefit, engaging volunteers and accessing funding that may not be available to the wider public sector.





It was also highlighted that 70% of the urban tree population was in private ownership (data sources?). Engaging tree owners, encouraging good management informing them of the benefits provided by their trees were all seen as important.

3 Do you have a target to increase tree and canopy cover in your town or city? Will you be planting more trees?

Most organisations and all of the Community Forests have targets to increase woodland and tree cover in and around our cities. We will be planting more trees!

The problem is that trees are also being lost and in places the losses are not being made up for by the new planting. It is likely that England is deforesting at present and that the rate of deforestation is greatest in our towns and cities.

Good policy that enables urban tree planting is also being lost (e.g. Sefton S106 policy) as local authorities look widely at how they can find resources to support services that might normally have come from central funds.

Communications

The need for better, coordinated communications on the value of our Urban Forest was highlighted by many. Engaging more people in our communities, particularly younger people was seen as be critical for the successful delivery of a resilient urban forest. Use of social media was highlighted as an opportunity.

The aspiration to bring strategy and grassroots activists together – somehow – could help to raise the profile of the Urban Forest

Conclusion

The Vision was warmly welcomed at the conference. The workshops highlighted the challenges that practitioners face in helping to deliver the Vision.

Community Forests have planted more than 20m new trees in and around our towns and cities, across England and have a role to play in both supporting the Vision and helping to find ways to overcome the challenges. As has always been the case the best opportunity comes from collaborative working and mutual support.

The gaps between research and practice, strategy and policy and between aspiration and actual delivery all fall into the category of needing a collaborative approach to bridge these gaps.

They also all need some leadership, and perhaps that is the next task for the UFWAC!

