

TREES AND PEOPLE KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Discussion notes

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Sheffield General Cemetery



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The Knowledge Exchange event is part of the work of the Urban Tree Observatory; an interdisciplinary centre investigating the interaction between urban trees, humans and the environment. The aim of the day was to bring urban forest stakeholders together to explore and discuss three topics so that insight could be gained on current issues affecting the care and management of urban trees and woodland and the people that live with them

Topics:

- Topic 1: Better understood, better protected. How do we increase knowledge in arboriculture and urban forestry in the public sphere
- Topic 2: Bright ideas: what techniques can we use to inspire all members of society to engage with urban forestry
- Topic 3: Conflicts Around the Felling of Trees – How Do We Depolarise Discussion?

Each topic began with speakers with experience of the topic, and then a round table discussion took place with questions based around the topic. Discussion points were recorded and have been included as part of this report.

A cross sector of delegates attended, including delegates from University of Sheffield School of Biosciences and School of Architecture and Landscape, local authority and private sector arboriculturists, activism and campaigning representatives from national charities and campaign groups, and community groups.

Visual Minute Takers – More than Minutes were commissioned to draw a live picture of the discussion as it took place.

Topic 1: Better understood, better protected. How do we increase knowledge in arboriculture and urban forestry in the public sphere

Discussion

At the round table discussion, delegates explored various strategies to increase public understanding of trees, focusing on

- **Educational Tools:** What types of education have proven most effective in increasing public understanding?
- **Storytelling & Outreach:** How can we tell compelling stories about trees that resonate with different communities?
- **Citizen Science & Engagement:** Could community involvement in tree monitoring or planting programmes be a way to foster a deeper understanding and connection with urban forests?

Speaker – Ian McDermott Birmingham TreePeople

Ian (or Mac as most people refer to him) talked about Birmingham Tree People: how it began, some of the activities it delivers and how training makes up a part of that.

Key points:

- Close Partnership with Birmingham City Council and other groups from the green and open spaces forum was invaluable for their success
- Training up volunteers was one of their key roles
- They are budget holders: They were commissioned to produce the Birmingham Urban Forest Masterplan and Birmingham City Council iTree project amongst other projects
- They now have two paid members of staff
- The future may hold Level 4 training and more conferences such as Tree Cities of the World

Educational Tools

Delegates agreed that targeted educational efforts are essential for fostering a deeper connection between people and trees.

Who should we be educating?

The conversation highlighted the need to target children, young people, and local communities. However, questions were raised about whether the education of community members at present overlaps with the volunteers already engaged in urban forestry, and if efforts need to be broadened to reach new audiences.

What are we educating about?

The focus should extend beyond natural woodlands to include urban forests, street trees, and trees in parks and gardens, which are often under-utilised in educational resources. While there are existing resources, they are not always tailored to urban settings, particularly for street trees, which play a vital role in everyday urban environments. Delegates emphasised the importance of defining a theory of change that clearly connects educational efforts to practical outcomes, ensuring that public understanding translates into action and protection.

Storytelling & Outreach

Delegates explored the potential of storytelling as a powerful tool for engaging diverse audiences and promoting a greater appreciation for trees. The discussion centred on whose stories are told, how they are told, and what kinds of stories resonate most with different communities. Gathering stories from the community was seen as key to making tree outreach more personal and engaging.

Delegates suggested fostering a sense of personal connection with nearby trees—whether through stories of conflict, friendship, or even imagining "grumpy trees" as a playful way to engage younger audiences. Several delegates proposed the use of digital tools such as Tree ID apps and QR codes to provide real-time information about tree species and their ecological benefits.

Storytelling can take various forms, from local folk tales and fables to more modern approaches like YouTube videos, rap, and music. The goal is to connect with communities through culturally relevant stories that reflect the diversity of urban populations. For example, telling the story of the Sycamore Gap tree could spark interest; while exploring cultural heritage through trees like mulberries or the Tree of Heaven could link communities to their histories.

Delegates also discussed tree twinning, where individuals could nominate a tree from their country of origin, connecting local urban forests with global heritage. Another suggestion was involving



Tasks such as tree planting (or in this case making mud bricks for a furnace) can be a conduit to hearing people's stories

children in the storytelling process by letting them plant trees and create their own signs or writing letters to trees, personalising the relationship with nature.

Citizen Science & Engagement

The discussion on citizen science revealed a strong interest in involving local communities in the monitoring and care of urban trees. Engaging citizens in tree monitoring, planting programmes, or simply taking photos to track tree health could create a deeper sense of ownership and understanding.



Friends of the Botanic Garden Sheffield lead a tree walk as part of National Tree Week

One of the key benefits of citizen science is that it fosters visual literacy—the ability to identify and appreciate trees. This can start with schools and gradually expand to include teenagers and adults, encouraging a lifelong connection with urban forests. Successful examples of citizen science projects, such as the Ash Dieback monitoring (Tree Alert?) programme and the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory, were highlighted as models to replicate.

However, several challenges were identified. One key issue is ensuring that these citizen science efforts are supported by the right tools and technology. Delegates stressed the need for smartphone apps that link to GPS and provide easy-to-use platforms for the public to contribute to tree monitoring efforts. Platforms like iTree Canopy and Treezilla were discussed as potential

models, but there was concern that technology could become a barrier to entry for some people, especially older generations or those unfamiliar with the tech.

Tree maintenance after planting also emerged as a significant challenge. While citizens may be eager to plant trees, ensuring their survival and growth requires ongoing community involvement. Delegates suggested working with local leaders, such as faith leaders, to engage underrepresented groups and identify the community hubs that could support long-term tree care.

Challenges and Opportunities

Throughout the discussion, delegates recognised several challenges to implementing these educational and engagement strategies. One barrier is accessibility—both in terms of geography (how to reach remote or under-served communities) and in ensuring that activities are inclusive of

all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. Forest schools and a variety of tree focused community events were suggested as ways to make learning about trees more interactive and accessible to a wider audience. Delegates also highlighted the importance of funding networks to support these efforts. Programmes like the GreenTree Schools Award or the Sheffield based Kids Plant Trees initiative (which includes school assemblies, outdoor sessions, and creative projects) could be scaled up with the right investment. However, securing funding and ensuring the long-term sustainability of these programmes remain significant hurdles.



Commercially funded Kids Plant Trees work in Northumbria

Another opportunity lies in combining tree education with other activities, such as exercise trails, bug hunts, or art and craft activities. These could attract a broader audience by making tree-related events part of a wider, engaging experience. Interactive signage, like QR-coded signs offering information on tree growth, water use, or biodiversity, was suggested as a way to maintain interest and provide ongoing learning opportunities.

Conclusion

The delegates' discussions highlighted that public understanding of trees can be improved through a mix of educational tools, creative storytelling, and citizen science. Targeted education, especially in schools, combined with engaging stories that resonate with diverse communities, can foster stronger personal connections with urban trees. Meanwhile, involving citizens in tree monitoring and care through science-based initiatives provides an opportunity for greater community involvement and protection of urban forests.

However, challenges such as funding, technology accessibility, and reaching under-represented groups need to be addressed to ensure the success of these efforts. By leveraging the right mix of educational resources, community engagement, and digital tools, urban forestry programmes can help ensure that trees that are better understood are indeed better protected

Topic 2

Bright ideas: what techniques can we use to inspire all members of society to engage with urban forestry

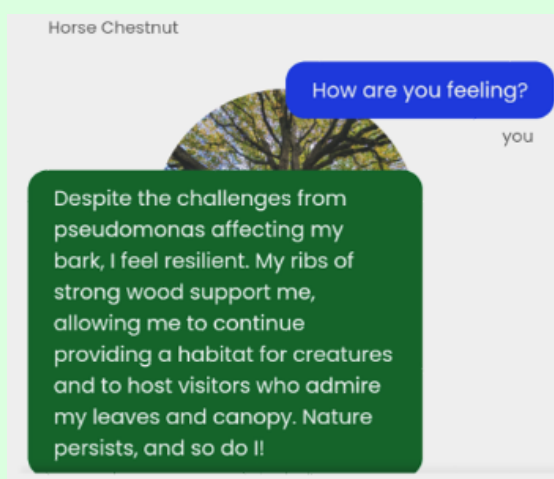
Workshop - Dr Toby Pillatt University of York - UK Treescapes Branching Out Project

Toby introduced the Branching Out project and how they are using multiple methods to address the problem of how we understand the social and cultural values we associate with urban trees, which by their nature are hard to quantify and account for in existing methods of assessing tree value.

ChatGPTree:

One particular method was Chat GPTree. ChatGPTree is an experiment in “talking” to trees. It’s a mobile website that uses ChatGPT together with data from the Branching Out project and information about specific trees in a given location.

QR codes were attached to two trees in Sheffield General Cemetery – a beautiful oriental plane and a veteran horse chestnut. The delegates were invited to scan the QR code and load the website on their own mobile device. The delegates could have a conversation with the tree, where they could ask it questions, and the trees would ask questions in return. Each tree had its own character and responded in that style.



Chat GPTree: a horse chestnut at the cemetery exhibits stoicism despite adversity

The delegates enjoyed talking to the trees and were surprised by the amount of insight could be gained by asking many different sorts of questions. However, some raised the point that the application caused the user to focus on the phone rather than the tree.

Discussion

The delegates then returned inside around the tables to discuss innovations in Urban Forestry: this focused on

- **Emerging Technologies:** What are the most promising technological tools (drones, satellite monitoring, big data analysis) and how can they be integrated into urban forestry programmes?
- **Sustainability and Equity:** How can we use innovation to ensure urban forestry efforts are sustainable and benefit all urban residents, especially those in under-served areas?
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** How can urban forestry benefit from collaboration with other sectors (urban planning, health, tech)?
- **Challenges of Adoption:** What are the biggest barriers to implementing innovative solutions, and how can they be overcome?

Emerging Technologies

Delegates identified several promising technological tools that could transform urban forestry practices. Drones, satellite monitoring, and big data analysis were highlighted as tools that can provide detailed insights into urban tree health, coverage, and species diversity. These technologies offer cost-effective ways to monitor vast urban areas, enabling more efficient management of tree populations. For example, drones can provide high-resolution imagery for tree health assessments, while satellite monitoring allows for real-time tracking of urban forests on a larger scale.

However, integrating these tools into urban forestry programmes requires careful consideration. One key question raised was: Which emerging technology should be adopted, and at what risk? Delegates discussed reputational, financial, and practical risks associated with adopting new technologies. Although AI and apps offer new ways to support urban forestry communication and decision-making, these tools often come with costs and complexities. While most people are familiar with the basics of smartphone apps, the challenge lies in ensuring that

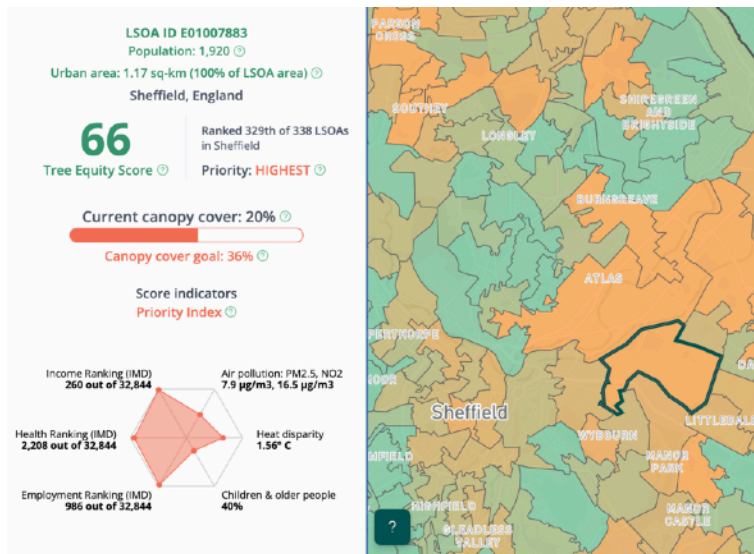


BlueSky National Tree Map Copyright
BlueSkyLtd, Esri

these technologies are accessible to all users and that they don't become barriers to direct engagement with nature.

There was also a consensus that despite the usefulness of technological tools, they should not replace the hands-on experience of nature. Delegates stressed that technology should complement, not overshadow, real-world interactions with urban forests.

Sustainability and Equity



Mapped - Woodland Trust Tree Equity Score

The discussion on sustainability and equity focused on how innovative approaches in urban forestry can ensure long-term ecological health while benefiting all urban residents, especially those in under-served communities. One key innovation suggested was the use of tree typology mapping, which can help ensure that trees are planted in areas where they are most needed for environmental and social equity. This includes a focus on temporal analysis, considering the long-term effects of climate change on tree species and planting strategies.

Delegates highlighted the importance of addressing the needs of non-residential urban users (e.g., commuters, tourists) who may benefit from urban greenery but are often overlooked in urban planning models. Moving away from rigid targets and giving urban forestry professionals the freedom to innovate was another suggestion. This could allow for more site-specific tree planting, where the right species are planted not only for the local climate but also for the community's needs. Community input, for example through crowdsourcing, was recommended as a way to ensure that the public has a voice in decision-making and that urban forests reflect local priorities.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Delegates recognised that urban forestry does not operate in isolation; rather, it intersects with multiple sectors, including transport, healthcare, and planning. Collaboration across sectors was seen as crucial to enhancing urban forestry's influence and securing diversified funding streams. Urban foresters must understand how other sectors view trees—whether they see them as competitors for space and resources or potential collaborators in creating healthier, more sustainable cities.

For example, the health sector increasingly views trees as part of green social prescribing, where nature is recommended for mental and physical well-being. Collaboration with healthcare providers, such as through initiatives like the NHS Forest, offers a way to integrate urban forestry with public health initiatives. On the planning side, interdepartmental collaboration is essential to ensure trees are factored into urban development projects and that all departments share responsibility for maintaining green spaces.

The private sector also plays a role in urban forestry, particularly in the management of trees in private gardens. Delegates discussed how homeowners and garden designers can contribute to urban forestry through better education and access to information about tree species selection and long-term care.

Challenges of Adoption



Having the right expertise is vital

Despite the potential for innovation, delegates identified several barriers to adopting new solutions in urban forestry. Policy and regulatory limitations often restrict the ability to experiment with new approaches. For example, health and safety regulations, risk assessments, and the need for council buy-in can delay or block innovative urban forestry projects.

Another challenge is the lack of skills and training in the workforce. Delegates noted that many local authorities are facing shortages in tree teams, meaning there aren't enough professionals with the expertise to implement advanced technologies or manage complex urban forest systems. Cost and investment were also identified as barriers, particularly for smaller organisations or local authorities that may not have the budget to invest in new technology or the time to train staff in its use.

There were also concerns about end-user accessibility—both for the public and for practitioners. How do we ensure that new tools are user-friendly, and how do we get buy-in from the community? Moreover, while open-source technologies offer one solution to reducing costs, there are often proprietary concerns that need to be navigated when using certain technologies.

Lastly, the complexity of urban forests themselves poses challenges for validating and implementing innovative approaches. There is a need for robust ground truthing to ensure that the data provided by emerging technologies is accurate and reliable. Establishing accreditation

systems for different approaches could help ensure credibility and trust in the innovations being adopted.

Conclusion

Delegates at the knowledge exchange day provided valuable insights into the future of urban forestry innovation. While emerging technologies like drones, AI, and big data offer exciting possibilities, they must be carefully integrated into urban forestry programmes to ensure they complement, rather than replace, hands-on interaction with trees. Ensuring sustainability and equity in urban greening efforts will require innovative approaches that benefit all urban users, not just residents, while cross-sector collaboration presents an opportunity to broaden the influence of urban forestry across public and private sectors.

However, there remain significant challenges to adoption, including policy limitations, skills shortages, and financial barriers. Overcoming these obstacles will require not only technological solutions but also investment in training, policy change, and public engagement. By addressing these challenges, urban foresters can use innovation to create healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable urban forests for all.

Topic 3

Conflicts Around the Felling of Trees – How Do We Depolarise Discussion?

Speakers



Sheffield Street Tree Campaign reached around the world. Photo: Christopher Thomond/Guardian

Christine King and video from members of Canopy

Canopy is a national coalition of grassroots tree campaigners and campaign groups that have joined together so they can have a louder voice in the fight to save trees and green spaces. They talked about how urban trees suffer from systemic neglect, and that by raising the profile of the issue can cause conflict. However, trees evoke strong emotions and canopy aims to provide resources to all people and groups fighting to save trees in their areas and to influence future decision making for the improved protection of trees in the UK

Luke Fay – Arboricultural Consultant and Director of Treework Environmental Practice

Arb consultants work to balance the needs of clients and the treescape, particularly in developments near trees. While careful planning should address these needs, mistakes can happen, leading to breakdowns in communication and polarised disputes. Arbs may face misplaced blame, and tree-related conflicts can become political tools. Working towards avoiding these disputes is important, as they can cause more harm to the urban forest than the original mistake.



Do some tree campaigns lose sight of the wellbeing of the wider treescape?



A living legend: Skipinnish Oak - Woodland Trust Tree of the Year 2024.
Photo: Woodland Trust

Adele Benson – Campaign Manager Woodland Trust

Living Legends campaign from the Woodland Trust to give ancient and veteran trees legal heritage status above that than what is offered from Tree Preservation Orders. They have gathered a petition of 100,000 signatures to lobby the government for better protection of ancient and veteran trees.

Discussion

At the round table discussion, delegates explored various strategies to increase public understanding of trees, focusing on

- **Understanding the Root Causes:** What are the most common reasons for conflicts over tree felling, and how do they vary across different communities?
- **Tools for Depolarisation:** Are there mediation tools, communication platforms, or facilitation techniques that could help depolarise these discussions?

The round table discussion on tree felling conflicts brought to light the complex dynamics at play and explored practical strategies for creating more balanced and open dialogues. Delegates addressed the root causes of these conflicts, focusing on why tensions arise between different groups, and identified tools and approaches that could help depolarise these discussions.

Understanding the Root Causes

Conflicts around tree felling often arise from a combination of breakdowns in communication, mistrust, and differing priorities. Delegates pointed out that in many cases, these disputes occur between local governments (often seen as a monolithic entity like “the council”) and residents or community groups. One of the central issues is the lack of transparency in decision-making processes. When decisions about tree felling are made behind closed doors or without adequate public consultation, communities feel excluded and suspicious of the motives behind the actions.

This distrust is compounded by the perception of an imbalance of power. Government bodies or private contractors making decisions (such as those operating under PFI structures) may be seen as indifferent to the concerns of residents. There is often a feeling that short-term thinking, driven by immediate pressures like budget cuts, safety concerns, or infrastructure projects, overrides the longer-term benefits of preserving trees.

Another key issue raised was the difference in values, aspirations, and knowledge between stakeholders. Some residents may view trees as an essential part of their local heritage or environmental well-being, while authorities may focus on issues such as safety risks or responding to a reduction in budgets and also responding to a high level of nuisance complaints about trees from other residents. The framing of tree felling decisions as purely a matter of “health and safety” can feel like an excuse, further fuelling discontent. Additionally, the lack of public understanding about the reasons behind tree felling exacerbates these conflicts. Without accessible, clear information, communities may struggle to grasp the broader context, leading to heightened opposition.

Tools for Depolarisation

To address and prevent these conflicts, delegates emphasised the need for more transparent and early communication, allowing different opinions to be heard before tensions escalate. Clear and

honest dialogue, using language that is understandable and inclusive for all stakeholders, was repeatedly highlighted as essential. This involves explaining why certain trees are being removed, what the risks or issues are, and what the longer-term vision for urban forestry entails.

One approach suggested was to establish community forums or discussion platforms where all stakeholders—residents, environmental groups, local authorities, developers—can come together to weigh the pros and cons of tree felling decisions. These forums would allow for ongoing dialogue and help build trust by involving the public early in the decision-making process. The forums could also be used to connect with a wider network of experts, planners, and community members, fostering a collective learning environment where concerns and solutions are openly shared.



The importance of good, 2-way communication can't be overstated

Delegates also proposed the idea of creating mediation mechanisms to help resolve disputes once they arise. By employing professional mediators or facilitators, conflicting parties can be guided through a structured process where both sides feel heard and respected. This can prevent conflicts from becoming entrenched and polarised, offering a pathway toward mutual understanding.

A more innovative suggestion was the creation of “Nature Assemblies”, modelled after climate assemblies. These would gather diverse voices from the community, including local planners and environmental advocates, to deliberate on tree felling issues with a focus on finding collaborative solutions. This assembly model encourages participants to view the issue from multiple perspectives and could lead to new, creative approaches for resolving conflicts. For example, instead of treating leaf litter as a nuisance, it could be viewed as a valuable resource for composting, with practical solutions like leaf litter nets or incentives such as vouchers for car washes to offset perceived inconveniences.

The delegates also stressed the importance of early intervention. Once a dispute over tree felling has escalated, it becomes much harder to resolve. By initiating communication as soon as the possibility of tree removal is considered, local governments can ensure that concerns are addressed before they turn into full-scale conflicts. The goal is to listen to people’s concerns without dismissing them, and to provide enough information for the decision to make sense in a broader context.

Finally, the group advocated for creating spaces where blue-sky thinking and innovative solutions can be explored. Think tanks or “sandpits” could bring together stakeholders from different sectors

to brainstorm creative solutions to urban forestry challenges. This collaborative approach would help transform conflicts into opportunities for innovation, aligning the needs of local communities with environmental and developmental goals.

Conclusion

The discussion on tree felling conflicts underscored the complexity of these issues but also provided a clear path forward. The key takeaway was that early, transparent communication, paired with inclusive forums and mediation mechanisms, can prevent polarisation and foster more constructive dialogue. Delegates highlighted that by bringing together diverse opinions and recognising the emotional, practical, and environmental dimensions of tree felling, it is possible to build trust and find shared solutions.

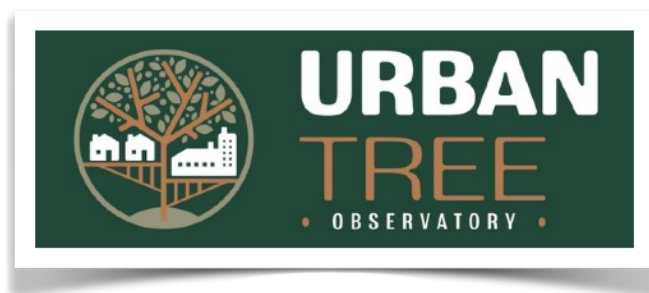
Moving forward, participants emphasised the importance of implementing these strategies in their own work. From improving communication with residents to establishing community forums or piloting mediation initiatives, there is a strong opportunity to depolarise discussions around tree felling and build more resilient, engaged urban communities.



Knowledge Exchange Delegates



Drawn by Chris and Siân from WWW.MORETHANMINUTES.CO.UK



About the Urban Tree Observatory

This Knowledge Exchange Day was part of the work of the Urban Tree Observatory; an interdisciplinary centre investigating the interaction between urban trees, humans and the environment. The UTO focusses on developing stakeholder led research. This research aims to deliver impact on the challenges and opportunities to maintain or enhance a sustainable Urban Forest for current and future urban communities. It also aims to provide an evidence base to support decision making in sustainable urban forest management

The workshop reported here was the third of four focussed on generating stakeholder led understanding of key challenges to sustainable urban forestry management. The four key themes are detailed below.

Themes

Theme 1: Species specific resilience to climate change and pests and diseases (2022)

Theme 2: Biodiversity (2023)

Theme 3: People and Trees (2024)

Theme 4: Tree Equity - KE: May 7th 2025

Acknowledgements

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Photos: Catherine Nuttgens unless otherwise stated