GETTING IT RIGHT FOR TREES – PART 1

Chair: **Marybeth Harasz**, Green Infrastructure Manager, Urban&Civic plc

Why do you want to plant the tree?
Catherine Nuttgens, Founder, Nuttgens Urban Forestry, Senior Associate, Treeconomics Strategy Lead for the Sheffield Street Tree Partnership and the Project Manager for Trees Together

The vital role of procurement - getting it right for your project
Michael Ripley, Assistant Arboricultural Officer, Hampshire County Council Highways

A Standard for planting trees in living landscapes
Lee Heykoop, Technical Manager – Sustainability, Homes England

Planting in Hard Landscapes – experimental evidence
Mark Syrett, Place Directorate Surrey County Council

The right budget for planting and establishment aftercare
Paul Nolan, Director, The Mersey Forest

Knowledge partners: Arboricultural Association, Fund4Trees, Institute of Chartered Foresters, Institute of Highway Engineers, Landscape Institute, Urban Design Group

SUMMARY

It is interesting to note that, despite all the embodied knowledge, the rate of failure and the reasons for failure where they occur, persist and in greater numbers than is reasonable wasting time and investment in planting in the first place as well as failing to deliver the many tree benefits that our urban areas need. But, congratulations to all who are achieving good levels of success!

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS AND SPECIFIC REFERENCES

Catherine outlined the many benefits of trees and the many reasons for planting them...and why you should be clear about the outcomes sought!

Risk
We want children to engage with trees, woodlands and nature but have people got too risk averse and can be reluctant to let their children roam and play in woods and on trees?

- From Catherine: Yes, I do. There is a fear of letting children play in woodland, and access to free play has diminished over the years. The forest school initiative has been a double-edged sword as it has highlighted the benefits of woodland play, but monetised it, and given the impression that woodland play needs to be supervised. I believe that

helping children access woodland safely would help tackle some of the mental health crisis in young people.

- Speaking of children, the Guardian had this interesting report on children's benefits from trees and other urban nature: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/29/soil-sandpit-children-dirty-biodiversity-finnish-nurseries-research-microbes-bacteria-aoe?utm_campaign=feed&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio

The most recent excuse I've had for not planting trees in a certain location is Vision Zero - in case a car crashes in to a tree :/ The Irony.

- That is interesting because the early Vision Zero work and meetings was willing to include trees…is anyone on the call involved with Vision Zero

Highway trees – Mike outlined the extensive highway tree planting by Hants CC.

Tree failures
A Birch grove planted above a backfilled subway - water seemed to be passing through the tree soil into the subgrade which was too porous caused drought conditions.

Ours mostly no watering. Some may be poor handling during planting.

More detailed specification of tree orders to the nursery, seeking confirmation of management history of the tree in the nursey e.g. how many times re-potted (container grown), or times transplanted (rootballed) etc., can help to ensure quality of stock purchased. Reference to relevant sections of BS8545 should also be part of any order to the nursery.

- Key is to pin down the specification at RM stage and inspect/enforce planting

Reasons for failure: Landscape contractor frequently sub-contracted to earthworks contractor and often pressurized to accept poor ground conditions or planting out of season because of commercial pressures. Clients frequently don't employ a landscape clerk-of-works to check on the quality of works.

Barriers to tree planting
You won't get trees into the ground in an urban context within the public realm without political buy-in and without appropriate policy/strategy documents to support that.
In a Planning context, here at Wakefield we are taking our Design Code to committee for approval later this month. If adopted (no reason why it shouldn't be), then it will become an SPD and a material consideration in development applications, which will help achieve a minimum 18% canopy cover on each development application that's approved.

Talking to one Local Authority Tree officer, they said that Highway Departments were more willing to adopt streets in new developments with street trees if the local authority tree team had actually planted them…a way to solve the refusal to adopt?

- We prefer to have the LA plant them because some developers plant trees that they don't water so we end up with having to replace dead sticks…

We seem to get blocked by Highways at every turn when we're trying to plant new trees and retain existing trees in Plymouth.

Mike - do you consider the possibility of the trees you plant causing subsidence in the future?

This is a really refreshing approach Mike - in Devon the Highway Authority is very reluctant to plant street trees, and focuses on trees causing obstructions/safety issues. How have you promoted street tree planting to colleagues/councillors - and importantly secured the budget to plant and manage these?

- Our local authority Trees for Streets scheme can help to unlock funding from local residents towards tree planting and also help to support with aftercare https://www.treesforcities.org/our-work/trees-for-streets

Mike - when you replace a tree, do you try to match the species taken out?

Mike, how do you choose target areas? Do you use tools like tree equity maps?

How do you deal with plant biosecurity?

Aftercare
And how do you undertake any aftercare - in house or contractors?

Do you have to bring in seasonal contractors for the planting season, or are they all part of a permanent team that do different tree tasks through the year?

Does your contractor have a specialist planting and aftercare division? Would you see a benefit in separating the Arb maintenance contract from the planting/aftercare element?

Good shout. I think this is a gap which needs addressing myself. It's all very well planting the numbers but to establish good, healthy trees with a structure and form that minimises future maintenance costs and conflicts has got to be best practice.

Support for trees
Anyone getting adequate support/collaboration from public health officials? Their sector benefits hugely from your work. Are they here today?

Lee outlined the key issues that the developing tree standard for trees in living landscapes would cover (she also made the point that this Standard does not include street trees which is being covered by another document by the Forestry Commission with Civic Engineers and others to support the update of Manual for Streets etc.)
The driver for the Standard was the extent of tree failure on housing development sites.

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- I have had a large-scale developer tell me they are quite happy to keep on replacing trees rather than do the job properly in the first place. Site manager does not value or understand landscaping establishment.

- Sadly, I think that view is common. They undertake a cost analysis and decide that it's cheaper to replace than maintain (especially when it relates to watering). I have been asked to visit sites where the developer has no idea whether the planting that they have paid for has been installed because they have relied on the contractor to self-assess.

Also, due to LPAs not making a detailed landscape/tree planting scheme a condition of Planning Consent and the condition is that the full scheme is approved in writing BEFORE any work can start.

Do the contractors undertaking the planting hold the NPTC Tree Planting competency? Was A01 but that's probably changed now

- From Lee: Thank you - I am including this for a requirement for our Compliance Inspectors. The Tree Standard itself basically talks about who needs to know what and their responsibilities and accountabilities.

Lee, what would you say would be an acceptable rate of tree deaths in a project?

Many local residents, particularly re. new developments, want to help with reporting tree stress/help trees thrive - there seems no mechanism for this.

- If they're community trees via Trees for Streets there's a 'Tree Watering Champions' app where people can sign up for a particular tree.
- If you have good tree surveys it would be possible to create something for all trees on your network.
- Great point. With so many citizen science platforms popping up there should be an easy way of supporting residents' contributions.
- 8,000 trees on a new development - no developer contact though they say they've spent >£1m on landscaping defects

It's not really about tree numbers; it should be about canopy cover. The principles of 'Right Tree-Right Location-Right Reason' should come into play.

- True, but if you're planting for canopy that might be the more rural, well-off areas, whereas if you're planting for equity that might be more cramped and difficult spaces. There's often a tension between these two aims, I think.
- Agree with this tension. We're looking into creating a 'tree equity' pot to help local authorities address this tension.

Lee - there is a relationship between trees in terms of mycorrhizae and if we are planting species together, we should consider the sharing of mycorrhiza species as a selection criterion

Limitations of JCLI contract?
The JCLI has a lot going for it in terms of length of defects period and onus on replacement in the next planting season, not at the end (5-years)

Mark reviewed the test case planting beds for trees in hard landscapes in Brighton four years after planting

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And, do structural soils get gaps filled?

A few concerns. Structural soil should not be underneath the tree. Structural soils, be they Amsterdam, CUSoil or Stockholm, were designed to be used underneath hardscape.
Another issue with Amsterdam and Stockholm is the lack of hydrogel which is essential to keep the soil inside the stone matrix.
In addition, fines are not acceptable as the take space that should be occupied by the soil.
In terms of the soil, the soil; recipe for the structural soil should match what you are planting into so there is no interface issue.
The very best structural soil is definitely CUSoil.

Costs: The last ones I installed with GBU cell system 25m3 were around £12- £14k per tree pit plus maintenance . Structural soil pits would bring that down.

Paul tackled the critical issue of costs – the budget for both planting and aftercare explaining that the most affordable level of expenditure is about £750 per tree and, for urban trees this tends to focus on areas with verges.

If the 'affordable trees' are in verges, does this limit what you can offer in more hard-landscaped inner-city areas which may need trees in terms of equity?

Terminology – should we refer to trees as 'critical infrastructure'?
But if you use that term to define trees, engineers and architects are encouraged to think of them is inanimate as opposed to living organisms that have needs. They are the living part of the urban forest and that is how they should be framed

- Trees as infrastructure is not to align trees with street furniture but rather to say that trees need to be given as much importance as any other element of infrastructure - i.e. electricity, drainage i.e. critical infrastructure

Reference
https://linktr.ee/ExmouthTreeProject