From Managing Trees to Leading an Urban Forest

The evolution of Cambridge's Urban Forest Strategy. From 1996 to 2026

Matthew Magrath, Urban Forest Manager

TDAG Webinar October 2026

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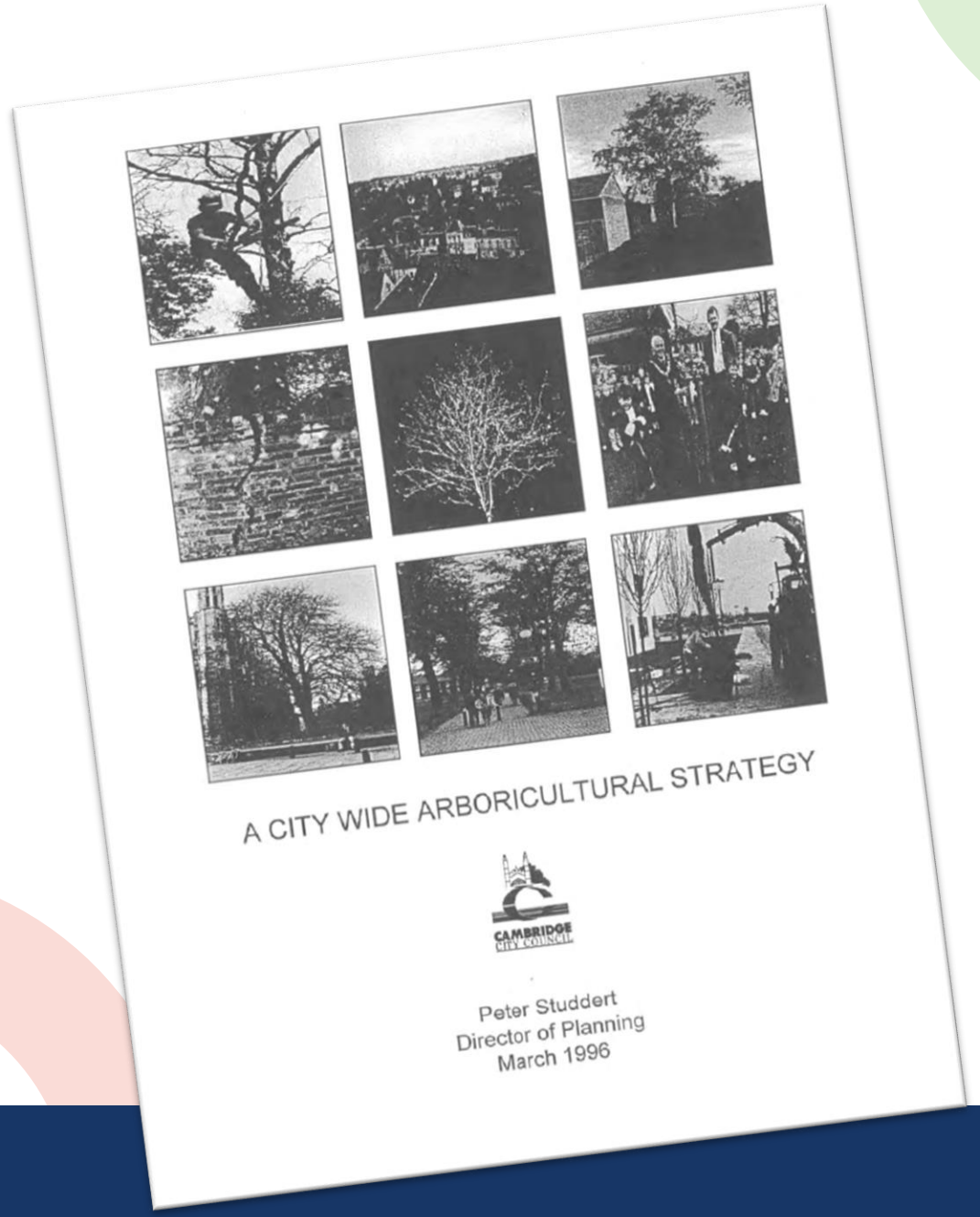

1996: Managing Trees

"Good management of a safe and sustainable public tree asset remains the foundation on which everything else has been built."

1996 - **2001** - 2013 - 2016 - 2020 - 2025 - 2026

The Idea Came Before the Evidence

2001 *"All the trees and woodlands in a town or city"*

Paper records – in house system - Ezytreev

ezytreev

Tree, TPO and Asset management system

"…an operational requirement created a data resource that later became strategically valuable."

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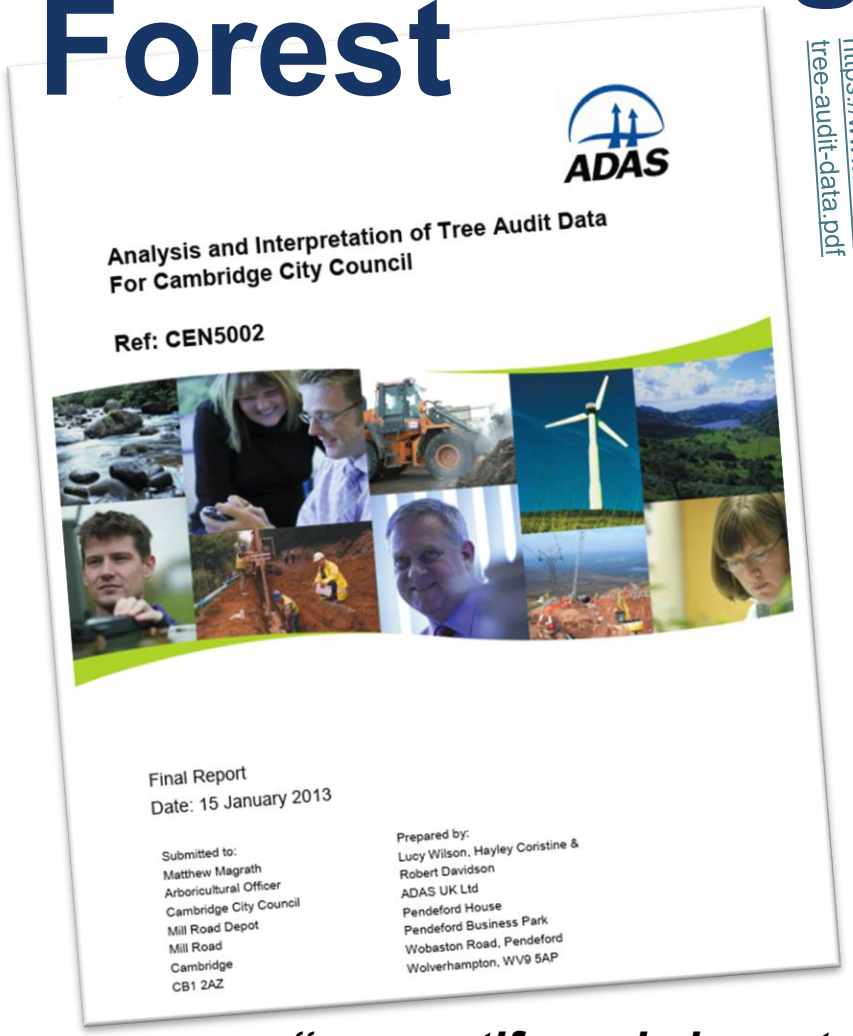
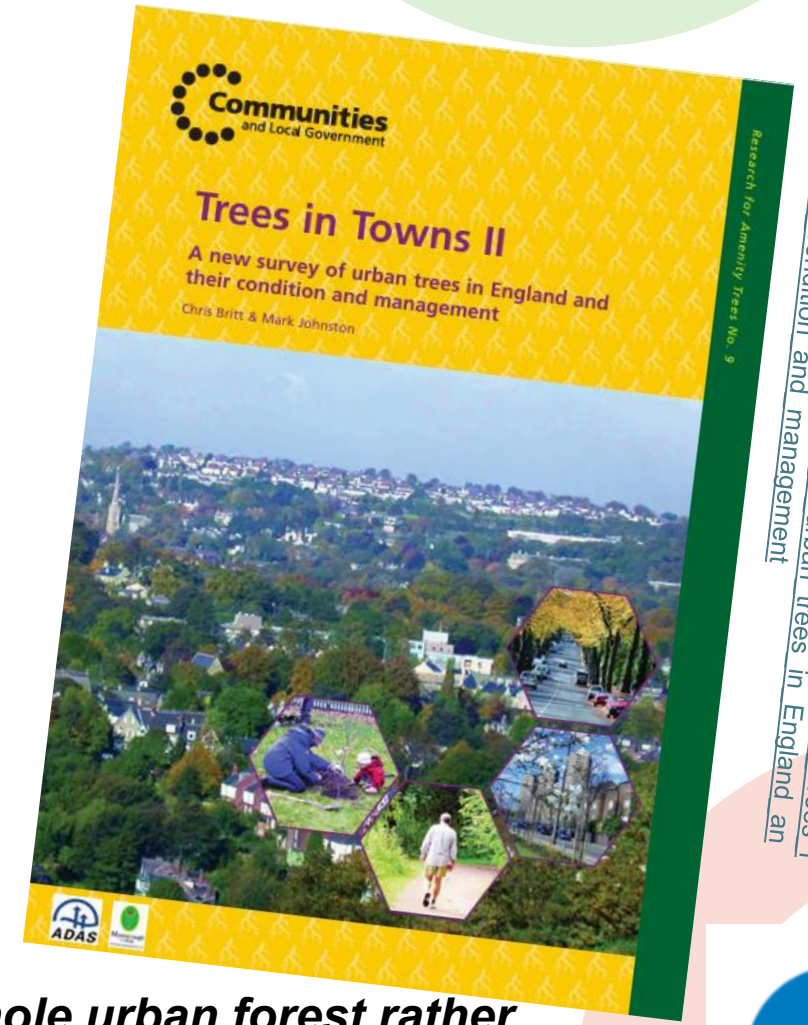
2013: Seeing the Whole Urban Forest



https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/3257/analysis-and-interpretation-of-tree-audit-data.pdf



https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262857090_Trees_in_Towns_II_A_new_survey_of_urban_trees_in_England_and_their_condition_and_management

"…quantify and characterise the whole urban forest rather than simply our own asset."

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bluesky A WOOLPERT COMPANY

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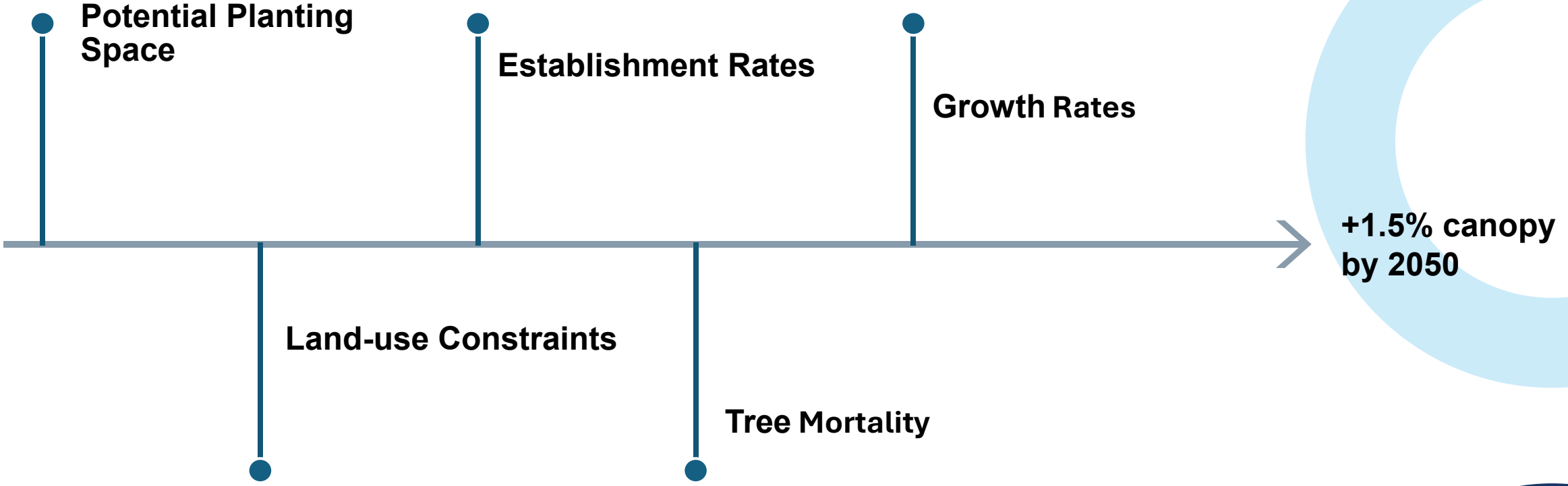
Evidence Challenged Our Assumptions



"Evidence isn't there to justify the target you wanted to set. Sometimes it tells you that your realistic target should be lower."

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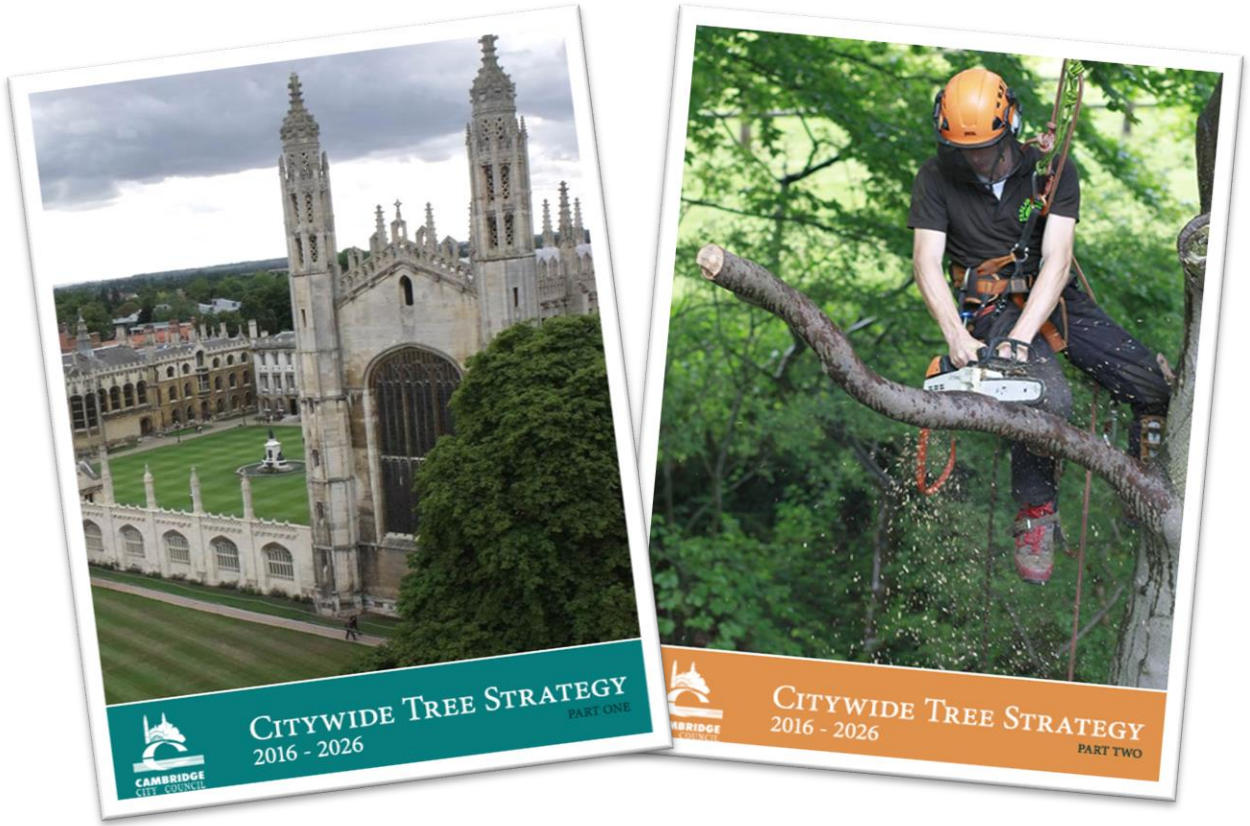
2016: From Evidence to Strategy

1996 Strategy - 2007 gap - 2013 evidence - 2016 Strategy



https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/tree-strategy

Tree management focuses on trees we own. Urban forestry focuses on the entire resource regardless of ownership.

"…think more about the urban forest as a whole"

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1996 - 2001 - 2013 - 2016 - **2019** - 2025 - 2026

Strategy Made Us Ready

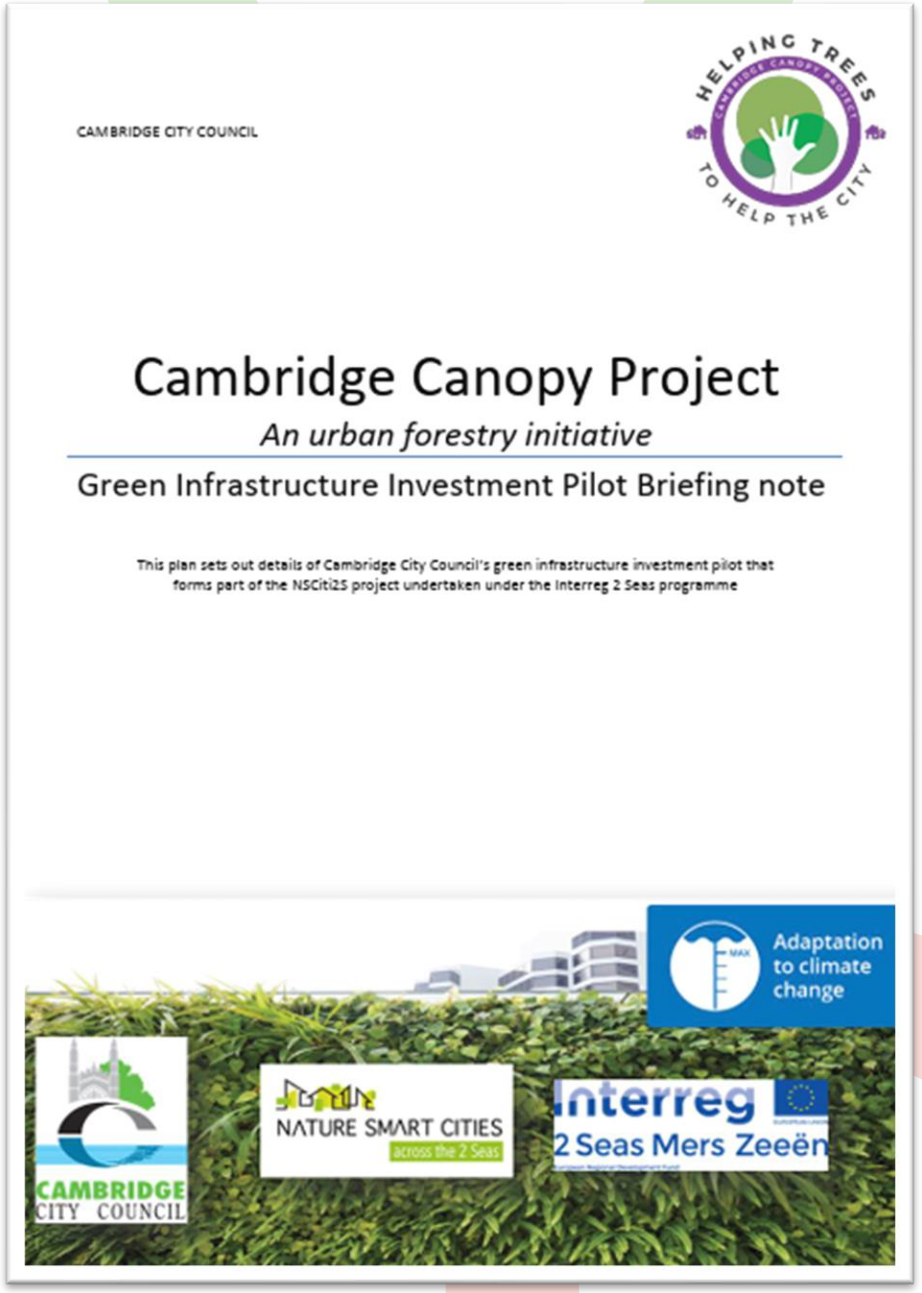
Strategy + evidence + opportunity

Cambridge Canopy Project 2019-2023

Manage More | Protect More | Plant More | Engage More

https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/nature-smart-cities-across-the-2-seas-programme

"Don't wait for a funding opportunity before deciding what you want to achieve"



https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/klepwttu/cambridge-canopy-project-briefing-note.pdf

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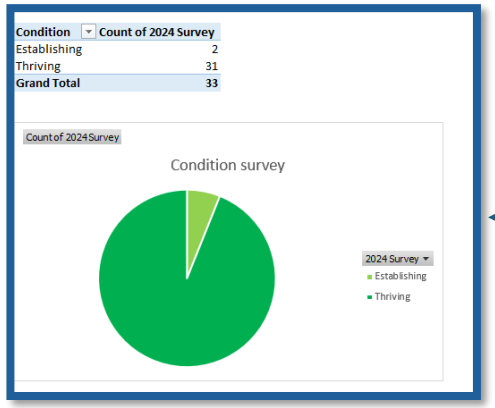
Learning by Doing

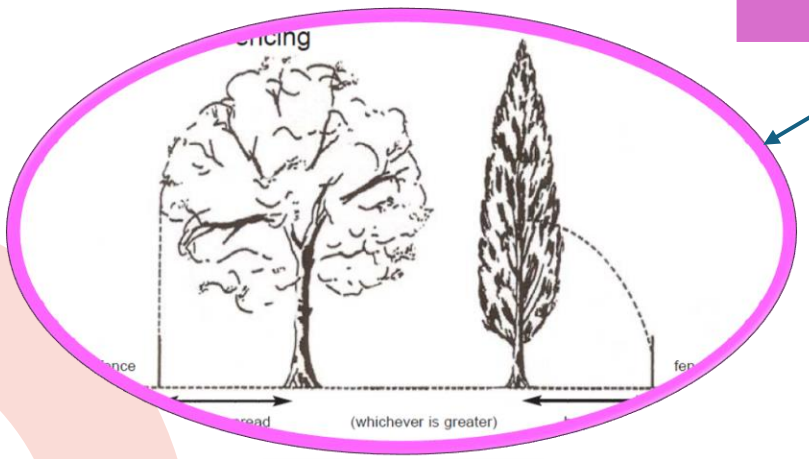


Manage more

Plant more

Protect more

Engage more



"...practical experience taught us what worked, what was difficult, and generated new opportunities."

Canopy Is Dynamic

17.1% → 17.6%

- Where?
- What size?
- What land use?
- Who owns it?

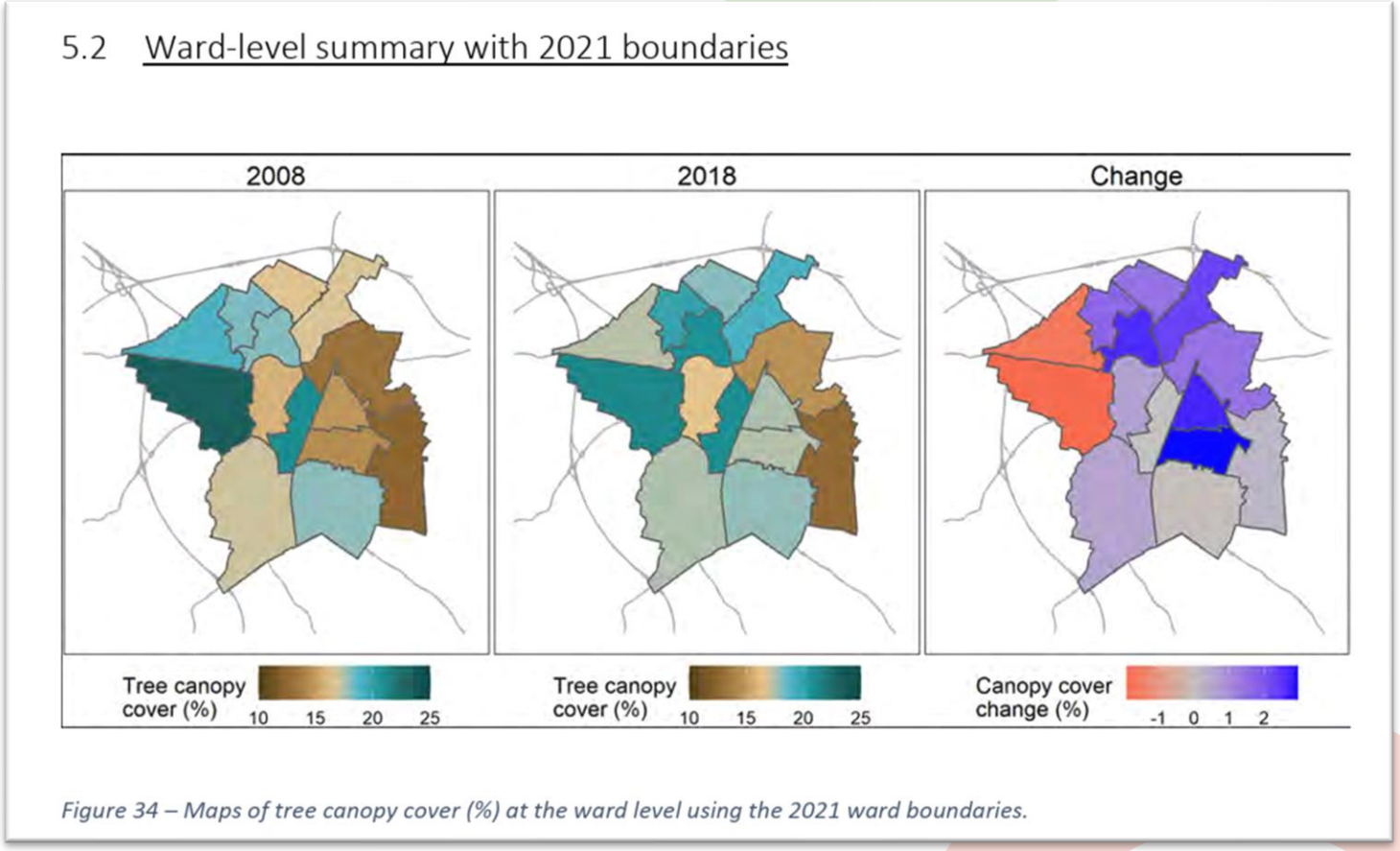


Figure 34 – Maps of tree canopy cover (%) at the ward level using the 2021 ward boundaries.

https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/4uvksm30/tree-canopy-cover-in-cambridge-between-2008-and-2018.pdf

"What has changed, where has it changed, and what is actually driving that change?"

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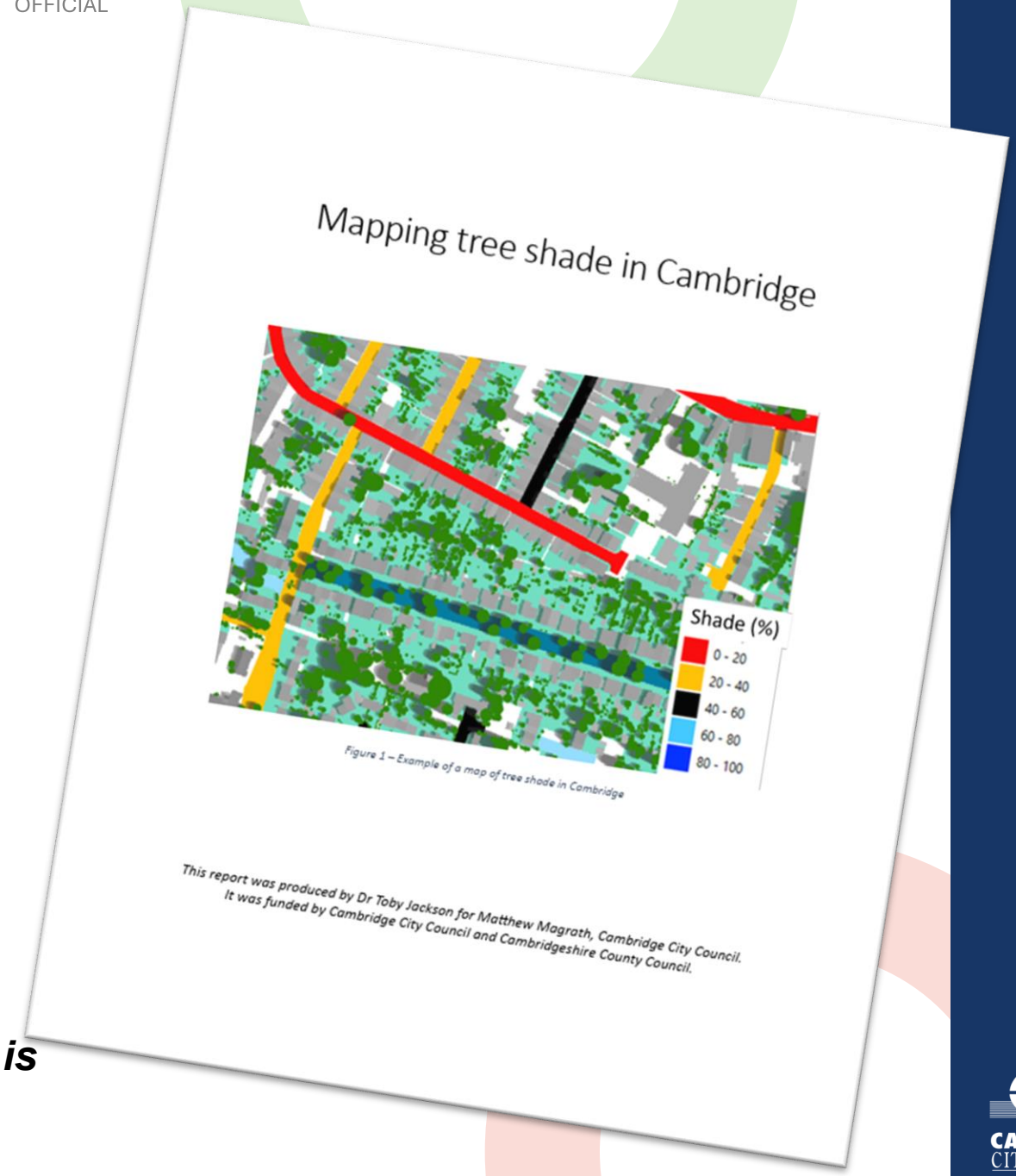
From Canopy to Need

IMD - Neighbourhood Canopy Campaign - Canopy evidence - Shadeways

https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/neighbourhood-canopy-campaign

https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/h54nmxh0/mapping-tree-shade-in-cambridge.pdf



"Where is the need greatest, and what intervention is most appropriate and achievable?"

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1996 - 2001 - 2013 - 2016 - 2019 - **2025 - 2026**

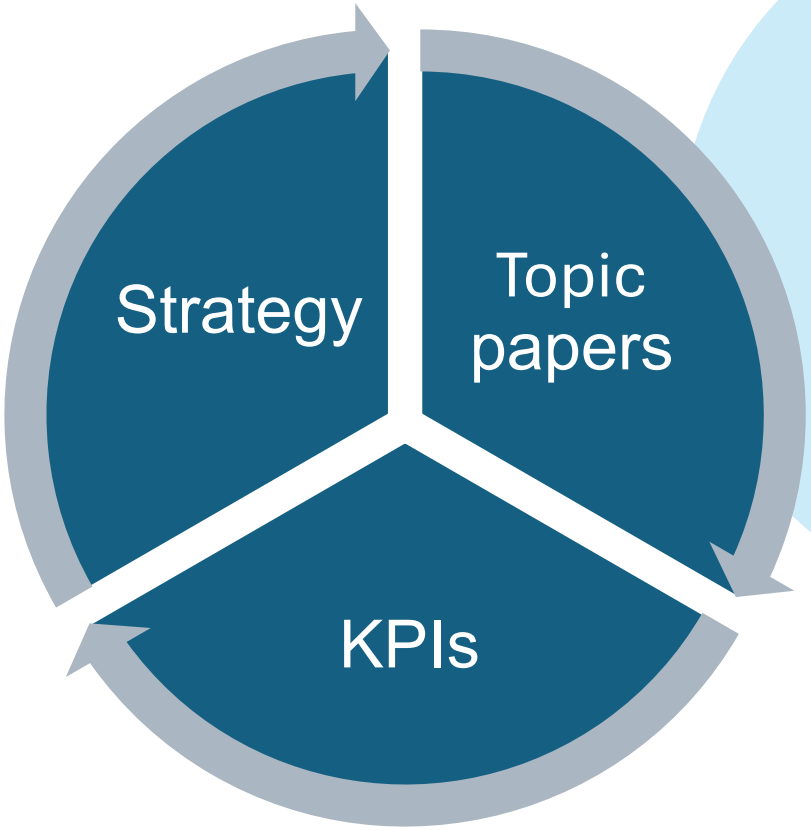
An Urban Forest Strategy 2026-2036

2025 - Urban Forest Manager

2026 - Urban Forest Strategy

The Urban Forest Consultancy

https://www.ufctrees.co.uk/



https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/urban-forest-strategy

"Monitoring should help us explain results rather than simply defend them"

Principles for the Unexpected

1. Awareness & Action
2. Climate Resilience
3. Intergenerational Equity
4. Public Engagement
5. Environmental Justice

"Policies help us deal with circumstances we can anticipate; principles help us make decisions about those we can't."

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One Urban Forest, Many Stewards

MANAGE WELL

our asset

USE OUR POWERS WELL

our statutory responsibilities

HELP OTHERS MANAGE WELL

leadership and participation

CCC + Highways has 22% of land and 35% of canopy

The majority of the city's canopy sits outside CCC and Highway ownership.

"The different ownerships of the resource means that urban forestry has to be collaborative."

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What 30 Years Taught Us

1. Be patient
2. Be ready
3. Build a pipeline
4. Gain senior support
5. Invest in people
6. Learn from others
7. Never neglect the asset

"…build(ing) urban-forest leadership on top of effective asset management-adding evidence, capability, partnerships and influence…"

Thank you

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