

Trees, People and the Built Environment 5 – what did we learn?

Some reflections and next steps

'Collaboration! Collaboration! Collaboration!' was the common theme in the various discussions in the recent *Trees, People and the Built Environment 5* (TPBE 5) partnership conference hosted by the ICF and held in Birmingham on 23 and 24th April.

The stated aim of the conference was to bring partners across the built and natural environment together to discuss how their work included the role of 'trees and people' and 'trees and the built environment' for the benefit of a cross-sector audience. One attendee said that it had been very rewarding for her, as an arboriculturist, to sit at a table with an engineer and a landscape architect.

For day one on 'trees and people', chaired for the day by Kevin McCloud, key themes were the need for effective land use in the UK requiring an integrated multi-functional and multi-disciplinary approach with an eye to the long term; the contribution of landscape towards zero carbon; including green and blue infrastructure alongside grey (engineered) infrastructure; focusing on the benefits of green and blue infrastructure especially the economic benefits and demonstrating the positive and exciting job opportunities in the skills that are needed to meet the challenges including the critical challenge of nature recovery.

For day two on 'trees and the built environment', chaired for the day by Gary Newman, the critical messages for timber were that we must not burn it for any purpose; that there is value for reuse in second hand timber; that we need to consider the kinds of buildings for which timber can be most effective in reducing carbon; the message for land owners and foresters is that we need to produce both spruces and broadleaf trees and that productive forestry can be both at scale in rural areas but also a valuable part of urban landscapes; that we need to increase the amount of timber framed housing throughout the UK (for example, Scotland has 80% of new homes built in this way) and that modular construction can play a significant role. Taking a wider view to encompass urban environments, we are often confused by guides and codes of all kinds some of which don't align or actually conflict – this needs to be rationalised.

We need to design foundations for new housing and low-rise buildings on shrinkable soils, not just for zero carbon but to enable trees to grow closer to homes; that we need to accommodate services and tree roots with a national underground design code and finally that nature-based solutions are critical for all urban projects – we know how to do it and we can demonstrate the value, in all senses, that they can provide.

The partners for this conference should be congratulated for coming together for these discussions and demonstrating confidence in and the value of working together.

So, where do we go from here?

What do we mean by 'collaboration'? The discussions seemed to point to the need for 'responsible cooperation' by which clients, investors, design teams and contractors were in agreement and working towards common ends.

What does this need? Taking TPBE 5 as a lead, we (professional institutions and associations and others) need to leave our own 'echo chambers' and recognise the value of working together.

For 'trees and people' the evidence clearly demonstrates that urban communities benefit from the presence of trees (and greenspace) for the many benefits these provide.

So, a call for increased positive action from **planners, landscape architects, urban designers, highway engineers, housebuilders, developers, schools, health providers and contractors** as well as **communities** to ensure that we increase tree canopy cover and urban greening throughout our towns and cities.

For 'trees and the built environment' – schools, health centres and other community buildings that do not involve overnight sleeping and so do not have the same fire issues, as well as single family homes are ideal for using timber framed systems.

So, this is a call to **land owners, foresters, tree nurseries and saw mills** to help produce at increased scale the timber that is most efficient for this use. This can be done with appropriate land use and combined with broadleaf woodlands for wider biodiversity and amenity benefits aligned with wider connectivity rather than smaller woodland stands. Designing with timber can also consider how the elements can be re-used if required. The key being – do not burn timber for any purpose.

For low rise buildings on shrinkable soils, there is always that question of 'subsidence'. For new low-rise buildings on shrinkable soils appropriate foundation design will enable a more creative and useful approach to landscape design. We need to **warranty providers and insurers** to step forward here in support.

What about the impact of street trees on utilities? How should we manage utilities – the National Underground Asset Register is a starting point to establish where the utilities are and who owns them, but we also need a National Underground Design Code to know

how to manage them especially in new developments where shared utility ducts should be the norm. So, this is a call for **service providers** and **street work managers** to support the integration of trees to work below ground as well as delivering our above ground ambitions.

Of course, the effectiveness of our actions will depend on having the right skills and expertise – working with trees as part of a nature-based solutions approach requires particular skills and expertise and, of course, **arboriculturists** and **educators** have leading roles here.

Finally, when it comes to urban trees, nature-based solutions and timber in construction - what do we know? what don't we know and what do we need to know about urban trees? We need to collaborate on the evidence-based research that will underpin the efficacy of our decisions and actions. So, this is a call for **researchers** to fill the knowledge gaps and ensure that their research outcomes are influential on practice.

So, it is right to congratulate the partners who came together for this conference as they took us out of our echo chambers and showed what collaborative working could achieve. We know what to do, so time now to do it.

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