

26th May 2016

URBAN FORESTRY

Purpose

1. To seek the Committee's support for Forest Service's (FS's) current approach and work on Urban Forestry, in light of publication of the Urban FWAC network's Vision and the Minister's interest in urban trees.

Background

Context

2. The urban forestry agenda has distinct local characteristics. Local authorities play the lead role in planning the planting and management of trees in the public realm. Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, London, Manchester and the Community Forests have done much to advance urban trees in recent years sometimes in partnership with the FC (e.g. [Newlands](#), Wirral Waters, London i-Tree, Mayors' Street Tree Initiative). Many other also have current ambitions (e.g. Manchester City of Trees, Birmingham Biophilic City).
3. There is a strong urban forestry sector: with the 25 years legacy of the Community Forests; and others, such as the National Forest having a strong delivery record in their areas. However the FWAC chairs have recently highlighted their concerns about the sector's ability to raise sufficient funds to survive the current very challenging funding climate. Groups such as the Trees and Design Action Group (TDAG) give particularly clear and well evidenced guidance for all urban design professionals on how they can incorporate trees into the built environment. The Institute of Chartered Foresters and the Arboricultural Association represent urban forestry professionals and run good conferences highlighting key research and good practice.

Government's commitments

4. The previous Government's Forestry and Woodland Policy Statement (2013) recognised the key role of the urban forest in engaging people with trees and woodlands on their doorstep. It also noted the importance of valuing of our urban trees, using tools such as iTree. Specific small scale urban forestry commitments from that document have been delivered.
5. Defra's developing 25 Year Environment Plan offers opportunities to go further. For example it is likely to include an urban pioneer and proposals that respond to the Natural Capital Committee's recognition that new woodlands around towns can bring greatest value.
6. Government's ambitions to accelerate new house building may also provide opportunities, for example through the Garden City concept

Our approach

7. FS's current approach is to facilitate and enable the wider sector to lead work to promote and deliver urban forestry. This follows the principle, set when the ENC last considered Urban Forestry (2010), for the Forestry Commission (FC) to be 'a leader but not the leader'. To underpin this approach we continue to support the development of evidence and technical advice; and work with the Urban Forestry research team within Forest Research.
8. Existing FS urban engagement, primarily but not solely focussed on London, has related to support for strategic planning; tree disease issues; tree resilience; and support to building the evidence base in the form of iTREE valuations. FS has also helped establish the Urban Forestry and Woodland Advisory Committees (FWACs) Network. This comprises one member of each FWAC with expertise in urban forestry, and other specialists where invited.

The vision for the urban forest

9. This network recently published their [Vision for the Urban Forest](#), with a foreword by our Chair and endorsement from Minister, Rory Stewart. It was launched at the March 2016 England's Community Forests Conference, and featured in the April 2016 National Forestry Forum, at which the Minister invited the Forum to come forward with proposals to help make the vision a reality
10. The Vision highlights the need for the urban forest to be recognised as being on a par with other infrastructure. It collates evidence on eight key areas of urban life supported by the urban forest:
 - a. Strategic planning and green infrastructure
 - b. Climate change
 - c. Natural environment
 - d. Human health and quality of life
 - e. Planning and development
 - f. Economy and wealth
 - g. Value and resources
 - h. Risks and resilience

It recognises the importance of cross sectoral working at the local and departmental levels.

11. The Chair's foreword sets out three challenges:
 - a. whether you know the **scale and value** of your urban forest,
 - b. whether you support the **care of your existing urban forest**, and
 - c. whether you have a **target for increasing the tree and canopy cover** in your urban areas.

12. The Network plans to use the next six months to seek opportunities to promote the Vision, encouraging support from within the urban forestry sector and using the vision to initiate discussions with other key stakeholders such as architects, planners and developers. They will also be collating and promoting examples of good practice to demonstrate how the Vision is being delivered.

Ministerial interest

13. The Minister, Rory Stewart has expressed his own interest in urban trees, and at a recent meeting with stakeholders, arising from discussions at the launch of London iTree report, he stated his interest in becoming the Minister for Urban Trees, while recognising that much of the relevant remit formally sits with DCLG. He reiterated this at the National Forestry Forum in April. Stakeholder expectations are high, and he looked to the FC to help him deliver on this commitment. We are currently exploring, with Defra, what this might mean in practice and welcome the committees' views to inform this.

Discussion

14. Potential proposals for future FC involvement in urban forestry include the following.

15. **Further developing the Evidence Base** – the most comprehensive survey of urban trees is Trees in Towns II from 2008. Encouraging authorities to update their evidence could help these locations to engage more with their urban by offering benchmarks and assistance in better understanding and valuing their urban tree stock and would be in line with the emerging 25 year environment plan's emphases on data and valuing nature in decisions

16. FS has already started to engage in the **25 Year Environment Urban Pioneer**, which will include looking at urban water management. Potential for integrating trees into this Pioneer could include developing the evidence base about the size and value of the existing tree stock; future new planting of trees and community woodlands; and the role of trees in sustainable drainage solutions.

17. The Minister is understood to be keen on a form of **competition** to encourage cities to support their urban trees better, and fulfil the ambition of the Vision. The FWAC chairs have also suggested something along these lines. Related thinking for the emerging 25 year environment plan also suggests an appetite for stimulating the creation of new woodland close to a large urban area. This type of challenge could range from large scale tree planting in and around urban areas in a similar way to that achieved by the community forests at their inception, to rewarding and recognising good practice through an Awards scheme, in a similar way to the US Arbor Day (www.arborday.org) or the London Re:Leaf Tree and Woodland Awards. The level of ambition will depend on resources available, but will rely heavily on existing and new partnerships to deliver.

18. The FC could also highlight how the Minister could advocate **opportunities across Government** to better integrate the urban forest as part of our built environment, when tackling challenging top priorities such as accelerating house building.

Resource implications

19. The Forestry Commission (FS, FEE and FR) has significant relevant experience and expertise in urban forestry albeit most resides with staff fully currently occupied in other priority roles.
20. There is currently no proposed larger scale work or potential external communication programme for urban forestry in FS's business plans for 2016/20, so any additional commitment would require appropriate additional resources.
21. It is hoped that any proposals could be taken forward in collaborative and innovative ways with civil society and private businesses in ways that would bring forward multiple sources of funding, perhaps including charitable foundations. Proposals that develop innovative financing mechanisms such as green bonds would be welcomed. However there is as yet no guarantee of what can be achieved through such approaches.

Risk Assessment

22. There is a danger that this work could increase Risk FS/2: *"FS lacks the resources to meet delivery expectations"* and Risk FS/7: *"Government domestic forestry policy (i.e.: what Government wants to do with and to forestry in England) becomes unclear / unstable, contradictory across Government, mismatched with delivery mechanisms, or out of kilter with our professional standards"*.
23. Although we position FS as a leader, not the leader, the Risk FS/15 *"The forestry sector lacks capacity (money, people, and skills) to respond to us enabling them to protect, improve and expand England's woodland"* also remains material.

Equality Impact Assessment

24. The Equality Impact Assessment of FS's overall business plan 2016-17 seeks to identify and take into account any equality impacts of this work. However, a focus on places where larger populations reside in urban areas does help reach more diverse populations and those living in poorer quality environments.

Communications

25. Communications should align with those for the 25 Year Environment Plan in the first instance, while good communications would be essential to proposals such as an urban forestry competition. Communications plans would therefore need to be drawn up and resourced for any proposals taken forward.

Recommendations

26. The Committee is invited to discuss our current approach to urban forestry; and consider where opportunities may arise. We particularly welcome the Committee's views on:

- a. How we might continue to help promulgate the Vision for a Resilient Urban Forest;
- b. Potential proposals for future FC involvement in urban forestry, including those described in this paper; and
- a) Whether FC resources are being effectively deployed within current policy and financial constraints.

Helen Townsend and Jane Hull

Principal Advisors, Social Forestry
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