

# Community participation in urban tree cover in the UK

## Abstract

A greater emphasis on community participation in local decision making in the UK has been evident both from the previous and current governments and is a central theme of the 'Big Society', based on notions of personal responsibility and a shrinking state.

This paper reviews community participation in urban tree cover. How is community defined and what does participation mean? Communities can represent both geographical areas and well as interest groups, while participation can involve a range of levels and ways of engagement. Why encourage participation? Is it in order to legitimise and overcome barriers to project implementation, or for more intrinsic reasons linked to empowerment and the generation of social capital?

Will the withdrawal of central government and an emphasis on civic society leave a gap in supporting the delivery of high quality tree cover? What is the role of external agencies in promoting and supporting community participation and community action?

New media – digital communications represented by the internet, blogs, and social network sites – have created new opportunities for people to participate in a range of issues including urban tree cover. What questions does this raise for governance and representation? Do new media encourage genuine participation? How can communities influence tree and woodland cover where this impacts on their communities?

This paper will review experience and evidence from a range of projects and research, and suggest areas for further study.

## Introduction

Recent years have seen increasing emphasis on community participation within political rhetoric, as a way of identifying, shaping and delivering policy across government (Burton *et al.*, 2004; Miliband, 2006; Cameron, 2010; Clark, 2010; Norman, 2010). This coincides with a greater devolution of decision making and power from UK Government to national and local government, and to communities and individuals (DCLG, 2008, 2010).

Within the urban environment there has been a move from consultation which serves a public interest to a greater degree of active communication, knowledge exchange and development of ideas with stakeholders (Van Herzele *et al.*, 2005). This reflects notions of active citizenship, development of social capital and participatory democracy which are built into the idea of the Big Society.

Urban tree cover and urban forestry have developed and become distinct within forestry more generally as urban society and conurbations have expanded. The focus on social and environmental objectives and the proximity to large numbers of people leads to a demand for varying levels of communication and involvement in decisions about urban tree cover (Konijnendijk, 2000). Urban trees often evoke strong emotional ties and reactions, particularly where changes to tree cover are planned.

### Keywords:

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## Defining community

Notions of 'community' and 'community participation' are built into many areas of government. Definitions are more elusive. In a report for the Department for Communities and Local Government, Pratchett *et al.* (2010) define 'community' as a group 'that recognise that they have something in common with each other, or who are recognised by others as such'.

Communities may be defined geographically, by their interests, by the services they use, by gender, ethnicity, religion, and so on (Smith, 2001). For instance, Asian women have often been identified as a community with an interest in using public open spaces but who may be prevented due to concerns over abuse and therefore excluded from participation in urban woods (Risbeth, 2004). Moore (2003) describes disabled, retired, black and minority ethnic communities, those aged 45–64 years, women and those from the more deprived social groups as under-represented users of green space – communities within a geographical community.

The diversity of communities needs to be recognised and was one of the key lessons of a report for the Home Office on the effectiveness of community involvement in area-based initiatives (Burton *et al.*, 2004).

## Defining participation

Definitions of participation are contested. Typologies of participation identify passive participation, where people are informed of what will happen, through to self-mobilisation, where communities initiated action independently of external agencies (Rifkin and Kangere, 2002; UNESCAP, 2009).

The National Community Forum defines community participation as taking place where statutory bodies and communities work in partnership to develop and/or implement policy (Morris, 2006). Cheetham (2002) identifies community participation as 'when a community organises itself and takes responsibility for managing its problems...[including]...identifying the problems, developing actions, putting them into place, and following through.'

Participation can be defined as the process and active involvement of stakeholders in the formulation of policies and strategies and in their analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Community participation means some form of involvement of people, with similar needs and goals, in decisions affecting their lives.

## Defining empowerment

Most definitions of empowerment refer to the ability of an individual, organisation or community to gain power and control over decisions and resources to bring about positive change. It has been defined as 'passing more and more political power to more and more people by whatever practical means available' (DCLG, 2009).

Beyond influencing decisions taken by others in authority it can also be seen as increasing autonomy and self-reliance (Eames *et al.*, 2009). This is indicated through an increase in social capital – communities developing confidence in their ability and capacities, increased skills, greater resources and the development of networks of contacts. The idea of empowerment is often directed towards those who are excluded from decision-making processes through disadvantage or discrimination.

During the 1980s, Balsall Heath in Birmingham became associated with crime and prostitution; it was an area run down and in decay. Over 25 years the Balsall Heath Forum, made up of over 1000 members of the local community, have campaigned and taken action to improve the area, transforming it into a green and welcoming community. The Forum now acts as the local representation to the public and private sectors (Balsall Heath Forum, 2011). Through taking action to improve their local environment and reduce crime, the community is reported to have grown in confidence with increasing community 'togetherness'.

## Empowering and empowerment

It is possible to distinguish between empowering and empowerment. People or organisations that are 'empowering' are able to facilitate an individual or group to take control of the knowledge or resources needed to bring about positive change. Those who are 'empowered' can develop and master that knowledge or resources to make positive change for themselves and for others. Ideas of participation and empowerment are closely associated. Active participation requires a degree of empowerment – confidence, knowledge, resources – while participation can itself be seen to as part of a process of empowerment (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995).

This is an important distinction when considering the role of third parties, such as public bodies and non-governmental organisations, in fostering empowerment and participation, while not excluding the possibility that individuals from within a community can be empowering.

Pepper Wood Community Woodland owned by the Woodland Trust was set up in the early 1980s. The group has been going for 25 years and actively manages the wood for a range of coppice and other products (Woodland Trust, 2011a). The Trust overcame the barriers to establishment of the group through providing a suitable site and through developing the governance and skills the group needed to get started and to establish their own systems for recruiting new members, training and management.

## Why encourage participation?

Motivations for government, non-governmental organisations and others for encouraging participation differ. Participation can be used instrumentally to improve project outcomes, remove or ease conflict, increase acceptance, and achieve greater sustainability of the project. This can be seen in examples of involving local youth in tree planting projects or woodland management in the expectation of reducing vandalism (Barker and Bridgeman, 1994; Woodland Trust, 2002; Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, 2011).

Alternatively participation can be viewed as a way of empowering people and communities, building social capital and redistributing power from central authorities to communities; participation as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end (UNESCAP, 2009). The Green Streets programme in Manchester, while delivering instrumental benefits in the form of street tree planting, also aims to 'encourage community interaction and improve community spirit...fostering a sense of ownership in communities and empowering them to change their neighbourhoods for the better' (Red Rose Forest, 2010).

In the past the emphasis of 'community woodland' has frequently been on the creation of 'woodland' which involved, at various levels, the community. Participation was a means to an end in the creation or management of woodland or in conflict resolution.

A review of community involvement by Burton *et al.* (2004) identified a mix of instrumental and intrinsic motivations of government in involving the community:

- aiding social cohesion through its effect on individuals and society, and fostering social capital;
- effective planning and delivery of services and legitimacy of decisions;
- as a right of citizenship justified on the grounds of due process, irrespective of outcome.

The Transition Town movement also demonstrates a more empowered approach; for instance using public space to plant nut and fruit-bearing trees (Transition Town Totnes, 2011). More radically, Guerrilla Gardening encourages planting of trees on public space without consent (Guerrilla Gardening, 2011). There is an opportunity to reframe the emphasis on 'community', so that participating in woodland becomes a way in which individuals and communities can develop and in which social capital can be increased.

## Benefits of participation in urban tree cover

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest even a passive experience of a 'green' environment has a positive effect on physical and mental health, and can have beneficial social impacts such as reduced driving frustration and aggression, and less reported crime and domestic violence (Kuo and Sullivan, 1996, 2001; Kuo, 2003).

Active involvement, including volunteering for tree planting and maintenance, engaging with planning and design, or campaigning to protect trees, can confer further benefits through improved health as a result of a more active lifestyle or through increased social capital (Westphal, 2003; Townsend, 2006). These benefits can accrue to the individual, an organisation or the community.

The Cydcoed project in Wales, delivered through the Forestry Commission Wales, funded community groups who wanted to plant new woods or manage existing ones in their area. Evaluation of the project suggested that 80% of the 163 groups felt that their project had helped develop stronger ties within their community, and more than 50% of interviewees felt involvement had improved their overall health and wellbeing (Forestry Commission, 2008).

The relative ease of participation with urban trees, compared to other social problems such as tackling unemployment or drug abuse, can provide communities with a starting point which leads to tackling more difficult issues (Westphal, 1999). Empowerment of the individual through active participation in social change has wider benefits in the organisation and creation of communities (Sadan, 2004).

## New media

New media refers to electronic communication made possible through the use of computer technology, as

opposed to old media, such as print newspapers and magazines. It includes websites, chat rooms, email, online communities, digital cameras and mobile computing. New media can be seen as offering new and novel opportunities for participation and for generating a greater participatory culture (Friedman, 2010). New media have supported the emergence of social phenomena such as blogs and social networking, and have allowed almost instant access and exchange of information and the opportunity for individuals to generate and post web content.

Bristol Street Trees was established in 2006 as a result of concern among a group of residents at the loss of urban trees. They put up a website and began to collect pictures of the stumps of felled trees to illustrate the loss of tree cover and to lobby the local council. The website attracted local and national media coverage and has resulted in Bristol City Council setting up a Tree Forum to address some of the issue of tree loss and to replace felled trees (Bristol Street Trees, 2009).

## Transmedia

There is also increasing interest in 'transmedia' as a form of storytelling or conveying information in an interactive way. Originally designed for use in entertainment and marketing, transmedia storytelling allows people to follow a story or issue across a range of media with varying levels of engagement and participation (Srivastava, 2009). It appeals in particular to a younger generation who regularly and consistently use a range of media including gaming. Transmedia creates a narrative which allows participants to interact with the story and thus generates actions for social change.

## Rapid mobilisation

Websites such as Flickr, Wikipedia and Facebook encourage the submission of content to the internet. Social network sites create opportunities to connect with others, recruit volunteers and increase individual-level production of social capital. They have the power to enable very rapid mobilisation of campaigners and activists, for example the '38 Degrees' campaign against disposal of the Public Forest Estate in England (38 Degrees, 2011).

Furthermore, the cost associated with organising members and meetings, and spreading and collecting information, is relatively low compared to more traditional forms of social organisation (Ellison *et al.*, 2009). Social networking sites are

perhaps particularly interesting in their potential independence from organisational and administrative power structures. Communities on Facebook, for example, can be truly self-organising. However, increasingly, organisations including environmental NGOs are also using Facebook, Twitter and other new media to both generate participation and also as a form of supporter marketing; people who actively participate in campaigning for instance are more likely to become donors (Cubit, 2011). The effectiveness of organisational involvement in social networking to deliver change remains open to question, however; does it dilute the power of social networking as a mobilisation tool or strengthen it?

## 'Democratisation' of media

This 'democratisation' of media has consequences for the way in which individuals and communities respond, including the formation and dissolution of communities of interest around single issues and media content. Woodwatch is a set of campaigning tools for individuals and communities to protect trees and woodland important to them. A series of web pages provides guidance on setting up local groups, organising meetings and starting a local petition, as well as downloadable information on planning, campaigning and recognising important features in the woods (Woodland Trust, 2011b). A 'community' can come together around a single threat, and then disperse or move to a different phase once the threat has passed.

Whereas old media was controlled by relatively few people, new media creates a wider opportunity for participation and self-organisation. Individuals who use the internet for information exchange probably encounter more opportunities for recruitment into civic life and may be able to exert greater control over their environments, encouraging participation and enhancing trust (Shah *et al.*, 2001). Use of the internet for information exchange is not without barriers. Ellul *et al.* (2008) found a mismatch between the web skills of active community group members and the web skills needed to access and process GIS held information provided by local authorities. This information is seen as essential in promoting active community participation in a range of spatial planning and consultation exercises on flood risk, air quality, planning applications and so on.

Although new media potentially makes participation easier and more accessible, is it less meaningful? How active is this kind of participation really? How much difference does it make to the individual and to social capital, compared with the physical act of planting a tree for instance?

## The role of NGOs and public bodies

While much of the premise of community participation is a shift in power from central authorities to communities, do NGOs and public bodies remain an important facilitator? A move from big government to Big Society can only be achieved if the opportunity for participation is matched by a 'tooling-up' of individuals, organisations and communities, equipping them with the knowledge, confidence and gateways to participation which match their circumstances and underlying limits on their capacities.

There are a number of reasons why continued involvement of public bodies and NGOs might be important. The first is to try to ensure representation of marginalised minority interests. A common criticism of participatory approaches is that they provide a platform to the most vocal and 'pushy' within a community, at the expense or even exclusion of other voices (O'Neill *et al.*, 2006).

Secondly, it is a common feature of urban areas that the populations can be mobile and changing. The interests of future members of the community may not be represented by the interests of the current members. Pain (2005) reported that, particularly in deprived areas, young people are poorly represented in community activity, local policy making and consultation relating to open space.

Thirdly, NGOs and public bodies often have the skills and capacity to secure funding. Milton Keynes Parks Trust, created in 1992, is an example of a large community led trust which leases and manages much of the city's woods and parks. It was established as a charitable company with an endowment of property and other assets from the former Development Corporation. The Trust is managed by a Board of Trustees, drawn from the community and local organisations. Local people are able to participate and assume greater control over the way in the woods and parks are managed to meet local needs through involvement in governance of the community trust, volunteering in maintaining the asset, and getting involved in events. The Trust generates profits from its commercial assets, and reinvests them in its long-term financial security and providing extra services for the community (Parks Trust Milton Keynes, 2011).

Fourthly, the involvement of NGOs or public bodies in a community project can allow for the building of social capital. This may particularly be the case during the early stages, when communities need to acquire skills, develop trust, seek funding or build governance structures.

The Capital Woods Project in London managed by Trees for Cities has been able to support communities to re-engage with their local wood (O'Brien *et al.*, 2009). By helping to tackle tipping, motor bike riders and anti-social behaviour, and through opportunities for people to volunteer to clear up the woods and join events, local people have been able to claim back green space 'turning these areas that have been perceived as no go into places that are turned round into the complete opposite.'

## Providing tools

In terms of new media, NGOs and public bodies can provide the tools which allow for participation or for the development of social capital. The Woodland Trust's MyView project is an example of the development of a web-based tool to support participation in local planning. Individuals or communities upload a digital image of their urban view to the website and can then manipulate it, inserting trees and other green cover to produce their ideal image of where they live or work or an area of importance to them. This can then be used to negotiate within the community or sent directly to local authorities responsible for developing spatial plans or management of the green space (Woodland Trust, 2010). The site also provides information on how to approach your councillor and which trees might be suitable to include in your MyView image.

The role of NGOs is not unproblematic. While they exist to serve public benefit, they are also established around representation of the interests of specific beneficiaries – disabled people, birds, the elderly, public access, etc. Representation of their beneficiaries may be in conflict with representation of a broad cross-section of the community.

## Research questions

Greater community participation in urban tree cover, whether demanded by communities, at the insistence of government, or as a result of the necessity of reduced central government funding, generates questions.

A greater emphasis on localism, whether in the guise of the Big Society or otherwise, is pushing both decision making and delivery of urban green space and urban tree cover to ever more local levels including a community level.

New media creates potential opportunities for wider or different forms of communication, but are these meaningful, do they lead to action and how should they be measured?

Is it becoming a substitute for more 'active' engagement or does it stimulate it? What does it say about governance? Can it ensure that a good quality urban environment which meets everyone's needs is provided?

We suggest ten questions for research:

1. What are the governance implications of a move to increasing localism and the Big Society approach to urban tree cover with different finance and tenure models?
2. What models of governance support a move to greater community participation in urban tree cover?
3. What do communities need to equip them to participate in a new, more local agenda?
4. If there is a shift to greater community participation in urban tree cover, how can the interests of all those living in the community be properly represented? How do we balance communities of interest with geographical communities?
5. What challenges does new media place on the governance and representation of interests in urban tree cover? Whose voice is legitimate, and how are those outside of new media use represented?
6. Do social network sites and other new media increase meaningful community participation and broaden representation in urban green space, including in policy and delivery?
7. Does engaging with new media translate to activity in the 'real world'? What makes people move from passive to active actors?
8. How should we measure the effectiveness of new media in facilitating participation in urban tree cover? What should be measured?
9. What is the role of the public sector and NGOs in facilitating and supporting individuals and communities and encouraging active participation? Is the structure and business model of NGOs suited to bottom-up community participation?
10. How can NGOs ensure a balance in the use of new media, including transmedia, as a fundraising tool while using it to deliver messages and catalyse action?

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