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## **A Survey of Urban Forestry in Britain**

**Mark Johnston and Brian S. Rushton**

**Faculty of Science  
University of Ulster  
Coleraine  
Northern Ireland**

**June 1999**

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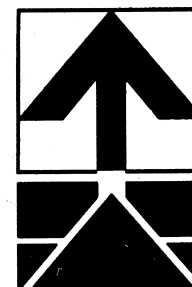
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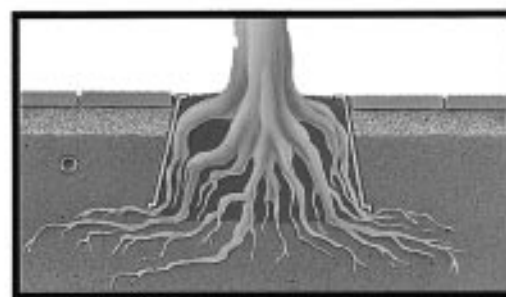
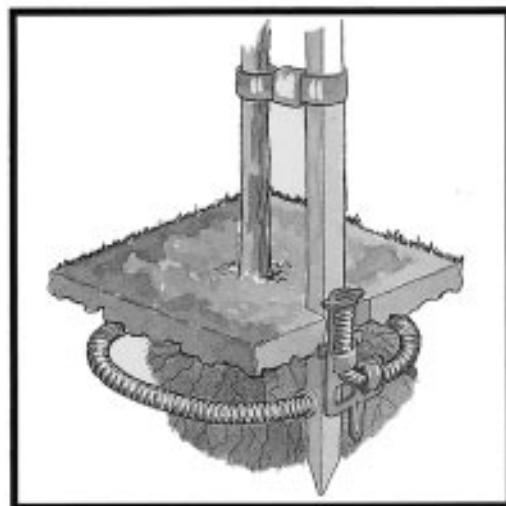
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A survey of urban forestry in Britain

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Front cover photograph:

A view of Wolverhampton's urban forest in the autumn

© David Woodfall, courtesy National Urban Forestry Unit

Further copies of this report can be obtained from Dr Brian S. Rushton at the School of Applied Biological and Chemical Sciences, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland, BT52 1SA. Tel: 01265 324450. The cost of a single copy of the report is £7.50 (£8.50 overseas) including postage and packing.

The results of a parallel survey conducted in the Republic of Ireland are contained in the publication entitled *Proceedings of Ireland's Third National Conference on Urban Forestry*. Copies of the publication can be obtained from The Tree Council of Ireland, Cabinteely House, Cabinteely Park, Cabinteely, Co. Dublin, Republic of Ireland. Tel: Dublin 6790699.

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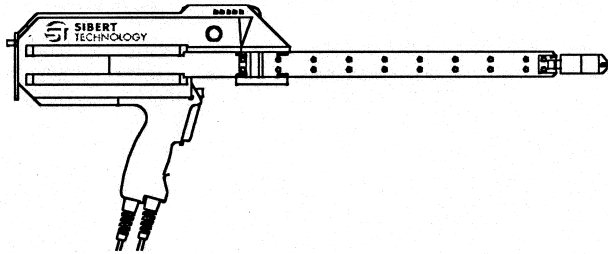
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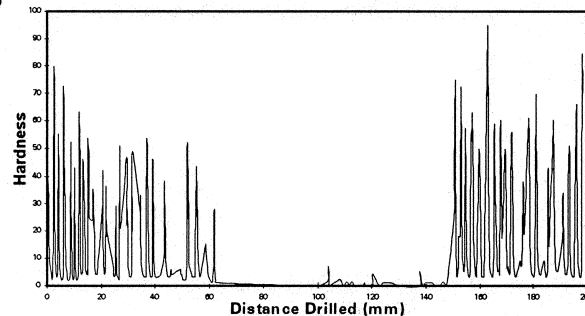


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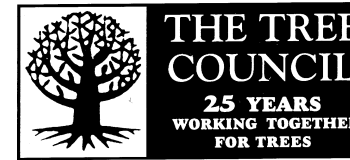
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### Foreword

Around 90% of our population live in towns and cities, so for most people urban trees are a highly significant resource. They provide a connection with the natural world away beyond the rooftops, living on despite the pollution and damage of city life. Indeed, they help to reduce the effects of both air pollution and noise pollution on those living near them. They provide shade and protection from the sun's rays, and they help bring birds and wildlife closer to our homes. Research into human health has shown that a view of trees and greenery has possible therapeutic benefits, while on the economic side, property values are invariably higher in tree-lined streets.

The duty of caring for these trees falls in the main to local authorities through their tree officers. Since many of the Tree Council's 200 member groups are local authorities, we are very keen for their voices to be heard. At a time when budgets are under pressure from many directions, urban trees are often neglected. The authors have accumulated a wealth of information about urban tree management across Britain, by targeting the survey at the people who are most directly responsible for carrying out the work. This information makes vital reading for Councillors and others who have a responsibility to protect and maintain trees for public enjoyment.

The Tree Council welcomes the publication of this report in 1999, which is both our 25th anniversary and the start of the new Millennium. We hope some of the lessons learnt after Plant a Tree in '73, which launched our organisation, will be remembered and that many of the trees planted in celebration now will be cared for properly in the future. The information in this report will help us all to ensure that this happens.

John G. Hillier VMH, FI Hort  
 Chairman  
 The Tree Council



The National Urban Forestry Unit was established in 1995. It is a specialist agency backed by central government, which promotes and demonstrates best practice in urban and community forestry. It encourages planting of more new woodland in towns and better care of existing urban trees.

The Unit works in partnership with fellow professionals in a wide range of organisations throughout the country, including local authorities, the private sector and non-government organisations. It has particular expertise in the greening of difficult and derelict land and in gathering details of best practice in urban forestry from around the world.

It is involved in a wide variety of activities, including

- **advisory work**
- **conferences, seminars and study tours**
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The National Urban Forestry Unit welcomes the publication of *A Survey of Urban Forestry in Britain* as a most comprehensive review of the development of urban forestry in this country.

*If you would like to know more about the National Urban Forestry Unit and its work please contact us at:*

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previously had little idea how their performance measured against that of most other authorities and what limited information existed was almost entirely anecdotal. Furthermore, there are no agreed standards of performance in most of the activities examined in the survey. When the results of the survey are publicised, it is hoped that Tree Officers will take the opportunity to assess the extent to which their own local authorities are pursuing a modern approach to urban tree management in comparison with other local authorities. Where their performance is significantly below average, it is hoped they will take immediate action to rectify this. It is also hoped that this survey will prompt the establishment of nationally recognised standards of performance in some of the more important aspects of planned, systematic and integrated management. Achieving these national standards could then be something to which all local authorities could be encouraged to aspire.

One way of encouraging local authorities to advance their standards of urban forest management in a number of major respects would be to establish a national programme similar to the Tree City USA initiative. This could be organised through The Tree Council. Similar criteria could be established for qualification, such as the formation of a local tree committee, the existence of a comprehensive tree strategy, a specified annual spending on trees per head of the population, and some degree of participation in National Tree Week. Attaining the status of 'Tree City Britain' could become a much sought-after accolade, imparting a sense of civic pride and achievement among both the local authority and the community.

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was encouraging. There was, however, still much scope on the part of many to expand this into a wider ranging and ongoing community involvement programme. Again, this should be promoted in the context of Local Agenda 21. The amount of officer time required to organise and supervise community involvement may be a major factor in dissuading many authorities from increasing the extent of this activity. This need not be the case, however, if they established a network of voluntary Tree Wardens. After appropriate training, Tree Wardens can relieve the local authority of much of the time consuming aspects of community involvement, not only resulting in a more extensive programme but also enabling officers to concentrate on the technical aspects of urban forest management. The value of these schemes to both the authority and the community needs to be far more widely appreciated. Within the community involvement programme there also exists considerable opportunities to engage the assistance of voluntary sector environmental and conservation organisations, given that these often have extensive expertise in involving the community in practical activities, and experience of the types of activities likely to appeal to the public. An extensive community involvement programme should provide the basis for the local authority's integrated approach to management at a practical level.

An excellent way for local authorities to promote a more integrated approach to urban forestry in their district, both strategically and practically, is to involve relevant outside organisations and the public in a major urban forestry project. One of the most surprising results of this survey was the limited number of local authorities that had developed these projects. While a small number of excellent and high-profile projects have received much publicity in recent years, it would appear that the imaginative example of these local authorities has not been widely followed. Of those authorities that had developed major projects, a substantial proportion had emerged as a result of the Community Forests Initiative, a government inspired programme of projects focusing on woodland in the urban fringe. Very few of the other projects could be described as comprehensive urban forestry initiatives, embracing an entire urban area with all its trees and woodlands and involving a partnership of public, private and voluntary organisations.

### **Progress in the future**

It was noticeable from the survey that the early 1990s was a period when considerable advances were made by many local authorities in a number of major aspects of urban tree management that are identified particularly closely with the urban forestry approach. The growth in the installation of computerised tree inventories and management systems, the development of relevant strategies, the establishment of local tree committees and the launch of major tree projects, are some of the more obvious examples. It is interesting that what appears to have emerged from this survey as a 'watershed' period in the development of urban forestry among the local authorities also coincides with what could be regarded historically as the 'springtime' of the urban forestry movement in Britain. It is also interesting that the rate of progress in these areas has slowed down in the past few years at the same time as the urban forestry movement has been in decline.

In the absence of a co-ordinated urban forestry movement, the impetus for further sustained progress will need to come from a different direction. It is hoped that this survey will have some impact in encouraging this. One of the most striking aspects of the results of the survey has been the enormous variation in performance among the local authorities across the broad spectrum of urban forest management. This is understandable given that local authorities



horticultural and landscape colleagues. However, while much of the routine work in Parks Departments needs to be undertaken on an annual basis, this applies less to trees where work cycles can often be much longer and less clearly defined. Furthermore, with local authority budgets being determined annually, it can often be difficult for the Tree Officer to know whether adequate resources will be available for routine tree work a few years in advance. This is another reason why a comprehensive urban forestry strategy is so vital because it commits the local authority to achieving these longer-term objectives.

#### **Integrated management**

Some aspects of integrated management within the local authorities were covered in the first section dealing with their organisational structure. This identified a generally high level of integration that was confirmed by results to questions in this section on the officers' satisfaction with inter-departmental liaison and inherited planting designs.

While urban forestry is primarily a local authority function, any town or city usually has a wide range of public, private and voluntary organisations that have some ownership, responsibility or concern for its trees. Local authorities should take the lead in ensuring that all these organisations work together in an integrated approach to the overall management of the whole urban forest. One of the best ways of securing their involvement is to establish some form of local committee made up of representatives of these organisations where issues affecting the urban forest can be regularly discussed. The local authority's own Council committees should not be regarded as a substitute for these more informal and wide-ranging forums. The number of local authorities that had established these committees was very disappointing, although they have become more common over the past ten years. Because of the relevance of such committees to achieving the aims of Local Agenda 21, it is hoped that many more will be established in the near future as local authorities become aware of their obligations to actively consult and involve the communities they serve. Where these committees already existed, their wide representation and broad scope was encouraging, indicating a desire by those authorities to involve many different public, private and voluntary sector interests in the overall management of the whole urban forest. There needs to be a much greater awareness of the benefits of these committees, particularly as their remit need not be limited to trees but could also include other aspects of the urban landscape and environment. It was significant that many officers did not respond to those questions in the survey that enquired about other organisations in their district that had some major involvement with trees. Considering the extent to which these organisations would normally exist in most towns and cities, this does raise questions about the officers' view of the relevance of these organisations to their local authority's overall urban forestry programme. However, those officers that did respond usually reported a satisfactory level of liaison with these outside bodies.

The lack of involvement of other organisations and groups in the strategic management of the urban forest was also highlighted by some of the responses to questions on strategy documents. Among the small number of local authorities that had developed district-wide strategies that embraced trees, outside organisations and the public were not usually consulted when these were being produced.

Despite the lack of integrated management at a strategic level, the extent of routine community involvement in practical tree related activities among most of the local authorities

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protected. Despite this, mortality levels among newly-planted trees did give cause for some concern. Although the average level of losses among the local authorities was acceptable, a substantial minority were still losing the majority of these trees and most had not managed to make any significant improvement in their performance over the previous five years.

Any programme of systematic maintenance will depend largely on the local authority's ability to undertake the regular inspections of its trees to identify the work required. While some urban forestry operations are relatively predictable, the visual monitoring of trees 'in the field' is still necessary to ensure that management is in control of the situation. Local authorities also have a legal obligation to undertake these regular inspections. A failure to carry these out can result in very expensive legal claims for damages. The performance of the local authorities in conducting regular tree inspections seemed surprisingly poor and although it was difficult to draw many firm conclusions from the limited data, there is some indication that the actual situation may be considerably worse. It would appear that there needs to be a dramatic improvement in this aspect of urban forest management among most of the local authorities. While legal precedents have established some guidelines for the frequency of tree inspection in different situations, the production of some clearly defined national standards on this would assist local authorities in assessing their performance in what seems to be one of the most sensitive aspects of urban forestry work. A government-backed recommendation that all trees in various categories of the urban forest should be systematically inspected at specified intervals would almost inevitably lead to some improvement in the levels of systematic maintenance.

It was encouraging that the majority of authorities routinely notified local residents in advance of major urban forestry operations. This indicated a widespread awareness of the public relations value of this notification in helping to promote the urban forestry programme in a positive light, and in defusing any potential opposition to the work from the public. Notifying residents of tree planting was undertaken less often, possibly indicating that local authorities were less aware of the more subtle benefits of this in building the community's sense of identification with the publicly owned trees in their neighbourhood.

As well as applying a systematic approach to the management of their publicly owned trees and woodland, local authorities need to be conscious of the need to apply the same approach to their involvement with the privately owned urban forest. The effectiveness of an authority's legal provisions to protect or replace these trees will depend largely on its ability to regularly monitor development activities to ensure compliance. The authorities' performance in ensuring both the protection and replacement of trees was surprisingly poor with most having no regular monitoring system. This could indicate that a substantial number of trees were being lost through development where this could have been avoided and many replacement trees were not being planted.

While the local authorities' performance in many aspects of systematic management left much scope for improvement, many had made significant advances over the previous five years. This indicates there is now a much greater emphasis on this component of the urban forestry approach than a few years ago. Although this trend is encouraging, the survey does suggest that local authorities were performing particularly poorly before this recent improvement. There is a need to promote a 'culture' of systematic management among Tree Officers, prompted by a greater recognition that a systematic approach to urban forestry operations is the key to cost-effective management. This is something that is quite familiar to their