

The relationship between tree officers and arboricultural consultants.....

.....*sharing a vision*



Sharon Hosegood

We work with the best and most versatile product in the world. It beautifies, cleanses, nourishes, and heals. It is useful, practical and renewable. It creates landscapes, habitats and communities. It is an asset that gets more valuable with time. Everyone has seen it and touched it.

And we work with it!

But pests, diseases, noisy complainers, budget cuts, profiteering and simple lack of understanding are the day to day concerns in our industry which can dull our passion....

It's another day at the office. You open your emails to see another complaint from Mr Toomuchtime about the felled tree on a site; he's got the local councillor on the case and this could escalate. You have four site visits this afternoon and you really want to help a worried local resident with a protected tree issue. You've got to write up the TPO applications as they are nearly out of time. It was easier before they moved Sue in admin to a central customer service centre. But here's an email reminder to go on a time management course this morning and you have got to prepare for a meeting tomorrow with Block Builder Homes. This site could be controversial, and you really want to make a difference but the planning officer hardly listens to you. Stress....

It's another day at the office. You open your emails to see another complaint from the Local Authority about the felled tree on the site. You

had to fell it to get the crane in. Why wasn't that picked up earlier? This new site is important to your company, Block Builder Homes. You are tired of people muddling you up with Barnacle Homes and you want to show a difference. You hope your 'arbo-whatsit' consultant gets on with the tree officer as the site is controversial and the pressure is on from head office. Stress....

It's another day at the office. You open your emails to see an urgent request to attend a meeting tomorrow for Block Builder Homes at Mediocre City Council. You have barely got time to appraise their layout. At least it was drawn up after the tree survey this time. They are



learning, but there's that business about the felled tree and the crane. It could be awkward with the tree officer tomorrow; you need to show that it is not a cynical exercise. You really want to make a difference, but it's all a bit stressful.

It is depressing and perplexing to hear how local government cuts affect the critical role of tree officers. It's not just tree budgets; but admin cuts, re-structuring pressures and lost posts. Many tree officers feel isolated and misunderstood, even an uncomfortable nuisance. How can this be when we have such a wealth of expertise, guidance and best practice? How can this be when the government's proposal to sell off our public estate raised such an outcry? How can this be when ash dieback disease became headline news? Have we missed an opportunity to tap into the public's love of trees?

The planning system is powerful. The person in the snapshot story with the power is the tree officer. Consultants have no statutory power, only opinion. But using imagination and persuasion can create a different intellectual landscape; one that can deliver societal change.

Here are twelve critical milestones in the planning process to ensure sustainable tree care.

1. A robust community audited Tree Strategy (TDAG* 2).

2. Inclusion of tree planting as part of infrastructure costs as part of the Community Infrastructure Levy.
3. Specific tree policies in the Local Development Framework (TDAG 3).
4. A culture of understanding the importance of trees within the planning department.
5. A Local Authority site planning brief on larger sites which guides development.
6. Early instruction of the arboricultural consultant at the pre-site acquisition stage to identify arboricultural constraints and opportunities. (TDAG 4).
7. A good relationship with the consultant, the tree officer, the design team and the client. Collaboration!
8. Effective use of S106 to deliver community engagement and land management.
9. Robust and detailed tree related planning conditions, including site monitoring and supervision.
10. Site supervision carried out by the consultant and an audit record sent to the local authority.
11. Detailed landscaping conditions, including site monitoring by the landscape architect at the planting stage to ensure the correct species and cultivars are planted and to the correct specification. Details of planting maintenance to be conditioned.
12. Involvement of the arboriculturists at the post-planning detailed construction phase. Collaboration! (TDAG 5 and 6).
13. An effective enforcement system.

Not all councils have adopted the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Each council has their own list of how CIL will be spent (a Regulation 123 list) which details how the 'planning tax' is spent. Essentially, as this is to deliver particular infrastructure projects; listing tree planting as part of this would guarantee a tree planting budget. This is distinct from S106, which is

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normally scaled back once CIL is in place. I wonder how many tree officers have been consulted on this by their planning colleagues.

That is all achievable and there is nothing new here, but let's think about taking it to the next level.

At the time of the application, the developer wants a swift result. I have found clients very open to suggestions of new planting and involving the community in managing small woodlands on site and getting involved with new planting. Many people feel disconnected from the planning process and are suspicious of change, but done the right way, development can provide an opportunity for local people to get involved. This is in line with TDAG 9. Here are two cases where this has happened.

Example 1 – Broomfield Hospital, Essex. When the hospital was redeveloped, an S106 agreement obliged the NHS Trust to manage their two onsite woodlands to benefit the landscape, ecology and people. This led to a long standing community engagement project which not only improved the appearance of the area, but also made many volunteers feel valued and changed the culture of the estates staff. The Trust enjoyed the awards too.

It was delivered by the collective vision of the planning department, and the Trust's design team and was embedded in legal agreement.

Example 2 – a landlocked derelict contaminated site (2ha) in north London. This site has recently been given planning permission and the client wants to demonstrate their community and ecological credentials to make this an exemplar project. They gave the design team free rein to use their imaginations, and to develop a strategy to manage two small neglected woodlands and create exciting natural spaces using community groups. They started

consulting the groups before planning and this principle is embedded in the planning conditions and legal agreement. This is good for the site, enjoyable for all and good for the client's brand.

So how did the meeting go? Was it just another day at the office?... **Imagine**

They got the difficult bit over first; three new trees to replace the one felled because of the necessity to have crane access, one of which would be planted in the local school. The tree officer and the consultant, working together, produced a scheme to manage, plant, and involve local people to carry out the work on the pocket of land on the new site which was rather overgrown, improving it for the people and enhancing the ecological value. Block Builder homes said it would be great for their PR, as they were looking to show that they were different to other builders, and to cap it all, the tree officer said that it could all be tied up in a section 106 agreement. So as well as good tree care and new planting, they could unlock a piece of un-loved land at the back of the site, get local people involved, AND enhance the biodiversity of the area.



So. That's what could happen.

The planning system can deliver great benefits, but we need to work together. We may not, and perhaps should not, always agree, but we are linked. Consultants need strong tree officers with vision. Tree officers need engaged arboriculturists with passion and commitment. We have the best product and great academic resources but we also have a responsibility to let people know how important trees are.

Our landscape needs us to work together. Let's fall back in love with working with the best product in the world and hope our passion is infectious.

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**TDAG Trees in the Townscape November 2012*