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The ambition to embrace a natural capital accounting management approach in the Government's draft 25-year environment plan is to be applauded. However, it focuses on the rural and maritime environments because they form the bulk of our national estate, yet the built environment, where most people live, is virtually ignored.

Of course, the health of the nation is dependent on the condition of the wider environment, but the health of individual people is equally reliant on the quality of the micro environments in which they live.

Built environment quality affects ordinary people and it is existing trees that deliver the most immediate benefits. An obvious threat to living conditions is the erosion of tree canopy cover through ineffective planning, yet this existing green asset hardly gets a mention in emerging Government policy.

As planning falls within the remit of the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, I was expecting to see this gap covered in the National Planning Policy Framework update draft, but it has no direct reference to urban trees. Indeed, in a drive to streamline planning, there is pressure to dilute the strength of planning conditions and remove the need for local plans. Both measures would undermine our national ability to sustain urban canopy cover despite mounting evidence that more trees make places better to live in.

A closer look at other flagship Government policies such as transport, health and climate adaptation also reveals widespread inconsistencies in optimising the societal benefits from trees. Despite the evidence and broad political acceptance that trees can enhance the delivery of key policies, the reality is fewer trees, not more. There is a gaping tree policy gap across all Government departments. Each seems to be leaving it to the other and all have failed to see the omission.

An interesting proposal in the environment plan is the appointment of a national tree champion, but the remit needs expanding for the initiative to succeed. A national tree champion must consider all trees, both rural and urban, and have the authority to oversee consistent national policy implementation across all Government departments, and across all local councils.

That strategic framework to optimise societal benefit from all trees — a national tree strategy — is currently missing from central Government policy and the primary role of a national tree champion must be to create it and then oversee its delivery.

