



Opinion... Focus on trees that are fit for purpose

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# Focus on trees that are fit for purpose

Attending tree conferences around the world, the thrust is always the same — lots of spin showcasing project successes and creating a pervasive impression that everything is fine. But it's not. Everywhere I look I see the natural environment in crisis. Industrial farming and fishing are degrading nature on a breathtaking scale, fuelled by visionless politicians oblivious to public opinion.

The scale of international climate protests demonstrates how far behind governments lag, and it's the same for trees. It's obvious that high-quality trees are good for people, yet the politicians still cling to sound bites and shallow gestures focused on numbers instead of outcomes. I am heartened by the Government pledge of £10m for new urban trees, but it is not bold enough for the unfolding climate crisis. It is too little, too late.

Many nurseries continue to produce trees unfit for purpose and buyers continue to accept defective products, despite a British Standard (BS 8545) designed to stop the rot. It is encouraging that many new trees are being planted, but the lack of maintenance funding means few will reach their full potential. So the numbers game wheel keeps turning — low-quality trees, poorly planted, die after a few years and the cycle restarts. Politicians and nurseries win, the people lose, every time.

Although new planting creates a comfortable sense of progress, the real gains are in preventing the loss of existing trees to development. Established trees are already in place and delivering benefits right where they are needed most, close to people, so it is intelligent to work around the best ones. The planning mechanisms exist to do this, yet incompetent planners and local politicians consistently fail to deliver sustainable development.

We have the expertise, technology, and capacity to put this right, but the mindset is missing. Government must legislate based on outcomes, not numbers. There must be a focus on growing trees fit for purpose and planting them properly. All local planning authorities must have a written tree policy and dedicated tree officers to implement sustainable tree management.

The historic Government approach of passive persuasion isn't working. Instead, we need political leadership to drive positive change — and legislation in the forthcoming environmental bill is the way to do it.

