



Barrell on ... the need for a tree framework

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Delivering the 2009 Richard Dimbleby lecture, the Prince of Wales set out a stark warning that we ignore the importance of natural capital at our peril (www.princeofwales.gov.uk). Indeed, we see the debris of failed environmental delivery all around, whether it is streets without trees or councils with no green-space strategies. Trees are the visible currency of urban natural capital and, similar to the rainforests, declining canopy cover is an inevitable precursor to environmental bankruptcy.

Our urban canopy cover is declining because it is difficult to value intangible tree benefits, which makes it easy for local politicians and council officers to conveniently forget about them in the scramble to prioritise funds. We know that the environmental diversity trees support makes us feel better and healthier, it's obvious. What is not so obvious is the erosion of this resource through the disjointed and uncoordinated approach by national and local government to managing natural capital.

The Forestry Commission effectively manages our woodlands, empowered by the Forestry Act. However, this statutory duty does not extend to urban trees. Instead, the responsibility for their management lies with local councils, which vary dramatically in their delivery of government guidance. As *Trees in Towns II* has identified, only 28 per cent of councils had a specific tree strategy, demonstrating the inability of local government to grasp the importance and urgency of the climate change challenge. Adopted green space strategies could serve to secure our urban natural capital, yet a majority of councils have failed to step up to the mark.

We need a national tree management framework covering all trees, and the Forestry Commission has the credentials to administer it. The Government will say its flagship tree policy does that, but there is no statutory mandate or funding for such a widening of the Commission's remit. The failure lies with local government and so must the solution. But it requires national leadership.

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