

Urban Forest Accelerator Case Study:



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Strategy



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Seven steps to creating and implementing a successful urban tree strategy are shared in this case study, illustrated through the experiences of Belfast City Council and Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council.

STAGE ONE: PLANNING

BCP explained **“Make sure nature is at the forefront of when you're thinking about it... [creating a strategy] that was one of the things that I would say, I would want to emphasise with people.”** BCP implemented a green infrastructure strategy, which mandated more greening in urban development. They noted that **“one of the deliverables within the first part of the project was a green infrastructure strategy”** that aims to integrate urban greening factors into development sites. **“Our goal is to make sure every new development incorporates green elements,”** they added, underscoring the importance of sustainable urban planning.

In Belfast, the team worked with consultants and chose a group selected for their expertise combined with local knowledge. They held several meetings to discuss the direction and vision for the tree planting strategy, which proved to be a vital step in laying the groundwork and ended up with a strong vision. **“Our vision was that Belfast is a city which focuses on protecting, enhancing and expanding its woodlands, hedges and trees, connecting people to nature and ensuring that these continue to be a major asset to everyone who lives in, works in and visits their city.”**

STAGE TWO: CONSULTING WITH THE PUBLIC

In Belfast, the strategy emerged from extensive consultations with citizens, revealing a strong public interest in urban trees. **“We asked questions like, ‘Do you think there's enough trees in the city?’ and received over 600 responses,”** highlighting the community's eagerness to engage in the initiative. Public support for the project was robust, as evidenced by surveys and discussions. **“The feedback was brilliant,”** revealing that **“97% said there aren't enough trees in the city.”** This overwhelming response motivated the team, **“it focused our mind,”** inspiring them to devise an optimal strategy for increasing tree coverage in local towns and cities. There was strong community interest, **“There was a lot of interest in trees, and they were really keen to be part of it.”**

They also hosted a roadshow, presenting the draft strategy across various locations in Belfast. Activities included a tree clinic and tree planting demonstrations, which fostered direct engagement with the community. **“We went to a venue in North, South, West, East Belfast, and then the city centre,”** demonstrating their commitment to inclusivity. **“We formed a presentation for people who came along... We had demo's, we had some tree planting. All that information then that we received from the general public, we brought that back into the tree strategy development,”** explained the Belfast team. The interactions during the clinic, prompted thoughtful questions from participants, which in turn stimulated further reflection within the strategy team.

Engagement with stakeholders was the next critical phase, as well as meetings with both internal and external stakeholders to draft the tree strategy's vision and identify necessary actions. This collaborative effort was described as **“very, very informative, helpful,”** with team members taking extensive notes.

In Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole they focussed on engaging a wide range of local communities. One consideration was addressing accessibility and inclusivity within the urban forest initiatives. The team discussed, **“If you really test yourself on the people who aren't coming in, that encourages you down roads of making space for girls and looking at different communities that don't access our spaces.”** Designing inclusive spaces that cater to diverse community needs was important to make sure people felt welcome and engaged with urban forestry efforts. **“We're working with schools and community streets to introduce street trees,”** they added, although encouraging a balance of getting involved/safety is a challenge when working on highways.

STAGE THREE: SHARING KNOWLEDGE

The Belfast team took inspiration from Birmingham City Council's thirty-year master plan, noting, **"If we had a layout like that, it would be simple and easy to follow for the public."** They incorporated clear action plans, with **"Thirty-seven action plans and targets and priorities"** to guide their efforts.

They focused on enhancing collaboration among various stakeholders. **"It's important to learn from other local authorities,"** they emphasised, aiming to share insights on tree warden schemes and broader urban greening strategies, in order to make a meaningful impact on Belfast's urban landscape.

Biodiversity is another key consideration in Belfast. The strategy acknowledged the significance of not only trees but also hedgerows, stating, **"In local authorities, you can run out of land to plant trees, so we needed to look at hedges as well."** This view aims to create more integrated green infrastructure across various regions.

It was important to think about long term impact, and the team had considered and communicated how long trees would live and how that would be sustainable, **"Our aim is to focus on protecting, enhancing, and expanding woodlands, hedges, and trees."** They recognised the need to safeguard existing natural assets while also enhancing and expanding tree coverage.

STAGE FOUR: COLLABORATING

Belfast has many layers of authorities to engage with, and acting proactively has ensured smooth progression of consultations with **"the highway authority and the housing authority"** to obtain necessary approvals for planting sites. These authorities operate under central government frameworks, which have distinct policies compared to organisations like **"the National Trust and the Woodland Trust,"** which fall under local government jurisdiction.

Partnerships with internal colleagues, such as those in the Climate Resilience team, have also bolstered funding opportunities, where one team will pay for trees for the first year or two and then another will take over permanent maintenance.

Collaboration with the Woodland Trust has proven invaluable to the Belfast team, as they provided financial support for the development of the tree strategy through the emergency tree fund. **"It was a delight at the launch to have the director of the Woodland Trust speak,"** underscored the importance of these partnerships.

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole have also found collaboration is essential, as demonstrated by the partnerships formed between parks operations teams and community organisations. **"Working together with local groups is key to overcoming challenges,"** the team remarked. Although some efforts, such as introducing street trees, face challenges, like resistance from highway teams—the ongoing local plan process provides an opportunity for further integration of community input and green infrastructure. **"This is a chance for us to align our goals with community needs,"** they emphasised.



STAGE FIVE: LAUNCHING:



The launch of the tree strategy in Belfast gained significant public interest and engagement. The initiative received extensive media coverage, with reports on **"BBC News television and BBC Radio,"** as well as **"every newspaper in Northern Ireland."** This heightened visibility created a ripple effect, attracting the involvement of additional authorities and trusts in Northern Ireland and across England.

Effective communication has been paramount in garnering support for the strategy. Recognising that construction in certain areas could raise concerns among locals, the team focused on proactive communication: **"We've really tried to communicate everything in advance."** This effort has been greatly appreciated, enhancing community support and engagement.

STAGE SIX: TAKING ACTION

Strategies can be intangible. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole definitely learned that it is wise to match strategy with action where possible **"strategic work and something people can touch and see"** is the best approach. It was important to balance both aspects, if at all possible, the team said **"quite a lot of this is around culture and around changing people's ideas of what a space and a park should look like, but we have ended up with something I'm really, really proud of."**

It was clear that the strategy BCP had produced was already having an impact with colleagues and councillors, **"we've achieved that strategic evidence base that is compelling to leadership"** the team reflected, adding that they now had a route map for **"practical delivery ... we know what we need, where we need it... we've got the maps we've got the data we know where we're over provided [nowhere] but we know where we're really under provided and the ... next stages of the work that needs to happen"**

Belfast's strategy included 37 key actions over a 10-year period. The emphasis was on creating a living document that would not **"just gather dust,"** but rather serve as a practical guide for implementation.

That strategy is now taking action through the establishment of a tree warden scheme. This initiative aimed to identify potential planting sites throughout the city. **"We're looking for sites across the city... and sharing best practices,"** reflecting a commitment to collaborative planning.

"The key there is protecting, enhancing and expanding. We need to protect what we have." They emphasised.

The Belfast strategy identified suitable tree species. **"We have to think about the right tree for the right place,"** which includes both native and ornamental species that can thrive in diverse urban environments. The strategy outlines a list of recommended trees, such as **"sweet gum, liquidambar"** to ensure that selected species are resilient and beneficial in the long term. **"We need to prioritize trees that will adapt to our urban landscape,"** they added, acknowledging that some species, such as Scots pine, may not survive in the long term.

Climate change is having an impact on tree planting. **"When I tried to introduce some trees from London to Belfast, they sat in the ground, cursed for years, didn't move, didn't grow,"** one of the team, recounted. However, in recent years, these same species are **"bouncing out of the ground"** and growing at a phenomenal rate. This unexpected resurgence demonstrates how urban forestry efforts can adapt to shifting climatic conditions, allowing species (once deemed unsuitable) to thrive in Northern Ireland.

Alongside the species, the strategy covers a comprehensive tree planting plan for Belfast. **"We've published ... the city into electoral wards, and then we've looked at potential sites to plant trees."** This methodical approach allows for targeted interventions in different areas, ensuring that tree planting efforts have maximum local impact.

The involvement of volunteers in tree planting is something Belfast wants to do more of. **"The council is putting money towards setting a [volunteer manager] post up."** Increased volunteer engagement not only amplifies available funding but also demonstrates community commitment, potentially leading to new employment opportunities. **"We also want to look at a woodland creation officer's post,"** further shows this potential.

Tree equity was used to identify areas in Belfast lacking adequate tree cover, particularly in socio-economically challenged regions. **"We're looking at areas of deprivation and where there's a lack of cover,"** they noted, emphasising a dual focus on environmental needs and social equity. This approach aims to enhance climate resilience through increased canopy cover in underserved neighbourhoods.

Community demand for urban trees is strong, particularly in areas recovering from historical challenges. The leader remarked, **"The key message especially from people in various areas of working class [in Belfast], is they want more trees."** This enthusiasm presents an opportunity to encourage residents to plant trees in their gardens, fostering a culture of local stewardship. However, the challenge lies in effectively managing this interest: **"There's no shortage of volunteers wanting to get involved as well. It's just how you manage that. I think that's the next big hurdle for us."** Developing structured volunteer programs and outreach initiatives will be crucial for harnessing this community spirit.

Community engagement through initiatives, like the proposed tree warden scheme in Belfast, is vital. **"Empowering residents, especially in areas of deprivation, is vital for the success of our urban forestry efforts."** This initiative aims to enable community members to take an active role in the stewardship of urban forests. This was also true in BCP where **"Because the most important thing is the person who came along to a volunteer experience and got something out of that."**

STAGE SEVEN: MEASURING PROGRESS

The strategy has led to notable achievements, such as Belfast achieving the status of **"Tree Cities of the World."** A member of the project expressed delight, stating, **"We managed to apply and successfully get tree cities of the world status, which we're really delighted about."** This recognition not only validates the efforts put into urban forestry but also emphasises the importance of adaptability and resilience in the face of unexpected outcomes.

To ensure ongoing accountability, this strategy will undergo an independent review after its first year, with additional reviews every three years. After all, **"What you don't measure, you can't progress, can you?"**

Performance indicators, available in a range of formats (including Easy Read) where impact is represented pictorially with **"smiley faces,"** helped communicate the strategy's progress to stakeholders and members of the public in Belfast.

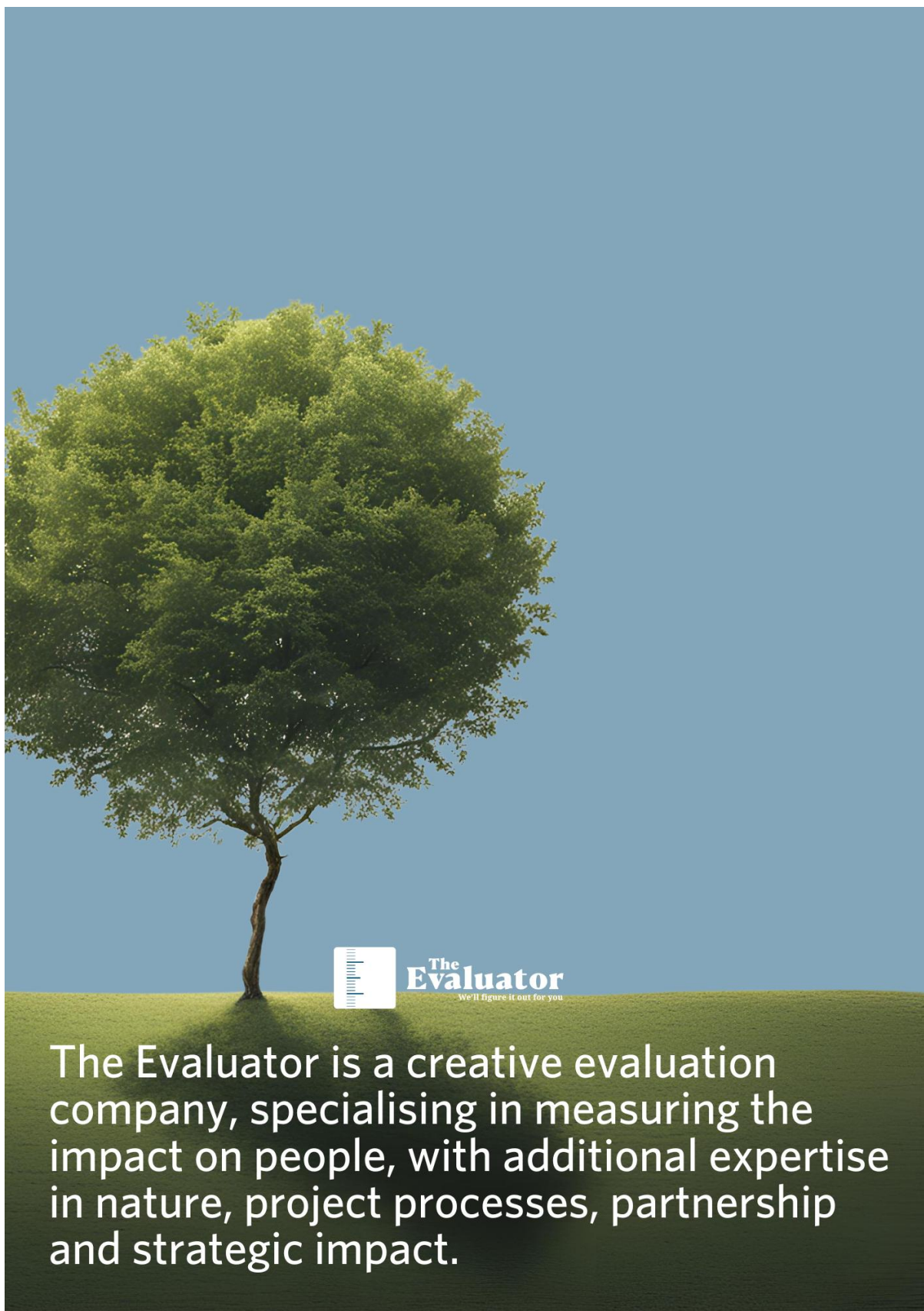
WHAT IS NEXT?

A critical action moving forward is to revisit and refine the tree establishment planting plan in Belfast. This reassessment will ensure that the chosen tree species are appropriate for current environmental conditions and community needs. It was emphasised, **"We have to adjust our tree species going forward,"** highlighting the necessity of ongoing evaluation and adaptability in species selection.

Another area of focus is going to be the sustainable use of resources generated through tree management activities. The team discussed, **"One thing I'd like to see in this strategy is how we utilize the wood that we create with our tree nursery."** Implementing plans for repurposing wood can not only reduce waste but also support local economies and promote sustainable practices within the community.

Funding remains a significant concern for the longevity of urban forestry projects. A project member stated, **"My mind at the moment is how we continue funding some of these projects,"** emphasising the importance of demonstrating the impact of these initiatives to secure future resources. To achieve this, the team must focus on collecting and presenting evidence of their successes and community benefits, which will be vital for attracting ongoing support.

Ultimately, this strategic step by step process works with people and trees to have the best possible impact on urban greenery.



The Evaluator is a creative evaluation company, specialising in measuring the impact on people, with additional expertise in nature, project processes, partnership and strategic impact.

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