

Case Study: Community Engagement



**The
Evaluator**
We'll figure it out for you



**The
Evaluator**

theevaluator.co.uk

WHY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS?

Community engagement is vital in urban areas, more so than rural areas, simply because, there are more members of the community around!

The Urban Forest Accelerator Project has been working with Birmingham Tree People to develop community engagement through the provision of two roles; a full-time Engagement Officer and a part-time Communications Officer.

One of the key elements of engaging with people is to make sure you approach them as early as possible, ideally from the start of the project, to foster a sense of ownership within the community, **"Having people involved from the beginning so that people feel that it's being done with them and not to them"** matters, explained the Community Engagement Officer at Birmingham Tree People.

"It's about...asking them, what do you think? How do you think we should do this? What's your idea?" says the Engagement Officer, showing how to involve the community in decision making. By using the communities' strengths, which were found through building relationships, listening to stories, and the aspirations of local residents, this kind of engagement helps to create lasting connections between people and their environment.

Involving people in the community from the start of the project, enables them to feel included and be proud of their own urban greenery as it grows and thrives.

LOOK FOR WHAT EXISTS ALREADY AND CAN BE ENHANCED

This community engagement work focussed on the strengths of communities and working together in a positive way. By emphasising local interests, and relationships with nature, they were able to encourage sustainable environmental stewardship whilst empowering residents to take ownership of their environment.

"I do love to see the trees in the autumn as the colours change. They're quite vivid. But I also think they do a lot more than that, they soak up water, so that helps with flooding, and they also cleanse the air" – A participant said, at a Birmingham Tree People activity.

The Engagement Officer here, started by listening to local partners and understanding their needs and ideas. They said, **"the main thing is getting across... to ask communities and then support them with the ideas that they bring forward."** This approach cultivates trust and empowers residents, making them active participants rather than passive recipients of externally imposed activities.

Relationship building is essential to the project's success. The importance of collaboration is highlighted by



working with local organisations too. The Engagement Officer explained **“having a good partner in the main community organisation”** deepens engagement and facilitates richer interactions.

Through open conversations about trees, in this example, residents were encouraged to share their stories and feelings, enhancing their emotional connections to the local environment. The Engagement Officer expressed how these exchanges foster a sense of community: **“People shared stories about trees... it felt nice, like bonding together.”**

HOW THIS ENGAGEMENT SUPPORTED PEOPLE TO CONNECT TO TREES

This engagement work has been led by the desire to connect people to trees, starting with their current experience. **“Having rich conversations with people about trees and how they feel about them... It’s about understanding people’s feelings about trees.”**

The team worked with a diverse audience and used **“sharing stories from their homelands about relationships to trees”** for example, **“how long they’ve known a particular tree?”**. The tree could have been a favourite spot for children to play, have a greater emotional meaning, or be a tree that is simply passed every day. In Birmingham **“there’s been quite a high amount of tree loss”** explained the Engagement Officer. This created opportunities to connect to trees through a discussion of how someone might feel if their special tree was no longer there.

An important fact is that everyone is different, and because of these differences there needs to be multiple forms of engagement and connection for people to trees through **“diversity in the way people connect to trees and trying to bring together all those different ways”** said the Engagement Officer.

This engagement work brought people together. **“It became a collective home, all the reading out of some true stories”** when people came together to talk about trees. **“It felt nice, like a bonding together of us all ... rich conversation and musings on trees and in the neighbourhood.”**

This project aimed to enhance community involvement in tree planting and stewardship, recognising that planting trees is just the beginning. Successful establishment requires a community that nurtures and cares for them.

They did this through encouraging collaborative decision-making and storytelling, which fostered a deeper connection between residents and their environment. The Engagement Officer explained **“We wanted to try and find ways to support communities, have involvement in deciding what we plant, where we plant, and how we plant.”**

CREATIVE WAYS TO WORK WITH PEOPLE AND TREES

A variety of creative activities were introduced to engage the community, including workshops, art projects and poetry sessions.

For example, a poster competition for children, which aimed to encourage people to water newly planted trees. **“We selected the four winners... and thought about where we might put the posters up,”** showcasing how creativity can inspire action, explained the Engagement Officer.

Another example was making tea, “collecting lime leaves to make some lime leaf lime flower tea... We went out, the four of us to collect some lime leaves, came back and then drank the tea and laughed” said the Engagement Officer. Through this activity they were able to connect with each other and with the trees.



An interactive tree walk allowed participants to connect with trees in a personal way, the officer observed, **“It’s about space to explore our relationships with trees and strengthen them.”** This narrative approach not only builds emotional ties but also encourages ongoing stewardship. This has led to increased awareness and appreciation for trees within the community. As one participant reflected after a tree walk, **“I’m always going to be looking up now and looking at my street in a new way.”** This indicates a lasting impact on community attitudes towards their green spaces.

By using both creative and participatory approaches, this has successfully cultivated a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members, ensuring the long-term health and care of the trees they plant, water and nurture.

COMMUNICATING WITH COMMUNITIES

Social media plays a pivotal role in this engagement strategy. The Communications Officer has supported community engagement through platforms like Facebook and Instagram to connect with volunteers and share visually appealing content. They remarked, **“the whole tagging, the whole sharing, the whole kind of online community thing seems to work really well.”** This approach enhances visibility and encourages community interaction, nurturing a sense of connection among participants.

Strategic use of social media helps to build partnerships and by tagging groups and collaborating on posts, Birmingham Tree People enhance engagement which broadens its reach. **“I’ve found that using social media that way has worked really well and it’s actually got other people interested,”** explained one member of staff, demonstrating the power of digital networking.

Despite the successes, there are challenges related to planning and internal communication. **“Things can kind of run away a little bit sometimes,”** highlighting the need for timely information sharing. To overcome this, Birmingham Tree People’s online presence also relies on the enthusiasm and contributions from community partners, whose active online presence supports broader engagement **“Their images, their texts, they’re full of enthusiasm”** this helps maintain momentum and interest through online engagement.

SHARING STORIES

A key approach is an emphasis on narrative-driven engagement. As the Communication Officer noted, **"we need to share those narratives better"** and ensure that storytelling begins **"right from the beginning."** This method has enabled participants to feel included in the journey, cultivating a sense of belonging and community investment. By showcasing different stages of the tree planting process—from selecting trees at their arrival and planting—UFA invites people to **"join you on your journey."**

OFFER DIFFERENT WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

Recognise that not everyone can physically participate in planting activities and create various avenues for engagement. **"Not everybody's going to be able to come out and plant a tree,"** so the organisation focused on sharing experiences and providing opportunities for people to connect in different ways. Inclusivity is crucial for broadening the participation base and ensuring that diverse voices are heard.

COLLABORATE COLLABORATE COLLABORATE

The organisation emphasises and encourages collaboration with local groups and individuals. By asking community members, **"What do you think? How do you think we should do this?"** This engagement project empowered people to shape their own narratives and involvement. This approach not only builds ownership but also honours local heritage and individual stories.

START AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE IN THE ACTIVITY LIFETIME

A critical aspect of the Urban Forest Accelerator is its adherence to the principles of co-production. One Engagement Officer told us how **"it's not co-production unless communities are involved in writing the brief and starting as early as possible can build deeper relationships which have lasting impact."** This principle of co-production ensures that community voices are not just heard but actively shape the initiatives that impact their lives.

START AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE IN THE COMMUNITIE'S LIFETIME

"Doing sessions for schools and getting kids to think about what trees give us" will help to connect people to trees from a younger age, whilst they are learning, at the intensity of a young mind. This knowledge will cement and stay with them throughout life, helping them stay connected to trees, which the Engagement Officer explained as **"that's the most powerful thing that this project could do"**.

BE FLEXIBLE

Diversity is another hallmark of this kind of community-led engagement. Activities are tailored to reflect the unique characteristics of those taking part, with the Engagement Officer observing, **"It's always different... but trying to find my own flavour for doing them."** This flexibility

allows for creativity, whether through arts, play, or reflective workshops, adapting to various age groups and cultural backgrounds.

MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

One Engagement Officer emphasised the importance of making sure you approach people in the right way, **“Some places we've seen...social media works really, really well...in other places, it hasn't worked,”** explaining how the use of social media may not always be the best way to engage people with projects.

Often in-person work is needed **“the biggest thing is being physically present”** explained the Community Engagement Officer, highlighting the significance of in-person engagement.

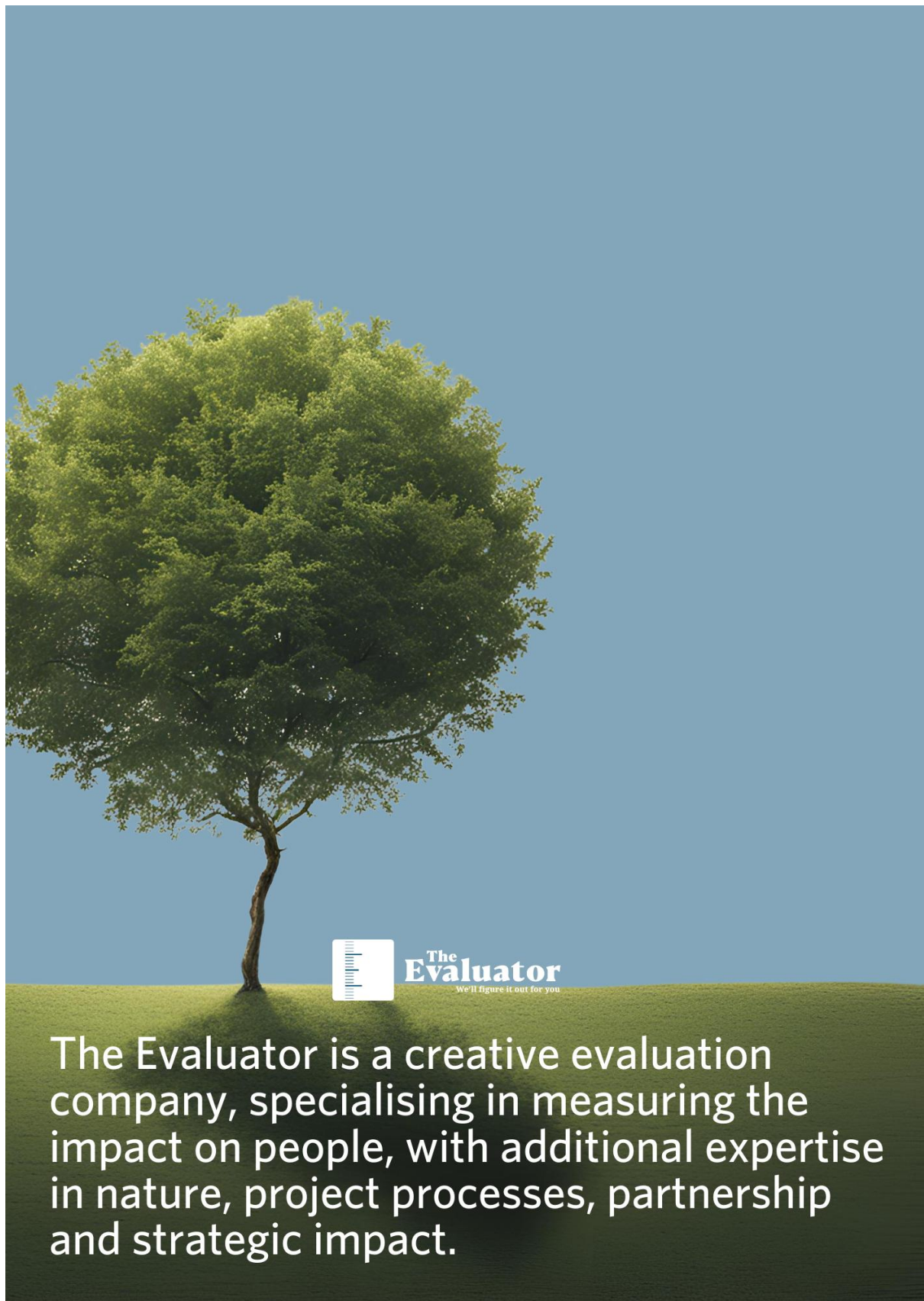
Ultimately the most important aspect of trying to initially engage and first talk to people is tailoring communication to match the specific group, either through social media or in-person engagement.

CONCLUSION

Working from previously formed connections, creates a positive effect which can help to connect more of the community, as the Engagement Officer said, **“it's about simply supporting connections to grow to trees because that will have ripple effects, even if it's not within the project lifespan.”**

Community engagement through qualitative storytelling, diverse involvement opportunities, and effective social media use, provides a robust framework for other organisations aiming to build connection to trees and environmental stewardship.

By focusing on inclusivity and collaboration, this engagement not only enhances community participation but also strengthens the narrative around urban forestry, encouraging a shared commitment to environmental care. In fact, **“reaching new people, reaching diverse audiences,” could be a guiding principle of community engagement** ensuring that the message resonates across all different kinds of people.



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.

This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



**The
Evaluator**

theevaluator.co.uk