



Plymouth's Community Forest: a plan for place-based funding & engagement



A strategic review of urban forestry in Plymouth

Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest is an ambitious partnership project which aims to create an equitable and accessible woodland network that connects people and places. Delivering benefits for individuals, communities, the environment and the economy, and protecting future generations through sustainable management and care.

This strategic review takes a closer look at the key achievements so far and explores ways they might build on this early success together through blended finance and place-based engagement opportunities.

There are two sections to this review:

1. **5 enabling factors:** highlights how the forest was established and what people, policies and procedures enabled the progress so far.
2. **10 ingredients for success:** highlights possibilities for enhancing growth, strengthening delivery and sustaining existing work.

5 enabling factors

Where are we now?

We look at what was in place and what has been achieved in five key areas:



The policy
background



The political
background



Organisational
opportunities



Operational
opportunities



People and
preparedness

[Jump to ingredients for growth >](#)



What was in place?

Strategic plans and evidence-based reports that painted a picture of the present-day urban forest and established a cross-border strategy for green infrastructure.

What have we achieved?

Recognition that the strong and coherent policy context could support the creation of a community forest. Together with a clear understanding of how tree-related plans could deliver other social and economic outcomes.



What was in place?

A strong and enduring political commitment in Plymouth that placed the environment at the heart of decision making. There was cross-party recognition of the importance of green and blue infrastructure and community projects being delivered across political boundaries

What have we achieved?

Rapid political support for progressing with a community forest bid. The creation of political champions for the environment, trees and woodlands. Plymouth acted as a catalyst with neighbouring councils aligning around the openings and opportunities.



What was in place

There has been a long history of the council working in partnership with NGOs. Existing delivery partnerships with NGOs were looking to push forward together on new opportunities. An active Plymouth Tree Warden Network.

What have we achieved?

There was rapid mobilisation around new opportunities. Existing delegation and trust within and between organisations reduced preliminary work and a community forest partnership was immediately established.



What was in place?

Collaborative partnership teams with a can-do attitude already existed. The operational plans of each organisation were flexible and strategic plans were owned by a broad partnership.

What have we achieved?

An existing management structure took ownership of the community forest. Existing delivery mechanisms drove the launch of the forest and these structures offered a solid base for development.



What was in place?

There were existing strong relationships between senior officers across the organisations, with a recognition of individual and organisational strengths.

What have we achieved?

The community forest acted as a platform for bringing together a range of existing opportunities. There was an ability to act rapidly with autonomy, but within a clear delegated framework.

10 ingredients for growth

What could be next? We explore different ideas to encourage continued growth within 10 key areas:



Partnerships and
involving
communities



Vision, objectives,
principles and
targets



Plan and policy
alignment



Governance



Land use



Funding and
finance



Operational
delivery & support
mechanisms



Skills and training



Agility and
flexibility



Communications
and stakeholder
engagement



- Identify and grow from existing partnerships where trust and rapport has already been established – not least between local authorities, charities and community organisations.
- Embed an ethos of partnership by default and ensure organisational and political structures are well placed to support partnership working.
- Align, support and learn with existing hyperlocal initiatives. Support existing tree networks, including tree warden groups.
- Develop public health, business and social enterprise partners to broaden reach and impact.
- Develop a range of opportunities with Public Health and NHS - from partnership projects on land through to social prescribing and shared approaches to the health benefits of tree equity.
- Consider if new partners are most effective within a governing Board or alongside in advisory and support roles.



- Ensure urban forestry is fully embedded in the organisational vision, rather than a standalone issue. Emphasise the multiple benefits. Place trees and woods as part of vibrant and healthy communities. Develop an evidence base (e.g. using i-tree data).
- Consider the bigger picture - assuming urban forestry sits as an environmental responsibility alone will constrain ambition and impact.
- Ensure urban forestry is the responsibility of all departments – not least carbon, health and infrastructure. Update objectives for health, access, nature and other environmental benefits.
- Be ambitious with targets. The Tree Equity Score tool gives an overall target for canopy cover and drives high impact activity.
- Use the 3-30-300 measure to ensure:
 - Everyone can see 3 trees
 - The urban area has 30% canopy cover
 - Everyone can access an area of trees within 300m
- Celebrate place and tell a story.



- Deliver urban forestry effectively by ensuring others are responsible for outcomes in their plans and policies. Spread the policy load across social, environmental and economic plans.
- Recognise the impact and role of urban forestry – consider urban trees and forestry in Health and Wellbeing Strategies, Local Transport and Infrastructure plans and policies.
- Consider producing a Joint Local Plan with neighbouring local planning authorities. This can be an effective way to plan for regional strategic priorities and unify the approach to urban forestry across boundaries.



- See local authorities as a logical host for urban forestry delivery. They can appreciate the bigger picture and adapt plans, policies, funding and projects to align to delivery.
- Remember that Trusts, charities and other not-for-profits offer greater access to wider funds, members and a different audience.
- Consider how hybrid local authority and not-for-profit partnership delivery arrangements may offer flexibility, with variability in the amount and sources of funds for urban forestry. In hybrid models, stakeholders can play to their respective strengths.
- Establish flexible governance and be prepared to respond rapidly to potential changes in funding. Having flexible arrangements will help the transition from start-up to establishment stage.
- Consider wide formal partner and community input.
- Consider including health, business and social enterprise members on the governing Board.



- See access to land as fundamental to any expansion of the urban forest.
- Undertake an asset audit of council and partner owned land as a starting point for understanding urban forestry capacity.
- Understand the existing tree stock and plan for replacement and enhancement in situ (not least in response to issues such as Ash Dieback) to maintain the extent of the urban forest.
- Use the planning process and “call-for-sites” exercises to identify privately owned land that might be mutually beneficial. Refresh any previous asset reviews to identify a pipeline of opportunity sites.
- Use a “call for sites” to promote urban forestry and offer support to private landowners to plant and manage trees.
- Ensure accessible and helpful data and mapping tools are available.



Differentiate and focus separately on these three costs:

- **Management costs.** Embed long-term costs into your financial plans to create a stable budget. This will need sustained arrangements and commitment from finance teams and local authority leaders.
- **Project costs.** Capital costs are easier to fund but organisations and places need to ensure back-office management costs are covered. One-off grant funding can pump prime longer-term revenue streams.
- **Maintenance costs.** It is crucial that these are factored in, ring-fenced and then deployed effectively. Factor in at least 10 years of maintenance costs for Nature for Climate funding and 30 years for Biodiversity Net Gain related funds.

Consider broadening funding sources to supplement government funding.



- Be clear how individuals and organisations can get involved in urban forest operations.
- Consider the benefits of integrating all urban forestry operations across a place into a single, coherent programme. Rationalise the overlap between organisations, initiatives and mechanisms.
- Plan to share delivery, offers, publicity, promotion and public and volunteer engagement across partner organisations.
- Use good data and clear maps to drive community engagement and involvement.
- Align mapping and data to nationally used, open-source systems such as Tree Equity Score, i-Tree and Ecoserv. Local solutions will vary but will allow for national comparison.
- Link to formal canopy cover measures driven by Planning Policy, Net Zero or Local Nature Recovery Strategy processes.
- Consider co-ordinated, one-stop support services for any organisation delivering urban forestry. This could cover data and mapping, advisory services, tree supply and tree management.



- Understand the land management and forest skills network and capacity locally.
- Address current skills shortage across the land management sector through accredited and informal urban forestry skills and training.
- Adapt training and support programmes to address the gaps you have identified.
- Support in-house skills development for urban forestry staff and apprenticeship programmes to build capacity.
- Explore training programmes for young people.
- Introduce digital badge accreditation as a simple, accessible means of demonstrating skills development.
- Develop partnerships with educational providers.



- Act quickly to seize opportunities, both locally and nationally.
- Create strong alignment and co-ordination between initiatives, ensuring agility and flexibility is not lost.
- Understand the limits of your flexibility, especially when establishing new partnerships to enhance delivery.
- Remain comfortable with developing your ideas in conversation with other local authorities or organisations, even in times of uncertainty.



- Continue building community support through publicity and engagement.
- Develop a cross-sector communications strategy and plan, including all partner organisations and activities.
- Share tasks and roles to ensure the benefits and rollout of urban forestry are owned as community actions from the beginning.



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