

Local authorities in Scotland: a catalyst for community engagement in urban forests?

Both local government and community engagement are central concepts in urban forestry, yet local authority (LA) managers are often caught between centralising and participatory agendas. Using three case studies, this research explored the situation in Scotland. It found that LA involvement in community engagement in urban forests was constrained by finances and statutory responsibilities, with the urban forest seen as a risk and a cost. Contemporary relationships between LAs and groups can however be constructive but if urban community woodland is to be more widely adopted, urban woodlands must be seen as an asset rather than a liability.



'Engagement with councils, who are the key stakeholders in the urban context, must be paramount'.
Contributor to the WIAT evaluation

Background

Local government and community engagement are important ideas in urban forestry, with 'participation' becoming an important expectation of local government in the UK. Despite the critical role of LAs in urban forestry (e.g. due to their ownership of urban forest land and their status as local institutions of democracy), little research has explored this issue, particularly in Scotland.

Objectives

This research explored three research questions: 1) What are the structures and processes of urban forest governance which provide the scope for community engagement?; 2) How does local government's status as a landowner contribute to the potential for demonstrating the involvement of communities in sustainable urban forest management? 3) Which delivery mechanisms work in the urban context, and how to they contribute to outcomes?

Methods

Evidence was drawn from three existing projects using qualitative interviews. Using a previously developed framework, a distinction was made between different types of engagement: 1) informing and consulting; 2) involvement; 3) partnership and 4) empowerment.

Findings

Community engagement in urban woodlands owned by LAs is not widespread. Indeed, the current expectations around engagement are implicit where as explicit statutory responsibilities emphasise a more risk based approach. There are however important cases where engagement is happening. These are often the result of the particular interest of LA staff, where community groups lead demand or where specific grants provide incentives. The role of LAs in engagement lies more with their status as an asset owner, with their activities focused on improving access or environmental conditions rather than increasing involvement of communities in decision-making about sites. Where communities are involved in woodland maintenance it is often via 'Friends of' groups (FoG) and most commonly these have been established on the initiative of the LA. Community engagement initiated outside of LAs are developing more collaborative or empowered forms of woodland management. A scarcity of funding, skills and motivation to take engagement forward act as barriers to community engagement. There was a strong view that building and maintaining community relationships requires specific staffing and without grant aid or partnership working LAs may not continue community engagement.

Recommendations

There is clearly more scope for greater community engagement in urban forestry and this could be a means for distributing LA responsibilities to communities and improving woodland management. A key goal must be for urban woodlands to be regarded by LAs an asset rather than a liability. Explicit networking and learning amongst community groups and LAs to realise the potential of urban woodlands should be encouraged.

This research was focussed upon the perspectives and experiences from within LAs. It would be valuable to take this further and explore the experiences of community groups themselves.

For further information contact: bianca.ambrose-oji@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

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