



# Public Perceptions of Urban Trees in England, Scotland and Wales: Key Results

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## Background

This summary report provides results from the Public Perceptions of Urban Trees survey and focus group research undertaken by Forest Research during 2020/21 across Great Britain. The key focus of the research was to explore people's attitudes and perceptions towards trees in urban areas, tree cover, support for tree planting, and management and maintenance of trees. The research included a focus on trees in a variety of settings from those in private gardens, public streets, parks, and woods to those alongside important infrastructure including roadside verges and railway lines. The survey included 4,400 participants in England, 1,000 in Scotland and 600 in Wales. In England 33 people participated in focus groups, 17 in Scotland and 18 in Wales. Participants, all over 18 years of age, were recruited based on their location, age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic group to gain a representative sample of the contemporary urban British population. The sample includes over 1,000 participants from different Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.

The full survey data can be explored through an interactive dashboard<sup>1</sup>. Findings from the focus groups are available as a separate [report](#). The groups were run before and after the survey to aid development of the survey questions and an exploration of and validation of the survey results (Ambrose-Oji et al. 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> [Public Perceptions of Urban Trees - Forest Research](#)

### What kinds of urban trees are valued?

The survey showed that participants valued urban trees the most when they were in woodlands, parks and recreation grounds open to the public, community gardens, and amenity areas (schools, hospitals etc.). White participants valued trees in woods, parks and recreation grounds slightly more than BAME participants. Trees located along railway lines, in residential streets, roadsides and roundabouts were valued but slightly less than in the locations mentioned above.

The focus group results confirmed the valued locations highlighted above, noting that urban woodlands and parks provide access to trees for individuals without a private garden, host a larger and more diverse range of trees (in all sizes), and encourage active participation with nature through recreation activities, family outings and exercise. It is important to note the value of public amenity areas for urban trees, which was expressed in the focus groups through discussions about the lack of trees in new developments and the need to ensure that developments of all types include the planting of trees and provide everyday access for people to urban trees. Overall, and particularly in the focus groups, trees were viewed as important and valuable to have close to home.

### Benefits of urban trees for people

Those with higher levels of education and older participants were more likely to agree that urban trees were good for mental and physical health and that trees made towns and cities better places, with those from a BAME background being slightly less likely to agree. There was unanimous agreement across the country focus groups that attitudes to urban trees had changed significantly with Covid-19 leading to a continued or sometimes first-time appreciation of trees. The focus groups participants expressed a range of emotional responses to urban trees including relaxation, rejuvenation, admiration and how trees supported feelings of being close to nature, as well as feelings of being away from the 'concrete jungle'.

The survey demonstrated that education and ethnicity were predictors of childhood visits to nature, with 89% of those with a degree visiting nature in childhood as opposed to 73% with no formal qualification. White participants (88%) were significantly more likely to report frequent or occasional childhood visits to nature compared to BAME participants (77%).

*I just feel like I can..breathe more and easier because it's big, it's green, it's all shapes and sizes... It just feels like you're in a different world. I also feel relaxed when I'm there. I sleep really well. (England)*

*...the tree that my grandad sat under's still there, and it's so nice just to still see that tree there, you know. It just takes you back. (Scotland)*

### How should urban trees be managed?

Survey participants suggested urban trees in public areas should be maintained to protect the safety of residents. Also, participants highlighted that they did not appreciate excessive management such as anti-wildlife measures and tree guards that affected the aesthetic and environmental benefits of trees. Women were significantly more likely to be annoyed about the use of anti-wildlife measures.

Older participants were more likely to be pleased with autumn leaves being cleared, but they were less likely to be pleased with tree branches in their street being trimmed. Older people were also more likely to be annoyed by a lack of management and this was most pronounced for hedges in gardens and public spaces not being trimmed and growing out to intrude into pavement spaces. In general, people were most likely to be annoyed when damaged trees (53%) and untrimmed hedges (49%) were left unmanaged and with street tree removal (50%). White participants were more likely to be annoyed about unmanaged trees or tree removal than BAME participants, those with no dependents were more likely to be annoyed about lack of tree management and tree removal and people with no formal education were less likely to be annoyed. However, these differences were small.

Focus group participants had little understanding and felt poorly informed about who owns and manages trees in different urban settings. However, there was a degree of confidence in local authorities as the most likely managers of trees in public spaces. Participants also expected to be provided with information about significant changes to trees such as removal or major management activities.

### Who should pay for urban trees and provide financial support?

Survey participants broadly agreed that polluting industries and sectors should help to pay for tree management and planting in urban areas (68.5%), and that central government should make more money available to maintain and enhance tree cover in towns and cities across the UK (67%). Older people were more likely to agree with these statements while younger people were more likely to say they already supported urban trees through charitable donations. Those with a higher education and employed participants were more willing to pay higher council tax and 'adopt a tree' schemes to pay for urban trees and their care. BAME participants were more likely to agree that those with better access to trees should pay more council tax than those in poorer areas than White participants.

Participants in the survey thought local authorities (53%) as well as government agencies (34%) should receive financial support to manage urban trees. Those in the focus groups also described having more confidence in local authorities when it came to the planting, management, and maintenance of trees. They were less likely to suggest that tree surgeons (17%) and tenants (16%) receive financial support to manage trees in their neighbourhood.

## Is urban tree cover adequate?

None of the focus group participants stated that there were too many trees in their towns, cities and neighbourhoods. In the survey, participants were more likely to state that there were 'too few' trees in towns and cities (37%) compared to their neighbourhoods (33%), and this was also true for large trees (39%). However, retired individuals were less likely to suggest there were too few trees compared to employed individuals and homemakers. Men tended to think there were too few trees compared to women, but the difference was small. Differences in desire for tree cover between towns, cities and neighbourhoods was explained by focus group participants' who expressed a desire for more equitable tree cover, with new tree plantings occurring in areas where there are fewer trees. It was suggested that this was often the case in more deprived areas as outlined in the quote below.

*I think the master plan is also really important for more equitable distribution of trees because some councils are very rich and other councils aren't. Why should poorer neighbourhoods have less trees? I think that's a problem. There needs to be more equitable distribution. (England)*

Levels of support for new tree planting exceeded 70% across the majority of different area types. People were slightly less likely to be as supportive of tree planting along railway lines (55%), and roadsides and roundabouts (60%). They were more likely to be supportive of new tree planting in parks and recreational areas (84%), urban woodlands (84%), and other amenity areas.

Higher levels of education and being White were associated with being more supportive of new tree planting across all areas and women were generally more supportive of tree planting. Men were more supportive of tree planting along railway lines compared to women. The unemployed were less likely to support planting on residential streets than employed individuals and retired individuals were less likely to support planting along canals and riverbanks compared to those in employment.

Older participants were more likely to be supportive of new tree planting across a range of areas, but younger people were more likely to be supportive of planting around residential streets. Removal of urban trees annoyed 50% of survey participants particularly if it was a valued older tree and if no explanation was given for the removal.

*There is a tree... I can just about see it from my window, ... There's a big sign on it at the moment to say they want to pull it down for development. It's a hundred-year-old oak tree. ... that's a big story in our little suburb at the moment. (England)*

### Are people getting involved in actions for urban trees?

Participants were asked if they had undertaken any actions for urban trees such as planting a tree, carried out any maintenance of a tree, protested or made a complaint about an urban tree. A third (34%) had planted a tree in their garden, 30% had carried out maintenance on a tree they owned and 21% had spoken to a neighbour about a tree that was causing a problem. Younger participants were more likely to have done the majority of the actions listed in the survey with the exception of having carried out maintenance on a tree they own. Those with a higher education were more likely to have planted trees in their garden, employed a tree surgeon on their property and carried out maintenance on a tree they own. BAME participants were slightly more likely than White participants to have spoken to a neighbour about a tree on their property, protested about the removal of a tree, lobbied for tree removal or complained about a tree in their neighbourhood. Those who were retired, and garden owners tended to have undertaken more tree management activities. 26% of survey participants had done none of these activities.

Getting involved in actions for trees was also quite low amongst focus group participants, with people often struggling to provide examples of their involvement and often pointing to involvement of friends or family. The most frequently mentioned type of involvement was tree planting in private gardens. Other examples participants spoke of were initiatives organized by their workplace or connected with schools, while others spoke of getting involved in litter picking or community gardening initiatives which are not specifically focused on trees. A lack of time, awareness or emotional connection to trees were outlined as barriers to getting involved, and some spoke of taking urban trees for granted until a catalyst such as tree removal or Covid-19 gave people pause for reflection about their importance. For some, involvement in taking action for trees seemed daunting and would require too much time commitment to get involved.

The participants also talked about the importance of meaningful participation and being able to see the results of their own efforts if taking action for trees and wider nature.

### Importance of engaging children

The importance of promoting children's involvement from a young age was a strong theme in the focus group discussions. This was both as part of their education and so that they could benefit, it was also felt that it would foster further interest in the environment in the future and could influence parents and carers.

*I think we'd be staggered if you actually spoke to the average eight, ten, 12, 13-year-old and their interest in the environment, and their concern and worry about these things is amazing. Absolutely amazing. They are much more aware. (Wales)*

### Would people like to engage in actions for urban trees?

Participants were asked if they would be interested in getting involved in a range of activities such as volunteering to plant or care for trees, donating money every three months to support organisations that care for trees, joining ad hoc events and campaigns, joining a community group that cared for trees, or becoming a tree warden. Just under a third (31%) were not interested in getting involved in these activities, though younger participants stated they would be more interested in donating money than older participants. More women than men were interested in planting a tree in their own garden, with men being slightly more interested in becoming a tree warden. Higher education was associated with an increased interest in the majority of the listed activities. BAME participants were more likely than White participants to be interested in donating money and volunteering to maintain trees in public spaces. Employed people were most likely to be interested in volunteering to water trees in public spaces, donate money and join community groups. Unsurprisingly those with gardens were more likely to be interested in planting a tree in their own garden.

### Consultation and communication about tree management

Many categories of the public, notably BAME participants, those with a degree or higher education, the retired and those who are employed all expressed satisfaction if they had been consulted about urban tree management practices – they appreciated being involved.

The most effective communications to encourage involvement or create awareness about urban tree planting, management and protection were thought to be television, YouTube/Instagram, websites of national organisations and local authorities.

Older participants found local authority websites and national newspapers effective while younger people used a wider range of media including YouTube/Instagram /Vlogs, radio, Twitter, television and printed media. Those who were retired found Twitter less effective while BAME participants found YouTube/Instagram/Vlogs, printed media and radio effective. These findings are helpful in developing future communication campaigns.

Focus group participants had little awareness of campaigns or communication regarding urban trees or of the organisations conducting them. However, they recognised the importance of raising awareness about urban trees and suggested a specific focus on children.

*When children come of age in a couple of decades, we want them to value these kinds of things, but we also don't necessarily have a couple of decades to spare. We need to properly derail the current way of doing things today, essentially. (Scotland)*

## Are there any major differences or commonalities in attitudes between nations?

Although country of residence and having dependents significantly predicted how much participants felt trees contributed to different areas, there were few other statistically robust differences between these groups.

Participants in England were more likely to be interested in joining events and campaigns related to trees compared to participants in Wales. Those in England were also more likely to have undertaken actions for trees, from tree planting to making a complaint. In the Wales focus groups participants perceived that the costs of tree management and maintenance would be passed onto residents in any new developments, which caused some concern and there was a perception this could possibly lead to poor maintenance. In Scotland there was thought to be a lack of policy coordination between local authorities in relation to urban trees particularly in addressing wider issues such as climate change and air pollution.

When discussing increasing council tax for trees Scottish and to some extent Welsh focus group participants felt that due to the economic impact of Covid-19, funds should be spent on alleviating these impacts rather than on trees.

*People don't have money for food you know. They can put their electricity or gas on, or they can have food, and we're discussing the tree maintenance money. Which – I'm sorry the governments got lots of money for that. They're just not using it in the way they should.*

(Scotland)

The idea of rewilding was welcomed in the Scottish focus groups and the scheme called the Welsh Plant! programme which was to plant a tree for every child born or adopted in Wales was supported by those in the Welsh focus groups.

### Commonalities

In the focus groups there was concern and disappointment regarding tree removal due to new developments and a perception that for these developments there was a failure to compensate for this by planting new trees, and that developers failed to incorporate green spaces into new developments.

In terms of management and maintenance, focus group participants were concerned with what they felt was aggressive trimming of trees, as well as tree removal, and a lack of appropriate planning and coordination by authorities to maintain and protect trees and increase tree cover in the long-term.

There was widespread agreement about the benefits of urban trees including provision of habitat for wildlife, mitigation of air pollution, aesthetics, as well as beneficial impacts on wellbeing.

### Conclusions

The research results emphasise that people value trees highly across the urban environment and particularly in public amenity places that they can have access to. There is also a high level of support for new tree planting. However, it was suggested that there should be a more equitable distribution of trees across urban areas with deprived areas benefiting from, and gaining, more trees to redress existing inequities.

The governance of urban trees and woods is not well understood by urban populations in terms of who owns and manages trees in different settings and locations. This has implications concerning how trees are managed and supported by local authorities and other responsible agencies. Communications and messaging about urban trees should be improved to engage urban populations and raise awareness about the role of trees across the urban environment.

The results highlight significant annoyance concerning poor management and a lack of maintenance of urban trees that lead to negative perceptions. These concerns point to the need for effective tree management strategies, action plans and adequate budgets for those responsible for urban public trees. Good planning for new or replacement trees is critical to ensure urban areas gain the 'right tree in the right place'.

About a third of respondents were interested in taking action for trees however focus group results highlight a lack of awareness of the environment sector organisations at a local or national level that can support and enable voluntary action and tree campaigns. Local authorities were the key body named and viewed as responsible in relation to urban trees.

It is particularly important to engage and connect children of all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds with urban trees and wider nature from a young age to instill interest, engagement, and knowledge concerning trees.

### References

Ambrose-Oji, B., Scott, E., Moffat, A., Doick, K., O'Brien, L., and Paterson, A. 2021. Public Perceptions of Urban Trees. Results of Focus Group Discussions in England, Scotland and Wales. Farnham, Forest Research.

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