

Consultation on a Tree Strategy for Cambridge

Feedback from stakeholders and residents



A report for Cambridge City Council

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1 Introduction

Cambridgeshire is one of the least wooded counties in England, but the city of Cambridge itself has a large number of trees, in a variety of settings and covering a wide range of species. These have a variety of owners and are managed in several different ways. Trees on public open spaces, such as parks, cemeteries, and commons, are owned and managed by Cambridge City Council; trees on Council-owned housing land are managed by Cambridge City Homes, the City Council's Arms-length Management organisation for housing. Highway trees such as those that line some city streets and cycle paths are owned by Cambridgeshire County Council, but are managed by the City Council under a rolling agency agreement whereby the two authorities agree a management specification for the service provided and a level of funding that is expected to cover the costs involved.

The vast majority of trees in Cambridge are, however, in private ownership. Many of the most prominent privately-owned trees are on land owned by the Colleges, but there are other prominent institutional owners such as the ecclesiastical authorities, health trusts and charitable bodies, as well as a plethora of individual private owners with trees in their gardens that also contribute to a vibrantly green streetscape.

Trees are prominent in the city's streetscape and skyline, and also in many local people's minds, making it especially important that the city has an up-to-date and forward looking tree strategy to shape the future of its work on this important dimension of the city's life and well-being. Cambridge City Council has therefore established a multi-disciplinary officer working group to develop a draft strategy for the city as a whole.

The objectives of this study are to support the development of the strategy by

- Exploring perceptions of the Council's performance in managing, protecting, and enhancing the tree stock in Cambridge, and how those perceptions arise;
- Identifying issues that might need to be addressed in a tree strategy for the city, and suggesting possible ways of tackling or mitigating the problems identified by respondents;
- Exploring specific challenges presented by the city's trees which call for strategic approaches from the authority.

To address these objectives, we have

- Held a series of workshop events linked to a public exhibition organised by the City Council. Places were available at up to six workshop sessions, but demand proved to be lower than the Council expected and only two workshops actually took place in the end. These were attended by a mix of people including some with professional interest in the subject, some members of local Third Sector groups with an active interest in trees, and some members of the public whose interest had been stimulated by recent incidents involving trees in their localities.
- Interviewed a range of stakeholders, including

- Cambridge Past, Present and Future
- Cambridge City Homes
- Cambridge City Council members with relevant portfolio responsibilities
- Cambridge City Council opposition members
- Relevant Cambridge City Council officers
- Relevant Cambridgeshire County Council officers

At the end of the consultation, we had interviewed a total of 17 people, and worked with 15 people in a workshop context.

All the conversations took place on a non-attributable basis, so observations and comments are not labelled with their source other than in exceptional cases. The notes from these discussions have been analysed thematically using a mind-mapping approach and are presented here in the same thematic structure. Inevitably, some themes and comments overlap with one another, or cross the boundaries of our analysis, but we are nevertheless confident that the material presented here is a valid and comprehensive presentation of the feedback we received.

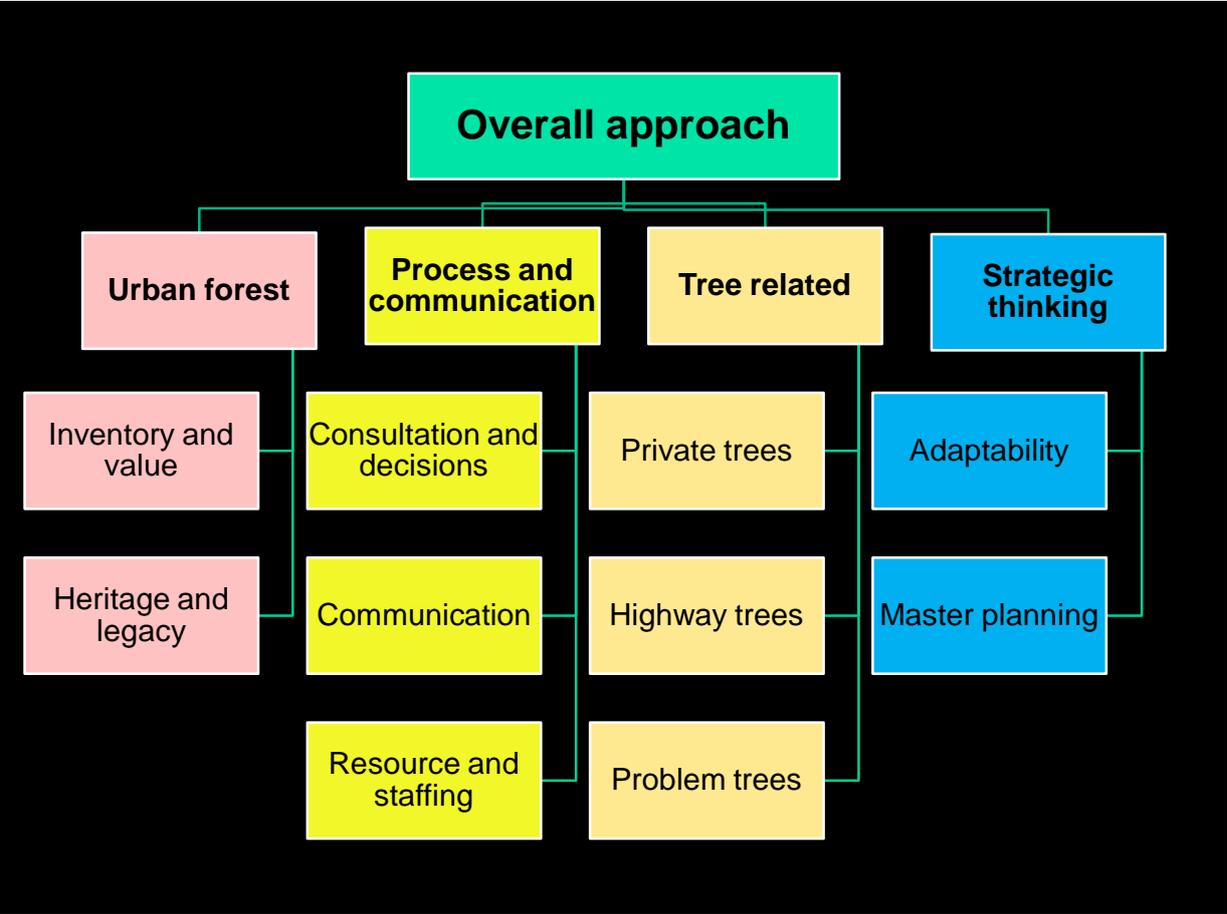
It should be noted that the comments and observations here are perceptions, not necessarily true in actual fact, but believed by those who make the comment and therefore influential to their view of the Council and its performance. It may also be noted that this is not a quantitative study, so the volume or frequency of any particular viewpoint is not reported except in those instances where a high degree of consensus is apparent.

This report should be read in conjunction with the analysis of comments received at the exhibition sessions held in parallel with this work.

In passing, we did note a high degree of consensus in some key areas of the study, across the respondents we spoke to, both in identifying issues and in the possible ways of tackling these – although, of course, there are also dissenting voices on some matters. Much of the response and opinion was supported by reference to examples from the city's recent track record, and there was a great deal of use of the same small number of examples to illustrate the points being made. Individual cases do not necessarily make good strategy, however, and references to these cases could divert argument away from the general to the specific, so these examples are used sparingly, if at all, in this report; this is deliberate and intended to focus thought on the issue in question, rather than on the mechanics of the examples (which are, by their nature, contentious). The examples are almost all now in the past; the issues they raise are still current and are more relevant to the development of a strategy for future work.

2 Structure of the report

The thematic approach we used to analyse the response has brought us to this structure for our report:



Some observations are focussed on the Council’s overall approach and deal with things at a higher level; these are discussed under the heading of “Overall approach”. Underneath this, comments have been grouped into four broad areas, and within that into sub-themes of related issues and observations. Each of these is considered in turn and in each case the mind-map used to analyse the results is provided to clarify the relationship between each group of comments.

3 Overall approach

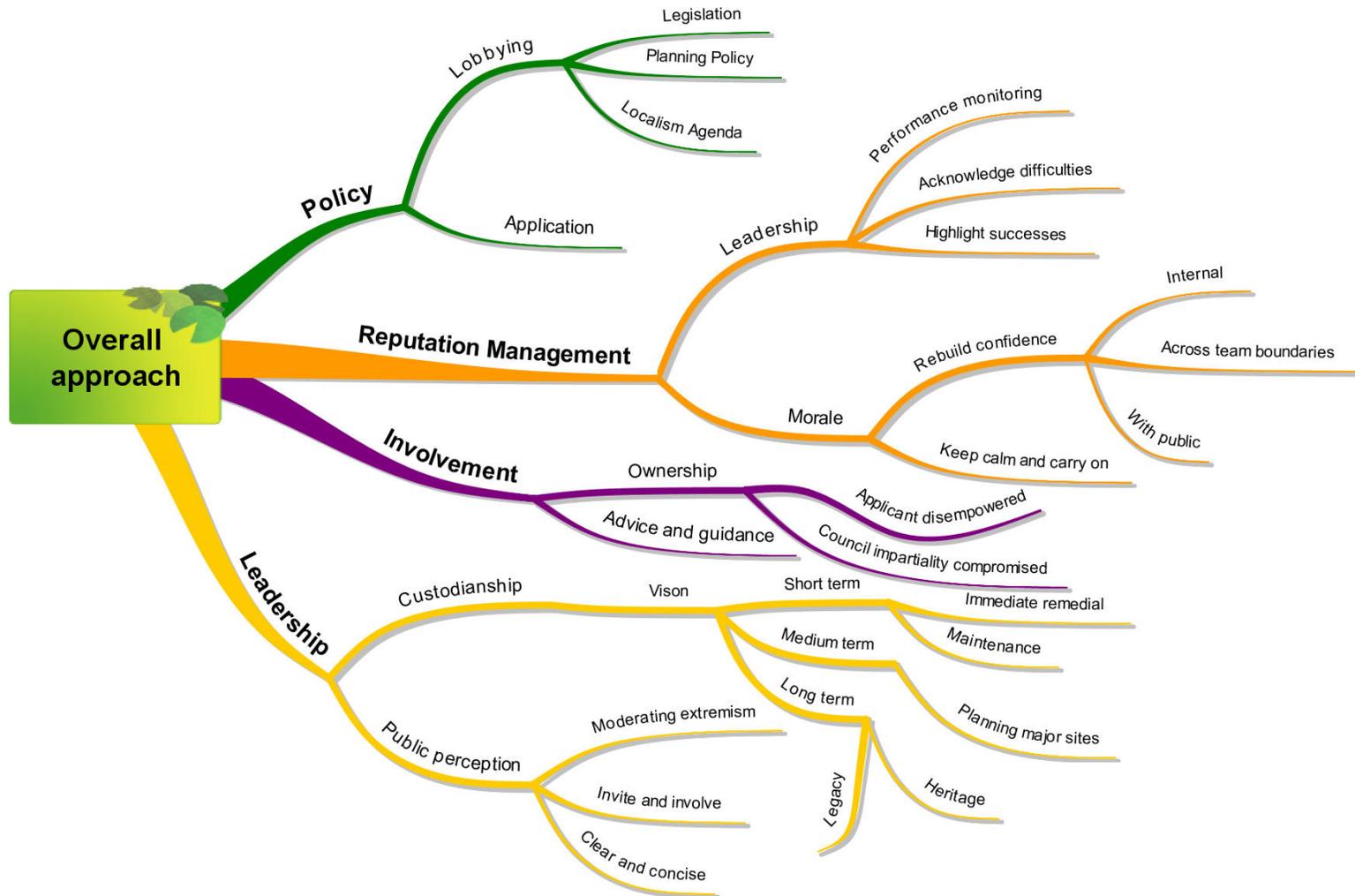
In a strategy discussion, it is perhaps germane to begin with the area of **strategic leadership**; it seems to be a given that the City Council would wish to take a strategic leadership role in managing the city's trees, and no-one suggested that this was in any way an inappropriate role or responsibility for the City Council to assume. In fact, people were if anything looking for the City Council to take a more active responsibility for the city's trees than they appear to do at present, and no other possible strategic leader on this issue emerged at any point in these discussions. It is therefore reasonable for the City Council to seek to develop a strategy for all the city's trees, and not just those in the public realm.

Some people see the City Council as the **custodian** of the city's trees, and of their overall impact on the city, regardless of ownership; it is therefore the City Council's role to ensure that the city's trees are managed for the common good and for the benefit of all citizens, not just the tree owners. This in turn demands the generation of a **vision** which will cover the short-term (exemplified by policy on maintenance, and on immediate and urgent remedial works, especially those requiring removal); the medium term, which would include planning for the future of important sites in the city such as major parks and commons, and the long term, essentially planning for the protection of the heritage inherited by the Council, and for the legacy it intends to leave to its successors.

Some say that at present, there is no overarching vision such as would be provided by a strategy; rather, there are a set of plans covering selected spaces in the city, that are not stitched together convincingly into an overall strategy; residents who criticise the Council for lack of a long-term vision share this view. Any strategy that does emerge should, however, be widely owned; the Council may be body that drafts it, but success would require much wider ownership; community involvement and ownership would also help to secure understanding and perhaps even acceptance of the need for removal, in some instances.

Leadership is not only about vision, however; it is also about ensuring that **public perception** is managed and enhanced. The City Council is thus seen as having a responsibility for ensuring that the public are invited to participate in the strategic development of the city's tree stock, and able to become involved when they see fit; for some, this role also extends into ensuring a balanced approach to trees which moderates what they see as the extremism of some members of the public (they seem to mean the environmental lobby here) and also the rapacious and malevolent intentions of developers; the Council is seen as uniquely placed to arbitrate between these opposing positions.

There is also a view, widely shared, that any strategy and policy will only be effective if it is **clear and concise**. Existing procedures are widely seen as opaque and obfuscatory, and are accused of being deliberately made so, so as to reduce the possibility of effective public intervention. Whether this is a valid perception or not, there is a strong case for making the policy clearer, and more readily accessed by those who wish to do so.



It is also noted that the public has a limited appetite for detail, and consequently the strategy needs to be capable of being summarised in simple, clear language in a short series of bullet points that might fit on a side of A4. This certainly echoes feedback from others who complain that at present policy and process are buried in impenetrable documents where only the initiated and knowledgeable dare to tread, and also those who want to see greater efforts made to engage the public on these issues.

Perceptions are that the Council's role at present lacks this clarity. The Council needs to be clear about whether its role in tree disputes (or potential disputes) is one of providing **advice and guidance**, and to whom this is offered – is it for elected members, for members of the public who wish to challenge proposals, or for applicants who wish to enquire about the acceptability of what they wish to do? Others see the Council's Tree Team as taking a more **directive** approach, deciding for themselves what the right answer is and not leaving room for options or alternative views. There is also a view in some quarters that, at present, the Council's Tree Officers are prone to allow their expert knowledge to put them in a position where they effectively take **ownership** of the discussion, which can in turn lead to them being seen by the wider public as acting for the applicant (thus compromising Council impartiality) and by applicants as disempowering them from making their own proposals. Officers can also be left exposed when they place themselves in this position, damaging their own reputation. This question of role is, we think, critical to improving public perception and restoring confidence in the service.

Reputation management has been put centre stage by recent problems that have been widely publicised, usually in a way that has been detrimental to the council's public image and thereby damaging to the wider reputation of the authority. The tree officers are accused of failing to recognise that people have different values, and of taking decisions without perceiving their likely significance or impact.

Responses to this issue call for the authority to take a more active leadership role, monitoring and (where necessary) challenging its own **performance**, acknowledging its mistakes, and also highlighting its successes, since these are much less likely to feature prominently in local media. They also see a role for the Council in addressing **morale** within the workforce dealing with trees, in particular focussing on rebuilding confidence within the team, between the team and its counterparts elsewhere in the Council, and between the Council and its partners. **Public confidence** will be a more difficult challenge, taking longer to re-establish, and while there is a view that the team should "keep calm and carry on", this is tempered by an awareness that work must be done behind the facade to restore and rebuild public confidence too. Officers will need to be more aware of the **public relations** dimension of their work; decisions based purely on expert knowledge may need to take more account of public reaction, however under-informed or misinformed that reaction may appear to be.

The Council is constrained in its options by **national policy** and by **legislation**. However, there are some respondents who take the view that this is not as immutable as it may seem to be. They would like to see the authority taking its arguments and issues to a higher level and taking on a role in which it **lobbies central government** to seek planning policy change

– particularly as regards shifting the balance of policy away from development and towards conservation, away from buildings and towards trees and biodiversity. If legislation does not work effectively to enable people to make adequate representations on tree-related issues, then legislative change should be sought to enable these views to be more clearly heard and more influential in the final outcome. The argument that legislation limits options is not seen as by any means a conclusive one, especially in the current context of a coalition government which might be more attentive to a politically significant local authority; if the rules are the problem, Cambridge City Council should seek to use its influence to change the rules.

The **localism agenda** may provide a good opportunity to develop this approach. Trees are widely utilised as a means of engaging people in environmental improvement, and there may be scope within the broad sweep of localism for opportunities to widen participation, develop awareness and knowledge, and increase pressure for local determination of policy and regulation.

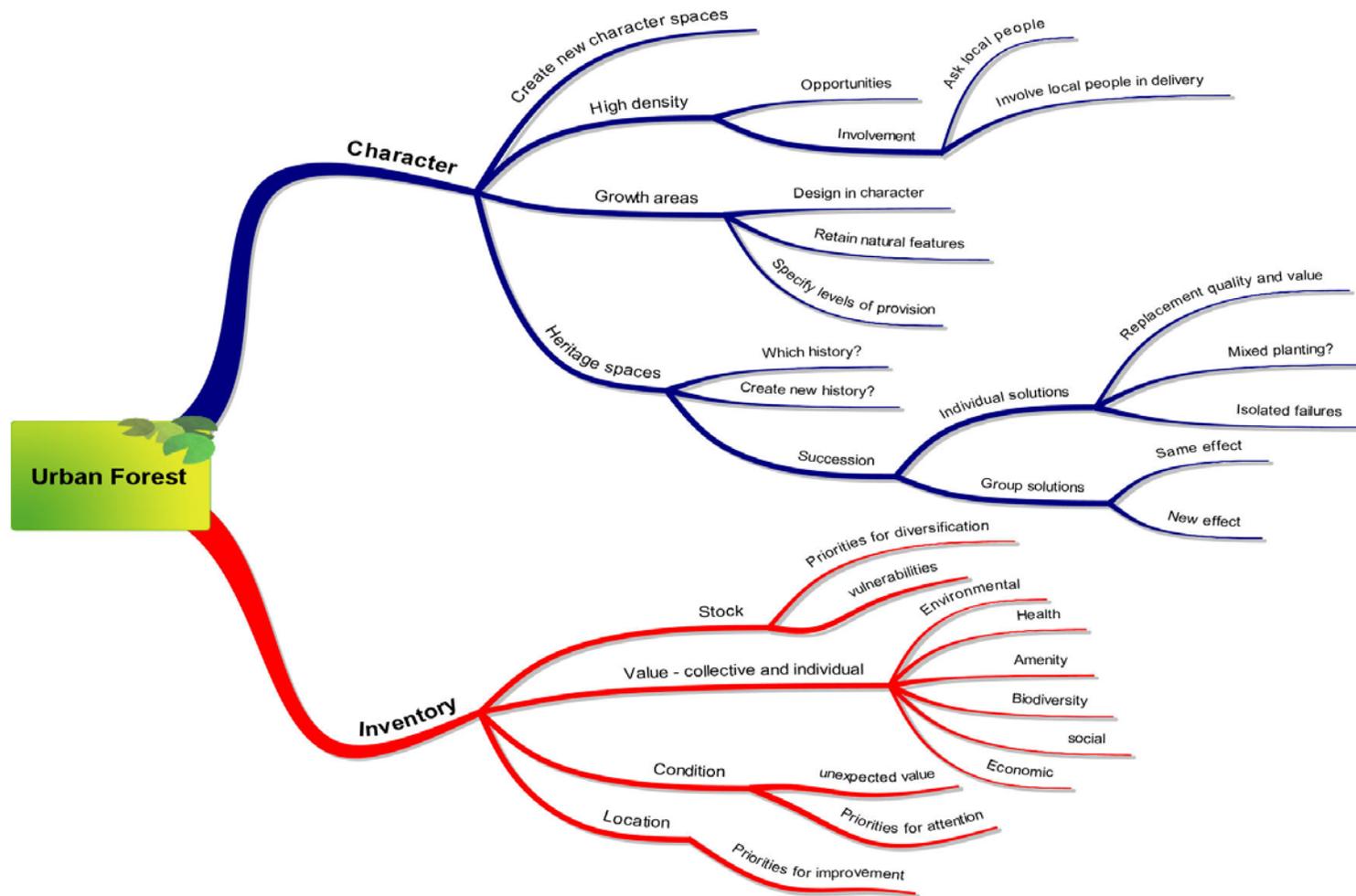
The existence of a good or sound policy is not the end of the matter, however; cynics note that policies have an unfortunate habit of being shelved after development, or ignored in practice where their application would be inconvenient. Developing a strategy is not, therefore, an end in itself; policy must then be applied, and be seen to be applied.

4 Urban Forest

One respondent used the term “**Urban Forest**” to describe an approach to tree management in the city. We warm to this concept, which seems to encapsulate the idea that trees are part of a larger green landscape in which the city sits, consisting not only of trees but also of grassland, watercourses, and other green growth, and sites such as parks, commons, and nature reserves, and that management of trees should not therefore be seen in isolation from these other important aspects of city life. It also seems to embrace the idea that trees have a value collectively to the city, as well as individually, so that changes to the city’s tree stock affect not only the immediate environment where work is taking place, but also potentially the wider city. One respondent describes the city as an “urban arboretum”, providing a wonderful mix of ideas and specimens.

The first question this raises, though, is to ask what the city actually has. It appears difficult to assess the importance or otherwise of an individual tree, for instance, without knowing its significance in this wider “urban forest”. There is therefore an argument for taking an inventory of the city’s trees, which would inform the strategy in several significant ways:

- The **opportunities**, or pressures, for diversification; which species may be in decline, and in need of enhanced protection; which are vulnerable to change such as climate change; which are significant, and which not (we have heard plenty of comment about the value, or otherwise, of self-seeding sycamores, for example);
- The **value** of these trees, both individually and collectively. There are mechanisms for calculating the **asset value** of a tree, but the value of trees is seen as going well beyond their value as assets, extending to
 - Their **environmental** value, in terms of reducing atmospheric pollution, mitigating climate change and reducing the carbon footprint of the city, and reducing noise such as traffic noise;
 - Their **health** value, in providing shade and reducing air pollution, and in providing substantive mental health and wellbeing benefits for people;
 - Their **amenity** value, providing visual attractiveness and relief from the built environment;
 - Their **social** value, providing places for play and recreation and for quiet reflection and contemplation;
 - Their **biodiversity** value, offering habitats for wildlife and also providing routes through which wildlife can safely move from one place to another;
 - Their **economic** value, making the city and its open spaces attractive to visitors and encouraging tourism, and also making the city an attractive place to live for people who are wealth-creators; and additionally their known impact on the value of housing close to trees or in tree-lined streets.



In this context, it is noted that value can arise in unexpected ways – through dead trees, for instance, which provide habitats and/or play opportunities,¹ or by *Leylandii*, which can be an attractive hedge as well as an eyesore. The strategy should aim to ensure “**the right tree in the right place**” – a mantra repeated very often in a variety of contexts in this study, acknowledged as hard to define, but important nevertheless.

The urban forest is not, however, just about the inventory; it is also about the cumulative effect of the inventory, in helping to define the **character of the city**, and in providing landmarks and backgrounds to different localities within the city.

In **high-density housing areas** such as Romsey, there is a wide recognition that the presence of trees is limited and the opportunities for changing this are similarly restricted by a lack of space for planting in the public realm, and a shortage of garden space suitable for trees. Some people accept that this means that areas like this will always be characterised, in part, by a lack of greenery, but others say that this places a premium on such opportunities as may emerge, with appropriate selection of species suited to this environment. Given the shortage of obvious locations, it is also suggested that there may be scope (and public relations benefit to the authority) in inviting local people, or their representative groups, to suggest suitable opportunities – which might also stimulate possibility thinking.

Newer high-density areas such as the **growth areas** are seen as presenting different challenges. Here, there is acknowledgement of the requirement for developers to deliver trees and spaces as part of the design guidelines, but also some scepticism about the enthusiasm with which developers will address these obligations; it has to be said that this perception is not always based on familiarity with the growth areas, however. This leads to calls for a stronger specification as to the level, and nature, of provision in these areas, including a desire that the design guidelines should recognise, and insofar as possible preserve, natural features already present in the local landscape, and for character to be designed in – so that the trees and other open space provision are not just delivered, but delivered in a way that adds value and enhances the character of the growth areas.

The **heritage spaces** of the city are recognised as contributing significantly to local character, but they raise questions of their own as regards a strategic approach. Among these is the question of whether it is today’s landscape that we should be preserving, or whether there are grounds for seeking to revert to earlier configurations of trees; Jesus Green, which has been an open space for much longer than the London Plane Avenues have existed, is an example of this conundrum. This in turn leads to the possibility that this generation should be seeking to create its own mark on some heritage spaces, and to leave a different legacy for our successors.

If, however, the plan is for **succession** of the existing landscape, then there is still a discussion to be had on how to achieve this. Where trees collectively have an amenity value greater than the sum of their parts – such as in a formal avenue – there is a view that

¹ They are used to very good effect by, among others, Stirling Council

succession planting should seek to recreate, so far as possible, the effect of the avenue. Trees should be being planted outside the line of the avenue now, so that when the avenue trees fail there are already mature replacements in place to succeed them. Succession trees planted in this way may not, of course, be the same species – not least because this would make them vulnerable if the avenue trees were to become diseased. Other respondents, though, point out that this will not recreate the original effect, but rather a new, and possibly different, effect, and this ought to be considered carefully before proceeding.

Where individual trees fail, the solution sometimes is to try and **replace** the failed tree. In a formation of trees, however, this may be anachronistic; the replacement tree will inevitably be very different in size and scale to its neighbours, and the effect of the formation is thus eroded. On the other hand, replacing failures that are themselves interlopers, such as trees of a different species introduced into an existing formation, may be desirable. There is no consensus here and we suspect that the way forward on issues like this depends very strongly on the specific location and the aspirations of those who care for such spaces.

The strategy will also need to consider whether examples that fail to meet the standard of “the right tree in the right place” need to be addressed proactively, or simply be **managed out** as opportunities arise for removing them. In either case, though, the public will need to be convinced of the need for, and desirability of, removal.

Those seeking a **new legacy** would ask whether there are new formations of trees, in new locations, that can be created now so as to generate mature formations for future generations.

There are substantial concerns about “**replacement**” trees. The City is thought to have a policy of replacing every tree that is removed;² but the replacements are usually (and necessarily) of a much less developed nature, and may not be used to replace in situ, especially if a tree has been removed on safety grounds such as obscuring visibility for motorists. The policy is thus seen as tokenistic, replacing mature specimens with what a number of people call “Balloon trees”, and requires more vigorous explanation if it is to become accepted as the correct approach.

² Some people believe this to be true; others want it to be so.

5 Process, consultation and decision

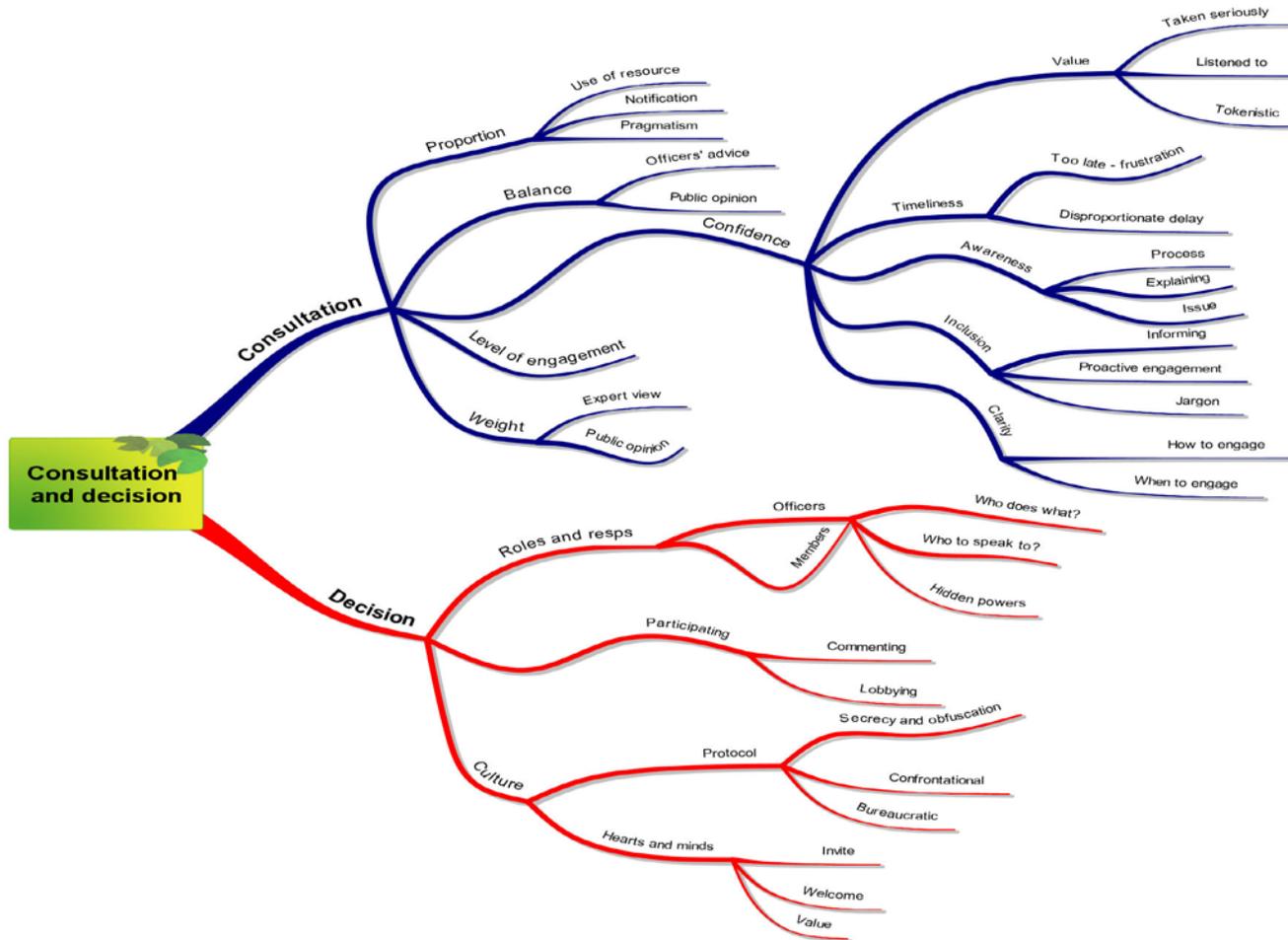
The process by which a decision is taken about a tree matter, and the way in which the public in general, and interested groups and activists, can influence that decision, are a major focus of people's comments. There is widespread dissatisfaction with both the mechanism and the opportunity for consultation as things currently stand.

The decision-making process is widely seen as inadequate. As much as anything, this presents itself as a **cultural issue**; rightly or wrongly, people outside the authority perceive a culture of secrecy, bureaucracy and obfuscation. A tree protocol which was developed to try and clarify the process has not worked especially well and is seen as ponderous and bureaucratic. The culture of the Council is seen as lying at the heart of this problem, and cultural change is therefore the preferred solution; a shift is needed, people say, to a more listening culture, a culture of **partnership**, rather than confrontation, with residents. One respondent notes that the relationship is at present a two-way one, whereby officers work with trees; it needs to shift to a triangular one, where residents also come into play as an equally important dimension of the process.



This new and different approach would seek to engage people's **hearts and minds**, using approaches that invite them to participate, welcome their views, and assign those views clear and obvious value, in place of processes that appear from the outside to be much less welcoming of alternative views, and more tokenistic in terms of paying these views due regard. Such an approach, it is argued, would tend to build **dialogue and trust**, allowing decisions to be made more transparently, and with people's active involvement.

An important dimension of bringing people on board in this way is a **clarification of roles and responsibilities**. At present, however detailed the protocol may be, it is by no means clear who does what in this process – a view that is widely held and which challenges the roles of members as well as of officers. Legislative timescales and requirements also mean that decisions that seem appropriate for Area Committees are actually taken elsewhere; people do not understand this, and see it as making the process even more impenetrable.



This in turn means that it is not clear who a member of the public should try to communicate with, or when; often, by the time they find out, the process has advanced too far for any intervention to be effective, causing frustration and cynicism – not least because people expect to be able to comment effectively. This also gives rise to accusations of **lack of accountability** – if people do not know who is making decisions, they do not know who they can hold responsible for those decisions.

Officers can make decisions under delegated powers in the absence of objections, but run the risk of being accused of acting **independently and secretively** if there are objectors that simply do not know how to make themselves heard. Most respondents expressing a view on this think that officers making professional judgments on the basis of their considerable expertise still need to engage more fully with the public and take these, albeit less well-informed, views into account. There is a view nevertheless which places a much higher premium on the views of expert officers and suggests that Councillors should defer more to the views of their own experts, give less weight to uninformed opinion, and be less ready to bring in outside expertise.

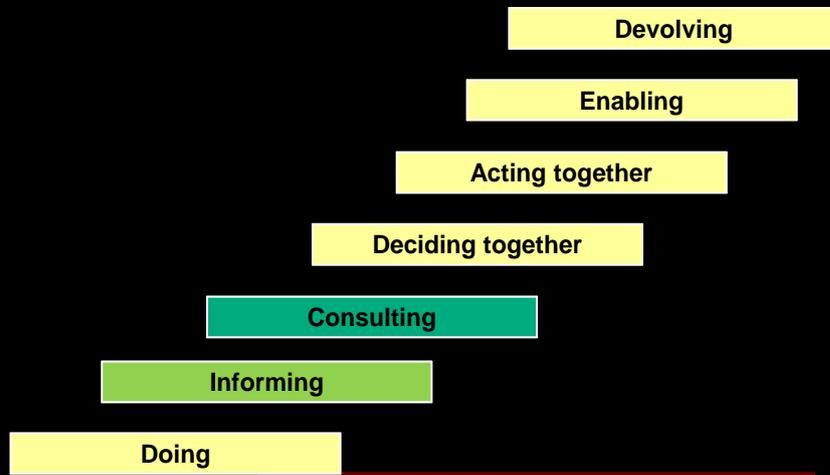
There is also a view in some quarters that the tree protocol is functioning as a blunt instrument, and that a **more pragmatic approach** is needed. These respondents are concerned that what should be simple and non-contentious decisions about trees that are of no real consequence are delayed by being taken through a protocol and consulted on when there is no real justification for this. This causes delay, and has financial implications too.

This is interesting; on the one hand, people complain that the protocol does not allow them to be effectively consulted; whilst on the other, people are complaining that the process demands a disproportionate level of consultation in dealing with simple problems. Both positions, though, suggest that a review of the protocol is called for.

This in turn brings the question of consultation to the fore, and the need to **engage more effectively** with those wishing to express a view. One respondent uses Arnstein's ladder of participation³ to illustrate a view that the Council is not, when it comes to trees, operating at a high enough level of participation; at present, the Council tends to inform, rather than to consult, on these matters, still less to engage at a level which would empower residents more fully.

³ Arnstein's ladder of participation was first developed in 1969 to demonstrate different levels at which public engagement could take place, and is still widely used as a basic model. It has been modified for application in different contexts ever since, including by myself for the purposes of illustrating engagement in a local government context; the diagram shown here is my modified model. It highlights seven different levels of engagement, in which the balance of power shifts gradually from one party to the other as one rises up the ladder. "Informing" is the second rung of seven, only marginally better than "Doing"; "Consulting" is the next level up, still a long way short of "Enabling" (level 6) and "Devolving" (level 7). There are "enabling" possibilities in the world of trees which could be explored further in developing a strategy.

Levels of participation



may want to get involved are aware both of the issue and of the opportunity. There is also a challenge to the Council to avoid **jargon**, which is usually inadvertent but has the effect of excluding those who don't understand it and making it more difficult for people to engage on equal terms.

It should also be noted that the Council is not always bad at this. The consultation on Local Nature Reserves, which was accompanied by plans of the work, explanatory material, and maps, was apparently very successful and shows that there are successful approaches that work well even on quite technical areas.

Nor should it be assumed that consultation is the sole responsibility of the Council. **Colleges** also have an obligation to consult on their works affecting trees, and find that students and faculty are keen to respond, especially to electronic consultation. Colleges also experience difficulties, though, in consulting effectively with their neighbours and with the Cambridge public.

6 Communication

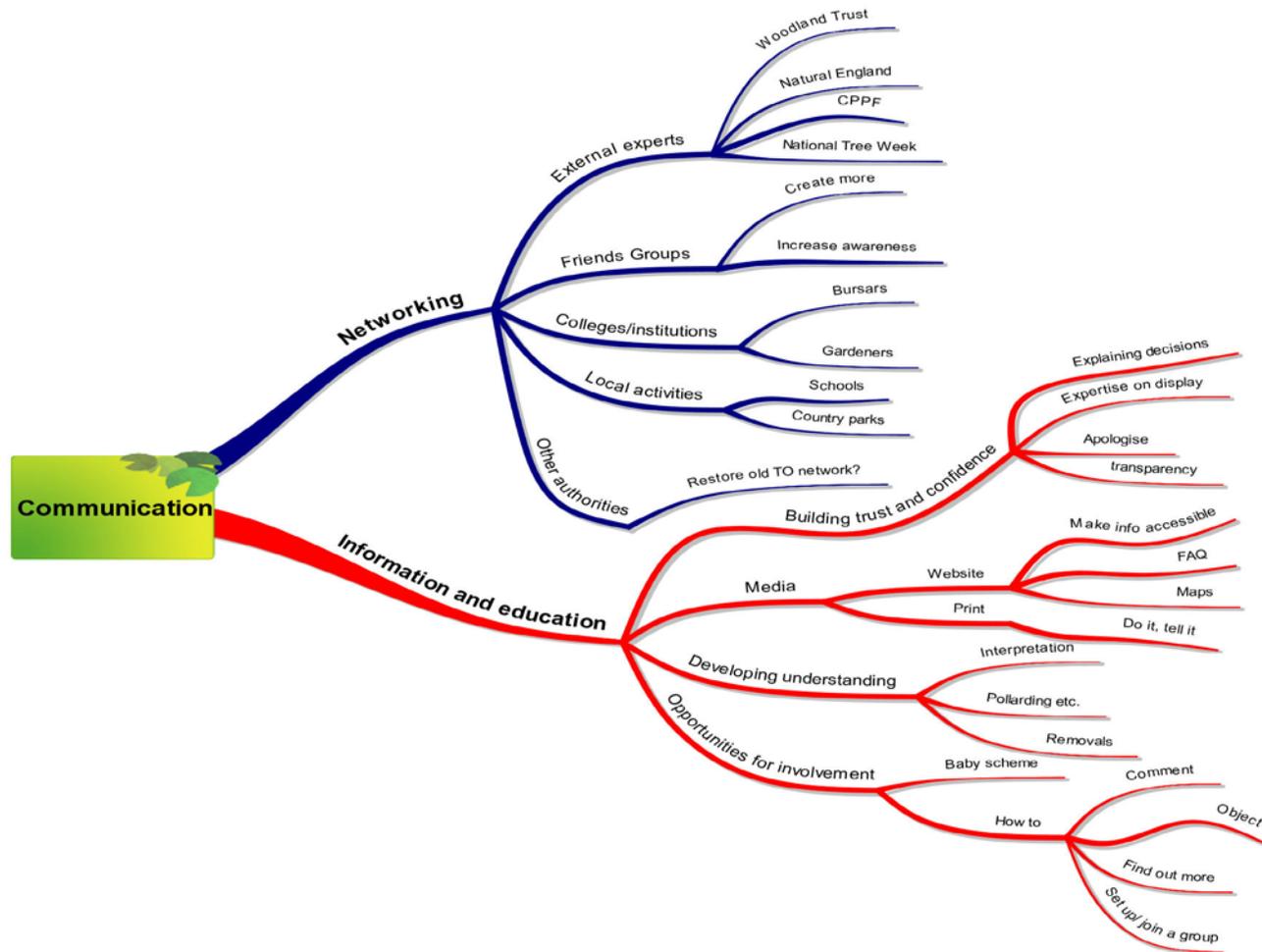
Communication is clearly in close relationship to consultation; informing people may be a step below consultation on the ladder of participation, but it is often a necessary preliminary to having people understand the importance of providing their own opinions on matters.

Several strands of thought emerge in the area of information and education. One of these links very closely to the previous section of this report in highlighting the need to **build trust and confidence**, particularly with the wider public. Respondents feel this can be done by explaining more fully the decisions that are made, and perhaps especially those that are contentious or less obvious; by apologising where mistakes have been made; and by a greater transparency in the process. They also think that public trust can be rebuilt if the Council's undoubted expertise in tree matters is put more fully on display; if people think decisions are soundly based, and explained well, they may be more willing to accept them.

Alongside this, the Council needs to **communicate opportunities for involvement**, so that people can play a more effective part in the process. People need to be told how they can comment, how to register an objection, or how to find out more about an application or proposal. They also need to know whether or not there are groups in their area (such as Friends Groups, for instance) who can help them; and if not, how to set such a group up. It is noted that talking to a Friends Group may actually offer reassurance to people, in that a group may well be better informed and able to make the Council's case on its behalf, for instance.

One respondent mentions a **Baby Scheme**, whereby newborn children can have trees planted in their names, either at their homes or in the public realm. Schemes of this nature do not seem to be widely promoted and could be communicated more - and not only to likely participants - to demonstrate the Council's commitment to tree planting.

The Council could, it is thought, also **develop the understanding** of the wider public about its work and its activities in relation to trees. If people are under-informed about issues they wish to comment on, the Council must, it is argued, take some responsibility for that and try to raise people's level of understanding. A good example of this is in relation to pollarding. When the Council pollarded some trees recently, there was public horror expressed at the apparent severe damage being done to the trees; a temporary information board nearby explaining what was being done, and how this would be beneficial to the tree, would have allayed many of the fears expressed. Interpretative material would also help to explain other works taking place - including even some removals - and would reduce the risk of later reactive work to deal with complaints and concerns.



The Council is encouraged to make widespread use of the **media** at its disposal in communicating more effectively on trees with the public at large. In print, it is of course limited by space in its own magazine (and by limitations on frequency of publication) and by the level of interest of the independent media, but the Council website provides a massive opportunity to communicate with an audience which seems to be largely familiar with and comfortable using new technology.

However, the Council must be aware that just placing something on the website is not in itself communicating effectively; **attention must be drawn** to the fact that the information is there in the first place, and the information itself must be **easily accessible**. The respondent who commented adversely on being referred to a very bulky PDF document to find the information she needed was making a sound argument for more readily accessible information.

Respondents suggested placing FAQ sections on the site to answer obvious questions such as the issues raised above about how to find out about proposed works, how to voice an opinion, where a decision will be made, and so on; another noted the large and useful maps and other information on offer at the exhibition sessions and asked why this could not be made available through the website as well.

Education and information could also be more widely disseminated through **networking activities**, including the possibility of developing work with local schools, many of which take an active interest in environmental matters, and some of which already have relationships with country parks and engage in planting and similar activities; and also through partnership with the country parks themselves. It is noted that park rangers run interpretative courses within their sites as part of their regular programme of activities, but it might be possible to develop this to use the same expertise to explore the trees in an urban area, for instance, and thus widen understanding at a local level.

Friends' Groups also offer opportunities for knowledge transfer, and several already exist in the city and help care for some of the city's parks, commons and cemeteries. All of these sites involve trees, and increasing Friends' Groups awareness of trees and tree issues might bring potentially influential people onside and build the relationships that will enable at least some Friends to speak knowledgeably about tree matters on their patch. Where Friends' Groups do not exist, the Council should look to enable more to be created, as these will have substantial payoffs in all sorts of ways, not least in disseminating knowledge about trees. There is more potential here though; Friends' Groups could get more involved in managing and policing trees on their particular sites, and can also assist in ensuring good pro-active distribution of information in their localities.

In times past, there was a **Tree Officer network** across the county, bringing together officers with tree responsibilities from the districts and from the County Council. This was apparently useful, and did not become redundant through lack of relevance; reinstating it would place the City at the forefront of tree management across the county and would also allow for exchange of good practice and knowledge between officers in different areas. There is a view that the City's focus has been too local and that it can learn from good

practice elsewhere. The city's strategy may not be completely self-contained especially in terms of its relationship to South Cambridgeshire, and to the County Council (which has expressed interest in participating, but not in leading, such a group).

It might also be possible to build stronger relationships with **external experts** such as Natural England, the Woodland Trust and National Tree Week, as well as with local bodies such as Cambridge Past Present and Future, to develop information exchange and discuss practical issues with external experts in an informal context. The strategy, and its inevitable consultation process, might be a very appropriate mechanism to begin building those relationships.

The importance of the institutional owners of trees – particularly the colleges, but also the NHS and the ecclesiastical authorities – makes it important that the Council also tries to develop a working relationship with these bodies, and again the strategy, as a city-wide document, is a potential vehicle for this. It was noted by one respondent from the colleges that while most attempts to build relationships are done through Bursars, it may actually be more productive to engage with gardeners themselves, and the gardeners have their own network to which invitations to come and talk might be sought.

7 Resources and staff

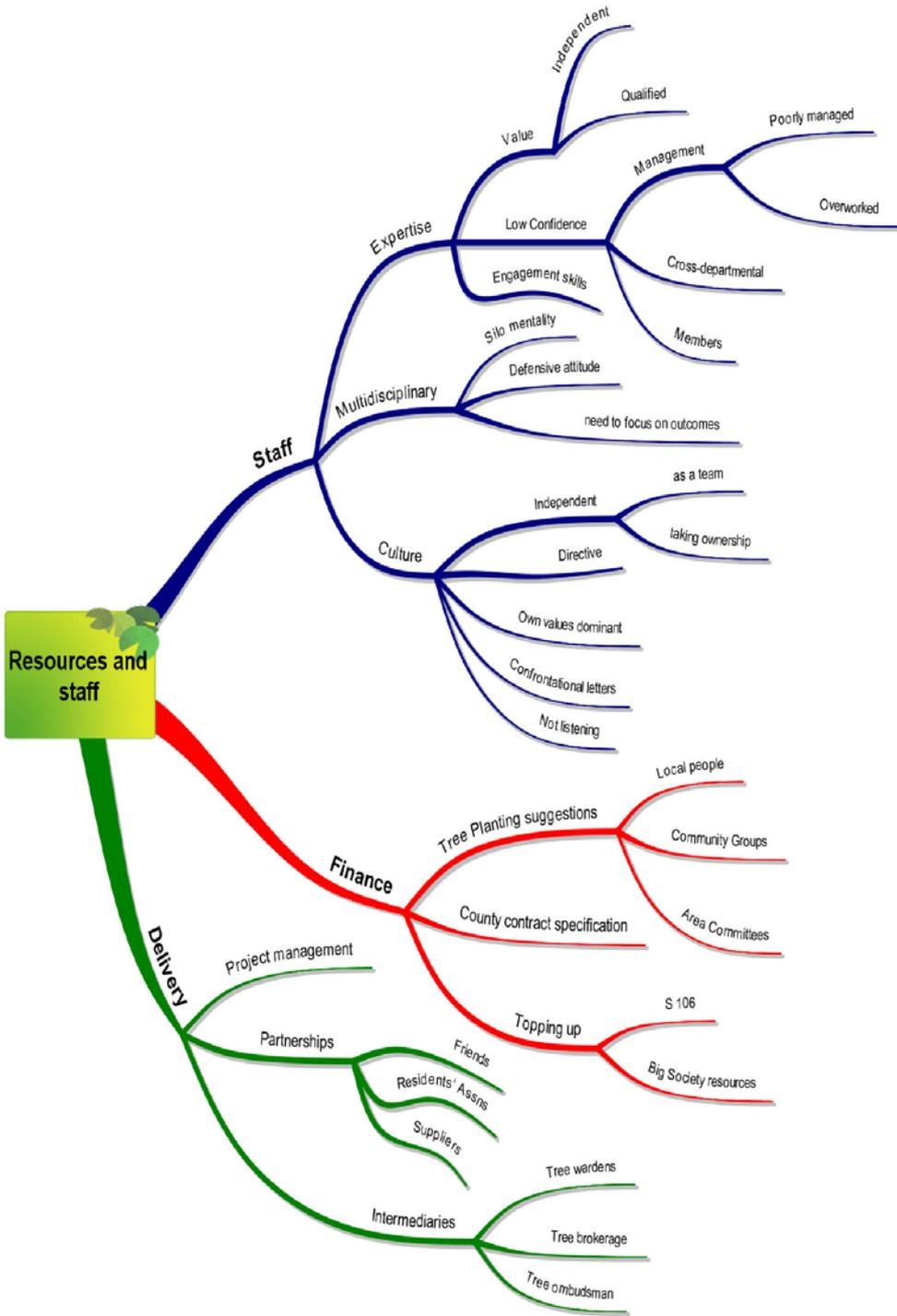
On the staff side of this issue, there is wide recognition of the expertise of the staff working for the Council's tree service. Their expertise in tree matters is not questioned at all, and is valued by many; they are also seen as passionate about trees, something which people value and respect.

The culture of the service has already been noted, but arises again under this heading. The team are seen in some quarters as acting in a largely **independent** way, taking decisions based on expert knowledge without necessarily seeing the bigger picture of which members are more aware, and thus exposing the authority to criticism. They are accused of being a team where their **own values are predominant**, to the exclusion of alternative positions which are not based on technical knowledge, and of not listening to or being responsive to those other positions when views are expressed that contradict or challenge theirs. One respondent looks for a **culture change** in areas like routine correspondence, which (it is suggested) invite objections, rather than welcoming comments – a subtle, but important, difference that moves away from confrontation towards consultation and inclusion. Another believes their approach is too directive, and insufficiently advisory; there is a feeling that their expertise is unquestionable.

The value of this **team's knowledge** is not in any way questioned; in practice, it is valued highly in the departments which rely on it. There is however a **low confidence** within the authority in the tree team at present, which is shared by members and by colleagues in other departments with which they work. This confidence level is ascribed to two factors: excessive workloads, which make it difficult to give difficult cases sufficient time and focus; and poor management, which has not had sufficient influence over culture and working practices within the team or dealt adequately with workload and prioritisation issues. Staff have been over-empowered, and this has been exacerbated by a laissez-faire management style.

It is suggested that staff may benefit from professional development in **engagement techniques and skills**. This would assist those who want to see a less process-led, and more publicly sensitive, approach, focussed on positive outcomes rather than purely technical solutions.

Staff comments are not exclusively about the tree team, however. The Council is challenged about its ability to provide the genuinely **multi-disciplinary approach** that tree services may require, with a feeling that the Council's culture has not yet sufficiently evolved from a silo mentality in some service areas; this is exemplified by defensive attitudes and by multiple representation at some meetings, and by reluctance to share difficult situations with colleagues. The Council could take a more **project based approach** on some issues, looking not just at specific trees but at the wider context of which the trees are a part; this would help to avoid one department making decisions that inadvertently tie the hands of others.



Financial resource is also an issue in this service. It arises most prominently in relation to the contract with the County Council, which is thought by some to demand far more from the tree team than it is prepared to finance; this is discussed in more detail in the Highways trees section of this report. Tree planting funds are generally regarded as insufficient, although awareness of these funds was not especially widespread even within the Council itself.

There are nevertheless views that existing tree works resources will need to be **topped up** if the City Council's ambitions are to be realised, and some suggestions are made in this respect. One is for greater use of Section 106 developer contributions in tree provision; it seems unlikely that the Council is not already alert to this, but it is suggested that S106 be used to buy land for open space provision, which is a less standard approach. Another is to utilise the **Big Society opportunities** that may emerge in the fullness of time; tree planting is a Big Society-type activity, and the proposed Big Society Bank may be accessible for this purpose, if not to local authorities then perhaps to local Third Sector groups who may be in partnership with the city. There are also possibilities through bodies such as Area Committees, Friends' groups and other community groups such as Residents' Associations, who could at the very least offer suggestions or invite officers to advise them on planting, and could even apply for funding to allow this to happen.

Resource issues are also raised in relation to delivery of the Tree Strategy. One view promotes the idea that the Council could enter into partnerships with others to deliver the strategy, including Friends' Groups and Residents' Associations, whose expertise will inevitably be a lot more limited than that of the authority's tree team but who nevertheless may be able to assist in practical ways or through local knowledge and a volunteer labour force. There is also a view that the Council could work more closely with local suppliers in using the Strategy to specify a likely future requirement in terms of species and maturity and encouraging local suppliers to respond to this.

Several respondents raise the question of an intermediary to sit in between the Council and its experts on the one hand, and the general public on the other. This intermediary is variously described as

- **project managers**, who would be the single point of contact both for the multi-disciplinary Council team and for the public on a case by case basis – people whose role involves co-ordination of resources but also public relations management;
- **tree wardens** – volunteers who have some knowledge (or who are willing to be trained) who can provide information to the public and also act as the Council's eyes and ears, looking for and notifying problem issues as they become apparent;
- **tree champions**, whose role is specifically public facing and less focussed on protecting the Council's reputation;
- **a Tree Ombudsman**, independent of the Council, who can rule on contentious and controversial issues and whose decision is final and binding on all parties.

The language used to express these ideas, and the context in which they are raised, suggests that these are not only possible solutions but further identifications of problems

already recognised in this study – the difficulty of knowing who to contact, the uninformed comment from members of the public, poor public relations, and a lack of clear accountability. Whilst these ideas may have merit, they are we think symptomatic of other issues which need to be addressed directly as well.

8 Privately owned trees

Private trees give significant amenity benefit, not only in their immediate surroundings but also to the skyline of the city, and it is seen as the Council's responsibility to set the agenda for conservation here. They are regarded as very important visually, and as a wildlife habitat, but are (it is thought) afforded insufficient protection.

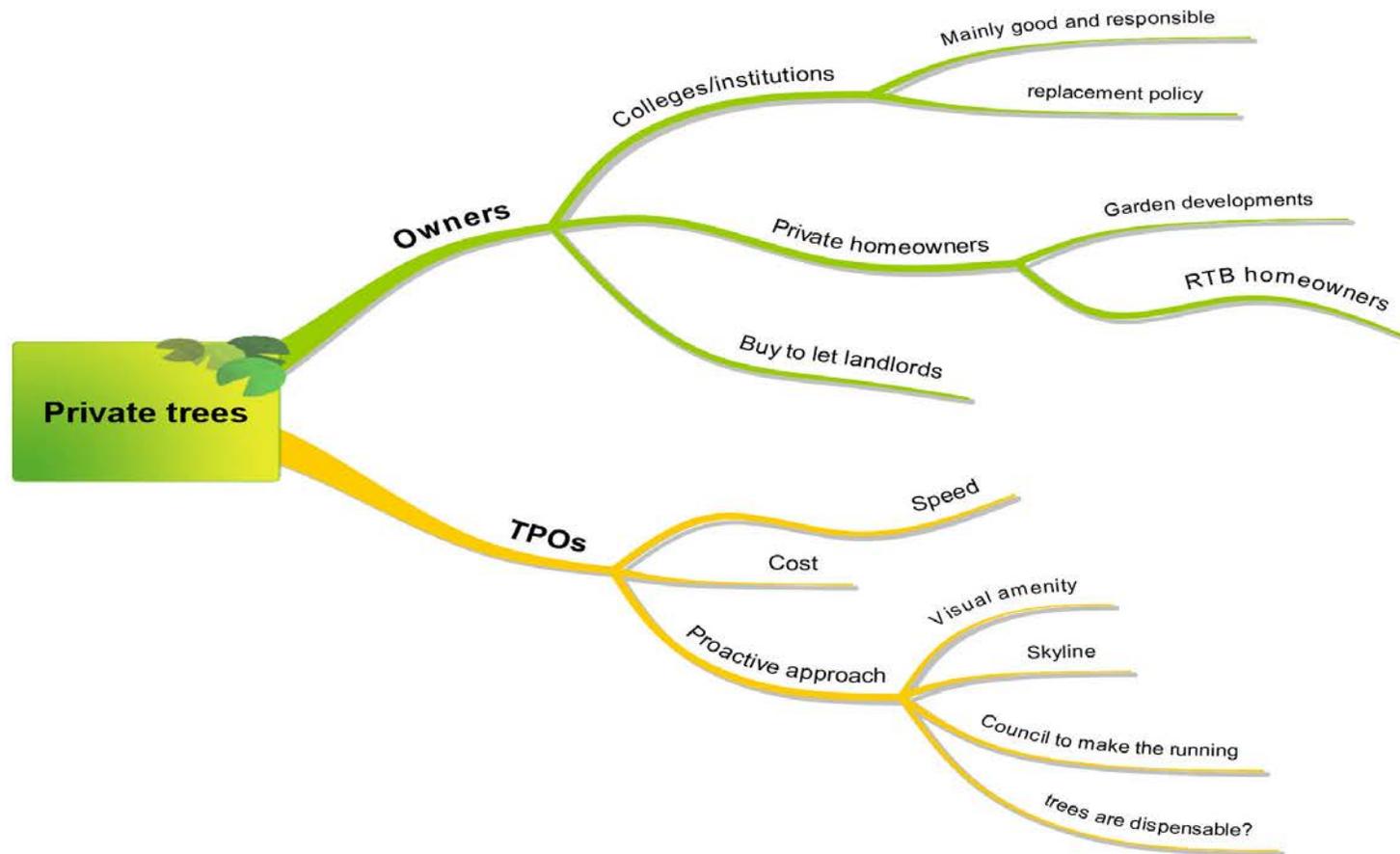
Although there are an enormous number of private owners in Cambridge, a large proportion of the most significant privately owned trees are in **institutional ownership**, particularly the colleges. The Council is thought to make occasional overtures towards a closer relationship on tree matters, but this is rarely if ever consummated. Genuine progress in this area requires stronger networks.

Respondents generally are of the view that the colleges are good owners, acting responsibly in the way they manage their trees, but coming under pressure in their land use from the need to expand their existing buildings to accommodate operational growth. Colleges therefore need to have a sound **replacement policy** in place in much the same way as the Council is expected to; some replacement policies are suspected of being insufficiently rigorous in their application, and information on performance in this respect is sketchy. Other institutional owners are more mixed and some are criticised for inadequate protection of their trees.

Private owners generally are accused of being too cavalier about trees; they are largely seen as **dispensable** in the face of development, while the Council is accused of conniving in this approach.

A number of issues are prominent in relation to private homeowners. One is the trend towards redevelopment of **traditional large mature gardens** in some quarters of the city; land is increasingly valuable and there is pressure to develop these spaces for housing, which in turn can threaten mature trees in these gardens. **Buy to let** landlords are a significant segment of private ownership in the city, but are frequently absentee landlords who take only a limited interest in their properties and perhaps an even lower interest in the condition of their gardens and the trees they contain.

People who acquired their houses under **Right to Buy** legislation (and, presumably, their successor owners) apparently have clauses in their title deeds that require them to secure permission from City Homes before carrying out major tree works such as removal. How well known this clause is, or how rigorously it is enforced, may be a moot point, but it could give the Council a little leverage with this group of private owners at least, in terms of ensuring that works are consistent with strategic objectives. Tenants of City Homes are also required to look after the trees within the curtilage of their property, although it is not always clear how this work should be financed or who should actually carry it out.



The principal way in which the Council engages with private tree owners is through the **Tree Protection system**, and the process issues this raises have already been thoroughly discussed earlier in this report. People do make adverse comment, though, about the cost of obtaining orders, and about the speed with which orders can be obtained and also overturned.

There are strong calls for the Council to take a **more pro-active approach** to private trees. There is a feeling that private tree owners (other than the colleges) are quite passive in their approach to managing their stock, and consequently problems are only brought to the Council's attention when it is too late or when options have been severely curtailed. Whilst people are unsure that the Council can give the resource needed to go round putting TPOs on every tree of significance, there is a wish to see the Council being more active in identifying quality trees before problems arise rather than reacting to them afterwards.

It is also noted that many private tree issues are small scale in a city-wide context; but that their cumulative effect may be a loss of biodiversity and habitat to the city.

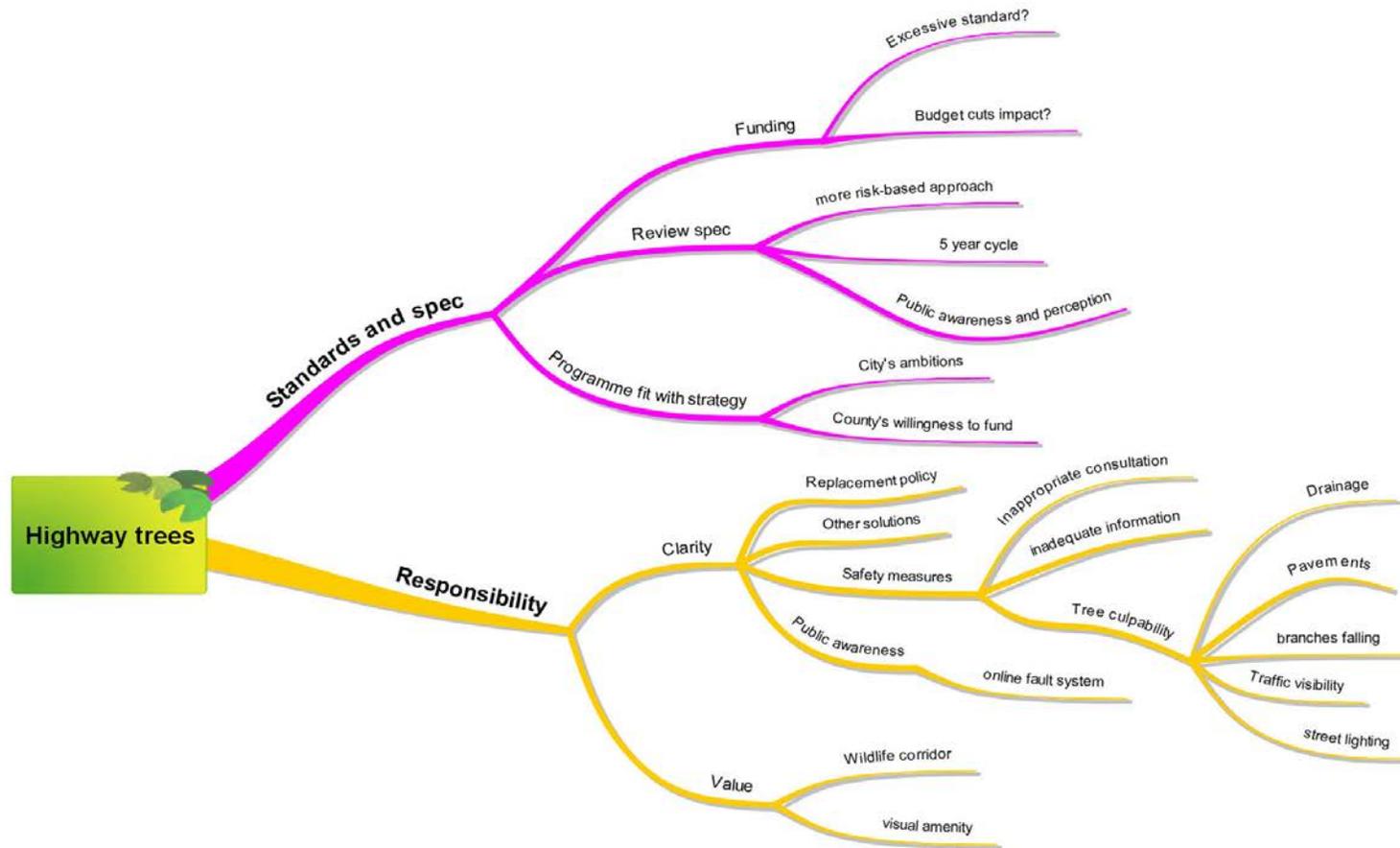
9 Highways trees

Street trees in Cambridge are the responsibility of Cambridgeshire County Council, but are managed by the City Council under a reverse agency agreement which funds the City Council to carry out an agreed three year cyclical programme of work. There are concerns about this arrangement, which is widely seen as requiring **more work** and to a **higher standard** than is allowed for in the funding arrangements; equally, there are concerns that pressure on County budgets will tend to reduce the specification, but that any public relations outcome from this will be to the detriment of the City Council which actually maintains the trees and which will be blamed for a quality reduction. Some people express doubts as to whether the County Council shares the city's level of commitment to quality in its trees.

Whatever the truth of this, there is a general perception of a **mismatch** between the City Council's ambitions for these trees, and the County Council's willingness to support that. There is also a view at County that a change in the standard of tree service provided by the City Council might well pass unnoticed by the public; opinions at County include one that suggests the level of service quality may be too high in an era of austerity.

The County Council's expressed position is that they wish to move from a three year cycle to a five year one, and to move to a more risk-based approach where those trees that present higher levels of risk or vulnerability are given more attention than others that are less contentious or problematic. Contract negotiations are under way, and care has been taken not to compromise these in any way, but the outcome of these negotiations is clearly relevant to the strategy, the programme that is agreed with the County would need to be built into the strategy (and would presumably need to fit within its broader objectives) and it may also be helpful to **clarify responsibilities**, specifications, and ownership of the budget, to increase public awareness of the situation.

Tree-lined streets are both **visually attractive** and provide movement corridors for wildlife, and trees can also be used as an effective noise barrier on arterial roads, where they are more visually appealing than fencing. Trees on highways can also be **problematic**, though, in that they can grow to obstruct visibility for drivers, and can also damage the footpaths, walls and other structures near which they have been planted. Damaged pavements can in turn give rise to problems for pedestrians and cyclists and create safety hazards. Highways trees also cause problems for street lighting (by virtue of their foliage obscuring the lights), can damage drainage, and also shed branches from time to time on to pavements and roadways. These problems are often caused by "**the wrong tree in the wrong place**", but remedying this gives rise to public concern over removals and the quality of replacements – which will usually be a different species and perhaps in a different hole. There is also a perception that the Council can be too ready to remove a tree rather than to consider other measures that might mitigate the problem and avoid removal.



This in turn leads to issues over **clarity and responsibility**. Who determines the need for removal, who decides on replacement, who arbitrates on safety measures, and where are these decisions taken, and how can a member of the public find out what's going on and contribute to the discussion – the questions here are the same as for trees generally. As in other contexts, consultation is regarded as insufficient (on the part of the public) or inappropriate (on the part of the Highway Authority).

The strategy will clearly need to address **appropriate planting** on highways and avoid repeating the problems being caused today by ill-advised decisions in the past.

Highways trees may be “the wrong tree in the wrong place”, but in practice no action is taken on this until such time as the tree is reported as a problem. There is no demand for this to be remedied and in fact the City Council is more likely to be accused of removing a tree unnecessarily than of leaving it in place for too long. Nonetheless, the strategy should consider whether it might be appropriate to develop a **replacement programme** for those species known to be likely to cause problems at a later date – or at least to provide information that will tend to soften the blow when a tree stands accused of causing a safety issue.

The County Council is about to go live with an online **fault reporting** system, which will no doubt have implications for the City Council. It will allow members of the public to report tree-related problems (among other things) and will therefore make it easier for the public to generate requests for service to the City Council; it seems likely that any tree problem, regardless of its relevance to the County, could be reported here. But it will also draw attention to the different reporting mechanisms available to residents, and may raise questions about why this system is not available on the City Council website as well.

10 Problem trees

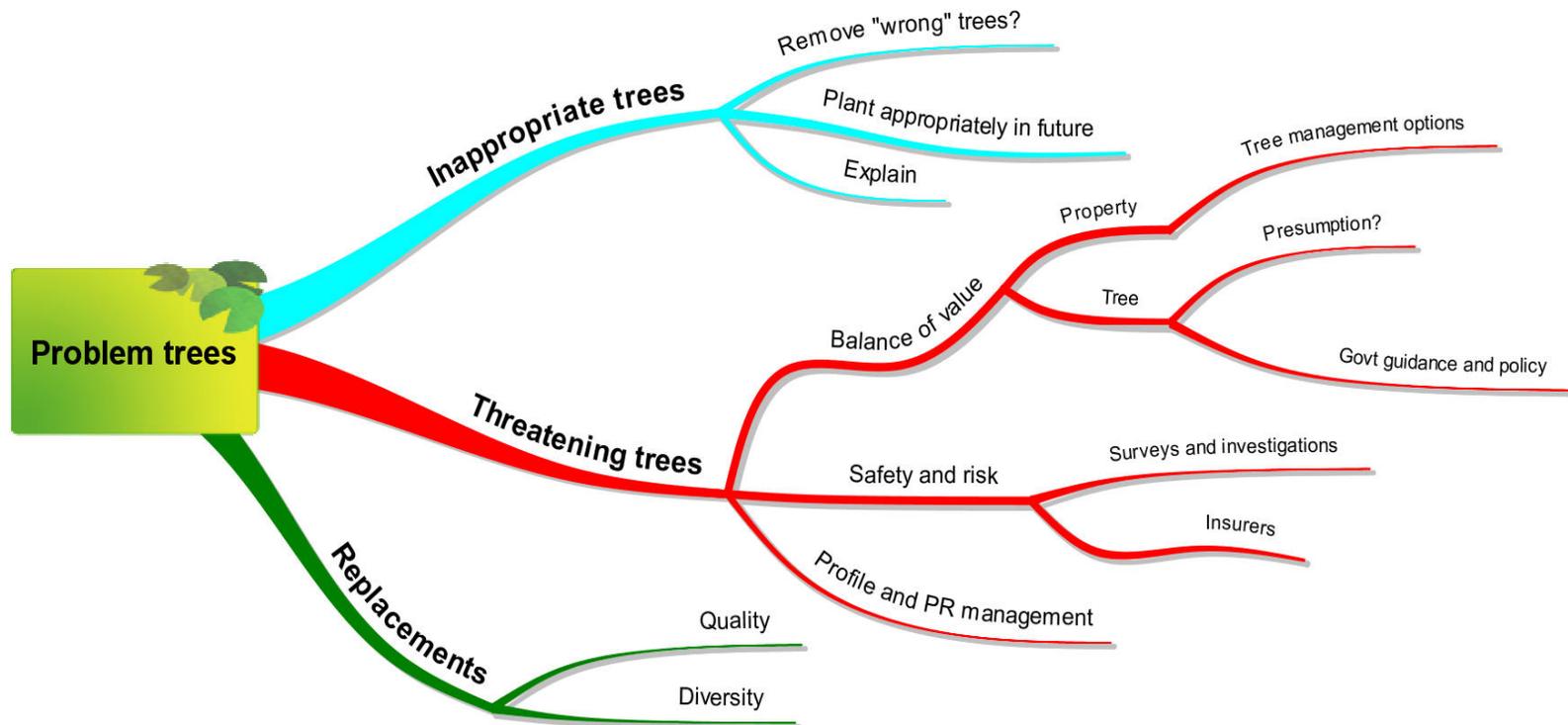
Many of the issues related to “problem” trees have already been articulated more specifically – the decision process, consultation, communication and so on – so this section does not repeat those, but focuses instead on some specific issues relating to trees that cause problems, wherever these may arise.

The strategy will need to consider a more detailed **replacement policy**. If the Council’s policy for the future is based on “the right tree in the right place”, the Council will still need to articulate a policy on whether it will be pro-active or reactive in dealing with situations where the wrong tree is in the wrong place. In doing so, it will also need to consider its replacement policy, and the need to ensure that replacements are of sufficient quality to satisfy a public that has serious concerns about the planting of small “whips” and claiming that these are genuine replacements for mature specimens that have had to be taken down. The perception created by the current policy is that the Council is insufficiently motivated to provide “proper” replacements; if the reality is that the trees being planted have a greater chance of success and survival, then this needs to be communicated (for instance, through locally-placed interpretative material).

Similarly, when the replacement is a different species, it will assist the acceptability of this approach if the Council **explains** why a different species is being used – for instance, to minimise risk of disease, or to adapt a formation to thrive in a warmer climate, or to avoid a repetition of the problems that the original planting caused. These arguments will clearly not convince everyone, but the information will help.

Some trees are of course controversial; these trees acquire a **disproportionately high profile** and require much more careful handling than they get at the moment, especially as regards public engagement and public relations.

Safety arguments may seem compelling to people on one side of the fence, but there are others who would wish the Council not to react with removal but to commit to undertaking surveys and investigations to allow the generation of other options which might allow a tree to remain in situ. A recent example has highlighted the difficulty created by the need for the Council to follow the lead of its insurers; there is a common view among those who are enthusiastic about trees that the Council has not made the alternative case with sufficient vigour and has been too ready to cave in to insurer pressure. Although such situations are relatively rare, it would probably be useful for the strategy to set out how the Council will deal with this type of dispute in the future, and under what circumstances it will engage with independent expert advisers. Given a view in some quarters that advisers are not always as independent as they could be, it may also be appropriate to spell out how this advice will be procured.



Many of these situations require a judgment to be made between the value of a property threatened by a tree, and the value of the tree itself. Activists and others in the city are of the view that the Council at present is more likely to rule in favour of the property. While there are some observers who would support this approach, most of the people we spoke to wanted to see a rebalancing of the equation in favour of the tree – in other words, a **presumption in favour of retaining the tree** unless there were compelling reasons not to do so. Some would go further and say that a tree should be inviolable other than in exceptional circumstances; others are willing to judge cases on their respective merits. Others note that Government advice at present is largely in favour of development and property, and without TPOs in place it can be difficult to make a case for retention against a property's claim.

11 Adaptability and change

There are four broad dimensions of change that potentially impact on the Tree Strategy. The first, and most commonly mentioned, is the need for the city to be ready to respond to the **impact of climate change** on the city's trees. There are concerns that the tree stock may be susceptible to climate change, in that species that were suited to this climate when they were originally planted may not be so suitable in the future.

However, scientists and arboriculturalists know more about climate and trees' resilience than they used to, and have a **better understanding** of what climate change may mean for the city, and of how to plan for a future in a different climate. This pressure, though, would benefit greatly from the inventory research described above.

Climate change may also affect the insects and diseases that live in and from tree hosts, and trees may be more, or less, **resilient** than they are now to pest and disease. This too needs to be planned for, in management, in succession planting, and in new planting for the future. **Mixed planting** will increase resilience, but may reduce historic character; this will call for careful judgment.

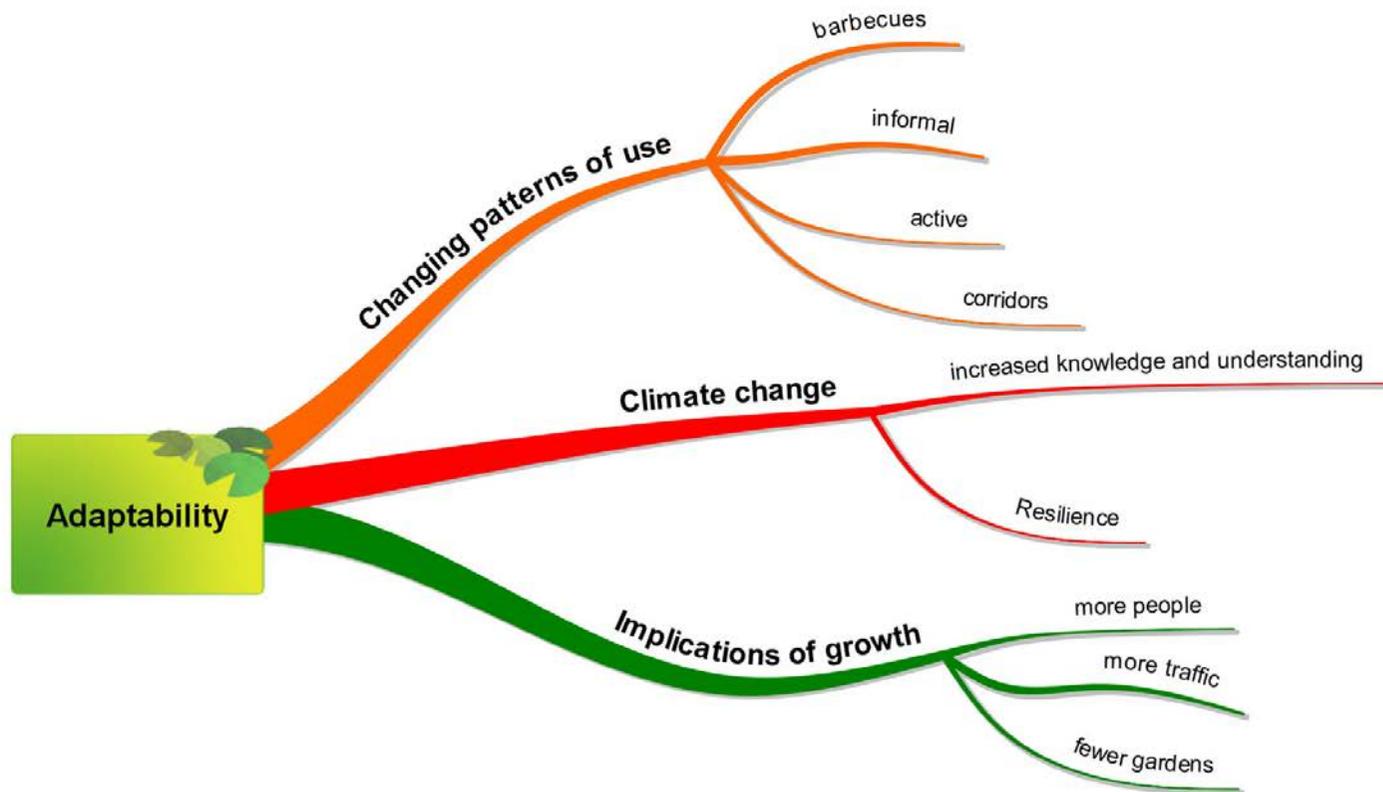
Meanwhile, the city continues to grow, and the **increased population** also has implications for trees in the city. Some of the homes for these new arrivals are being developed in former gardens, with associated loss of trees in these areas of town. A larger population will impose more on existing open spaces, and will need more space; and traffic increase can also be predicted, with its own impact through increased air pollution, a need for more parking space, and increased pressure for road widening, which may threaten highway trees.

At the same time, **patterns of use** of open space are changing, and there is a feeling that the city may need to adapt open spaces in particular to accommodate those new uses. Landscapes such as formal avenues or formal cemeteries were originally designed for strolling and promenading, and whilst people still enjoy walking in these spaces, life is becoming much more informal in nature and our use of space more active; trees get in the way of some new activities, as well as more traditional ones like football or cricket. People also enjoy sun as well as shade.

Increased cycling also creates an increased demand for **safe green corridors** through which cyclists can pass freely, and this may mean different management of trees in those spaces to make room for cyclists and walkers.

Budget pressures on the City Council and on the County Council may force **new ways of working**; at present these are unclear, but it may be that the city has to move to a more risk-based way of working, focussing its attention mainly on those trees which are the most vulnerable or which present the greatest risk when they fail.

In all this change, it is also worth noting the comment that trees provide an anchor of continuity and calm in the background of a rapidly evolving city.



12 Masterplanning

A number of people suggest a **more planned approach** to tree work, and by extension to other public realm work, seeing trees as just one dimension of the public realm that should not necessarily be seen in isolation from its wider context. They note the significance of character, to which trees make a significant contribution, and look for the City Council to take a lead in developing future plans that protect or enhance this character.

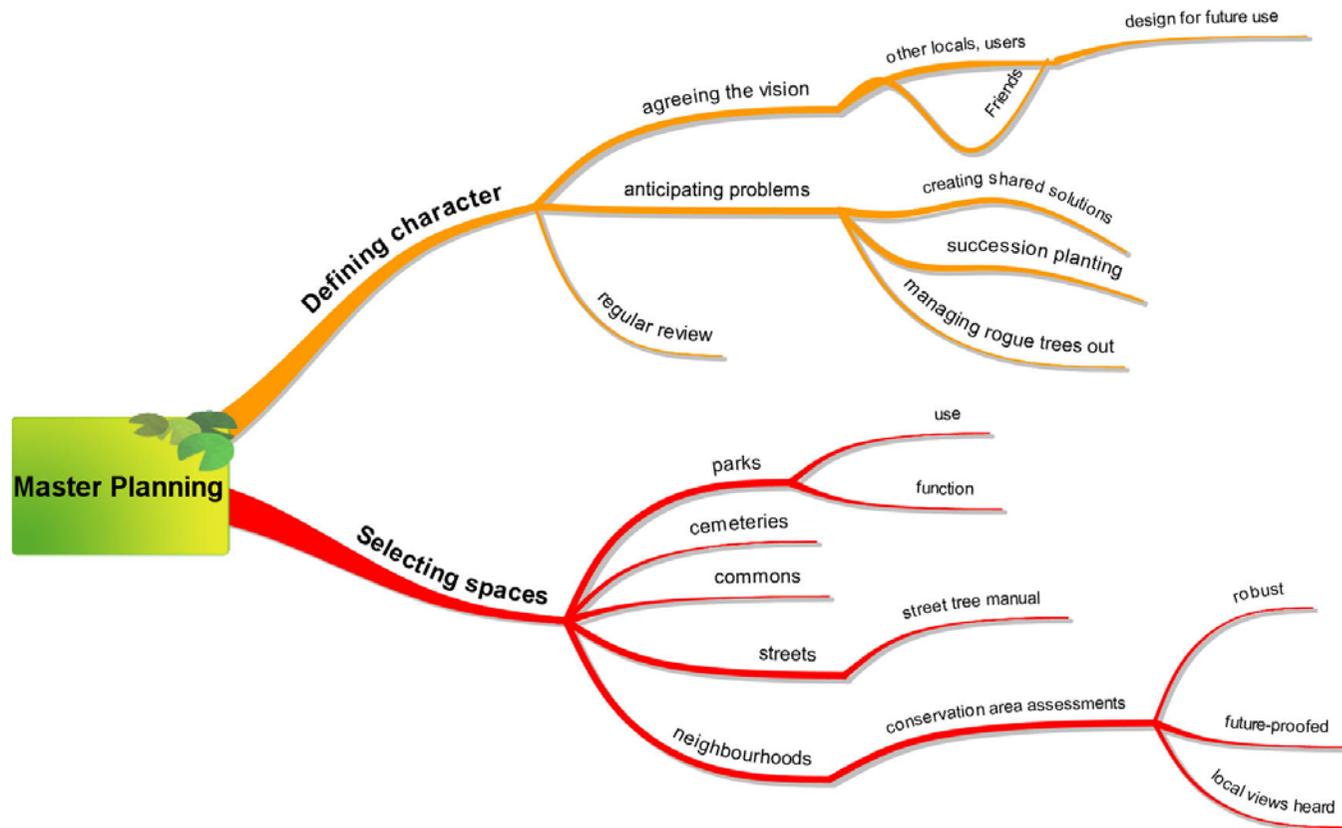
A prerequisite for this is the need to **define** what the character actually is – and in some cases, which particular aspects of character should be protected and which enhanced. This will require a vision to be agreed for the space in question, which should involve Friends' Groups or other obvious stakeholders, but should also involve local people and particularly those who use the space. It is noted that Friends' Groups do not necessarily represent the full range of users, and may be defensive in their approach. This vision should then take account of the aspects of character that are to be protected and preserved, and also the changing patterns of use of the space which may require a modified approach for future planting.

The vision will be codified as a Masterplan setting out the future of the site over the medium to long-term, and should reduce argument over smaller maintenance and renewal works, since the broad principles will already have been agreed. Although the plan will require **regular review**, it should aim to set the vision for up to one full generation forward.

It will work to reduce or eliminate the piecemeal approach that has characterised the City's approach to some spaces in the past, and will encourage the public to think more about the long term and see short term work in that context. It should not be regarded as a panacea, though; agreeing a shared vision for some spaces will not be easy and several different viewpoints may need to be reconciled; but a successful Masterplan vision will also provide a defensive position for the Council if it needs it later.

It is noted that the Council has a good track record in developing Masterplans, with Cherry Hinton identified as a case in point. Masterplanning, it is thought, would also facilitate cross-departmental working in the Council, and provide an opportunity to engage expert advice to help with species selection, for example.

The Masterplan should also **anticipate problems**, acknowledging the issues that are currently present in the space and also those which may arise in the future as a consequence of the changes described above. This provides an opportunity to work towards shared solutions without the pressure of urgent remedial works, and also to look at options for succession planting and for the removal, over time, of "the wrong tree in the wrong place".



Which spaces should be planned in this way? Suggestions are made that encompass the city's main **parks** – the historic city centre ones, and also suburban parks of local significance, addressing the way these parks are used, and the functions they serve for local people, commuters, and visitors to the city. But some people want to go further, and develop Masterplans for **other important locations** such as the city's commons and cemeteries. Others suggest Masterplanning could also embrace **significant streets** (a street tree manual is mentioned here as needing revision and updating) or **neighbourhoods**, though it is not clear how these would dovetail with Conservation Area Assessments in those localities that have them.

CAAs are criticised for dealing too much with the present and the past, and not sufficiently with the future. The discussion that a plan would involve, though, would at least allow issues to be raised (for instance with private tree owners) and would enable more information to be disseminated.

Masterplans may also have a role in growth areas too, asking people what they would like the area to look like in (say) twenty years' time and setting a vision that can then be worked on in the intervening period; the key ingredient here is that local people are being asked to take ownership of aspects of their neighbourhood, and to work to improve it.

The essence of these proposals is the opportunity to provide robust, future-proof plans for localities, in which local people's views have played a significant role.

13 The bigger picture

As is usually the case with a strategy, some issues can, or should, be tackled in the short term while others require more careful consideration. As a result of this consultation, we identify these issues as requiring more or less immediate attention:

- 1 The Council needs to act urgently to sort out the process by which decisions are made, including the opportunities for people to comment, and clarify where, when, and by whom, decisions will be made. The Council also needs to allow the process to demonstrate that public consultation has due weight in decisions. Clarification of roles and responsibilities, and accountability, is of paramount importance. It also needs to strike the right balance between enabling appropriate consultation, and allowing a pragmatic approach in non-contentious areas and for urgent work.
- 2 The Council needs to begin work on a communications strategy for its tree work, developing information in a format that is easily accessible for people, so that they can find out more about activity taking place, comment effectively on this work, and learn more about the process for specific tree works proposals. This should include communication through the website, and also examine the potential for using other media such as local interpretation. Part of this is about informing people, part is about enabling people to inform themselves, and part is about demonstrating the expertise of the tree team as a means of rebuilding confidence in their judgement. The availability of information will in itself allow the authority to refer people to the website for many enquiries. The strategy may also wish to consider how, and to what extent, the frontline Customer Service Team should try to deal with public enquiries.
- 3 The Council needs to begin work on rebuilding confidence in its tree service. This calls for culture change that embraces these issues:
 - Clarification of the role of the tree service: is it meant to direct or advise, how does its work inform member decisions, and what should be its role in relation to enquiries from private owners, or from applicants or potential applicants for tree works?
 - Instigation of a new, more outcome-focussed culture that gives more weight to public perception alongside technical issues, and is transparent, avoiding any impression of secrecy;
 - Awareness that decisions about trees affect not only trees and amenity, but also have public and media relations implications that need to be managed;
 - A genuinely multi-disciplinary approach with proper, accountable and accessible project management that brings disciplines together and requires constructive joint working towards agreed outcomes.

In terms of the longer term aims of the strategy, we recommend that consideration is given to these points:

- 4 The development of an inventory and comprehensive valuation of the tree stock, analysing its strengths and weaknesses, to provide an evidence base for the strategy and to enable prioritisation of some activities over others. As a spin-off, this would also provide a useful resource for other tree owners and could be used to bring people into a closer network.
- 5 Consideration of a more pro-active approach to identifying trees of merit that may need protection, and to identify potential problems before they become crisis situations. Resources will limit the Council's capacity to do this, but it has potential as a more risk-based approach to tree management and would fit well with the County's wishes for highway trees.
- 6 If the "right tree in the right place" is a basis for the future, what should be done about wrong trees in wrong places now? Should the Council be more pro-active in dealing with these situations before they become problematic, or should it wait for a problem to arise?
- 7 Should there be a presumption in favour of the tree other than in compelling situations – and if so, what are the compelling circumstances that would decide against a tree? Under what circumstances will the Council engage external experts to advise, and how much will it follow the lead of insurers against internal or external expertise? The strategy cannot be prescriptive on this kind of issue, but it should clarify how contentious issues will be progressed and resolved.
- 8 As a general principle, the Council should seek to explain why it is doing the work. For example:
 - clarify the replacement policy and explain more carefully, either on the website or in local interpretation, why small trees are used in preference to larger specimens;
 - explain why different species may be needed to reduce risk of disease;
 - explain the authority's role, and its constraints, in managing highways trees.
- 9 Look for potential partners to support delivery of the strategy objectives; if there are none, look at whether partners such as Friends' Groups can be enabled or created. Work to build effective and mutually useful relationships with external bodies such as colleges (using existing networks or creating new ones), landlord groups, private owners (using local resident groups, for instance), neighbouring authorities, and good practice authorities elsewhere.
- 10 Awareness and monitoring of the localism/Big Society agenda as it emerges, to look for opportunities to resource tree work directly or to enable others to deliver some of the strategic objectives.

- 11 Seek opportunities for wider public engagement, perhaps using the emerging strategy as a focus for discussion on principles rather than specific examples. In particular, invite residents of growth areas to consider the future of their areas and start to plan accordingly. The idea of using country park and other local experts with experience in leading such activities, to engage people, or schools, in urban tree walks, or other celebratory activities, offers a low cost option to engage a wider audience.
- 12 Identify specific, defined character areas where trees are a significant contributor to the local character, and schedule a list of areas where a Masterplan might be a productive way forward for managing those areas; Masterplans should be set up as a rolling programme over the life (or at least the early life) of the strategy, so that resource implications of planning and implementation can be managed effectively.

***Phil Back
Wetherby
April 2011***