



Opinion... Our colleagues need to step up

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Intuitively, we know that trees make urban living more comfortable. On a hot day, we naturally migrate to the shade. When it rains, we know leaves intercept water because of the shelter beneath tree crowns. City stress is busted by the calm of urban parks and researchers continue to confirm that people near trees are healthier and happier. Yet, local politicians are just not getting it. Why?

Historically, the lack of credible methods to value trees offered urban accountants a soft target for balancing the books, but that loophole is rapidly closing. The London Tree Officers' Association (www.ltoa.org.uk) endorses an approach called "CAVAT", which calculates the asset value of trees. In the USA, its Forest Service developed a peer-reviewed approach called i-Tree (www.itreetools.org) for calculating tree benefits, now routinely used by hundreds of communities around the world. These credible methods make it harder for politicians to ignore tree value, and yet it seems that old habits die hard.

London mayor Sadiq Khan publicly rebuked Wandsworth Council for its plan to fell an historic 140-year-old avenue of horse chestnut trees on Tooting Bec Common, despite thousands of community objections. It was recently valued at £2.6 million, a material consideration that politicians omitted from the public consultation, yet the trees have now been felled. In Sheffield, the ruling political elite has overseen the destruction of thousands of street trees valued at £66 million — a vast community asset destroyed by political mismanagement. Common factors are a failure to consider tree value in decision making and local politicians hijacking technical arguments to justify tree removals.

Another surprising commonality is the absence of any protest from built environment professionals who seem content to sit back and leave the dirty work of crying foul to the tree people. Architects, planners, engineers, surveyors, ecologists, and landscape architects, represent a powerhouse for change, but where are they? Local politicians are getting away with tree murder while built environment professionals remain silent.

By comparison, arborists are a tiny voice, and their squeaking is being drowned out, trampled underfoot by political egos, might and manipulation. There is an asset-stripping tide ripping the green heart out of our communities, and arborists need support before there is nothing left. The dirty politics of the Third World are here, green-fleeing communities before our very eyes, and it needs more than arborists to stop the loss.

