



Opinion... A solid base from which to rebuild after the coronavirus crisis is over

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From humble business beginnings, processing firewood to make ends meet in 1980, I have learnt the tree trade the hard way. In 1995, I concentrated on providing planning and legal advice, culminating in the Horticulture Week Tree Consultancy of the Year award last year. At the start of this week (23 March) I had a million-pound turnover, international consultancy. Today, thanks to the coronavirus crisis, all my hand-picked team of 13 are on an unpaid leave of absence, with no real idea whether I will ever have a business left to rebuild.

Grim as it is, this is a far better alternative to compulsory redundancies and closing the business for good, which would have dispersed all our accrued expertise. This loss was only averted by the decisive Government intervention offering salary support, and I am grateful for the lifeline that has provided. Of course, there are moments when the negatives of it all are just overwhelming, so here are a few positives that may help others to ride the waves of despair.

I am a trustee of the Trees & Design Action Group (TDAG), a not-for-profit and apolitical collaborative forum facilitating cross-sector and cross-disciplinary dialogue and projects promoting the role of the UK urban forest. Among its core strengths is there being no membership fee, so we are not bound by any member-led agenda, and we have no political masters. Its focus is entirely on how to make life better for people through integrating trees into where we live and work. None of the trustees are paid and all the projects are funded from supporter donations.

Useful free publications include detailed strategic guidance for built environment decision makers, plus practical guidance for installing trees in hard landscapes, species selection, assessing urban air quality, valuing trees and green infrastructure, all supplemented by a growing library of case studies. Our most exciting imminent publication is *Trees, Planning & Development: A Guide for Delivery*, explaining how to manoeuvre in the planning system to optimise urban canopy cover.

It was TDAG that developed the concept of a national tree strategy, which subsequently morphed into the UK tree and woodland framework that is now proposed in the forthcoming Environment Bill. This primary legislation enshrines the principle of trees being environmental assets on a par with other urban infrastructure, providing a powerful springboard for professionals and enthusiasts to advocate for trees at the local level.

The post-COVID-19 landscape will be unrecognisable, but these core developments are a more positive basis for rebuilding than anything I can recall. There is a lot to look forward to, but we must reach the other side of this crisis first. Good luck to all in this time of need.

