



TREES & SOCIAL WELLBEING

BY KENTON ROGERS
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Kenton Rogers is Co-Founder of Treeconomics, a Social Enterprise based at Exeter Science Park. It is the mission of Treeconomics to work with communities, businesses and research institutions to highlight the value of trees. Treeconomics has collaborated in over 30 projects in the UK and abroad (including the UK pilot of i-Tree in Torbay, Valuing London's Urban Forest, and ongoing work with Highways England), to develop tools for cost benefit analysis of its natural capital. Kenton holds a Master's in Forest Ecosystem Management and is a Chartered Forester. He was a contributing author on the UK National Ecosystem Assessment and the Springer Handbook on 'The Urban Forest', and more recently was lead author for the Haynes Owners' Workshop Manual on Trees. Kenton was a serving Trustee of the International Tree Foundation for 10 years, and is also a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

When we think about the human living environment, we often forget that as a species, we may have been around for about 200,000 years, but civilisation is a relatively recent concept.

Humans are much better adapted to living on the prairie, savannah or woodlands, than to living in towns and cities. Sadly, our urban environments do not give much thought to this ancestry and aren't always designed with our health and wellbeing in mind. We all know that trees enhance the places we live, and there are many residential areas which celebrate this fact. But the value of trees is not always recognised by residents. Trees provide many benefits: cleaning our air; absorbing stormwater; providing thermal comfort, reducing heating costs, storing carbon, providing a habitat for wildlife, and many more. Studies have also found that people



Above: Trees enhance the places we live and provide many benefits

living in proximity to trees have brain structures that are better able to handle stressors; another found that the mental wellbeing scores of housing association residents was higher at sites with more tree cover. There is no doubt that the significant number of trees that housing associations own make a positive daily contribution to the lives of residents, and this is something that LiveWest, a housing association in the SouthWest of England, now has quantifiable data to illustrate.

So how can tree benefits be quantified? It all starts with a tree inventory; a collection of data on the trees managed and their locations. If a tree population is to be understood and managed, an inventory is a great place to start. LiveWest first decided to create a

tree inventory as part of its risk management process, and in an effort to better understand the asset it was managing. "A worthwhile exercise", says Estate Services Technical Manager, Rob Scholefield. "It really has helped the association to proactively manage its trees, thus reducing the number of enquiries and complaints coming in. It has also helped us to deal with enquiries from residents without having to conduct a visit each time; we manage trees across 23 local authority areas, so having detailed records makes the process much more efficient."

LiveWest then took its tree inventory one step further and, in 2018, engaged consultancy Treeconomics to take the data from over 26,500 trees and put it through a software system called i-Tree Eco.

Up until then, the onus at LiveWest had very much been on risk management, rather than on the benefits that trees provide. The resulting report gave a valuation of the association's trees in both monetary and environmental terms. For example, there were found to be 150 species across the association's estates, the replacement cost of which was over £15 million. In environmental terms, the trees were sequestering 109 tonnes of carbon every year (equivalent to the emissions of roughly 30 percent of LiveWest's repair vans). Furthermore, they were filtering nearly 4 tonnes of air pollution a year; worth around £50,000 annually in avoided social damage costs (in this instance, adverse effects on residents' lungs and on buildings). Many more benefits



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were identified.

Having an objective valuation of its trees has made it possible for LiveWest to face requests for tree removal with real data; having quantifiable values for the trees in question, it has been able to advocate that removing them would degrade that value. Furthermore, it has helped to justify the annual spend on tree maintenance and planting, as it can be clearly seen as an investment in a valuable long-term asset. Importantly, the study has shown what the replacement cost of trees lost to ash dieback might be, enabling the association to plan ahead.

Rob Scholefield is extremely pleased with the results of the study: “The i-Tree project has helped with publicity both internally and externally and has even fed into our environmental strategy. It has also helped us to argue for trees to be kept when faced with requests to remove them. It was an interesting exercise, and the resulting report has not only been used to raise the profile of trees here at LiveWest, but has also prompted real action on the ground.”

That was two years ago, and LiveWest has recently commissioned another i-Tree valuation, to see how it is progressing toward its green goals. “We’ll be using the i-tree figures as part of our environmental reporting going forward”, says Rob. “Since the last report, we’ve recorded nearly 10,000 more trees, through more robust surveying processes and on newly acquired land and properties – so the benefits continue to grow. We want to make sure that our trees are well managed, benefiting residents and ensuring that our homes remain attractive, desirable places to live”.

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