



## Managing the inspection of trees

### Key Issues:

- Concerns have been raised about local authorities having adequate tree inspection programmes following recent fatalities. In addition to a lack of actual inspections a recent court finding, where a fatality had occurred due to a falling tree branch, raised further issues about a lack of accountability and poor communication within and between departments regarding the management of tree inspections.
- APSE has carried out a short survey to provide MHCLG and Defra with some initial anonymised findings regarding the current tree inspection methodologies adopted by those local authorities replying to the survey.
- Results show that although there are several different approaches and inspection methodologies, most authorities have fairly robust approaches to tree inspection programmes and have supporting policies and strategies to support the wider management of **their authorities' trees**.
- Of concern however, is the lack of detailed information that local authorities hold on their areas total tree stock and by association the risks associated with these trees, most of which are not under local authority control.
- Recent government pledges of planting 30 million trees per year, or 30,000 ha annually, between 2020 and 2025 is welcome in an attempt to combat the effects of climate change and carbon emissions, but it is hoped as well as tree planting adequate resources will be allocated to the recording, management and inspections of these trees, particularly those which come under the ownership of local authorities where budgets are already under considerable strain.

### Background

Following fatalities caused by falling trees and branches, concerns have been raised that some councils were not regularly checking trees within their areas, in particular on their highways. In the case of the authority where a recent fatality occurred, it was identified that there was also a lack of accountability and poor communication within and between departments regarding the management of tree inspections.

Further recommendations included that there be a strategic management of tree policy along with effective staff training in order that future potential threats from diseased trees can be identified more accurately and prompt action can be taken.

APSE was approached by The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to discover the level of preparedness of local authorities and where possible identify best practice and any improvements that could be made to existing policies associated with this activity.

APSE is conscious that this is a sensitive area and therefore will keep the responses in confidence and will only release specific authority data to MHCLG in agreement with the particular authority in question, for example in relation to best practice or innovative approaches.

This request for information will provide local authorities with an opportunity to help shape Government guidance on this issue by providing data which will help improve national tree inspection levels but also identify any challenges local authorities are facing in relation to managing their tree stocks.

As well as an interest from MHCLG, DEFRA are currently developing best practice guidance on tree strategies for local authorities. At the request of MHCLG they will include a section on surveying the condition of existing trees and carrying out a disease management plan. It is unlikely that MHCLG would want to produce separate guidance on tree management, but the findings of the APSE survey could provide opportunities to feed into the DEFRA work.

## Detail

In relation to the survey, APSE asked the following questions:

- How many trees is your local authority responsible for in your council area?
- How many trees in total are there in your council area?
- How many FTE tree inspectors do you employ?
- Do you provide tree inspection services in-house or is it providing through an external contractor (if by a contractor please give details).
- What is the frequency of your tree inspections?
- Do you employ a risk rating system for identified tree works as a result of tree inspections?
- Do you undertake any private tree inspections for which you make a charge?
- Do you have a tree inspection policy working practice document you would be willing to share?

The aim of the survey was not only to provide information to MHCLG but also look at whether opportunities were being taken to generate income from tree inspection services to help local authorities fund such activities, as in the case of Dundee City council which offers its tree inspection and maintenance services as a commercial service.

<https://www.dundee.gov.uk/service-area/neighbourhood-services/environment/arboricultural-service-and-maintenance>

Responses were received from 26 local authorities across the UK.

How many trees is your local authority responsible for in your council area?

Perhaps not unsurprisingly there was a wide variety of responses in relation to numbers of trees which fell under the responsibility of the local authority, ranging from less than 10,000 to over 400,000 individual trees. Many mentioned they were also responsible for the maintenance of woodlands where there was a large degree of uncertainty of numbers.

This uncertainty was also clear in relation to the question, 'How many trees in total are there in your council area'? Almost all respondents stated that they were unsure as to the total number of trees in their area, and those which did return a number stated these were based on estimates.

One could argue therefore that although not all trees in a local authority area are the responsibility of the local authority it would be good practice to be able to have an understanding of numbers and the types of trees present and by association, the potential risks they pose.

How many FTE tree inspectors do you employ?

Only three respondents stated that they did not have any FTE tree inspectors but plans were underway by one of these to have inspectors in place in the next 18 months, the other two carried out shared inspections with specialist tree companies or outsourced the service.

Numbers of FTE tree inspectors varied between councils and they were not always in proportion to the number of trees which were under council responsibility. However the average number of FTE tree officers per authority was two.

Do you provide tree inspection services in-house or is it providing through an external contractor (if by a contractor please give details).

21 of the 25 respondents provided tree inspection services in-house, of the remaining three, two provided the service in partnership with a private contractor and the final respondent had an out-sourced service. The shared services were based on the council undertaking some of the inspections, but any remedial work being given over to specialist contractors

What is the frequency of your tree inspections?

Not surprisingly responses varied significantly. Most had clearly defined frequency of inspections whilst others based inspections on locations e.g. schools and highways, some only carried out inspections when problems or concerns were raised. Most authorities did however have clear criteria as to where trees were located and as a consequence, this often determined the frequency of inspection cycles.

Do you employ a risk rating system for identified tree works as a result of tree inspections?

This question follows on from the previous question in that it looked for greater details as to how frequency of inspection cycles were determined. 20 of the respondents replied that they did use a form of risk rating to determine the frequency of inspection, ranging from location or type of tree to a fully blown Quantified Tree Risk Assessment Methodology whereby tree safety management looks at limiting the risk of harm from tree failure while maintaining the benefits conferred by trees. Of those respondents who **did not use a formal risk rating approach they commented that they used 'common sense'**.

Do you undertake any private tree inspections for which you make a charge?

Few respondents carried out chargeable works, and of those who did, most confined themselves to internal council work for other departments, Parish Councils and Housing Associations. Most stated that they did not have the resources to consider undertaking commercial work.

Do you have a tree inspection policy working practice document you would be willing to share?

14 of the 25 respondents had some form of tree management policy which addressed tree inspections and several more were currently preparing or waiting for such a policy to be adopted. The documents provided showed a large degree of consideration to the inspecting and subsequent management of trees based on a risk assessment and a clear response timetable to any problems identified.

#### APSE Comment

It is clear that whilst the majority of local authority responses received did show evidence of written procedures and auditable processes in relation to tree inspections, there are still many areas where improvements could be made and should be made considering the potential risks and real incidents which have occurred in relation to tree damage.

However it must be equally realised that the task of monitoring every tree, not only in council ownership or responsibility, but also outside of council control is huge and looking at **the numbers of FTE's against known tree stocks**, clearly shows there is an imbalance between workloads and available resources. It is unlikely these resources will be **forthcoming as council's struggle to meet continual budget reductions, and this is unlikely** to change in the foreseeable future. Therefore there is a clear need for guidance to highlight best practices such as Quantified Tree Risk Assessment Methodology which can help local authorities to manage, maintain and preserve their current tree stocks.

More recently a new area of tree related work has increased in profile which is the pledge from government and local authorities, to increase tree planting as a means to reduce the impact of increasing carbon emissions and the wider effects of global warming. If these mass tree planting schemes are to be delivered there will also need to be a reciprocal increase in resources to manage and ensure these trees are healthy and thereby reducing potential risks as they grow. If local authorities are finding it difficult to estimate current tree numbers in their areas then the billions of trees being proposed will make this task even harder.

A final point of note is with regards to the threat from current and potential tree related disease such as Ash Dieback <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/tree-pests-and-diseases/key-tree-pests-and-diseases/ash-dieback/> . **The consequences of this disease are huge with estimates of 95% of the UK's stock likely to be lost or severely affected.**

If these trees are to be replaced together with the planting of new trees, some of which may need to be imported then the potential for new tree-borne diseases needs to be carefully managed. If local authorities, are expected to be given some of this responsibility to manage much of this new tree stock, then it will need to be suitably resourced. It is therefore hoped this is taken into account when budgets are being allocated for new and replacement tree planting programmes.

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