

Managing the inspection of trees

To: All local authorities in UK

1 Summary

The recent tragic incident in a local park in the South East of England, where a young girl lost her life due to a falling tree branch, has once again brought the issue of local authority tree inspection programmes into sharp focus.

This briefing explores the findings of an APSE survey on tree inspection methodologies. It finds that many councils have established inspection strategies. However, the looming reorganisation of local government structures raises critical concerns over continuity, accountability and resource allocation in this vital area of public safety.

2 Background to the survey

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 one case, the court highlighted serious gaps in inter-departmental communication and accountability within the responsible authority.

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.

3 Responses

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.¹

¹ <https://www.dundee.gov.uk/service-area/neighbourhoodservices/environment/arboricultural-service-and-maintenance>

3.1 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 below:

3.2 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.

3.3 How many FTE tree inspectors do you employ?

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.

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

Over 80% of those surveyed provided tree inspection services in-house. For those who did not, only one had an outsourced service whilst the others provided the service in partnership with a private contractor. The shared services were based on the council undertaking some of the inspections, but any remedial work being given over to specialist contractors

3.5 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. However, most authorities did have clear criteria as to where trees were located and as a consequence, this often determined the frequency of inspection cycles.

3.6 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. A large majority 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 Methodology² 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 they had used 'common sense'.

3.7 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.

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

Over half of those surveyed 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.

4 APSE Comment

The UK government has ambitious tree planting goals, aiming to increase tree and woodland cover to 16.5% by 2050.³ This includes trebling planting rates, with a target of 30,000 hectares of new woodland annually from May 2024. Therefore, the capacity to monitor, inspect and maintain these trees is becoming even more critical to ensure their long-term health, public safety and the success of national climate and biodiversity goals.

However, in an environment where council budgets are already under strain, there is deep concern that the resources needed to manage existing and newly planted stock will not keep pace. With further structural change on the horizon, there is also a real danger that these types of vulnerabilities could be exacerbated, especially where responsibilities are split, teams are restructured or knowledge is lost in transition.

² <https://www.qtra.co.uk/about-qtra/>

³ <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2024/04/08/working-together-to-meet-government-targets-for-tree-planting-in-england/>

APSE's survey makes it 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 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 councils 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 practice such as Quantified Tree Risk Assessment Methodology which can help local authorities to manage, maintain and preserve their current tree stocks.

As responsibilities shift, either through shared services or structural reform, clarity over who manages tree inspections must be maintained. Best practices – such as Quantified Tree Risk Assessment methodologies – should be more widely adopted to ensure consistency. Equally, investment must be made in data collection and tree stock management if authorities are to address both current risks and the challenges of future expansion.

5 How can APSE help?

APSE can support councils through reorganisation by sharing best practice models, facilitating peer learning, and offering guidance on maintaining service continuity. Find out how APSE can support your council through reorganisation by visiting our LGR Hub [here](#).

APSE also regularly receives queries on tree inspections from our member councils. We source responses to these queries by circulating them to our extensive UK-wide network of parks professionals. If you belong to an APSE member council and have any tree inspection queries – or any queries relating to grounds maintenance – the APSE network may have the answers. Connect with the APSE network and get involved with our Network Queries service [here](#).

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance Network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across the parks and greenspace sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

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APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

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