



Opinion... Tree strategies are essential for safety

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Earlier this year, Wirral Borough Council (WBC) pleaded guilty to breaching Section 3(1) of the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 and was fined £100,000 plus costs of £49,363.

This was in addition to the £1.37m it had already allocated to addressing serious shortcomings in its corporate tree risk management.

These actions were triggered by the death of an infant, Lucia Jayne Stear, in 2016, when a tree branch with discoverable defects fell onto her mother's car, causing fatal injuries. At her inquest, a jury found that "*WBC did not have a proactive, robust tree management system in place*" and noted "*a systemic lack of accountability in WBC*".

In 2008, the Government-sponsored Trees in Towns II project found that nearly 50 per cent of UK councils did not have a formal tree strategy. Ten years later, a freedom of information request to 214 highway authorities indicated that figure remains unchanged. Clearly, many councils are failing to manage tree risk responsibly, with mounting evidence that the absence of formal tree strategies is contributing to public death and injury.

There are multiple benefits from having a written corporate tree management strategy — communicating sustainability and environmental credentials to the outside world, providing internal benchmarks to keep employees aligned with corporate objectives, securing consistency through personnel changes, improving efficiency by plugging gaps and avoiding duplications of effort, and identifying who is accountable when things go wrong. These are obvious gains, yet many local councils continue to ignore the need.

Despite more than 80% of people living in urban areas, these local shortcomings in urban tree management have not been recognised in the recent Defra England Tree Strategy consultation. The Arboricultural Association has expressed concern about the lack of attention on urban trees in an open letter to the secretary of state. The Trees & Design Action Group has added its support, stating: "*The England Tree Strategy must be enshrined in law and require all local authorities to have robust, evidence-based local tree strategies and be congruent with other policies and strategies. Without this, the tree strategy is of limited benefit.*"

Lessons from the past show that formal tree strategies are essential for safety and sustainability, but a discretionary approach is not working because around 50% of councils are failing to comply. The England Tree Strategy is a visionary initiative, but it will not deliver meaningful local benefits unless there is a statutory requirement for all councils to have a formalised and adopted strategy to make the most of trees for their communities.

