



FEATURE

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STANDARDS FOR TREE INSPECTIONS

A PERSONAL VIEW

Is it time to revisit the prospect of a British Standard for tree inspection, or at the very least an Industry Code of Practice (ICoP) for the same?

The last decade

In the decade since halting the development of a British Standard for tree inspections (British Standard BS 8516: 2008) and the subsequent 2011 publication of The National Tree Safety Group (NTSG) common sense risk management of trees document(s), it seems to me that this significant part of our undertaking continues to be in a disparate state of affairs.

National Tree Safety Group publications

NTSG publications are impressive endeavours with considerable merits. Ironically, perhaps their very scope and ambition is why they fall between forming either a commonly agreed technical or process driven standard.

Whilst the NTSG (quite correctly) promotes the value of trees, it does not seem to do the same for those professionals engaged in inspecting them - the NTSG supports the position of tree owners. However, when the time comes for them to seek tree advice it is not so forthcoming regarding the importance of engaging the services of professionals with appropriate knowledge, experience and understanding. Unintentionally, the guidance may be counterproductive to our professional development.

As a body, we actively promote our professionalism yet appear to support a position that persons with minimal capability can undertake tree inspections. If these are the circumstances in which tree owners gain their first impressions, this introduces them to poor standards and low expectations from the outset. The commercial race to the bottom is perpetuated, with obvious implications for tree health and public safety. From these

poor foundations, how will tree owners gain a positive insight of us as professionals and the importance and value of trees?

Where are we now?

Of course, there are many positives, but my 35 years' experience in the industry has noted considerable challenges and concerns:

- ✓ We remain big on opinion and little on facts
- ✓ We lack governance, in terms of leadership and regulation (it's not a criticism, there are just considerably more operating outside of any professional body than within)
- ✓ There are minimal to no 'Licence to Practice' requirements
- ✓ We still do not use commonly agreed terms for the basic parts of trees

These circumstances enable the 'self-styled-expert' to thrive, particularly in the field of tree risk assessment and management. Consequently, individuals develop their own approach or buy into quasi-scientific proprietary systems that become accepted norms without any credible peer review or industry mandate.

Given that tree risk assessment and management is such a large part of most arboriculturists' commercial undertaking, this disparate approach does not seem professional or beneficial to either party.

The way forward

It could be argued that Arboriculture is still in its infancy, but the fact remains that to move forward we surely must accept that where we are is simply not tenable. This is particularly true when we compare ourselves to other

professions involved in risk assessment and management. Organisations such as the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Healthcare Council of Healthcare Professionals demonstrate where we could gain inspiration in terms of competency, frameworks and consistency of approach.

We certainly start to raise our professional game where clear standards and processes are referenced, such as:

- ✓ BS 8545:2014 Trees: from nursery to independence in the landscape. Recommendations
- ✓ BS 5837:2012 Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction. Recommendations
- ✓ BS 3998:2010 Tree work. Recommendations

My experience is that reports referencing these tend to have a greater consistency of approach, layout and expected key benchmarks. Perhaps more importantly, they break out beyond our profession into broader society. Consequently, allied professionals reference them and have an understanding of what to expect when commissioning services. It almost appears remiss to not have a tree inspection standard, because the above three are key tenets of what so many of us are routinely engaged in, i.e. planting trees, maintaining trees, building near to trees. So why not when inspecting them?

It would be naive to suggest that a British Standard (or ICoP) gives a guarantee of competence and quality, but as other allied professions have demonstrated, professionalism flows from these common foundations.

As Chartered Arboriculturists, we need to be raising the bar considerably for the sake of our professional development, credibility and, most importantly, the best interests of our trees and society at large.



RESPONSE / Hilary Allison MICFor Chair of the National Tree Safety Group

In response to Jeremy Lawton's article, I am writing to clarify some points in relation to the historical context as to why the British Standards Institution (BSI) decided to discontinue preparations for the unpublished draft of 'BS 8516: Recommendations for tree safety inspections', concurrent with the development of the NTSG's own guidance.

Readers may remember the furore that surrounded the public consultation stage of the draft BS 8516 at the time and the subsequent decision by the BSI to withdraw from the process in the light of forthcoming NTSG guidance. I am informed that, as a general rule, the BSI does not publish standards where there is a nationally recognised organisation already addressing the issues with its own guidance and which has a broad consensus of agreement on what such a standard or guidance should be articulating as good practice. So, it was with the NTSG, from its inception at a conference held at The National Geographic Society in 2009 to publication of its first guidance document in late 2011.

Jeremy correctly points out that NTSG guidance necessarily covers the full spectrum of situations within its scope and ambition.

However, I disagree that the NTSG guidance falls between either a commonly agreed technical or process driven standard. The great strength of the NTSG is that it does cover the full spectrum of ownership and professional representations and provides specific agreed guidance where previously no common viewpoint was available. Indeed, I am told it was this very breadth and scope that played a part in the BSI deciding to withdraw its own document.

I also disagree that the NTSG guidance underplays the role of the professional in this process. All three NTSG documents; the full guidance, the landowner's version and the householder's leaflet in one way or another acknowledge the importance of obtaining professional advice at the appropriate stage within the process. The householder leaflet in particular is explicit in this regard.

Readers may be aware that the NTSG is currently revising its guidance and is completing a rigorous and thorough review of its advice in the context of recent court cases and the views of all the relevant sectors who have an interest. The arboricultural sector is playing a significant role in this process and is assisting the drafting group with representations in the form of the Institute

of Chartered Foresters, the Arboricultural Association, the LTOA and others.

The goal should be to provide tree owners and managers with the best quality professional advice at the appropriate time. Jeremy highlights that the development of arboriculture as a profession has suffered from a lack of parity with other professions, to which I agree. However, this situation does not necessarily need to be perpetuated but it will require significant culture change to ensure other professions recognise the value of professional arboricultural input. An agreed methodology for tree safety inspections is one element in this process of change and while helpful it is not central to the task and will not, as Jeremy says, replace effective and focused leadership.

The NTSG is seeking to provide such leadership within the narrow field of tree safety inspections and using its best offices to communicate that to the disparate sectors that all have an interest. I would urge all Institute members to get behind the revised guidance when published so that we create a level playing field in which to operate and a presence that other sectors can acknowledge and defer to when our input is required.