

A call to councils: Implementing effective tree management to prevent future tragedies

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The tragic incident in Cheshire East, resulting in a £500,000 penalty after a man lost his life due to a falling tree, serves as a reminder to all councils of the importance of diligent tree management. On 28 August 2020, Christopher Hall, a 48-year-old resident of Wilmslow, was fatally struck by a large tree limb while walking his dog in a local park. Despite immediate efforts, Mr. Hall died at the scene.

Councils, as the primary entities responsible for the maintenance of public trees, must adopt and implement a “zoning” approach for regular inspections, prioritising areas based on the frequency of public presence.

Zone one includes areas like parks, playgrounds, and busy roadsides, where public interaction with trees is frequent. Zone two covers less frequented areas, where the risk of trees causing harm is significantly lower.

For trees in high-access zones, periodic visual inspections by individuals knowledgeable in tree health are essential. These checks, focused on identifying signs of instability, do not require arboriculture specialists but should be carried out by those with a basic understanding of tree defects. Additionally, establishing a system for reporting tree damage and implementing safety measures during adverse weather conditions are critical components of a comprehensive tree management strategy.

In cases where trees with serious structural faults are retained due to their ecological or aesthetic value, a specific assessment and tailored management measures become necessary. Such trees, especially those near areas of high public use, require a detailed evaluation and possibly, intervention by a competent arboriculturist to mitigate any risks they pose.

When things do go wrong, the risks posed to individuals by the duty holder’s failures are a critical consideration when deciding the level of penalty to apply, alongside any historical incidents or previous regulatory advice or actions.

This incident highlights the need for a proactive and preventative approach to tree management, and the critical but often overlooked role it plays in safeguarding the community. By adopting comprehensive tree management strategies and implementing consistent risk monitoring and response units, Councils can mitigate the risks associated with trees in public spaces and prevent the recurrence of similar tragic events.

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