



Increase profits; take trees seriously

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Increase Profits: Take Trees Seriously

Jeremy Barrell* and Jonathan Hazell#

Playing councils at their own tree game is a guaranteed winner for developers, saving them money and leading to a much easier life thrown in as a bonus. The common view that councils love trees and they are nothing but a thorn in the developer's side is a very effective smoke screen. Behind the myth there is a more attractive reality, but those who know keep it quiet to guard their competitive edge. The wise players have been doing it for years and the rewards are there for all to see; quick progress of applications through the planning system, reduced tree related stoppages during construction and more attractive developments when its all over. These benefits are all there for the taking and the path to success hinges on one expert – the arboricultural consultant.

In the past, trees did not pose a significant obstacle to development because there was plenty of space and few controls. However, as space became scarcer, the pressures to optimise its use increased and trees are now a limiting factor. Councils have a 'duty' to give them due consideration in all planning applications and the way they are handled by the developer is often the difference between failure and success. The importance of tree issues has been further emphasised by the recent Government revision of Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 1 *General Policy and Principles*. This confirms the status of trees as a material planning consideration, sending a clear signal to developers and councils alike; ignore trees at your peril. The bottom line is that developers providing full information on trees will get an easier ride through the system than those who do not bother. If there are trees on the site, the role of the arboricultural consultant is pivotal throughout the planning process; from the earliest stages when development is conceived, right through to handing over the finished product.

Trees can cost developers money in a number of ways:

- **Increased time to get consent:** Councils have generally been slow at appreciating the implications of PPG1 and, in the past, many developers have got away with providing poor levels of tree information with applications. However, good news travels fast and that is not going to be the case for much longer. With the backing of PPG1, councils can insist that the environmental impact is fully appraised, and not process the application until it is. Returned applications with requests for further information on trees can delay the final decision by weeks and often months. Delays cost money.
- **Lost units:** As experienced developers know, there is a tendency for councils to err on the side of keeping all trees, irrespective of their actual condition. This tendency is especially
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- **Decreased site value and reputation:** How a site looks on completion and in the following years is an important factor in the public perception of the developer. Attractive layouts with healthy trees enhance reputations. At the other extreme, an increasingly sensitive public is quick to receive the negative message sent by dead and dying trees. Inadequate protection of retained trees and their subsequent demise will decrease the value of the site and the reputation of the developer.

On the face of it, this is bad news for developers; trees are clearly important, they are going to cost



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them money and the situation will get worse in the future. The good news is that these costs can be minimised and often turned in to gains by taking the advice of an arboricultural consultant. For best effect, the input of this expertise must be throughout the planning process and fully integrated with a development team of other appropriate experts.

Astute developers will use tree experts to guide sensitive applications through the planning system in the following way:

- The tree expert informally visits the site as soon as it is identified for development to provisionally assess the potential constraints from trees. If they are too excessive, that may be the end of the process for that site. It saves money to hear bad news early rather than later into the process when significant costs will have been incurred.
- A very early meeting with the planning officers, and specifically the tree officer, is important to establish the general principles that the council will be looking for in terms of tree retention. In many situations, detailed information on certain areas will not be appropriate and knowing that in advance saves time and expense.
- With this knowledge, the tree expert then visits the site to collect detailed tree information restricted to those identified as relevant by the council. These trees are tagged and numbered.
- Only after this should the surveyors carry out the land survey. They can restrict their survey to the identified trees and not waste time plotting irrelevant vegetation. The site survey should pick up all the ground detail, levels, tree locations and exact crown spreads. The surveyors should not be measuring other tree parameters such as height or diameter; they are not tree experts and have no appreciation of the significance of inaccuracies later in the planning process.
- With the site survey and the tree data, the tree expert can now prepare a site constraints plan to identify the developable area of the site. With reference to the British Standard, the distance of protective fencing for the important trees can be calculated, which identifies the protected zone. No disturbance should occur within this zone but all areas outside can be considered.

- This provides the design team with a clearly defined area to plan the layout outside the tree constraints.
- Once they have produced a provisional layout, the tree expert is consulted for a detailed analysis and to advise on any further modifications to produce the final application layout.
- The tree expert then writes a full arboricultural impact appraisal on that layout with all the supporting tree data, which is then submitted as supporting information with the planning application. This should include a draft arboricultural method statement for the council to consider as a means of controlling all the tree issues on the site.
- Generally, there is the need for one more meeting with the council to iron out a final agreement on any contentious issues and finalise the details of the arboricultural method statement.
- Formal issue of consent on receipt of revised documentation.

Almost invariably, councils are concerned that what is agreed on paper is not actually carried out on site. Consequently, they are very receptive to ways of tightening up the implementation of proposals. An arboricultural method statement draws together all the tree issues on a site into one document that is available as a reference throughout the construction activity. It covers every detail relating to trees, from when and where the protective fencing will be erected to the precise specification for surfacing within the protected zone. On sensitive sites, allaying council anxiety over this implementation issue can often be the difference between a refusal and a consent. On any site, it will ease the path to a consent.

In practice, developers who routinely use arboricultural consultants as part of their development team are finding that their planning applications are being processed quicker. There are less hold-ups related to trees in the construction phase and the finished developments are enhancing their reputations. In the past, astute use of tree consultants has provided a competitive edge. In changing times, it is now a necessity and future survival will depend on it.

Selection of 'pull-out' quotes:-



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- " developers providing full information on trees will get an easier ride through the system ..."
- "Attractive layouts with healthy trees enhance reputations."
- "... an increasingly sensitive public is quick to receive the negative message sent by dead and dying trees."
- "... councils are very receptive to ways of tightening up the implementation of proposals. ... arboricultural method statements ... can

often be the difference between a refusal and a consent."

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Jeremy Barrell is one of 29 Registered Consultants of the Arboricultural Association. For a free copy of their Directory of Registered Consultants, please telephone 01794 368717.