



Barrell on... Why highway tree inspection regimes must be protected

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When a death arises in unnatural circumstances, an inquest is a fact - finding public inquiry to establish who has died as well as how, when and where the death occurred (www.judiciary.gov.uk).

Since 2013, coroners have had a statutory duty to report where they believe action is necessary to prevent future deaths and a Prevention of Future Deaths (PFD) Report is the mechanism for doing so.

These Reports are considered important instruments of change for the better, with a presumption in favour of publication.

At a recent inquest in Windsor, the Berkshire coroner issued a PFD Report relating to the inspection of highway trees to Bracknell Forest Council. The report criticised the local authority for failing to give its highway inspectors guidance on how to conduct tree inspections and only providing limited training on tree hazard identification.

It also identified a wider lack of detailed guidance available to local authorities on appropriate roadside tree-inspection systems, calling for "clear direction" in "this crucial role".

Published records show that by far the greatest number of incidents causing death or serious harm from tree failures occur at roadside locations. It seems obvious that roadside tree inspection is an important risk-management task that should be carried out by properly trained inspectors, but the shortcomings of Bracknell Forest Council confirm that is not always happening.

This PFD Report has an obvious implication for all local authorities thinking of trimming service costs through downgrading highway tree-inspection regimes — that they do so at their peril.

