Tree Management at Walesby Forest

Introduction

This policy aims to set out the way in which Walesby Forest meets its obligations to reduce the hazards from trees to staff, contractors and visitors.

Employers and persons carrying out undertakings or in control of premises all have duties under the HSW Act. In particular, there is the duty to do all that is reasonably practicable to ensure that people are not exposed to risk to their health and safety.

Doing all that is reasonably practicable does not mean that all trees have to be individually examined on a regular basis. A decision has to be taken on what is reasonable in the circumstances and this will include consideration of the risks to which people may be exposed.

Around half of all fatalities due to falling trees or branches occur in public spaces, such as a park or beside roads, so Section 3 HSW Act may be applicable. Whilst HSE may regard the average risk as extremely low, the law requires that where reasonably practicable measures are available, in individual cases, they should be taken. Whilst the risk of such incidents puts them outside HSE's main proactive priorities, inspectors may be called upon to investigate serious incidents, including fatalities.

The law recognises that there is not an infinite financial or operational resource to be able to do all tree work or inspect all the trees at once. It is therefore essential that both the surveys and the works be prioritised. The most efficient way of prioritising is by assessing hazard and risk, but a system must not only manage risk effectively; it should also include a clear audit trail and history to demonstrate that all reasonable precautions and steps have been taken.

In many instances defects in trees usually start to develop many years before the tree becomes potentially unsafe. Regular inspections should identify and monitor such defects along with any damage or other factors so that action can be taken before the trees become dangerous. It is therefore essential that a written tree safety policy ensures detailed record keeping.

It is impossible to ensure that no branches or indeed whole trees will fall on a person at any time, but this policy does attempt to prescribe a procedure which will ensure that the risk is reduced to an acceptable level. It therefore does not attempt to prevent all falls on people, only those which are heavy enough to cause serious injury. Furthermore, it does not attempt to prevent falls in all parts of the centre because this would be impracticable due to the size and number of trees within the site. It also attempts to ensure that drivers on roads and pedestrians on pathways and other areas of high usage are not exposed to unacceptable risks. Whilst an inspection will endeavour to identify and assess hazards, it is accepted that trees which have recently been inspected will occasionally fail unexpectedly, and that any injuries caused by such a fall are unforeseeable.

Policy

Walesby Forest undertakes to ensure that working practices are established to protect staff and centre visitors from the hazards associated with falling branches and trees.

Aims

In order to fulfil its policy above, the aims of Walesby Forest are to:
   a) Prioritise tree work so as to deal effectively in the first instance with areas of highest visitor numbers, pathways, vehicles and properties.

b) Inspect trees regularly to establish, in so far as is reasonably practicable, the risk of falls which are heavy enough to cause serious injury;
c) Make safe trees, in so far as is reasonably practicable; and
d) Keep records of these activities.

Responsibilities

In discharging their H&S responsibilities under this procedure, Walesby Forest staff will, as a minimum, carry out the following duties:

1. Chief Executive Officer
   a. Ensure support, by way of time and resources, for the procedure in this policy.
2. Centre Manager
   a. With the grounds staff review establishment of estate zones of high, medium and low risk
   b. Ensure that sufficient resources are made available for the implementation of this procedure.
   c. Ensure that prioritised surveys and associated works are carried out and to a suitable standard.
   d. Inform the grounds staff of planned alterations to the centre such as new pathways that may inform risk assessments.
   e. Instruct site closures (see plan attached) as weather warnings are issued.
3. Grounds Staff
   a. With the Centre Manager review establishment of estate zones of high, medium and low risk.
   b. Ensure that a schedule of inspection covering all trees in the centre is produced based on the re-inspection requirements.
   c. Arrange for the inspections to be undertaken according to the schedule and for resulting works to be prioritised, scheduled and carried out.
   d. Report to the Centre Manager on progress in undertaking inspections and any anticipated delays beyond the timings in the schedule.
   e. Ensure that suitable records are kept.
4. All staff
   a. Take care in windy weather
   b. Report to their manager any hazards of which they are aware.

Procedure

This tree risk management system is designed to be pro-active, rather than reactive as far as possible, with problems identified as part of a routine assessment rather than reacting to reports regarding specific trees.

Secondly, any actions, such as tree works or further investigation that are proposed, are prioritised. Finally, any actions proposed are to be carried out in accordance with the priorities, recorded and approved as complete.

In 2018 the site was divided into three colour coded risk priority zones. Using the detailed knowledge of the staff the process of zoning was based upon its use e.g. car park, visitor numbers, designated pathways, tree density and age, estate boundaries and highways.

The zones are as below (see plan attached):
1. Red zone
   a. top priority: survey period every 18 months (alternate summer and winter surveys)

      b.   Defined as well used pathways, high visitor number areas, internal roads, car parks, mature roadside trees and properties.
2. Yellow zone
      a.   Medium priority: survey period every 3 years.
      b.   Defined as medium visitor number areas, open grassland, lower tree densities, easily accessible wood pasture and younger roadside trees.
3. Blue Zone
      a.   Low priority: no hazards surveys required, general woodland management principles and operations apply.
      b.   Defined as low visitor number areas, accessible agricultural land, dense woodland and difficult terrain with no properties.
4. White zone
      a.   No action
      b.   Defined as agricultural farmland, little to no tree scape or very occasional access.

The zones reflect normal usage, but will be kept under review as circumstances may change. An event involving large groups of people may change the status for the duration of the event; new paths or re-routed paths and roads will also change the patterns of use and may change the risk zone. Centre staff should be mindful to such changing circumstances and if necessary should discuss the review of a particular zone with the Centre Manager.

Areas by target risk have been identified on plans, and the surveys are prioritised on this basis. However, only the inspection itself can accurately identify the priority of any remedial action or control measure and/or the timing of a repeat inspection as this is based upon an assessment of the tree and its actual relation to the risk zone.

Individual trees may therefore be given a higher or lower inspection priority than the risk zone in which they are sited. For instance, an exception may be given to trees that are found to have a higher hazard potential than their risk zone suggests, such as ancient and veteran trees, and very large single specimen trees sited in open areas which can act as magnets, drawing in people from surrounding areas.

Where trees are in dense woodlands (blue zone) only trees within falling distance of the red zone pathways are surveyed unless they are individually identified for additional assessment.

Within zones that require no formal inspection or visual check managers should consider responding to all problems reported so that this may inform the review of the policy and risks associated with the area.

Skills and Knowledge
Site managers that have a full understanding of the site, visitor characteristics and behaviour should be fully conversant with the zones. However, an arboriculture consultant will be required to identify and evaluate tree defects and help assess the level of risk.

Only competent professional tree surgeons with public liability insurance should be considered to carry out the prioritized works identified.

Inspection
All inspections should take place from ground level when visibility is clear and at the appropriate time of year. If there is a problem that cannot be fully evaluated, suspect trees should be

programmed for re-assessment. In the case of a specific defect, this should be recorded and identified for further monitoring or detailed investigation.

Landscape
Public safety is not the only concern when deciding how to manage trees, other broader concerns such as ecology, landscape, heritage and aesthetic value should also be taken into account.

"Safety is but one of the many goals to which we aspire; the mistake that is often made is to focus on safety as if it is the only goal" Professor David Ball, Centre for Decision Analysis and Risk Management, Middlesex University.

Wildlife
There may also be the potential risk of habitat loss or harm to protected species. Cavities, splits and bark flaps may be a potential bird nesting site or bat roost. These species are protected by law under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1987 and, if they themselves or their resting places are present, no tree works can take place without a licence. This is likely to be particularly significant in the case of veteran and over mature trees, and those providing a habitat for protected species and if necessary include precautions or seek further advice
In any risk area, trees which show obvious signs of imminent collapse or other serious hazards, should be dealt with or controlled immediately. This may require the use of temporary fencing to keep park staff and visitors out of the area until such time as the works can be carried out.

Severe Weather and Events - (Wind, Snow, Heavy Rain)
During periods of extreme weather the risk from falling branches and tree failure will be increased. For example when wind is at gale force the risk may be increased to an unacceptable level. The Chief Executive and Centre Manager must give consideration to site closures (see plan attached) closing areas physically where possible, backed by temporary signage where appropriate and verbal instructions to staff and visitors. There may be instances where conditions are severe enough to consider closing the whole centre.

The senior management team need to be informed of any centre or building closures immediately. Consideration should be given to the following scale of events:
1. Yellow weather warning
   a. Close woodland areas.
   b. Approximate occurrence, 2 events per year.
2. Amber weather warning
   a. In addition, close parkland areas but retain visitor access to car parks and main visitor centre
   b. Approximate occurrence, 1 event every 2/3 years.
3. Red weather warning
   a. Full site closure.
   b. Approximate occurrence, 1 event every 5/10 years.

After the event, and when safe to do so, all staff should be vigilant and report any tree defects to the grounds staff and centre manager.

If closures have taken place a site check must be carried out before reopening to the public is permitted.

Record Keeping and Review

A record will be kept of all periodic checks, suggested remedial works and associated actions with dates completed.

Records should be retained for at least seven years. In the event of an accident, documents will provide supporting evidence that reasonable care has been taken.

The policy and procedure will be subject to regular review by Walesby Forest.