Arboricultural Information for Environmental Statements

Trees form an important part of our environment and in the delivery of sustainable development, the retention and the planting of new trees is important. They provide significant ecosystem service, amenity and biodiversity benefits, however, how does this all fit into the Environmental Impact Assessment process?

Section 3 of Schedule 4 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2011 gives details on the information to be included in an Environmental Statement. This states that “A description of the aspects of the environment likely to be significantly affected by the development, including, in particular, population, fauna, flora, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, including the architectural and archaeological heritage, landscape and the interrelationship between the above factors”.

The key word here is ‘flora’, which dictionaries define as ‘all plants of a particular place or from a particular time in history’. We can discount the latter meaning and concentrate on the first. So all plants of a particular place would include trees, whether growing as individuals, groups or in a woodland.

Trees may have to be considered in an Environmental Statement, if significantly affected by the proposed development. If Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) deem that trees are an issue in response to a scoping opinion request, or if the EIA coordinator has identified that trees will be impacted significantly, then the following steps are recommended.

Firstly, a tree survey to give baseline information and an arboricultural impact assessment is likely to be required where there may be impacts on trees from the proposed development and/ or the application includes site layout/ masterplan details or is a full or reserved matters application. The standard for these are set out in ‘British Standard 5837:2012 - Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction – Recommendations’ (Ref. 1).

To complete the tree survey, a ground based topographical survey will be required. This should show the stem locations of all trees that have a stem diameter of 75 mm and above growing within and immediately adjacent to study area. Shrub or scrub masses and hedgerows should also be recorded on the topographical plan. For trees growing closely together in groups and woodlands, only trees with a stem diameter of 150 mm need be recorded. It should be noted that other types of survey such as aerial LiDAR surveys do not provide accurate tree stem locations, which is required for accurately plotting the tree’s root protection areas (RPAs). The RPA is the minimum area of soil rooting area required by trees and is calculated from the tree’s stem diameter. The larger the tree’s stem, the larger the rooting area required.

With the topographical survey in place, the tree survey can commence, which should be undertaken by a qualified arboriculturist. This should follow the template set out in BS 5837:2012, unless otherwise instructed by the LPA. The aim is to assess trees for their arboricultural, landscape and cultural/conservation qualities, with the most important trees being graded ‘A’ quality, followed by ‘B’, ‘C’ grades.
Trees that are in such a condition that they cannot be realistically be retained for longer than ten years are categorised as ‘U’ quality trees. Using this method helps to identify good quality trees, whilst discounting trees of poor form or which have a limited safe life expectancy.

The tree survey information is used to draw up a Tree Constraints Plan, which will show the surveyed trees crown spreads and RPAs and be colour coded to enable the trees quality to be easily ascertained. The tree survey data and Tree Constraints Plan can then be used to assist in the design/ masterplanning and EIA process.

Once the development design is finalised, taking into account the constraints posed by trees, an AIA can be included in the Environmental Statement. The AIA can be used to evaluate the direct and indirect effects of the proposed development design on trees and where necessary recommends mitigation measures. A Tree Protection Plan is included with the AIA and this will show trees to be removed/ retained and the positions of tree protection measures to be implemented to protect the trees and their rooting zone during construction activities, in addition to the information shown on a standard Tree Constraints Plan.

Consideration should also be given to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in relation to trees, which states in section 118 that ‘planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland and the loss of aged or veteran trees found outside ancient woodland, unless the need for, and benefits of, the development in that location clearly outweigh the loss’.

Consideration should therefore be given to the effects of development on ancient woodland, veteran and aged trees. In England, all ancient woodlands can be found on the government’s ‘Magic’ website (Ref. 1). However to find out if trees are aged or veterans is more difficult and other sources should be consulted.

The Ancient Tree Inventory (Ref. 3), formerly known as the Ancient Tree Hunt, is a database holding records of over 150,000 ancient, veteran and notable trees in the UK. This is a citizen science project run by the Woodland Trust and is supported by the Ancient Tree Forum and the Tree Register of the British Isles. It is a good starting point for undertaking background checks for the scoping exercise. The drawback is that this database is not comprehensive, so an arboricultural site survey will still be required.

To summarise, trees should be considered in an Environmental Statement if development is likely to have a significant adverse effect on a site’s tree population. If veteran, aged or ancient woodland is likely to be impacted by development, the NPPF gives LPAs reasons for refusal, accordingly these should be retained and incorporated into the development design wherever possible.

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Ref. 2 Magic: http://www.magic.gov.uk/.
Ref. 3 Ancient Tree Inventory: http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/.