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Article by Peter Neighbour, Fountains plc.

A new Utility Arboriculture Group (UAG) has been set up as a sub-group under the auspices of the Arboricultural Association's Professional Committee and sits alongside the Contractors Working Group formed last year. The purpose of the group is the advancement of utility arboriculture, with the aim of raising arboricultural standards, advancement of the care and maintenance of trees and liaison with bodies such as NPTC, Lantra, the Health and Safety Executive and the Electrical Network Association etc. The group will be outward looking and strive to serve the wider public benefit. The scope of the group will encompass arboricultural operations within the electrical distribution and rail networks sectors.

For many years utility arboriculture has been the Cinderella within the wider arboricultural profession and has not presented a unified voice in a number of important areas. This is certainly true in the area of qualification standards, which are vital if this part of arboriculture is to continue to expand to match future demands. The electrical utility and rail industries are a major employer of arboriculture workers, with an annual tree work turnover approaching £150 million per annum. The lack of professional representation within this sector of the arboriculture industry has therefore been out of all proportion to its size.

As this issue became more pressing in recent years the sector has received an increasing profile within the AA. Paul Hornby of AUS deserves particular mention for his efforts over recent years in organising a utility arb programme within the AA's annual conference, together with the very successful AUS utility arb skills competition.

The need to address the lack of specific utility industry representation was a key issue at the Association's 40th year conference last September. Following that conference a number of prominent utility arboriculture contractors recognised the need for a forum to debate and engage with stakeholders and to raise industry awareness more generally. They considered that this was of vital importance if sufficient new people were to be attracted into the industry to meet a growing customer demand.

Utility arborists need to engage with customers and regulators to ensure they have a sustainable industry where professionalism and a commitment to advance the standards of tree care are both fully recognised and appreciated. The setting up of the UAG coincides with pressure from electrical utility customers to have a wider forum to develop industry standards and capabilities.

The Department of Trade and Industry is also in the process of consulting more widely on the subject of electrical network resilience. This is particularly important with the increasing frequency of storms in the UK and the subsequent increased risk from whole of partial tree failures and therefore failure of the electricity supply or rail network. The electrical utility companies have their own organisation, the Energy Network Association (ENA), which liaises on their behalf with other interested parties and it was clear that the utility arboriculture industry needed a similarly relevant grouping to engage in these and other issues. The AA was and is the most obvious home for this forum and founder members BTS Group Limited, Fountains Support Services Limited and Tilhill Forestry Limited were very pleased that Association Director Nick Eden and the professional committee were so supportive of this initiative.

The inaugural meeting of the UAG was held in February and one of its first achievements was to agree terms of reference. The UAG will be preparing regular features in the Newsletter to keep members abreast of further developments and a virtual group will be set up which will have interim news items distributed by email. Anyone interested in more information or in joining should, in the first instance, contact

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The founder members of the UAG are:

- BTS Group Limited
- Fountains Support Services Limited
- Tilhill Forestry Limited

To date the following arboricultural contracting companies have also indicated their support for the UAG:

- Arboretum International Limited
- Protree Limited
- Scottish Woodlands Limited.

UAG has also received the following external stakeholder support:

- AUS Limited
- CE Electric UK Limited
- Lantra Awards
- National Grid Transco
- NPTC
- Scottish and Southern Energy plc

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