

“The tree is causing subsidence to my property”

Subsidence can be a very complex issue and, in order to remedy the problem, the cause must be thoroughly investigated. Should you notice structural damage to your property, contact your insurance company. They will then investigate and try to find the cause.

Caution is advised because the insurer will tend to look for the most cost effective solution, and although felling a nearby tree is often the cheapest option it may not be the right one. The insurer should provide evidence that the tree is causing the damage before it is removed, particularly where the trees belongs to a third party. The investigation may involve a structural engineer monitoring the movement of the ground for up to year (sometimes longer) to see if the movement coincides with the natural water uptake cycle of the tree. It is also important to know that trees can only cause subsidence on clay soils. It is possible to obtain information about soil types from the British Geological Survey website: www.bgs.ac.uk

Understanding the true cause of the problem is vital, as only then can the right solution be used. Otherwise the damage to your property may continue, even after the tree has been removed unnecessarily.

“I’m worried that a street tree is unsafe and will fall on my house”

If you are concerned about the safety of a tree outside your house, you should inform the Local Authority. Every tree owner has a legal duty of care to ensure that their trees are regularly inspected by a competent person and maintained appropriately. If a qualified arborist deems a tree to be dangerous, they will recommend that it is pruned or removed altogether. Careful pruning can often make a tree safe and felling should always be the last resort. Trees are valuable to us and should only be removed if absolutely necessary.

Is your tree causing a nuisance?

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Trees provide many benefits to us and the environment. However some people who live on tree-lined streets experience problems. So what can we do? Good management of street trees can solve, or reduce, most of the relatively minor problems that trees cause without the need to remove them altogether. Because trees are so important to our health and wellbeing felling one should be considered a last resort.

Here a few of the main problems and some simple solutions we can use to solve them.

“The tree is damaging the public footway, I’m worried that it will cause a trip hazard”

Local Authorities’ highways departments should routinely repair pavement damaged caused by roots. It is often simply a case of removing and relaying the tarmac; sometimes several layers of tarmac have been laid over the roots making them look much more bulky than they are (figure 1). Paving slabs can be replaced with more flexible materials like tarmac or a special material called Flexi™-pave that is designed to be both strong and flexible, allowing the roots room to grow without damaging the surface (figure 2).



Figure 1 A ring at the tree’s base shows the tarmac level before the many built-up layers were removed.

“The tree is causing damage to a light structure” (e.g. fence, garden wall)

If a tree owned by a third party is causing damage to your property, the tree owner is legally obliged to cover the costs of any repairs. As an alternative to removing the tree, it is often possible to prune roots and install root barriers to prevent the damage reoccurring. It is also possible to build walls and fences in such a way that it allows room for root growth. A good builder should be able to discuss this option with you.

“I’m worried the tree will just keep getting bigger and will one day become a huge problem, or that it is old and will fall.”

This will mostly depend on the age of the tree. Much like humans, once trees reach maturity they all but stop growing; this happens when they are between a quarter and a third of the way into their lifespan. Much of Britain’s housing was built during the Victorian and the early part of the 20th century, and the street trees planted alongside these homes have only just achieved full grown maturity. They will continue as a stable and fairly predictable part of our environment for up to another 150-200 years, as long as they receive the correct basic maintenance.

“The tree is dropping leaves/fruit/seeds”

Leaf and fruit fall is part of a tree’s natural yearly cycle. As it happens over a relatively short period during the course of a year, any temporary inconvenience has to be balanced against the benefits the trees bring to an urban environment. It may help to contact your local council’s street cleaning department.

“Tree roots are damaging the drains”

Tree roots can grow into leaking drains and sewers, but only if they are already cracked. Tree roots will not grow into a drain that isn’t already damaged. Tree roots are hydrotropic, this means that they grow towards water. Tree roots cannot sense water through an intact drain. If a tree root encounters wet soil caused by leaking or damaged pipes and/or drains, increased root activity may occur. This may result in roots entering and blocking services or drains.

You are only responsible for drains within your property boundary, however if you encounter this problem it would be necessary to make your drains watertight by having them repaired or replaced. Modern drains are made from durable plastic and once replaced, the problem is not likely to recur.

“The tree is overhanging my property and/or blocking light”

In UK law there is no inherent ‘Right to Light’ (or shade).

Lack of light caused by trees is a common problem that can be much improved by regular pruning. If the tree belongs to a Local Authority, they may agree to prune the tree to allow more light to your property as part of their normal pruning schedule so it may be worth asking if they can help. Pruning is carried out every three years or so ‘as standard’ by many local authorities.

As the property owner you are entitled by common law to prune any branches overhanging your airspace back to your property boundary; you do not need to obtain permission from the tree owner. If your local council are unable to prune the tree for you, and the branches overhang your property, you could either prune back the branches yourself or employ a tree surgeon to do it for you. A list of approved contractors can be found on the Arboricultural Association website: www.trees.org.uk

“The tree is blocking my TV/Sky signal”

The television licensing laws state that payment of the licence fee does not guarantee reception of a television signal and that there is no legal right to television reception. If the signal is being blocked by a tree, the best cause of action would be to move the aerial or dish.



Figure 2 Flexi™-pave is a tarmac alternative that is used around tree roots and is standard practice in many cities.

“The tree is dropping sticky sap on my car/driveway”

This sticky substance is known as honeydew and it is secreted by aphids feeding on the leaves of the tree. It is just a sugar and water solution and, although unsightly, it should not affect the paintwork of a car providing that the manufacturer’s recommendations for care and maintenance are followed.

However inconvenient, honeydew secretion only happens for a brief period each year. The problem it creates has to be weighed against the many benefits provided by trees for your local neighbourhood.