

Trees



Many churchyards contain a large number of beautiful trees. They form a natural part of the overall landscape, bringing wide and many varied benefits as well as contributing to the overall aesthetic appeal of your church premises.

However, trees, if not properly managed, can cause serious damage. In windy conditions, they may fall onto or lash against the church building itself, neighbouring property or cars. Root movement can cause the collapse of boundary walls. Roots can also absorb soil moisture causing foundations to move and walls to crack. They can also encroach upon the foundations of neighbouring buildings, causing subsidence or damage to drains.

They can also cause injury where tree roots become trip hazards themselves or where they disturb paving slabs or other footpath surfaces. On very rare occasions, branches have been known to fall and strike people.

Legal requirements

Depending on your own particular circumstances, you may have to meet certain duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. Where these apply to you, you will have to do all that is 'reasonably practicable' to ensure that people are not exposed to a risk to their health and safety.

This 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 your particular circumstances. This will include consideration of the risks to which people may be exposed.

In addition to this, you may need to manage your tree stock to meet responsibilities under other legislation or show that you have met your duty of care to:

Risk Advice Line

Should you have any additional questions on this topic or other risk-related matters, as a valued Ecclesiastical customer you can contact us through our Risk Advice Line on

0345 600 7531

(Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm, excluding bank holidays)

and one of our in-house risk professionals will be able to assist.

Alternatively, you can email us at

risk.advice@ecclesiastical.com

and one of our experts will call you back within 24 hours.

- Reduce the risk of property damage from subsidence
- Maintain stocks to preserve their amenity, conservation and environmental value
- Prevent personal injury or vehicle damage.

Relevant legislation includes the Occupiers' Liability Acts 1957 and 1984, Occupiers' Liability Act (Scotland) 1960, Land Reform (Scotland) 2003, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, as well as legislation relating to Sites of Special Scientific Interest, planning issues and Tree Preservation Orders.

Hazards to look out for

Some typical hazards include:

- Signs of decay at abrupt or 'dog-leg' bends
- Signs of decay caused by fungi or decay at the stem base
- Cracking in the trunk, lower stems of branches or in the ground
- Gaps in or poor condition of the crown
- Excessive swaying in the wind
- Exposure of previously sheltered trees
- Splitting at branch forks
- Grafts showing incompatibility
- Neglected pollards
- Ribs and open cracks on stems and major branches
- Possible damage after bad weather, e.g. storms*.

Precautions you can take

The precautions you will have to take will depend upon the number, species and condition of the trees at your church including any specific hazards they present. Typical precautions could include:

- Branch reduction or removal
- Correct topping and pruning
- Regular re-cutting of pollards
- Using correct arboreal techniques (e.g. to avoid creating large wounds)
- Cable or belt and/or rod bracing of branches
- Crown reduction
- Felling, if other options are not adequate or feasible
- Periodic tree inspections*.

*This list is not exhaustive.

Making a start

Action

1. **Identify the groups of trees that you have responsibility for. Take account of their position and the degree of public access to them.**

Make a note of these.

Guidance

This will help prioritise any risks associated with your tree stock, and decide if any checks, inspections or other precautions are needed.

2. **Decide what risk the trees at your church present and what further checks or inspections are necessary.**

Where these are necessary, complete them at appropriate intervals, making a note of the outcome.

If you are an employer, you will need to complete formal risk assessments. These should help you identify what precautions might be required.

You may need to make arrangements for your trees to be inspected periodically. To help you decide what is required, you should classify your trees into 'zones', including all the trees at your church for which you are responsible.

You should then identify those:

- In areas of high public access
- That could fall onto areas of public use
- That could fall onto property that could be damaged.

Normally, the best person to do this is someone familiar with the land, how the church is used and what trees are present with reference to published guidance. Usually, this does not require a tree specialist to complete this.

Trees can then be divided into two zones:

- **Zone One** – where there is frequent public access to trees (e.g. popular foot paths, car parks, at the side of busy roads or where property may be affected). As a rough guide, trees in Zone one are those that are closely approached by many people every day
- **Zone Two** – where trees are not subject to frequent public access.

For trees in Zone One, a system of periodic, proactive inspection is appropriate. This will vary depending on your particular circumstances. For example, individual tree inspection is only likely to be necessary in specific circumstances where a particular tree:

- Is in a place frequently visited by the public
- Has structural faults that are likely to make it unstable; and
- A decision has been made to retain it with these faults.

Action

Guidance

Trees in areas of low public use may only require irregular inspection, if any.

Formal or more detailed inspections will need to be completed by those who have the necessary expertise, training and experience. You will also need to consider how you will obtain specialist assistance and take remedial action when checks reveal defects outside the experience and knowledge of the person carrying out the check.

If you identify any trees on neighbouring land which could present a risk to the church premises, you should write to the landowner advising them of your concern and requesting them to take appropriate remedial action. You should retain copies of any correspondence.

You should keep adequate records of any zones (maps may be useful here); inspections or other checks made; trees presenting a serious risk; any treatment or other precautions taken; and when tree work has been carried out.

3. Ensure that any necessary precautions are taken and remain effective.

Act on any issues of concern reported to you so that any additional precautions necessary are taken.

Any checks or inspections that are completed should identify what additional precautions are necessary. The hazards set out on the previous page identifies some of the precautions that might be necessary. However, this list is not exhaustive and the precautions you take will need to reflect your own particular circumstances.

You may also need to consider:

- How people can report incidents (such as vehicle collisions) resulting in damage to the trees at your church premises
- Additional checks following potentially damaging activities (such as work by utility companies in the vicinity of your trees or following severe gales)
- Any additional precautions that might be needed to protect those visiting your church premises during high winds (for example, closing or restricting access to footpaths or car parks).

Where trees are the subject of a Tree Preservation Order, the Local Authority should be consulted prior to any work being carried out.

Making a start

Action

4. **Ensure that employees (and volunteers in these circumstances) involved in any inspection or minor tree work are provided with necessary information and training.**

Make a note of any information or training that is provided.

Guidance

The level of information and training required will vary depending on the tasks involved reflecting your particular circumstances. If you have completed any risk assessments, these will help you determine what is necessary.

Those involved in formal or more detailed inspection of trees must be suitably competent.

Whilst it is accepted that experienced, competent members of the church can carry out minor work on trees, anything major (e.g. felling, pruning etc.) must only be carried out by a competent arboriculturist. This is usually because such work tends to present a relatively high risk of injury to those involved and may involve the use of specialist equipment (such as chainsaws). Those completing such work should be appropriately and adequately insured.

If you do provide any information or training for your employees or volunteers, you should keep records of this. These should contain detail relating to the persons who were trained (including their signatures to say that they have received and understood the training); when they were trained and by whom; an overview of the training that was provided etc.

5. **Document your arrangements and responsibilities for tree management.**

Review these where necessary, particularly if you suspect that they are no longer valid. Retain records of the notes you have made in steps, 1, 2 and 4 above.

If you have prepared a health and safety policy, record these as part of it. You can use our Church Health and Safety Policy template if you haven't done this and need one to comply with health and safety law.



Want to know more?

Other useful health and safety information is available at

https://ecclesiastical.com/risk-management/articles/?q=&facet_productService=&facet_articleType=35515

A good deal of relevant guidance has been produced by various organisations. Examples include:

- the National Tree Safety Group: see <https://ntsgroup.org.uk/publications/>
- the Arboricultural Association: see www.trees.org.uk/

Note: if you are in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey or the Isle of Man, then regional variations might apply. In this instance, you should check the guidance provided by the Enforcing Agency for your region. This will be freely available on their website.

Need to report an incident involving an injury?

If an incident occurs that may result in a claim for injury, please retain any accident investigation records e.g. accident book entry, photos etc. and contact our specialist claims team on **0345 603 8381** (Monday to Friday 8am – 6pm) for advice. Where you have received correspondence about a claim being made against you, it is important that you notify us immediately and email a copy to our experts on casualtyclaims@ecclesiastical.com.

Report a claim

Do you need to report a claim? If so, you can call us on **0345 603 8381**. Our normal office opening is 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays, but our lines are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week for emergencies. Alternatively, [click here](#) to report online or you can send us an email to claims@ecclesiastical.com. It's helpful if you can have your policy number available when making contact.

Contents

To help us process your contents claim as quickly as possible it would be helpful if you could provide a description of the item(s) (including a make or model number where applicable) when you call us. Where more extensive damage has occurred, we may ask you to provide a list of items to help us process your claim.

Policy cover queries

For queries about your policy cover, call our specialist church team on **0345 777 3322** (Monday to Friday 8am – 6pm, excluding bank holidays) or email us at churchteam@ecclesiastical.com.

Alternatively, please visit www.ecclesiastical.com/church.

This guidance is provided for information purposes and is general and educational in nature. It should not be used as a substitute for taking professional advice on specific issues and should not be taken as providing legal advice on any of the topics addressed.



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