



BUILDING CONTROL INFORMATION SHEET



Existing Garden Walls

Building Regulations **do not apply** to garden walls, but they may eventually collapse if they are not properly maintained. Unfortunately they are one of the most common causes of death or serious injury from falling masonry. Please check your garden walls from time to time to see if any repairs are necessary, or whether they need rebuilding.

ROUTINE CHECKING OF EXISTING GARDEN WALLS

Why not get into the habit of routinely checking and maintaining your garden walls?

The main points to look for are: -

Softening of the mortar pointing

If the mortar can easily be scraped out with, say a door key, then this is a good indication that the wall may need re-pointing.



Softening of the bricks

If restricted to a few bricks this may not be serious, otherwise it may be necessary to replace damaged bricks.

Cracking and damage due to ground movement

Clay (shrinkable) soils change volume as their water content changes. Soil has less volume change at a greater depth. Garden walls usually have shallow foundations. Trees tend to increase the changes in water content of the ground. If a wall is cracked and trees are nearby, it may be prudent to trim them. Complete removal of mature trees can lead to swelling of the soil, which can in itself cause damage.

Even with no trees nearby, clay soils can damage a wall. If the damage warrants it, the wall may need to be rebuilt with deeper foundations, or repaired by adding vertical movement joints so it can accommodate the movement without being damaged.

Even in non-shrinkable soils, walls can be damaged by the presence of tree roots, which expand as the tree matures. Seek professional advice before cutting back roots; you make the tree liable to collapse, or kill it. An alternative is to partly rebuild the wall so that it bridges the roots by being supported on a lintel at that point.



Cracking can also be caused by leakage from an adjacent drain.

Excessive climbing plants on the wall

Some climbing plants like ivy can damage walls.

Traffic damage caused by vibration / physical contact

If you think vibration may be the cause of damage, we suggest that you seek expert advice.



Minor scratch marks or scoring of the surface of a wall may obscure more significant cracks. Piers at vehicular entrances may have been dislodged by impact and made unsafe.





Damage to the top of the wall

If the top of the wall is weather resistant the life of the wall will be enhanced. Any water in a wall can freeze causing cracks and loosening of masonry that further reduces the life of the wall, and loose masonry may then fall.



Signs of damage here may indicate the need for rebuilding the top of the wall. Capping stones work best if they have overhangs and drips. Bricks work best if they are hard engineering bricks. If a damp-proof course is incorporated, ensure that the bond is not lost at that point, which could cause early loosening of the masonry above it.

Leaning due to unequal ground levels

If the ground is higher on one side of the wall than the other, the wall will have to retain the higher ground. It may have been designed to do this or may simply be inadequate.

We suggest that, if the wall leans more than 30mm (½ brick wall), 70mm (single brick wall) or 100mm (1½ brick wall) you seek expert advice. If the lean is nearing this amount, consider monitoring it at regular intervals.

Solutions include altering the ground levels so they are nearly the same, adding structure at the side of the wall below the higher ground level to reinforce its strength, or rebuilding the wall in a more suitable form. Any weep holes in the wall to allow water through should be cleared if blocked.

Cracks

Horizontal cracks which pass right through a wall, or cracks close to gates, may indicate problems. Do not re-point without establishing the cause of the cracking.

Hairline cracks (0-2mm across) are common in walls and normally do not indicate serious problems. Cracks that are vertical, or near vertical, are often due to thermal expansion and shrinkage.



If you are concerned that a wall may be in danger of collapse, please contact Building Control on 01983 823580. We will not be able to carry out repairs, but we will take action to protect the public if the wall is considered to be a dangerous structure.

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