

Executive summary

Summarising the key findings from the 2025 independent expert investigations into the Old King George Oak Tree & structural movement issues in properties on Clifton Terrace in Wivenhoe, Essex.

30th March 2025 - Rev 01

Report purpose

We have developed an evaluation report to explore the circumstances that have led to the intention by Aviva and Wivenhoe Town Council (WTC) to fell the 150+ year old 'Old King George' oak tree and two other trees nearby. The report seeks to address concerns raised by a large number in the Wivenhoe community about this decision to fell well-loved and nature-supporting trees. These concerns also include whether felling trees would be a suitable long term solution to address structural movement issues in properties involved in current insurance claims as well as the wider context of the terrace and nearby properties.

As a matter of public interest, the report is to be shared openly, and for the particular attention of Aviva and Wivenhoe Town Council.

The report has been commissioned using funds raised by the Save the Old King George Oak Tree campaign, with a group of local residents having directly appointed suitably certified professional individuals and companies to advise on the complex circumstances.

This document is presented as a 'report of reports' containing many documents with information presented as provided by the experts involved, including but not limited to,

- Arboriculturalists & tree surgeons - Hallwood Associates and Tree & Lawn Company Ltd.
- Geotechnic engineering experts - Heyne Tillett Steel and GEI.
- Ground investigations consultants - Soil Investigation Eastern Ltd.
- Ground penetrating radar based surveyors - Location Surveys Ltd.
- Dendrochronology expert - Dr Martin Bridge of the Oxford Dendrochronology Lab.

The intention is for this report to provide a transparent set of information to contribute to further decision making. The situation is complex and there is much nuance owing to the unique geography and the history of this particular tree.

We are mindful that much of the content of the main report and investigation summary is very technical in nature and long to read, so have this Executive Summary to accompany it. This Executive Summary seeks to fairly represent the key points and findings in a more accessible manner alongside necessary background information.

Major findings and recommendations

- **The Old King George Oak tree and other nearby trees are of considerable amenity value.** They are together worth at least £102,142 (CAVAT value). Old King George is confirmed to be **at least 150 years old.** To 'offset' the biodiversity value of Old King George that would be lost by felling, 55-110 trees would need to be planted. 29 trees would need to be planted to equal his carbon absorption role, with carbon 'break-even' only achieved in 24 years' time with a loss of carbon absorption impacts until then.
- **Old King George exceeds the minimum threshold of 5m³ that would necessitate a felling license or exemption** from the Forestry Commission for the felling works under the Forestry Act. Old King George cannot legally be felled without this.
- **Experts reviewed the evidence produced by Aviva and Innovation Group and found there to be shortcomings.** This has warranted independent investigations including new ground conditions investigations and soil testing.
- It has been recommended by experts from a range of specialisms to continue to explore causes and solutions for movement issues at Clifton Terrace and continue investigations. **Felling the trees is not currently recommended by experts.**
- Trees - including Old King George - are likely contributing to movement at nearby properties to some extent. However, multiple experts have stated that **trees are not the sole causes of movement in this location. So, removing the trees is unlikely to resolve the combined movement issues.** These additional factors include the ground and soil conditions, construction types, drainage issues and the proximity to the railway line.
- **Removal of the trees may have unintended but foreseeable consequences** that require further investigation, e.g the extent and impact of heave.
- **Underpinning has been recommended as preferred long term solution by multiple experts,** including our appointed ground investigations consultant and engineer, those appointed by property owners of a property Aviva is insurer for and by Wivenhoe Town Council in 2024.
- **Short to medium term tree care improvements are recommended in conjunction with underpinning,** including de-tarmacking a limited zone in the car park and crown management. This will help the trees' health and their retention.

Investigation scope

In order to address the decision to fell Old King George and the issues seen at nearby properties, we posed a number of questions to appointed experts. These included,

- What is the value and amenity that the trees present? What is their CAVAT value? What is their environmental impact (carbon and biodiversity)?
- What is driving structural damage to nearby properties? Is there specifically and primarily clay-based shrinkage subsidence? Is there other ground movement type? Could there be additional factors contributing to the subsidence? (e.g. the railway line, sandy/silty soil, the topography, groundwater and aquifers)?
- Are the old oak, ash and horse chestnut probable sole/primary causes of this subsidence/movement?
- If the trees are causes of or contributors to the subsidence/movement, what alternatives to felling exist to address the issues?
- If the old oak, ash and horse chestnut were removed, what would be the impact be on the properties in the claims and those more widely along Clifton Terrace and the railway beyond? Would ground heave be a likely risk?
- If the old oak, ash and horse chestnut were removed, would additional factors continue to cause subsidence/movement, thus requiring further mitigations?
- How has the management of these trees and the adjoining hedge contributed to any issues identified, and what can be done in the near term to alleviate any issues while decisions are being made?

Experts have conducted desk-based analysis alongside fieldwork on and around the tree vicinity. The complexity of the questions we sought to address has necessitated the appointment of a multidisciplinary team. The appointed team are each suitably certified professionals. We have also referred to publicly available and well-regarded tools for some aspects.

The experts who have contributed to this report have also reviewed secondary information including previous materials and reports generated by Aviva, Innovations Group and WTC as provided by FOI releases and recent additional SI Data release by WTC. This has been to understand previous conclusions and the reliability of their joint claim that felling is the only viable /environmental solution to address the present issues.

Background

This investigation has been undertaken following a long-running campaign to save Old King George. There has been much activity over the past few years seeking to save this well-loved historical landmark of Wivenhoe. A Facebook group was started in May 2023 with residents participating in dialogue with the council over the course of many meetings leading up to this and beyond. In Winter 2024/25 it became apparent that a decision had been made to fell Old King George and other nearby trees in a confidential process between WTC and Aviva, much to the disappointment of a considerable number of the Wivenhoe community. The evidence used to determine the trees' fate was held under confidentiality and not fully released under FOI.

A petition created in January 2025 has received more than 4,300 signatures. When the trees were planned to be felled in mid-January, a group of concerned Wivenhoe residents started a 24/7 vigil of the trees while a formal negotiation was undertaken between WTC, Aviva and some of the campaign group and their respective legal advisors. This negotiation saw the agreement to delay felling of the trees until after the 31st March. This was to permit the undertaking of independent expert analysis; as separate to the materials conducted by Aviva and Innovation Group.

Limitations & further work needed

Aviva and Innovation Group's materials that have been made public are incomplete in their detail, but have been undertaken over many years. This study has been produced in less than a couple of months. We have not had full access to the affected properties. There is likely a need to appoint further experts to develop the long term solution based on findings seen, including structural/civil engineers and for ongoing monitoring.

We are keen to support the further investigations and works recommended in this report, to support the best outcomes for property owners and residents together with the trees.

Conclusions

The independent expert evaluation finds that felling the trees - a permanent and final act - is not justified or preferred as a solution. There are multiple contributing factors to movement issues arising from the uniquely complex geography and conditions here, with movement not attributed to clay-based shrinkage alone. **Underpinning is recommended to address the complex and multiple movement issues identified long term.** This, together with ongoing improved tree management, would mean the trees can be retained for continued enjoyment in Wivenhoe both now and by future generations.