

Clearing Japanese knotweed does not have to be too costly

Having read the article about the spread of Japanese knotweed (16 June, p163), I suggest every surveyor should have at least one encounter with the dreaded weed!

A couple of years ago I acted for a client who had a half-acre site ripe for development but everything was put under threat by the discovery of an infestation by Japanese knotweed.

We were selling the site and the purchasers immediately came up with various estimates for remediation, which eventually peaked at £280,000.

To be fair, this did take into account the possibility of the rhizomes having migrated into adjoining land (which was also due to be developed).

As it turned out, no migration was found, despite the most dire warnings from some of the experts involved and, having looked at all the various horrendous methods of remediation to prepare the site for development, we eventually found a contractor from Cambridgeshire who could do the job in three months (not the three years that some were talking about) at a cost of between £12,000 and £20,000.

In the event, both parties agreed to the £12,000 figure and the sale proceeded.

Knotweed is obviously a pernicious and damaging infestation to have on your land but our experience is that in some parts of the industry there is a vested interest in over-egging the problem.

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Crying shame when OSCAR is not appreciated

I write in response to John Calvert's letter regarding Jones Lang LaSalle's OSCAR reports (26 May, p66).

JLL has produced OSCAR for the past 23 years and it continues to represent a progressive and invaluable independent reference point for

both occupiers and investors as to trends in service charge levels in commercial property. In recent years, its scope has broadened to encompass the office, retail and retail park sectors and, with the sharp increase in cross-border investment, is already being produced in Germany and the Republic of Ireland.

Our growing list of UK contributors includes blue-chip investors and their managing agents, all of whom provide the underlying data entirely voluntarily, and the publication is available free of charge.

OSCAR has always encouraged transparency and debate and built up knowledge in what has always been an important area of property management. It has no hidden agenda and any implication by Calvert to the contrary is viewed as extremely unhelpful, not least by the JLL team who dedicate their time and energy to its production.

Together with many others, JLL assisted the RICS in producing and rolling out the recently updated service charge code. Its OSCAR team played a key role in the formulation of the new standard service charge cost codes, and my colleagues David Griffin and Gavin Blackwell presented at each of the 10 nationwide RICS

"Now that the anti-smoking regulations are in force, will managing agents have to mount regular patrols to ensure no smoking in communal areas of blocks of flats?"

roadshows underlining JLL's commitment to this initiative. Future OSCAR publications will indeed reflect these changes as they work through the data, as we have already stated in this year's report.

OSCAR's evolution depends on our contributors, as well as on constructive feedback. Although I fully appreciate that Loughborough University's research is sponsored by a firm of service charge consultants, I would nonetheless encourage Calvert to take a more positive approach towards OSCAR, and perhaps give a little credit to the industry where it is due.

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FLOODS WASH AWAY COOPER'S WORDS



How devastatingly ironic that in the week following Yvette Cooper's pronouncement that the need for more housing is a greater challenge than climate change (23 June, p46) large swaths of the country are hit by some of the most damaging storms and floods on record, and that extreme and erratic weather is now an annual phenomenon.

Having presided over the decimation of the country's productive base - which was arguably largely inevitable - the political establishment is intent on decimating our once

enviable agricultural sector in a destructive dance with the development lobby. Politicians of all parties are signed up to the premise of economic growth at all costs, in which housebuilding on a huge scale will figure prominently. The latest planning white paper will engineer this outcome.

Development on this scale is incompatible with any concept of self-sufficiency for the country. Will future generations, possibly even ours, ponder the concept of "sustainable development" from the upper floors of their houses on the flood plains or former green fields as they watch the world literally float past?

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The No Smoking rules will hit lessees

As with so much legislation today the smoke-free regulations will have an unfortunate knock-on effect when it comes to those who own or live in long-leasehold blocks of flats.

The regulations, which came into force on 1 July, apply equally to the enclosed communal areas of blocks of flats, and the penalties for failing to display the appropriate signage, for smoking in these areas and failing to prevent it are the same as for all other public buildings.

While fully supporting this legislation, the Association of Residential Managing Agents is concerned about the impact on lessees and their residents management companies; 60,000 such companies are registered at Companies House.

Residential freeholders are not affected by this legislation but lessees are, and many may object to having their block festooned with the obligatory signage. Then there is the question of enforcement: will RMC directors or their managing agents have to mount regular patrols to ensure that residents do not smoke in the communal areas - and what action can they take?

We hope the authorities will take a light-touch approach, as fining any RMC £2,500 for failing to prevent smoking in communal areas could put many RMCs into liquidation.

To help RMC directors and lessees generally, ARMA has produced a Lessee Advisory Note on the regulations. The note explains the impact they will have on the block and individual flat owners, the required signage and the enforcement procedures and penalties; it also provides a list of further information sources. The advisory note is freely available on our website's Downloadable Publications page.

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Please send your letters to the Editor, Peter Bill, at *Estates Gazette*, 1 Procter Street, London WC1V 6EU or e-mail to sinead.coughlan@rbi.co.uk