

# Installing/upgrading surfacing in root protection areas

SGN



This document is only a summary of its subject matter. You should not rely on this general guidance in isolation, and you should always seek detailed advice from an appropriate expert in relation to specific circumstances before any action is taken or refrained from. You may download and republish (in its full format) and print copies of the guidance – but you must not adapt any guidance.

# Summary guidance for site operatives

Installing/  
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## Administration

- Unauthorised damage to protected trees is a criminal offence and could lead to enforcement action.
- Work under the normal site risk assessment procedures and comply with the wider site safety rules.
- Brief operatives entering root protection areas (RPAs) by the supervising arboriculturist before work starts.

## Other relevant SGNs

- Monitor works in root protection areas (RPAs) by the supervising arboriculturist (See *SGN 1 Monitoring tree protection*).
- Design access to avoid soil compaction (See *SGN 3 Ground protection*).
- Follow the guidance in *SGN 4 Pollution control*, if concrete is poured within or near RPAs.
- Minimise excavation into original undisturbed soil (See *SGN 7 Excavation in root protection areas*).
- Follow the guidance in *SGN 8 Removing surfacing and structures in root protection areas*, if existing surfacing is to be removed before installing new surfacing.
- Follow the guidance in *SGN 10 Installing structures in root protection areas*, if the surfacing is to be installed on supports, i.e. piles, pads, or posts.

## Important reminders

- For ground without existing surfacing, remove any loose material at the soil surface by hand and do not excavate into existing soil levels unless approved by the supervising arboriculturist.

# Summary guidance for site operatives

## Installing/ upgrading surfacing in root protection areas

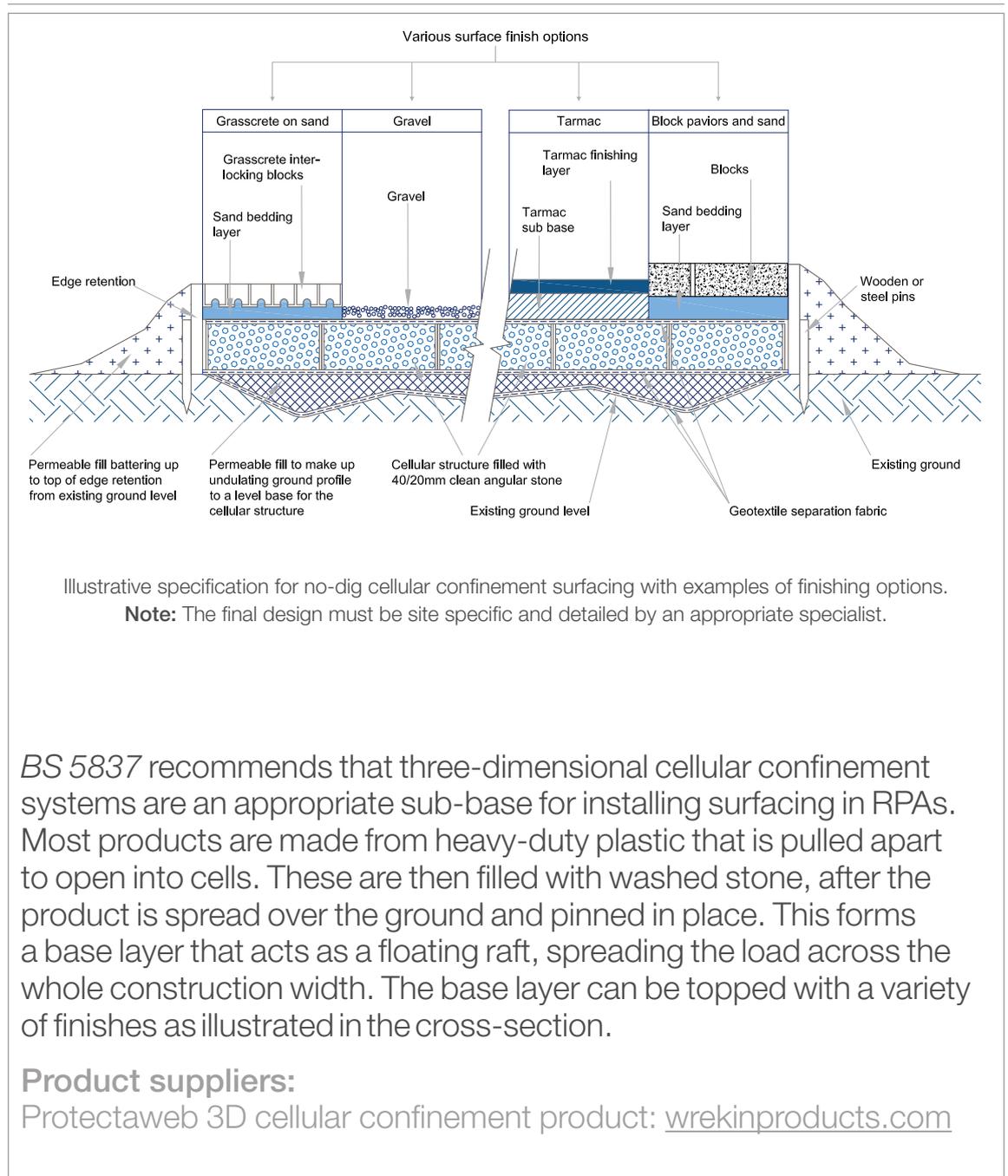
- For ground with a vegetation layer, excavations may be appropriate to remove the turf layer and surface vegetation, but this must be agreed by the supervising arboriculturist.
- All new surfacing must be set back from trunks and buttress roots by at least 50cm, unless otherwise agreed by the supervising arboriculturist.
- Fill low points on undulating surfaces to an even level with any high points using an agreed granular material such as sand or stone.
- Do not mechanically compact new fill or existing soil.
- If a three-dimensional cellular confinement system is used, install it according to the manufacturer's technical specification.  
**Note:** The cellular fill will be washed angular stone with no fines, as specified by the manufacturer.

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## Purpose

SGN 9 describes the practical requirements for installing new surfacing and upgrading existing surfacing in RPAs, based on the recommendations in *BS 5837 (7.4)*.



## General principles and clarifications

Conventional surfacing installation based on excavating and compacting a supporting sub-base is unacceptable in RPAs because it can damage roots and the rooting environment. This harm is caused by killing roots, compacting soil structure, and impeding water/gaseous exchange through the soil. Adverse impact on trees will be reduced by minimising the extent of these changes in RPAs.

## New surfacing solutions

Important elements of an effective design include protecting roots and the rooting environment during installation, a load spreading capability to prevent localised compaction, and providing adequate permeability for water and gasses to support living roots. The main approaches are:

- three-dimensional cellular confinement systems filled with washed stone laid directly onto the soil surface;
- concrete slabs cast directly onto the soil surface; and,
- surfacing supported above the soil surface on top of piles, pads, or posts.

The specific design of the chosen approach is an engineering issue that will take account of the bearing capacity of the soil, the intended loading, and the frequency of loading. The detail of product and specification are technical matters to be provided by an appropriate specialist.

## *Dealing with undulating surfaces and establishing a tolerable level of excavation*

The precise location and depth of roots within the soil is unpredictable and will often only be known when careful digging starts on site. Ideally, all new surfacing in RPAs will be no-dig, i.e. requiring no excavation, but this can sometimes be difficult on undulating surfaces. New surfacing normally requires an evenly graded sub-base layer, which can be made up to any high points with granular, permeable fills such as crushed stone or sharp sand. This sub-base will not be compacted as would happen in conventional surface installation. Some limited excavation can be necessary to achieve this and need not be damaging if carried out carefully and large roots are not cut. Tree roots and grass roots rarely occupy the same soil volume at the top of the soil profile, so the removal of

an established turf layer up to 5cm from the surface is unlikely to be damaging to trees. However, this may not be possible where there is no grass because tree roots may grow right up to the soil surface. In some situations, it may be possible to dig to a greater depth, depending on local conditions, but this will be assessed by the supervising arboriculturist if excavation deeper than 5cm is anticipated.

On undulating surfaces, finished gradients and levels will be planned with sufficient flexibility to allow on-site adjustment if excavation of any high points reveals large unexpected roots near the surface. If the roots are less than 2.5cm in diameter, they can be cut and the base for the surfacing formed with the preferred minimal excavation of up to 5cm. However, if roots over 2.5cm in diameter are exposed, cutting them may be too damaging and further excavation may not be possible. If that is the case, the surrounding levels will be adjusted to take account of these high points by filling with suitable material. If this is not practical, the situation will be discussed with the supervising arboriculturist before a final decision is made.

### ***Edge retention***

Conventional kerb edge retention set in concrete-filled excavated trenches can cause damage to roots and will be avoided. Edge retention in RPAs will be designed to avoid any significant excavation into existing soil levels, with several approaches that are fit for this purpose. For block pavements, the use of pre-formed edging secured by metal pins is effective and can be reinforced by concrete supports if there is no excavation into the soil. Railway sleepers pinned in place or wooden boards offer alternative options, depending on the expected loading of the surfacing. If the edge retention needs to be battered down to lower surrounding ground levels, a permeable soil fill will be used, as agreed with the supervising arboriculturist.

### ***Footpaths and surfacing without a load-spreading base layer***

In some situations, limited-width floating concrete rafts constructed directly onto the soil surface may be acceptable for both pedestrian and vehicular access, but the design will not include any strip-dug supports. If concrete is poured directly, precautions

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must be taken to ensure that no toxic fluids can contaminate the adjacent soil, e.g. confining the concrete in an impermeable liner. Alternatively, elevated paths supported on low impact frames or post supports allow a decking surface to cross sensitive areas. Where paths are installed very close to trunks, provision will be made for distortion from future root growth through using flexible components for the supporting frame and surfacing.

### ***Specific considerations for upgrading existing surfacing***

When upgrading existing surfacing, the preferred option will be to leave it in place and install the new surfacing on top of it. If the retained surfacing is

impermeable, it may improve conditions for tree roots if it is punctured before the new surfacing is laid, but this is detail to be agreed with the supervising arboriculturist. If the existing surfacing is to be removed, it will be excavated down to the soil level beneath following the guidance set out in *SGN 8 Removing surfacing and structures in root protection areas*. The new surfacing will then be installed on this surface, as described above.

### ***New surfacing near trunks***

All new surfacing should be set back from trunks and buttress roots by at least 50cm to allow space for future growth and minimise the risk of distortion.

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### SGN 9-01

The flat-packed three-dimensional cells are pulled apart, spread across the area to be surfaced, and pinned in place ready for the washed angular stone fill (with no fines).



### SGN 9-02

The stone-filled cells spread the load of traffic to prevent localised compaction. The permeable geotextile membrane on the ground allows the movement of water and gasses, but prevents the migration of stone into the soil profile.

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### SGN 9-03

Although *BS 5837* recommends a minimum distance of 50cm between new surfacing and buttress roots, there may be scope for flexibility in this separation for mature trees with little potential for future growth, if agreed by the supervising arboriculturist.



### SGN 9-04

A conventional concrete haunching can be used to retain new surfacing if it is not dug into a trench – here it is placed on top of the three-dimensional cellular confinement layer.



### SGN 9-05

Preparation of new residential access drive with base formation above original ground level and permeable geotextile layer covering the ground. Wooden boards are pinned in place to create informal rustic surface edging.

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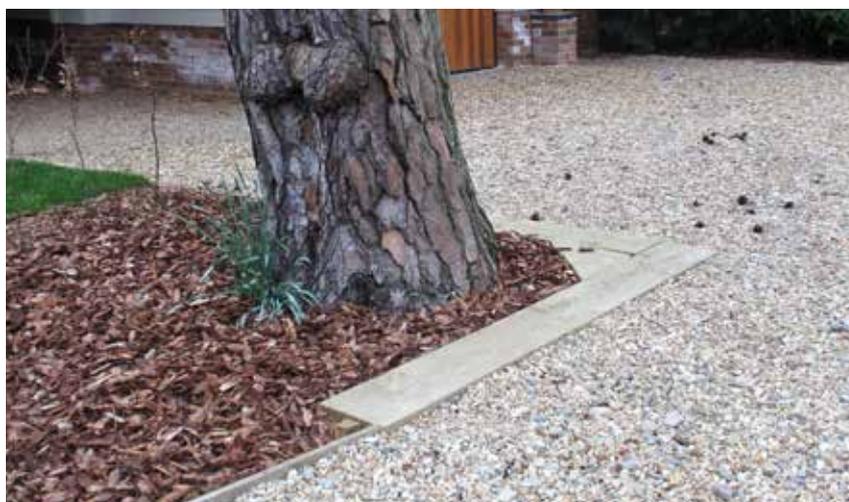
## SGN 9-06

The three-dimensional cells have been installed and filled with washed stone, ready for the finished surface to be laid above. The ground beyond the drive edges has been profiled with backfilled topsoil.



## SGN 9-07

An alternative to the flexible three-dimensional cells is rigid interlocking plastic cells, again filled with washed stone and retained by pinned wooden edges.



## SGN 9-08

Another option for wooden edges at corner points that allows for vehicles to accidentally track over the edge of the formal surfacing.

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## SGN 9-09

This temporary access for heavy construction traffic on the outer edge of a RPA is a concrete slab cast above ground level and will be removed when the project is completed.



## SGN 9-10

In some situations, it may be appropriate to cast a free-floating concrete surface directly onto the soil surface provided provision is made to prevent soil contamination while the concrete is being poured.



## SGN 9-11

This 12m RPA was covered in tarmac and used as parking. This original surfacing was removed and replaced with a new patio set above the ground level, with provision for water and air input into the covered RPA.

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### SGN 9-12

Where new surfacing is to be installed over existing, sometimes it may assist the movement of gasses and water if the existing surfacing is punctured.



### SGN 9-13

An option for installing surfacing close to mature trees is to use a light metal frame with rubberised surfacing to allow the path to distort without failing as the roots grow.



### SGN 9-14

Board walks supported on posts or a light frame are another way of providing pedestrian access across sensitive RPAs. (Photo courtesy of Philip van Wassenaer).

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### SGN 9-15

New surfacing such as decking can be supported above the ground on posts leaving the soil surface beneath undisturbed.



### SGN 9-16

Although this is only a temporary surface, railway sleepers pinned into the ground can be used to retain the edges of new surfacing.



### SGN 9-17

Where space is restricted it is possible to use metal edging.

Due to copyright restrictions, the relevant British Standard clauses are summarised, not quoted, as follows:

**1. BS 5837 (2012) Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction – Recommendations:** Clause 7.4 (Permanent hard surfacing within the RPA) recommends:

- 7.4.2.1 New surface design should not require excavation other than the removal of the turf layer and surface vegetation. The design should be able to bear any anticipated loading, especially if it must carry construction traffic.
- 7.4.2.2 The design should evenly distribute the loading to avoid localised compaction.
- 7.4.2.7 The design should be resistant to or tolerant of deformation by tree roots, and should be set back from the stem and any root buttresses by a minimum of 50cm to allow for growth and movement. Levels can be made up using appropriate inert granular material. **Note:** Piles, pads, elevated beams, and three-dimensional cellular confinement systems, can be used to support surfaces. If excavation is required, the location of roots greater than 2.5cm in diameter should be determined by exploratory investigations and retained if possible.
- 7.4.3 The conventional installation of kerbs, edgings, and haunchings, can damage tree roots and should be avoided either by using alternative methods of edge support or by not using supports at all. **Note:** Examples of suitable edge supports include above-ground peg and board edging, sleepers, gabions, and other non-invasive ground-contact structures.
- 7.4.4.3 Ground levels should not be reduced to establish the new hard surface at the former ground level. Loose debris and turf should be removed carefully and the new surface should sit on top of the original soil.

## Removing surfacing and structures in root protection areas

- 7.4.4.4 Fill to raise levels should be a granular material which remains gas- and water-permeable throughout its design life.
- 7.4.4.5 Wet concrete should not be poured in the RPA unless an impermeable liner has been installed to prevent soil contamination from the toxic leachate.