

THE BEST PRESSURE WASHERS

Kärcher K7 Premium Full Control Plus Pressure Washer, £570, karcher.com; 93/100

- A good all-rounder, can do most tasks
- Ecological setting to reduce water and energy consumption
- Comes with useful attachments/detergents

Mac Allister Pressure Washer, £128, diy.com; 93/100

- Performed well in all areas, easy to put together
- Good nozzle selection
- Hose tangles easily

BUDGET BUY

Kärcher K2 Compact Home Pressure Washer, £78, johnlewis.com; 83/100

- Well priced and compact, easy to store
- Despite its small size, it performs just as well as some of the larger models
- Easy to use: the trigger can be locked, which helps for long jobs
- Handle kept coming off

goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute



READERS' CLINIC

HOW CAN I AVOID COWBOY BUILDERS?
S Moshar, London

AJ Swanson, Aberdeen

- Builders' cards should include a postal address.
- Ask the builder for name/address of all clients for the past two years, for similar projects. Don't be fobbed off by one or two names — they could be the builder's mate or sister.
- Put every detail, down to the doorbell, on plans.
- Don't pay in advance, or in cash. Agree instalments in advance, holding back some for snagging. Don't pay for materials before delivery. If a builder can't afford them, that says a lot.
- Document any changes along the way in an email. Keep all documentation.

Terry Hines, Norfolk

As an architect, I told my clients: never pay up front!

Future question

Should I put laminate flooring in a kitchen?

Send your tips, tricks and questions to homehelp@Sunday-times.co.uk



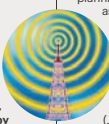
ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL DUFFY

PROBLEM OF THE WEEK MY NEIGHBOUR'S HAM-RADIO AERIALS WRECK MY INTERNET

Q The neighbour behind us is a ham-radio enthusiast and has five aerials, each 35ft high. He has planning permission for one, and for the others by default: they've been in situ for more than five years (we moved in 2½ years ago). He has now erected a sixth. The planning enforcement team at Cardiff Council told me in October that they warned him he needs to apply for permission, but nothing has happened. Since the erection of the sixth aerial, my wi-fi signal has become much weaker. By the terms of the original permission, the aerial(s) have to be kept in "the lowered position", but they are not, and are eyesores. **Help!**

Frank Lincoln, via email

A There are two breaches of planning control: 1) the erection of the sixth aerial, and 2) the breach of planning condition for the first aerial to be kept in a lowered position. For enforcement action to be taken, the sixth aerial must have been erected within the last four years; the breach of planning condition must have been less than 10 years ago, otherwise the works will



be lawful. Also double-check when the other four aerials were installed, in case it was within the past four years.

If you have already contacted the planning enforcement officer and your councillor, write a letter to the council's head of planning enforcement: ask them to take enforcement action, and threaten to challenge their decision not to take action by way of Judicial Review (JR). A JR allows the court to challenge the lawfulness of a decision; therefore the letter should force a decision from the council. But legal challenges can be costly, and ultimately the council's decision not to enforce is discretionary. The key is gathering evidence of harm caused: record dates and times of interference with your internet to persuade the council that it is necessary to take enforcement action.

If the council fails to resolve the complaint, ask the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman to investigate. Finally, whether the outcome of the enforcement investigation (if it happens) is a full planning application by your neighbour, or an appeal against an enforcement notice, you can lodge an objection on amenity grounds (ie that the aerials interfere with your enjoyment of your property).

Linda Boateng, associate, Russell-Cooke solicitors; russell-cooke.co.uk

HOME HELP

Carpets showing the dirt, or next door's boiler keeping you awake? Our experts are on hand

Q All of my pale carpets look grimy at the edges, despite regular Hoovering. What can I do? **Susan Taylor, Prestwick**

A The grimy look is likely caused by dust being the skirting boards being blown into the room by the building's natural ventilation. To prevent the build-up, carefully pull the carpet and underlay edges out from under the skirting and give the floor beneath a good vacuum. For ease, you may need to start pulling near a doorway: use a small tool, such as a flathead screwdriver, to loosen a bit of carpet, then pull up along the edges. You will probably find spiky carpet grippers beneath the underlay, so go carefully. Don't pull the carpet up too much, or it will be hard to return it to its original tight fit.

Use a scraper tool or something suitably wide and flat to push the carpet edges back under the skirting board. Now the carpet edges should remain clean for longer.

Wayne Perrey and Steph Brom, founders of thedydoers.com

Q I live in a detached house, and some cracks are appearing in the walls. I have noticed they are getting bigger and there are more of them. Could it be subsidence? I don't live in an area of mining activity. I do have house insurance. What should I do? **Peter Wright, via email**

A Don't panic! Cracks can occur for all sorts of reasons and are not necessarily bad or a sign of subsidence. Isolated cracks are often due to normal thermal movements occurring within a building. Small cracks of less than a few millimetres are seldom a cause for concern. These are often (but not always) straight and are usually of even width; hairline cracks can often be fixed when you redecorate.

Sometimes the cracks will be more worrying. They might be angled away from a door or window opening; those doors or windows may become harder to open. You might see a pattern to the cracks: all in the same corner of the house, say; or perhaps they're visible

both inside and outside the house. Any of these could suggest foundation movement.

Subsidence occurs when the ground can no longer support the building in top of it. It often occurs in areas where mining is prevalent, but is also widespread in areas where there are shrinkable soils such as clay. The clay dries, and as it does, it shrinks and the building drops or subsides. The drying out can be caused by trees close to the property sucking up too much water, or where the soil is washed away, possibly by a broken drain.

So small and hairline cracks are unlikely to be of much concern, but where they are larger or more widespread, or if you live in an area where others have experienced subsidence, take advice from a structural engineer. They will advise whether an insurance claim is necessary, often having monitored the property over time to determine the extent and direction of movement.

Steven Way, principal, Collier Stevens chartered surveyors; collier-stevens.co.uk

Q A neighbour has installed a condensing boiler. Its flue vents onto my property a few feet from the bedroom window. It is very noisy and keeps us awake. Is there anything that can be done or fitted to cut down the noise? **Roger and Joan Harris, via email**

A New condensing boilers produce a plume of water vapour as a product of the combustion process. There are standards that control the positioning of a flue terminal, to help reduce nuisance to neighbours. They cover minimum distance from a boundary line, as well as the direction the flue is pointing.

Standard BS 5440 stipulates that if the flue terminal is pointing towards your boundary, there should be a minimum of 600mm from the terminal to the boundary. If the terminal is pointing parallel to the boundary line, this distance can be reduced to 300mm. If the terminal is pointing directly towards a window or other opening in your property, the minimum

distance has to be increased to 2,000mm (two metres).

There is also a caveat on both these clearances: "unless it is likely to cause a nuisance". In your case, this applies. There are "plume management" extensions that can be fitted to the terminal, to redirect the flow. These should also reduce the noise pollution.

As a last resort, the boiler installation is subject to building control regulations. If it is in breach, alert your local building control officer. The boiler may have to be moved so that the plume does not cause a nuisance. It is the boiler owner's responsibility to comply with building regulations. The building inspector has the power to have a boiler that is causing a nuisance to be repositioned.

Nick Bitley, operations director, Aspect; aspect.co.uk

DO YOU NEED HELP FROM ONE OF OUR EXPERTS?

Email your questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility