Topping and lopping involves the indiscriminate cutting of tree branches and is perhaps the most harmful type of tree pruning, despite being common practice. Home owners often feel that nearby trees are too large and are fearful that they may pose a hazard. Trees grow quite naturally and safely to significant heights and topping can make a tree hazardous in the long term. Topping and lopping causes the following tree problems : -

Stress - The removal of a high proportion of a tree's leaves, which produce its food, can temporarily starve the tree. The tree will then produce multiple shoots from below each cut to support a new crop of leaves. If a tree does not have the stored energy reserves to produce new leaves, it can be seriously weakened.

Shock - The canopy of leaves casts shade on the internal branches. Topping removes the shade and exposes the sensitive tissues beneath the bark to high levels of light and heat. This can cause sun scorch, which can lead to cankers, bark splitting, and die-back of some branches.

Decay - A stressed tree is more vulnerable to attack by wood decaying organisms which infect the exposed sapwood and heartwood through the pruning wounds. Trees are biologically equipped to wall off (i.e. seal) pruning wounds provided they are healthy and the pruning cuts are correctly made. Cuts made along a limb between lateral branches create wounds which the tree may not be able to close and the exposed wood tissues begin to decay. Topping creates multiple severe wounds, which provide wood decaying organisms with a clear path to move down through the branches.

Hazards - The tree produces multiple shoots below each topping cut from dormant buds near the surface of the branches. Unlike normal branches, which are soundly attached by overlapping wood tissues, these new shoots are anchored only in the outermost layers of the parent branches. The new shoots quickly develop into sizeable branches, which are then prone to breaking, especially during windy conditions. Whilst the intention is to reduce the tree's height to make it safer, topping actually makes it more hazardous.

Ugliness - The natural branching structure of a tree is a beautiful work of nature. Topped trees become so disfigured and mutilated that they never recover their original grace and natural form.

Death - Some species, e.g. Beech and Birch do not tolerate topping and the severe reduction in foliage may cause the tree to die. The life-span of trees which do survive after being topped, is significantly reduced.

Expense - The cost of topping a tree is not limited to the initial operation as further pruning will be required within a few years. If this is not done, inevitable storm damage will have to be cleared and repaired. If the tree dies, it will have to be removed entirely, at further cost to the owner.
Another possible cost of topping is the potential liability of the tree owner because the practice has now been scientifically proven as harmful to the tree. Damage caused by branch failure from a topped tree may lead to a finding of negligence in a court of law.

IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT EXCESSIVE SHADE OR THE HEIGHT OF A TREE, PLEASE CONTACT THE COUNTY COUNCIL'S FORESTRY GROUP FOR ADVICE.