



British
Association
of Landscape
Industries

Not just grass cutting: Why continued investment in landscape maintenance services is essential

Many commercial landscape contractors, and particularly those in BALI's National Contractors Forum, are tasked with ensuring large areas of soft estate are maintained according to client specification.

The range of clients and sites is diverse. In addition to conspicuous public areas maintained for amenity and recreation, landscape contractors are tasked with protecting commercial assets and ensuring service provision associated with critical national infrastructure sites in highways, water and electricity sectors. Maintenance works commonly consist of vegetation management such as grass cutting, hedge trimming and arboricultural works, but also activities such as waste collection and ecological habitat management.

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic many commercial clients, and particularly those in the public sector, were faced with difficult decisions regarding budget allocation. Many commercial clients directed funds away from soft-estate maintenance budgets, and either reduced frequency of visits or cancelled them altogether.

This reduction in funding for landscape maintenance services came at a time when access to high quality green spaces and interaction with nature was lauded as a source of solace for the public. The benefits associated with access to green space is supported by peer reviewed literature; positive mental health is not only associated with access to parks, research has also demonstrated that healthcare savings result from high quality green infrastructure.

A survey by the Association of Public Service Excellence suggested 90% of urban parks remained open during the crisis, with half sustaining a higher than normal footfall. Furthermore, whilst public movement and interaction is restricted, visits to shops, hospitals and many other commercial sites continues, as does demand on infrastructure and resilience to interruption. Maintenance tasks are

therefore required to ensure continued operation, accessibility and hygiene of sites.

Whilst scaling back budgets from landscape maintenance services may seem like a logical decision to cash-strapped clients, BALI urges clients to reflect on the longer-term impacts associated with this decision. The operational challenges associated with maintaining large areas on a regular basis should not be underestimated. The frequency of maintenance visits is based on the experience of professionals who understand the time required to undertake operations in accordance with the maintenance goals of the client.

Longer periods between maintenance visits is not the financial panacea imagined and neither time, nor budget is saved in the long-term when the frequency of maintenance visits is reduced. During summer months 10,000 m² of grass generates approximately 130kg of dry matter growth each day, meaning that a temporary reduction or withdrawal of maintenance will result in a significant accumulation of vegetative growth.

Unmaintained vegetative growth – and any outstanding maintenance activities - must be addressed to ensure site specifications are met, which will place a greater demand on contractor resources. Additional work required to restore areas will be reflected in higher costs, meaning any savings made during reduced or cancelled maintenance regimes will be reduced or lost.

Whilst BALI welcomes the wider recognition of high-quality landscape provision that the current pandemic has generated, we believe acceptance of the skills, equipment and time required to maintain such areas by our profession equally important – and essential to guarantee the continued contribution such areas make to the environment.