

Why we need to spend more on the Barbican private gardens

Report from the Gardening Advisory Group to the Residents' Consultative Committee

'Trees and plants were as important as the bricks and mortar and the open spaces were as important as the built spaces'

Polly Powell, daughter of Barbican architect Geoffrey Powell
<https://www.greyscape.com/my-father-one-of-the-men-who-designed-the-barbican/>

Background

The Garden Advisory Group (GAG) is a working party of the Residents' Consultative Committee (RCC) and reports to the RCC. Beginning in February 2018 GAG has conducted regular inspections of the gardens on the Barbican estate.

These inspections have confirmed the anecdotal comments of residents that, despite the best efforts of the gardeners, the gardens need much more care and attention. In particular GAG drew the RCC's attention to the need for more weeding and pruning and to the need to plan and execute plant and shrub removal and replacement. Many shrubs and plants need to be removed as they either outgrow a space, despite careful pruning, or reach the end of their useful lives and to ensure that the gardens remain looking vibrant and beautiful. Removal and replacement should cover both individual specimens and particular areas of the gardens on a planned basis in line with overall objectives for the gardens' maintenance. The changing climate and the significant increase in new pests and diseases necessitates changes in gardening practice e.g. the use of new plants more resilient to pests and climate change and changing watering regimes. Growing concerns over bio-diversity (see City Plan 2036 Strategic Policy S14 p. 137) highlight the need for biodiversity value across all sites. Bio-diversity can be supported by increasing the diversity of plants in our gardens and the number of pollinating plants.

'More please'

In its report in February 2019 GAG drew RCC's attention to the impact on the gardens of the limited resources available. At present Open Spaces devote approximately one gardener's time to the Speed and Thomas More Gardens. GAG suggested that "an increase (in the service charge) in the order of 50p or £1 a week per flat according to size would fund a significant difference to the attractiveness of the private gardens."

In making this case GAG was trying to emphasise that an increase in gardeners' hours that would make a substantial difference could be had at a relatively small cost. In the ensuing discussion it was proposed that residents be asked what they thought about such a proposal in the annual residents' survey. The question included in the survey used the lower figure of 50p resulting in an average increase of £25 a year. 72% of respondents agreed to this proposal indicating the strength of residents' interest in the gardens and their willingness to fund improvements in garden maintenance. An increase in the service charge of the magnitude indicated in the survey would provide for a doubling in the amount of gardeners' time spent in the private gardens from 210 days to 420 days per year.

Garden budgets over time

Although GAG drew attention to the impact on the gardens of limited resources it did not document the very limited increases in gardening charges over time. The amount spent on the gardens varied from year to year depending on the particular circumstances. Taking a long term perspective helps to even out the impact of major works.

By way of illustration for a typical flat in Lauderdale the service charge over the period 2003/04 to 2018/19 rose by 67.6% from £4203.94 to £7044.67. Over the same period the gardens element of the service charge rose by 10.8% from £89.94 to £99.62. The failure of the gardens charge to match or even come close to the increase in the overall service charge is at the heart of the problems in the gardens. Had spending on the gardens matched the overall rise in service charges the garden charge in 2018/19 for a typical Lauderdale flat would have been £150.71 - £51 more than the was actually charged.

We all know that prices rise. Those price rises mean we buy less than we used to unless incomes rise too. Over the period 2003/04 to 2018/19 the Bank of England Inflation Indicator rose by 55.3%. The gap between that 55.3% and the 10.8% rise in the gardens service charge reflects a very real squeeze on the resources available to maintain our gardens. Gardening, particularly in established gardens, is labour intensive. Labour costs tend, over the longer term, to rise faster than prices. The current difficulties arise from the failure to match the year on year increase in costs with an increase in the service charge. Not providing a small but regular uplift in garden charges has resulted in a substantial reduction in the number of gardening hours available. Unsurprisingly the gardens have suffered in consequence.

What will residents get for their money?

GAG proposes that a new approach to funding the gardens is implemented. That new approach has three principal components. Firstly, we need a new service level agreement (SLA) that sets out the required standards of garden maintenance. Secondly we need to identify the resources required to deliver the performance that matches those standards. Thirdly those resources need to be costed and those costs met through the garden service charge. A large part of the additional resources will be an increase in the annual number of gardening hours available. Specifying an annual hours figure rather than headcount reflects the reality that more hours are required in some seasons than others and that it is more efficient to have several gardeners working simultaneously on particular tasks e.g. turf care or mulching. Insofar as there is an increase in the resources required – over and above those currently provided – this will necessitate an increase in the garden service charge.

The actual use of the additional and the existing hours will be recorded and monitored by City Gardens in a transparent process. The additional hours will be used to achieve specific outcomes in relation to agreed schedules for the frequency and scale of all the operations required to keep the gardens in great condition throughout the year. Those operations will include weeding, pruning, lawn maintenance, leaf clearance, monitoring the condition of plants, shrubs and trees and

removing and replacing where appropriate. Details of the proposed improvements are shown in summary form in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 offers photographic examples of areas where the gardens need more attention. Appendix 3 includes images from Speed where there was a significant project and from a new development near King's Cross. A revised draft General Maintenance Detailed Service Specification is set out in Appendix 4.

GAG, through its system of regular quarterly inspections in conjunction with City Gardens, will continue to monitor the state of the gardens and provide regular feedback to the RCC on the extent to which these improvements are being achieved and maintained. A report after the first year will be produced demonstrating improvements identified by GAG.

Appendix 1 Specific improvements in garden maintenance as a result of the service charge uplift

The additional resource:

will ensure the improved specification is delivered to an excellent standard;

visible improvements will include the improved specification on lawn care (increased mowing regime and top dressing) which will deliver a higher quality weed free lawn throughout the year (drought permitting);

will ensure that beds and paths are kept weed and litter free;

will ensure that bare patches of soil do not develop. Bare patches will be filled with new or moved plants and the additional mulching regime will ensure healthier plants in general;

allow CG to develop, with the BEO and GAG, a long term phased shrub replacement programme for shrubs that have come to the end of their useful lives.

Appendix 2 Photo examples demonstrating the need for more garden maintenance

Examples of areas that needs more planting



Examples of areas where more lawn maintenance is needed



Hedges, shrubs and climbers in need of more attention



Other areas of required improvements including gapping up, weeding and leaf clearance



Appendix 3 Photo examples what can be achieved
Improvements to Speed Pergola and Gardens



Images from other gardens





OPEN SPACES DEPARTMENT

Thomas More and Speed Gardens

Section

- A. Introduction/General Information
- B. Grass maintenance
- C. Removal of Rubbish, Leaves and Debris
- D. Planted Areas
- E. Footpaths and garden seats

SECTION A

A.1 Scope of work and general responsibilities

A.2 Tidy Work Practices

A.1 Scope of work and general responsibilities

In general the work will include:

- i the regular maintenance to a high standard of lawn areas, hedges, planted areas and specified paved areas.
- iii routine maintenance tasks such as litter-picking, leaf clearing and pruning;
- iv when requested and at rates agreed in advance, the planting of new and replacement trees, shrubs, hedges and bulbs;

The above is an indication only of the basic tasks that can be expected. More detailed tasks are set out in the Specification below.

A.2 Tidy Work Practices

All work within the green spaces should be carried out with the least inconvenience to customers and users; piles of debris should be cleared from paths and walkways and be removed as soon as is practicable and by the end of the working day.

SECTION B

Grass Maintenance

- B.1 Introduction**
- B.2 Pesticide application in grass**
- B.3 Fertilisers**
- B.4 Lawn Maintenance**
- B.5 Irrigation**
- B.6 Edging of all grass areas**

B.1 Introduction

A high quality finish is expected of all lawn areas throughout the open spaces. All grass shall normally be mown in parallel straight lines so that lawns are left with a neat and tidy appearance. On successive cuts the direction of cut will, where appropriate, be at right angles to the previous cut. All grass should be cut with the minimum of overlap and produce alternate parallel bands of light and dark green.

The mowing speed will always be controlled so as to achieve the best standard finish. The operator will ensure that all movement of the machine, whether mowing, turning or in transit, does not damage the sward or its visual appearance.

- (i) Grass areas shall be cut with a rotary mower of a size appropriate to that location and its individual obstacles. The sward shall be mown not shorter than 25mm and shall not exceed a height of 45mm.
Clean, clipping-free, litter and debris-free finish.
 - Green healthy looking sward, free from unsightly weeds / moss / bare patches all year round.
 - Paths and surrounds, free of clippings.
 - Edges to beds should be maintained to provide neatly trimmed, tidy and aesthetically pleasing perimeters, sympathetic to the site's design.

- (ii) Naturalised Bulb Areas: All areas planted with bulbs shall be left unmown until the leaves of the bulbs have died down.

The areas with bulbs will be cut by gradually lowering the height of cut over a period of three or four cuts, the aim being to bring the area planted with bulbs back to the standard grass height as soon as possible without impairing the visual appearance. The length of grass in these areas shall be reduced by not more than 50% at each cut.

- (iii) Climate and soil

In very wet, dry or adverse weather conditions and after prior agreement with an HO, all services involving grass cutting shall cease until ground conditions allow services to continue without damage being caused to the surface levels or to the contours of the ground.

(iii) Obstructions

Grass will be cut as close as possible up to and around obstructions without causing damage to plants or other features. Alternative machinery or equipment e.g. strimmers or hand shears will be used to cut the grass next to obstacles.

B.2 Pesticide application in grass

Good cultural practice and hand-weeding are the preferred method of weed control. In the event that no other remedy is available and that the problem is sufficiently severe, we will discuss the use of pesticides with the HO prior to use.

B.3 Fertiliser

We will supply and apply suitable dressings of turf fertiliser to all Ornamental Turf lawn areas once a year.

Extent and distribution

Spring and summer fertiliser ratio NPK 9:7:7 shall be applied in May each year. Autumn fertiliser NPK ratio 3:12:12 shall be applied in October each year. Applications shall not be made in line with guidance and COSHH regulations. Fertilisers will be thoroughly watered in.

Fertilising areas planted with bulbs

A high potash feed shall be applied to grass areas planted with bulbs immediately after the flower has faded. Following application we will irrigate if necessary.

B.4 Lawn Maintenance

Each year, all lawns will have a seasonal maintenance applied as follows.

Aeration

Fine Turf areas and Ornamental Turf areas shall be aerated by solid tine spiking in October/November each year to a depth of 100mm and at 100mm centres. Hard ground may need to be irrigated to aid penetration of tines/spikes.

Top Dressing

All fine turf areas will be top dressed in October/November with an application of three parts sandy loam, six parts sharp sand and one part compost or leafmould. Application of 2-3kg per sq m, working the dressing in with the back of a rake.

Scarification

All fine turf and ornamental areas shall be scarified each year to prevent the build-up of thatch, weed and moss infestation. Scarification shall be carried out in April each year

B.5 Irrigation

During the summer months irrigation will need to be carried out, therefore a constant cycle of watering will be required at all locations. During the summer period we shall apply sufficient water at a sufficient frequency to ensure healthy grass growth.

During periods of protracted hot and dry weather consideration will be given for sustainability and water conservation, discussions to determine watering regime will be held with HO and GAG.

B.6 Edging of all grassed areas

Grass on edges shall not exceed 40mm in length and shall be cut at the same time as the grass is mown. All grass edges shall be reformed once a year in the winter if required in which case if it is not part of the core works it will form part of the quoted works to be agreed by the BEO.

We will maintain or reform any necessary channels, to provide suitable mowing margins, and keep them clean and weed-free.

SECTION C

Removal of Rubbish, Leaves and Debris

C.1 General

C.2 Dangerous Materials

C.3 Tree Debris

C.4 Leaf Clearance

C.1 General

The sites will be kept litter free Monday to Friday. We shall be responsible for removing and disposing of all litter, with the frequency required to ensure that the gardens are kept litter free.

All wastes resulting from sweeping, litter picking or garden maintenance activities shall be removed at the time the work is completed.

C.3 Tree debris

We will clear any fallen twigs, branches etc., which arise from trees within areas under our control. We will also arrange for the removal of litter, polythene bags and other debris which may become lodged in trees. This debris will be removed within 48 hours.

C.4 Leaf clearance

At all times of year we will ensure that leaves are all removed at least once a week. During the autumn leaves will be collected every other day.

Restrictions

We will remove leaves from all areas without damage to grass, plants or other features. If, due to inclement weather, e.g. snow and ice, complete clearance of leaves cannot occur, this task shall be temporarily suspended until ground conditions improve. Similarly, clearance will cease if weather conditions would lead to damage to grass, bedding areas etc. from any equipment being used. In both cases an HO's permission will be obtained. Work shall also cease on the instructions of an HO.

SECTION D

Planted areas

D.1 Shrub maintenance

D.2 Hedge trimming

D.3 Herbaceous plants

D.1 Shrub maintenance

In maintaining shrub beds, great care will be taken so as not to damage the stem, bark or roots of shrubs, trees or bulbs.

Weed control

We will arrange to keep all planted areas free from weeds at all times. Weed growth will be removed initially by hand cultivation and weeding, prior to any further treatment. Weeds will be removed from the soil surface. All roots of deep rooted perennial weeds will be forked out to remove the root systems.

Mulching

All beds will have an application of a biodegradable mulch during the autumn. The mulch will be laid to a depth of at least 2.5 cm and no more than 7.5 cm. There will be no direct contact with the stems of trees and specimen shrubs.

Weed control in tree bases

The bases of trees planted in paved areas shall be kept free of weeds, moss and other debris at all times by hand weeding and the use of mulch. We shall also remove as necessary any epicormic, suckering or basal growth from the trees before it reaches

500mm in length. These operations shall be carried out so as to cause minimal disturbance to any aggregate material around tree bases.

Gapping up

Where gaps in beds appear gardeners will attempt to fill them by using plants that have been moved from overcrowded areas or have been divided. Where this is not possible, the gardeners will compile a list of suitable plants and quantities to fill the gaps and provide the list to the HO. The HO will be responsible for authorising the spend on purchasing the plants.

Pruning

Shrubs, ornamental hedges and roses will be pruned in accordance with best horticultural practice, and carried out by a suitably experienced operative.

Generally all dead, dying, weak, diseased and crossing shoots or branches will be removed to achieve a good shape to individual shrubs/roses and an "even" shaped effect in large shrubberies and ornamental hedges. As a guide, pruning of flowering shrubs will conform to the timetable below. Deadheading of non-species roses, rhododendrons, azaleas, etc. will be carried out as required.

Category	Characteristics	Examples	Pruning Action
1	Shrubs that do not regularly produce vigorous replacement growth from the base and are generally slow growing	<i>Potentilla fruticosa</i> , <i>Cotinus coggygria</i> , <i>Syringa vulgaris</i>	Prune when immature to remove weak branches, crossing branches to retain plant symmetry and form. Once established, the only pruning necessary is to remove dead, dying diseased and damaged growth
2	Shrubs that flower on stems which are produced in the previous season or on short laterals from one year old wood	<i>Philadelphus</i> sp., <i>Forsythia</i> sp., <i>Kerria japonica</i>	The wood that has flowered should be removed. Also, when a shrub becomes mature, renewal pruning should take place to encourage a good supply of one year old wood
3	Shrubs that bloom on current years growth	Type 1: hardy <i>Fuchsia</i> , <i>Leycesteria formosa</i> Type 2: <i>Buddleia davidii</i> , <i>hydrangea paniculata</i> , <i>Spiraea x bumalda</i>	Prune hard in the spring, cutting all shoots down to ground level Allow a framework of branches to develop to the desired height and cut back subsequent growth to the desired framework
4	Shrubs grown for bold foliage or coloured stems on current year's growth	<i>Cornus alba</i> , <i>Salix alba</i> , <i>Rubus cockburnianus</i>	Prune hard back in the spring to ground level to encourage vigorous growth
5	Evergreen shrubs	<i>Mahonia aquifolium</i>	Prune in April or May to remove dead, diseased and

		<i>Lavandula sp.</i> , <i>Calluna sp.</i> , <i>Erica sp</i>	damaged stems, and stems that detract from the symmetry of the shrub but not to the extent that the shrub becomes unnatural in appearance As above except pruning to be carried out after flowering
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Disposal of prunings

All prunings will be either bagged or stacked neatly and placed in an approved position ready for removal on the same day as the operation.

Fertiliser application

We shall supply and spread fertiliser to all areas twice a year. A spring/summer feed of NPK ratio 9:5:3 shall be applied in April and an autumn feed of NPK ratio 3:4:8 shall be applied in September. The fertiliser will be applied by hand and lightly raked or hoed into the soil surface around each plant, without causing any damage to existing planting and watered in.

Edge maintenance

Where plants overlap hard areas, all plants will be maintained to prevent encroachment onto footpaths, highways, signboards, street furniture and windows. Where plants overlap grass border edges, the encroaching growth will be pruned back by secateur only so far as to allow free passage to mowers.

Irrigation

In addition to irrigation requirements for bedding and lawn areas, and where an irrigation system is not installed, it will be necessary to irrigate to maintain healthy shrub growth. Foliage of shrubs will from time to time have to be sprayed with water to remove deposits of dust from atmospheric or traffic pollution.

D.2 Hedge trimming

We will cut all hedging using hand shears or hand-held mechanical cutters. Cutting will be such as to encourage a stable hedge. That is, the width at the top of the hedge will be slightly less than at the base. Cutting will remove current growth rather than old wood. However, we allow for cutting a proportion of the hedges back to the main body every 4-5 years to retain their size and shape.

Hedges will have a neat and tidy appearance and be clipped in such a way as to achieve a straight level surface along the tops, sides and ends.

At the base of all hedges a strip 300mm wide or to the full width of the planting bay edgings as provided will be cultivated and kept free of weeds.

D.3 Herbaceous plants

All work shall be carried out in accordance with good horticultural practice and as agreed with an HO.

SECTION E

E.1 Footpaths

We will dispose of all leaves and litter from footpaths. Other deleterious matter such as weeds, bird droppings and aphid deposits shall be removed by sweeping, jet-washing or otherwise keeping clean as required.

E.2 Garden seats

Once a year, the garden seats will be cleaned of all algae etc. by scrubbing and washing and, when dry, treated with teak oil. During the year, should the seats become stained with bird lime, algae or spillage (e.g. hot drinks), they will be jet-washed as a spot treatment and as required.