

# Take on staff shortages without falling short this winter

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***Adam Brindle, Managing Director of **Grounds Care Group** explores why more organisations are outsourcing snow and ice clearances and what to consider when taking this step.***

With virtually every industry competing fiercely for skilled staff, outdoor FM is being particularly hard hit as experienced staff retire, access to overseas workers dries up and young people staying in education longer struggle to identify with careers in grounds care. For many businesses, these challenges have reached a tipping point: At one of our customers – a large further education college, the head groundsman – a veteran of forty years – had been struggling to recruit an understudy and to find staff living locally. As winter came around, these pressures had started to bite. Where previously the college's estates team had been handling snow clearing and gritting in-house, the shortage of staff willing and able to be on site early in the day was leaving the campus and its hundreds of students dangerously exposed to the risks of trips and falls.

Without staff to throw at the challenge, the recruitment squeeze had exposed the inherent inefficiency of how they – and far too many organisations – take on winter conditions. Previously, in-house staff had been arriving in the morning and reacting to the weather rather than proactively gritting according to forecasts. Moreover, working reactively presented a significant opportunity cost – preventing other maintenance essential tasks from being carried out, complicating forward planning and tying up skilled staff with handling snow and ice clearance.

For the college, the combination of staffing pressures and the exposure to potential liability led to the decision to partner with a winter maintenance specialist for the first time. This is becoming a more common trend as organisations seek to outsource this specialist area. The pandemic has also had an

impact, and we have seen businesses struggling to get staff back into the office seeking to find ways to reduce the overhead of their buildings.

However, unlike many areas of grounds care, the high risk, high liability context of snow and ice clearance is unlike lawn mowing or hedge cutting. You can't simply cut costs by doing it less often. Slips, trips and falls are responsible for over a third of all reported major workplace injuries and organisations have a duty of care to mitigate these risks to ensure the health and safety of both staff and visitors. Effective winter maintenance is critical to reduce the risks of accidents on premises and partnering with the right specialist can provide an opportunity to manage costs, while achieving far higher standards of safety.

Yet outsourcing is not without its own risks. A key challenge is understanding what to expect and what to specify when tendering for winter maintenance services – especially as the quality of offerings has become increasingly varied as some providers have transformed their services through technology while others have lagged behind. This is producing real differences in capabilities, standards and value for money. Today's best in class services have adopted a data-driven approach, triggering site visits based on advanced weather forecasting to ensure that proactive gritting is undertaken just when it's needed and avoiding the expense of gritting unnecessarily.

One advantage of keeping snow and ice clearance in-house is that it can be easier to keep track of your own teams' activity. Yet this is where technology is also helping by enabling service providers to offer high levels of transparency and accountability through live reporting via customer portals and dashboards. We've all heard horror stories of contractors not turning up and leaving sites unable to open, but it can also be problematic if they are doing the work but can't demonstrate what they've done and when they've done it. Especially when accidents occur, accurate and accessible records are vital.

At Grounds Care Group, our own investments in technology – and in advanced weather forecasting solutions from the Met Office – ensure that we can efficiently keep our customers sites up and running. We can offer peace of mind through minute-by-minute live reporting and serve as our customers' eyes and ears on site. I would argue that, in this day and age, there simply is no excuse not to expect this level of assurance when outsourcing winter maintenance. Even so, even very established providers are still charging a premium without delivering that level of service.

Naturally, these dynamics aren't unique to our sector. Just as outsourcing isn't a silver bullet solution to labour shortages, the old approach of throwing manpower at problems can simply entrench inefficient practices. In the wider economy, there's been much discussion of how better training and technology investments can help to unlock greater productivity. Ultimately this is what matters in outdoor FM too – getting the right people working smarter, and sourcing expert support where in-house resources are limited.

For further information on how to keep your business operational and compliant this winter call the Grounds Care Group on 0800 122 3376 or email [info@gcgrp.co.uk](mailto:info@gcgrp.co.uk)