

GRASS ROOTS

ANGUS LINDSAY



Do we get the best from our public sports grounds? **Angus Lindsay** asks if managing our local pitches differently could yield greater use and income

Landscaping is all about improving the aesthetic appearance of an area or facility by changing its contours, adding features, or planting trees and shrubs, but I think there is more to it than that.

In my opinion it should encompass all aspects of the green spaces we live and work in – parks, housing, open spaces and sports facilities. This last area is of particular interest as I believe we don't manage and maintain our public sports grounds to get the best from them. Not just for the local authority that owns them, but more importantly developing the next generation of home grown football and rugby players.

The UK produces some of the world's best groundsmen and greenkeepers. It is also true that we have some amazing sports venues in this country, and the technical support from the likes of the STRI (Sports Turf Research Institute) is world class. However, we also have thousands of hectares of local authority-owned sports pitches for public use, which in many cases are no better than maintained fields from which councils look to generate income. To get the best from these facilities we need to do more than just cut the grass and occasionally punch holes through the surface – they should be managed as sports surfaces, not just fields with white lines.

Budget cuts continue to burden our local authorities and I sympathise with their task of making the numbers add up whilst trying to



Initial investment may be costly but the long term benefits make sense



With the correct input you can create a top quality playing surface in a matter of weeks

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maintain services, but let's think for a minute. Rather than continually cutting services, why not invest in some of the facilities with a view to generating income? Take the example of football pitches: lack of fertilising, inappropriate reseeding and outdated pitch renovation practices can lead to matches being cancelled due to muddy or waterlogged playing surfaces. If games do get played there can be significant long term damage.

For example: the average Sunday league team playing 10 home games per season on a local authority pitch costs £600 per season for the use of one pitch = £60 per game, a total usage at 90 minutes per game of 15 hours per season per pitch. For one pitch the actual usage is probably 100 hours per season = 66 games @ £60 per game = £3,960 x 60 = £237,600 of income to the authority.

There is the potential with these pitches (if maintained correctly) of 650 hours use per season = 430 games @ £60 per game = £25,800. If the local authority has 60 pitches x £25,800 = £1,548,000! It is easy to juggle figures to show how money could be generated and there is a cost to get the pitches to the standard where they will be more intensively used, but currently there seems no appetite from those who manage these facilities to even consider doing something new.

During April and May one of the industry's leaders in the

supply of sports turf equipment, Campey Turfcare, embarked on the UK-wide Pitch Renovation tour, showing just what a difference good practice can make. Supported by seed producers and machinery suppliers, events were enthusiastically attended by sports clubs and groundsmen but very few representing the biggest sector managing the grass roots facilities we all grew up with.

Why have these natural playing surfaces if we're not going to look after them? Sometimes the solution to a problem is within our grasp, we just need to think differently. If you want something you've never had, then you've got to do something you've never done.

ABOUT ANGUS LINDSAY

Angus spent several years working on arable farms in Scotland before joining VSO in Egypt, implementing a mechanisation programme, managing field operations for a commercial cotton plantation in Nigeria and working as a contract instructor for Massey Ferguson in Yemen. He gained an MSc in agricultural engineering and mechanisation management at Silsoe, joining Glendale as machinery manager in 1994 and then in 2009, The Landscape Group as group head of assets and fleet. Contact: alindsay@thelandscapegroup.co.uk