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You might be in for a nasty surprise if you go down to a park today. The odds are that you will see a catalogue of green space mismanagement and degraded community assets, all financed by the public purse.

Expensive and excessive grass mowing is degrading habitat diversity and new trees are dying because of poor-quality design, installation and basic maintenance. The most damaging impact is basal trunk wounding by strimmers and ride-on mowers, preventing many young trees ever reaching maturity.

Mechanical basal wounding rarely kills immediately but frequently results in tree removal, often years after the damage. A slow lingering death and the hidden nature of the damage makes it difficult to pinpoint the blame, but the outcome is always the same, accumulating harm to environmental assets with no compensation for communities deprived of tree benefits.

There is lots of anecdotal evidence identifying the harm, but it took a research project in Christchurch, New Zealand, to document it as an "urban epidemic" (Morgenroth & Cadwallader, 2015). Its findings of 62.9% of 1,018 surveyed trees having at least one wound has now been mirrored in emerging UK research in Birmingham. A pilot study in one council ward identified such severe damage to young trees that the research has been extended across the city. Preliminary findings indicate that the cost to rectify the harm, extrapolated right across the city, could be more than £3m.

Thankfully, there are exceptions, with the Royal Parks around London being a beacon of best practice. However, the national normal seems to be substandard service delivery causing gross harm to Britain's climate adaptation effort. A typical example is a main contractor plants new trees, the council mowing team kills them and the council then pays the main contractor to plant replacements, just in time for the carnage of the next mowing season.

Grounds maintenance teams, both private and local authority, are delivering the destruction, but council administrators must bear most responsibility because of weak contract specification and inadequate oversight during implementation. Viable quick fixes include immediately stopping mowing near all tree trunks, mulch around the bases of all young trees and the use of properly trained staff to maintain green space.

The COVID-19 crisis has thrown the importance of high-quality green space into the public spotlight and councils with any integrity must respond. An obvious starting point is an urgent and full audit of all grounds maintenance contracts to make sure they are fit for purpose relating to tree maintenance and mowing regimes.

