Cleaning, gardens and communal areas

How to specify, price and inspect the everyday services that residents notice most.

Cleaning, gardening and general upkeep are what residents see and judge. They are also where service charge disputes often start. A clear specification and regular inspection keep standards up and costs fair.

Write a specification

For each service, set out:

- **What:** the areas, tasks and standards. For cleaning: floors, stairs, windows, bins, lifts, glass and handrails.
- **How often:** daily, weekly, fortnightly or seasonally.
- **Times and access:** when the work is done, and who gives access.
- **Materials and equipment:** who supplies them, and any safety needs.
- **Reporting:** how the contractor tells you about damage, hazards or problems.

Price it fairly

Ask for quotes on the same specification. A very low price may mean visits are shorter than you expect or the contractor is not properly insured. Ask for the hours allowed on site, not just the price. Check that charges are covered by the service charge provisions in your lease.

Inspect regularly

- Walk the building every month, and keep a simple checklist with dates and photos.
- Check the work against the specification, not against personal taste.
- Tell the contractor promptly, in writing, if standards slip, and record how it was put right.
- Invite residents to report problems through one channel.

Safety in communal areas

Hazards in the common parts matter more than appearance:

- Clear escape routes and keep fire doors closed and unobstructed.
- Do not store belongings in corridors, stairwells or lobbies.
- Repair trip hazards, broken lighting and damaged paths without delay.
- Treat spills and wet floors as a risk, and use warning signs.

Gardens and outside areas

Plan seasonal work and keep trees and boundaries under review. Larger trees may need a specialist's inspection, and some may be protected by law, so check before any work. Agree who is responsible for bins, bike stores and parking areas, and enforce the rules fairly.

Keeping residents informed

Tell residents what the service includes and when to expect it. A short notice in the entrance hall avoids many complaints.

> Review every year. A cleaning or gardening contract that is never reviewed tends to drift in both price and standard.

Next steps

1. Write or update each specification.
2. Set up a monthly inspection checklist.
3. Agree who deals with complaints.
4. Diary an annual review of each contract.

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