



Briefing 20 - 14

March 2020

Local authority responses to COVID-19 in relation to parks and Grounds Maintenance services.

This briefing is provided to all APSE member authorities but will be of particular interest to those officers responsible for Parks and Grounds Maintenance services.

Key Issues:

With the onset of ever more stringent measures to control the spread of the coronavirus, local authorities are having to implement pre-prepared business continuity plans and prioritise the level of services they provide.

This short briefing provides the most up-to-date information as to how these plans are being implemented and service priorities decided with regards to parks and grounds maintenance services.

- The key decisions in relation to which service elements will be provided with regards to parks and grounds maintenance are being decided by the need to provide staff to cover essential services and the reduction of exposure to the coronavirus both to staff and via the closure, cancellation or removal of facilities and events within parks where large numbers of people gather.
- Examples of service changes and priorities as well as arrangements for the safety of staff and managing staffing levels in the incidents of increasing staff absence through illness or self-isolation are also contained within the briefing.
- Service continuity planning involving the redeployment and training of staff are areas which have received much attention with details contained within the briefing.
- It is clear that despite many challenges, most local authorities will still keep parks and greenspaces open to public access to ensure there are opportunities for exercise and mental well-being but this will clearly be reviewed if social distancing cannot be realistically achieved.

Background

APSE issued a survey which asked how local authority parks and grounds maintenance services are being affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey asked member authorities for information as to how they plan to deliver services in light of the impact of the virus.

From the responses APSE has received to date it is apparent that the majority are referring to pre-prepared Business Continuity Plans (BCP's) and there is a good deal of commonality across the UK with regards to the changes to delivery, either implemented or ready to be implemented should the need arise.

Generally, authorities appear to be prioritising their services based on resident needs. A good example of this is below with the services that relate to parks and grounds maintenance / public realm:

Primary Services

(Essential services – all staff redeployed to ensure service delivery)

Meals at Home (including shopping service).

Waste Collection (agreed collections priorities to focus on noxious wastes).

Cemetery – grave provision.

Transport administration, compliance and contract delivery.

Day Centre kitchen.

Secondary Services

(Medium priority – redeploy staff in phase 2 to ensure primary service delivery)

Street Cleansing -scheduled cleansing.

Playground checks.

Street Cleaning - reactive cleansing.

Accessible minibuses for elderly and disabled.

Telecare services and social prescribing.

Day Centre – non kitchen use.

Tertiary Services

(Non-essential – redeploy staff in phase 1 to ensure primary and secondary service delivery)

Road/pavement sweeping.

Locking parks and general parks duties.

Grounds Maintenance.

Bin deliveries.

Allotments.

Abandoned cars.

Market management.

Countryside.

Sports centre and bookings

Parks and grounds maintenance services are viewed as having an important reserve of staff which, when given appropriate training, will provide critical support and cover to essential services; this includes areas such as waste collection and cemetery services. A brief summary of the changes being made both with regards to levels of service continuity in parks and grounds maintenance, and also areas of current staff redeployment is detailed below.

Operational Changes

Councils will need to prioritise services as staffing levels fall. This is particularly problematic for frontline services which may be integrated with other services commonly defined as Environmental Services, which may also include grounds maintenance, tree maintenance, street cleaning, waste and recycling services, bereavement services and the council's fleet.

Integrated services such as these will need to prioritise what they do with particular priority given to waste collection, litter bin emptying, bereavement services such as grave digging and responding to emergency call outs, for example RTAs and dead animals, alongside ensuring fleet is maintained. It is therefore likely that staff within parks as with other staff across the service may be put to different tasks to ensure that priorities are delivered.

In light of this Parks and Grounds Maintenance services have begun to make operational changes to the way in which they may need to deliver services during the current climate.

These include:

- Closure of certain amenities events which promote the gathering of people such as music concerts, sports matches, closure of cafes and mini zoos and other indoor facilities, play grounds / fixed play areas and outdoor gyms.
- Where facilities are remaining open, particularly buildings then increased cleansing regimes are being introduced requiring additional staffing input. Also contactless card payments are being imposed to prevent cash handling.
- Playground inspections may lead to removal of damaged equipment rather than repair
- Reduced grounds maintenance activities such as grass cutting frequencies, fine turf maintenance, pushing back start date of highway verge cutting, pitch marking and weed killing
- Reduction in emptying and even the removal or taping up of litter bins.
- In many local authorities volunteering activities are being scaled down or cancelled, particularly given the age profile within some groups.
- Outdoor working, particularly lone working such as ride on mowing is seen by many as less of a risk with regards to infection and therefore much of these types of operations are continuing as normal.
- Where staff are working across services there is a move to segregate those staff who work predominantly in the burial service to ensure segregated; this is to ensure service continuity with cemeteries and crematoria.

Despite many of these reductions and cessations, parks and open spaces are still being promoted to keep people healthy as long as the requirements for social distancing are adhered to. However this was challenged over the weekend of the 21/22 March with large scale crowds descending on to bigger parks and country parks as well as outdoor leisure facilities such as lakes with the public in many cases not maintaining social distancing. It was also concerning to receive reports of fast food vans / ice cream vans where the public were queuing in close proximity to one another with little scope for enforcing the recommended distancing measures. The issue of the licences to operate these facilities may be an area in need of urgent review if effective social distancing is to be maintained.

Protection of Staff

Many local authorities are placing particular emphasis on the containment of the virus from affecting their staff in order to ensure service continuity. Examples include:

- In many local authorities' staff who are in a health risk category, as set out by the NHS and Public Health agencies are being encouraged to go home and self-isolate. This is particularly important as due to the ageing workforce within the UK's parks and grounds maintenance services, many employees will be considered at risk.
- Where possible, all remaining staff are being encouraged to work from home.
- Ensuring all staff who remain in the workplace minimise social contact to 'essential only' and follow the practical steps of working as independently as possible.
- No congregating in welfare areas - keeping segregated - or using outside areas.
- Using separate work vehicles wherever possible and implementing stringent cleaning programmes for vehicles.
- Preventing access to works depots until 10 minutes before clocking-on times and keys left in vehicles to be collected by one person rather than having crews congregating in depots.
- Allowing crews to clock-on by text messaging.
- Focussing on critical services: play area inspections, PRE checks, park inspections, essential Health and Safety repairs, animal welfare, and so forth.

APSE Comment

The parks and grounds maintenance services find that they are caught between 'a rock and a hard place'. On the one hand, even though self-isolation and social distancing are the order of the day, people are still being reminded of the need to stay fit, and parks and greenspaces are being suggested as places where exercise can be freely taken. On the other hand many of the facilities and events within parks have been closed or cancelled due to the potential need to redeploy staff in essential services such as waste collection and cemeteries.

The need to achieve some sort of balance will be a major challenge for parks and greenspace managers in the immediate days. In the longer term the restoration of these spaces, which may undoubtedly deteriorate as a consequence of reduced maintenance brought about by the need to address the impacts of the coronavirus, will need to be a key focus.

APSE is seeking further discussions on the safe use of parks including ways in which parks could remain open with social distancing effectively in place; including encouraging and ensuring behaviour change amongst the public to achieve this with appropriate measures in place to ensure the 'stay local' messages are observed.

It is clear that the UK and local authority services are certainly facing difficult times. Parks services are still suffering from depleted revenue streams as a result of the long-term financial issues that have faced councils and now face the biggest challenge since the Second World War in relation to meeting public need during a pandemic.

From the responses received it is apparent that local authorities have been planning for such an incident but perhaps the sheer speed and scale of the pandemic has taken many by surprise. Nevertheless, local authorities are clearly implementing their business continuity plans and have in place services which will continue to meet public need even in these strange times.

APSE will continue to support its members through daily monitoring and disseminating information as it becomes available.

APSE has set up a COVID-19 WhatsApp group which will allow Parks and Grounds managers to ask questions and keep up to date with the latest service impacts caused by the pandemic and the need to combat its effects,

APSE's network query service will still be operational and advice will be forthcoming as and when it is received.

Members should look out for regular updates either via the APSE website or through short briefings such as these.

Undoubtedly there will be significant changes and demands being placed on local authorities but through the sharing of information and experiences we will undoubtedly rise to the challenge and meet the needs of our public and customers.

We would encourage you to visit the [APSE COVID -19 web hub](#) to ensure you are kept up to date with the latest information and to sign up to the [APSE COVID -19 network](#).

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