



The changing guidance for greenspaces and allotments in the face of the impacts of COVID-19

This briefing provides the most up-to-date information as to how these parks and greenspace managers are dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 in relation to public use of open green spaces and ancillary services provision within these spaces such as the use of allotments. The briefing will be of particular interest to those officers responsible for parks, open spaces and allotments

Key Issues:

- With the onset of ever more stringent measures to control the spread of the coronavirus, local authorities are having to constantly adapt to shifting government and other agencies advice, regarding the provision of services in light of the current Coronavirus pandemic.
- Within the parks and greenspace service areas there are conflicting demands of making sure such areas are open whilst also trying to manage social distancing of those who are use these spaces.
- As well as the larger parks and open spaces, there is a need to consider the use of local green spaces more, particularly in light of the restrictions now being imposed on the amount of time the public are being told to spend outdoors.
- Ancillary services such as allotments also need to be considered if they are not to suffer the same issues of overcrowding which occurred recently in parks and open spaces.
- Throughout all of these issues is the need to ensure social distancing and thereby controlling the spread of the Coronavirus, for if social distancing cannot be achieved, then many parks, greenspaces and allotments face certain closure.

Background

Initially the promotion of the use of greenspaces was seen as an important part of the response to COVID-19, by providing recreational and well-being opportunities to the population who were finding their daily ability to move freely more and more compromised in an attempt to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus.

However as the number of people infected has increased together with the associated danger of the potential to spread the virus to others, public gatherings were cautioned against.

The use of greenspaces and public parks are still seen as opportunities for people to get out of the house and exercise, but following the huge numbers of people who gathered in parks and open spaces recently, many ignoring the need for social distancing, then many authorities began to restrict the opportunities to allow further large gatherings by closing cafes, rides, seating areas and other similar facilities within their parks and open spaces. The National Trust initially offering free access to its parks and gardens has since taken the decision to close all such properties in an attempt to prevent crowds gathering.

Following the decision to close the nation's schools' extra pressure has been placed on parks and open spaces.

The most obvious attractant within parks for children, are playgrounds and in order to prevent unnecessary contact all local authorities have now closed all their fixed play areas, green gyms and other similar facilities.

However, in spite of the need to close all of these facilities, parks and open spaces are still accessible to the general public, providing social distancing is adhered to. This is a point all local authorities are making very clear, as without the compliance of the general public to this requirement, then there is the option of closing all parks and open spaces, albeit somewhat difficult to enforce in those areas where there are open entrances. However, the recent government ruling is that if large gatherings do occur then the Police now have the authority to disperse crowds or even fine offenders.

The importance of local green spaces

One of the problems regarding public parks being overcrowded is that many people have headed towards large 'destination parks' where many of the attractions would have previously been heavily used, but now with many of these facilities closed there isn't the same pull on the public to go to these sites and as many people are being advised that local green spaces are just as accessible and relevant to taking exercise. Indeed, with the recent guidance that people should spend as little time as possible outside of the house, limiting themselves to one outing per day, then local greenspaces may be the only option for such exercise. Staying local is also an important factor in containing the virus.

APSE has been monitoring these changes closely and have been reporting back to members about these changes via its web pages, briefings and the newly created WhatsApp pages which cover a variety of different service area. These WhatsApp groups allow members of APSE to keep in touch on a minute by minute basis discussing the latest developments in their service areas. You can visit the APSE COVID-19 [web hub here](#). You can complete the online web form to join the networks including [WhatsApp groups here](#) (members only).

The most recent issue being raised within the WhatsApp group, has been how local authorities are dealing with the ongoing provision of allotments and whether they are remaining open.

There are a number of issues which need to be considered regarding the continuing provision of allotments, firstly, particularly if they are local authority run, then ensuring there is clear guidance on social distancing and the protection of both local authority staff, who may be inspecting the site, and the allotment holders themselves. Social distancing is particularly pertinent, as with parks previously, there is the potential for whole families to visit their allotment plot as part of their daily exercise, and this increase in numbers could therefore compromise the social distancing rules, and threaten the continued provision of the allotment site.

Although allotment plots can provide good opportunities for daily exercise this does not mean that allotment holders should spend all day on the site, current recommendations would suggest short visits are the best policy, ideally visiting on your own.

Many local authorities are providing signs at the entrance to their sites about changes which need to be made in light of the Coronavirus, these include closure of on-site toilets, kitchens and produce shops.

A further point is that many allotment holders because of their age, may fall within the vulnerable groups' categories, and should therefore seriously consider whether it is in their best interest to leave the house to attend the site, government guidance would suggest not.

Allotments guidance in light of COVID-19

To assist in ensuring sites can remain open and users are safe, many local authorities are referring to the National Allotments Society guidelines which have just been released.

These guidance notes in summary suggest allotment holders:

- Keep hand sanitiser in their shed and wash their hands regularly
- Use hand sanitiser before opening and closing any gate locked
- Observe "Social Distancing" with each other 2-3 metres
- Do not share tools
- Minimise the contact with each other for example no handshakes
- Do not wash their hands in water troughs
- Recommend that all communal facilities are closed
- If allotment holders have livestock on the site and must visit twice a day, then they should take a photograph on their phone of their livestock, based on what is happening in other countries they may eventually have to print off a government

form to leave the house but if challenged it would be good to be able to show a photograph of where they are going.

- Plan ahead to ensure that you have food and medication delivered to you during this time
- Stay away from vulnerable individuals such as the elderly and those with underlying health conditions as much as possible
- If you display any symptoms of coronavirus stay at home and self-isolate for at least 14 days or until symptoms have passed.

Further advice from the Association can be found at the following link:

<https://www.nsalg.org.uk/news/covid19-information/>

APSE Comment

The UK and local authority services are certainly facing difficult times. Not only are local authorities dealing with austerity measures and changing public demands, but we now face the biggest challenge since the Second World War in relation to meeting public need.

From the responses received it is apparent that local authorities have been planning for an incident such as this 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.

Parks and open spaces and their ancillary services such as allotments, are receiving regular updates on how they should operate; occasionally these messages may seem contradictory, whereby people are being promoted to use these spaces, but need to follow strict social distancing rules or perhaps not visiting at all.

Included in this increased demand for places and spaces to take exercise, is the need to re-prioritise the importance of key council services, which may require the redeployment of parks staff, consequently reducing the resource to upkeep parks and greenspaces at a time of peak demand.

A further point to consider is how local authorities will need to bring many of these facilities back into operation once the current pandemic is over, facing issues such as the need for enhanced grounds maintenance, ensuring facilities which have been closed down now are clean and safe to re-introduce in the future as well as managing this against lost income from additional services such as car parking charges, licence fees or income from cafes. Indeed, many have suspended car parking operations to avoid public contact with pay machines or moved to contactless payments only. Some have redeployed parking

enforcement officers to other more urgent roles as part of the response to COVID -19. APSE will continue to support its members through daily monitoring and disseminating information as it becomes available.

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 or through our [COVID-19 hub](#).

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.

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