



APSE Update survey on how local authorities are dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 in relation to parks and greenspaces.

This briefing provides the most up-to-date information via a survey carried out by APSE in the second week of April 2020, 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 playgrounds and sports and leisure facilities.

The briefing will be of particular interest to those officers responsible for parks and open spaces

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 using these spaces.
- The survey looks at the level of service provision still being maintained as well as some of the challenges facing parks managers in ensuring social distancing is maintained in order to protect park users and their own staff.
- 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.
- 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 may face closure.

Background

The promotion of the use of greenspaces is seen by Government and health practitioners 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 have been banned.

The use of greenspaces and public parks are providing 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 have had to restrict these opportunities to allow further large gatherings by closing cafes, rides, seating areas and other similar facilities within their parks and open spaces.

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.

FINDINGS OF THE APRIL 2020 PARKS AND OPEN SPACES SURVEY.

The survey was issued to APSE members on 8 April 2020 and received almost 100 responses within a 48 hour period. What follows is the main findings to the survey questions.

How many of your urban parks are remaining open?

90% of respondents have all of their urban parks open, whilst a further 6% have between 75% - 50% of their urban parks open. Within the responses it was noticeable that nearly all local authorities had closed most if not all of the associated parks infrastructure, such as playgrounds, MUGA's, cafes, toilets, sports facilities and pitches and skate parks. Most had also closed their car parks in order to dissuade non-essential travel by car to distant parks and greenspaces.

How many of your country parks are remaining open?

72% of country parks are being kept fully open, however again most have closed all associated infrastructure such as toilets and car parks. 7% of respondents stated that they had closed their country parks. It is likely most are remaining open because of the difficulty in preventing public access, but most have restricted vehicular access and only pedestrians and cyclists can use recognised entrances.

Within your parks, grounds maintenance and open spaces services, how has the provision of specific functions been impacted by COVID-19?

The responses were divided into those services which had been prioritised, reduced and ceased. From the findings the services which had been most prioritised and therefore still fully operational were maintenance of cemeteries (50% of respondents), Country parks (34% of respondents), grass cutting of parks and open spaces (26% of respondents) Maintenance of highway verges (25% of respondents) and maintenance of car parks in greenspaces (20% of respondents).

Those services which had been reduced were mainly: grass cutting in parks and open spaces (40%), provision of services in country parks (42%), reductions in the maintenance of sports pitches (38%) and less frequent cuts/maintenance of golf and bowling greens (25%).

Those services which had been most frequently ceased were: provision of bowling greens and golf courses (73% and 70% respectively), provision of car parks (54%), provision and maintenance of sports pitches (53%), cutting of highway verges (25%), cutting of grass in parks and open spaces and the maintenance of country parks (both 20%).

How have you managed social distancing guidance?

91% of respondents had erected notices informing users of the need for social distancing based on government guidance and were supporting this with social media and use of the local press. 74% had roped off play areas, 72% were liaising closely with the Police and community support officers regarding the ability to enforce social distancing if required.

16% had locked main entrance points to prevent vehicular access and thereby manage entrance points for purely pedestrians and cyclists. 14% of respondents had increased staff numbers in parks to ensure social distancing if required.

Further comments noted that most had closed off car parks to reduce unnecessary car travel.

Would you say people are observing social distancing in parks and open spaces?

Almost 90% of respondents stated that the majority of park users were observing the need to socially distance. Where problems did occur, these were mainly in relation to young people gathering (64%), groups of people taking exercise such as cyclists (10%), runners and dog walkers (21%) and groups occasionally forcing their way into playgrounds and in particular skate parks.

These problems were being addressed through the use of Police patrols, social media campaigns and local press articles.

What would you say about visitor numbers / footfall in your parks overall since the imposition of lock-down?

48% of respondents stated that they had seen increases or at least no reductions in visitor footfall, many reported that new visitors were using parks many for the first time. Where decline in usage had taken place (39% of respondents), many commented that this was due to the reduction in tourists who would normally have made up a substantial element of the users and now mainly local people were the main visitors. Also the closure of car parks will probably mean that those who travelled to the park by car, were probably now using more local green spaces.

With regards to staff safety and the issuing of PPE, what arrangements have you introduced?

90% of respondents stated they had issued hand sanitisers and enhanced access to hand washing facilities. 82% reported they had reduced numbers in vehicles and 42% had enhanced the information being given to staff regards the need for social distancing. Only 18% had issued face masks.

Other initiatives included: spreading staff more widely across parks when working, introducing week on week off rotas and staggering finishing times to prevent staff congregating at depots.

APSE COVID-19 Parks WhatsApp Group

As well as regular surveys APSE has introduced a Parks WhatsApp group which allows members to ask questions on parks related issues, often receiving swift answers to their queries. As part of this APSE has been monitoring these responses closely, and have been reporting back to members about these changes via its web pages, briefings notes, which cover a variety of other service areas as well as parks. 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.

The WhatsApp group for parks can be joined by clicking onto the following link:

[APSE Covid 19 WhatsAppGroup for Parks - Joining Link](#)

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, are receiving regular updates on how they should operate, sometimes these messages may seem contradictory, whereby people are being promoted to use these spaces, but needing to follow strict social distancing.

Competing against this increased demand for places and spaces to take exercise, is the need to re-prioritise the importance of other 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 are now clean and safe to re-introduce and all this in light of lost income and reducing budgets.

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. We are also operating a rapid network query services for COVID-19.

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.

Wayne Priestley

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