



Second 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 partnership with the Midlands Parks Forum, in the last week of April and first week of May 2020, as to how parks and greenspace managers are dealing with the on-going 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.

This is the second Update Survey to be carried out. The first survey can be found at [The first survey can be found here.](#)

The briefing will be of particular interest to those officers and elected members 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.
- A key issue has been that throughout the lockdown period, Government has requested that wherever possible, local authorities provide access to their many parks and greenspaces.
- This second survey looks at the on-going levels of service provision still being maintained as well as some of the continuing 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, it has become clear that the use of local green spaces has become more popular.

Background

The promotion of the use of greenspaces continues to be 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 are finding their daily ability to move freely, more and more compromised, in an attempt to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus.

The use of greenspaces and public parks are providing opportunities for people to get out of the house and exercise. Unfortunately, following past instances, where large numbers of people gathered in parks and open spaces, ignoring the need for social distancing, many authorities have had to prevent the opportunities for such 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, local authorities have ensured parks and open spaces are still accessible to the general public, providing social distancing is adhered to. This is a point which local authorities have made very clear. On occasion where this requirement has been flouted some parks have been closed. Closures are now infrequent due to the government ruling which now allows the Police to disperse crowds and fine repeat offenders.

Findings of the May 2020 parks and open spaces survey

The second survey was issued to APSE members during the last week of April and the first week of May and received 107 responses. What follows is the main findings to the survey questions.

How many of your urban parks are remaining open?

86.87% of respondents reported that all of their urban parks remain open to the public and a further 7% of respondents report that over 75% of their urban parks remain open. There were no current reports of any local councils closing off all of their urban parks. Clearly local authorities despite many of their park's services having had staff re-deployed, are still providing access to their parks and greenspaces.

How many of your country parks are remaining open?

Almost 83% of respondents reported that all of their Country Parks are open which is a 10% increase on the first survey's findings. Just 4.5% reported that they had closed all their Country Parks. Clearly there has been a move to open more greenspace

facilities perhaps to spread the opportunities to take exercise and increase the ability to socially distance.

Also, it is likely most are remaining open because of the difficulty in preventing public access, however, from previous data collected by APSE, 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 show levels of maintenance are still varied across many councils with local needs and staff availability being a major influence on service levels.

However, the main findings show that:

- Over 87.1% of grass cutting is either continued as planned or with a reduced service. Just 10.8% have ceased this service currently.
- Over 96% of playgrounds remain closed to safeguard children and families
- Near to 59% report bowling greens have ceased to operate and a further 42% have closed off sports pitches
- Conversely maintenance of cemetery and crematoria grounds continues with 63.7% reporting no reduction in normal maintenance routines and 28.7% reporting services continue but have been reduced.

How have you managed social distancing guidance?

95% 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. 76% had roped off play areas, 82% were liaising closely with the Police and community support officers regarding the ability to enforce social distancing if required.

15% had locked main entrance points to prevent vehicular access and thereby manage entrance points for purely pedestrians and cyclists. 26% 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.

These figures show increases in all areas (apart from locking main entrances which declined slightly), on the first survey, in particular liaising with the Police and perhaps surprisingly increasing staff numbers in parks, which may be a reflection of the survey's findings that there has been increases in problematic behaviour amongst certain groups most notably youth gathering in groups often in areas such as skate parks which have proved very difficult to close off.

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

Over 90% of respondents stated that the majority of their park users were observing the need to socially distance, which is an increase on the last survey, clearly showing the public are now complying more effectively with this requirement. Where problems did occur, these were mainly in relation to young people gathering (76%), groups of people taking exercise such as cyclists (28%), runners and dog walkers (27%) allowing dogs off leads was a particular problem, and groups occasionally forcing their way into playgrounds and in particular skate parks.

It is noticeable from these results there has been an increase in all of these problematic occurrences across all of those authorities who responded. These figures suggest the vast majority of the public are respecting social distancing but parents may be unaware that teenagers, out on their daily exercise, without them, are using the opportunity to meet up with friends, as the length of the lockdown continues.

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?

Over 52% of respondents reported that their local council Parks are being used more than ever by the public, with increased usage up across a range of parameters. Which is an increase on the first survey. A further 10% reporting usage has stayed about the same.

Only 10% of responses reported a decrease in usage by about a quarter and a further 10% reported a decrease in usage by about half the normal numbers.

Some of the reductions as stated in the previous survey may be due to a reduction in tourists who would normally have made up a substantial element of the users and now mainly local people were the main visitors. The closure of car parks will probably mean that those who normally travelled to the park by car, were now more likely to be using more local green spaces.

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

89% of respondents stated they had issued hand sanitisers and enhanced access to hand washing facilities. 82% reported they had reduced numbers in vehicles and 58%

had enhanced the information being given to staff regards the need for social distancing. 21% had issued face masks.

Other initiatives included: spreading staff more widely across parks when working, introducing week-on / week-off rotas and also 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 WhatsApp Group for Parks - Joining Link](#)

APSE Comment

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.

The regular undertaking of surveys such as this at this current time is crucial in order to assist local authorities to collect data to fully understand the impact and consequences of COVID-19 and how this has affected resources and performance across services. Councils need to be looking now to ensure that they can evidence the impact of COVID-19. This includes changes to operational methods due to social distancing measures such as drivers in cabs or funeral procedures, and reductions or closure of service such as leisure centres, car parks and school meals. Good quality data will be key in helping councils' arguments to be fully reimbursed from Government for local efforts and their associated costs in the current emergency.

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 need 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 has required 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.

However, despite these problems, the survey showed that 96% of parks managers and other respondents felt keeping parks open was the right thing to do, despite a third of respondents stating this decision had brought issues regarding the management of their parks and its visitors.

It is clear our parks and greenspaces are continuing to play a vital role in maintaining the physical and mental health and well-being of the UK's citizens in challenging times. Parks managers and staff are continuing to deliver services despite the constraints and the new daily problems they are experiencing.

APSE, working in partnership with the Midlands Parks Forum, will continue to monitor and provide assistance to our Parks members in whatever way it can to ensure the provision of parks and greenspaces together with the multiple benefits they bring both now and in the future are guaranteed.

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