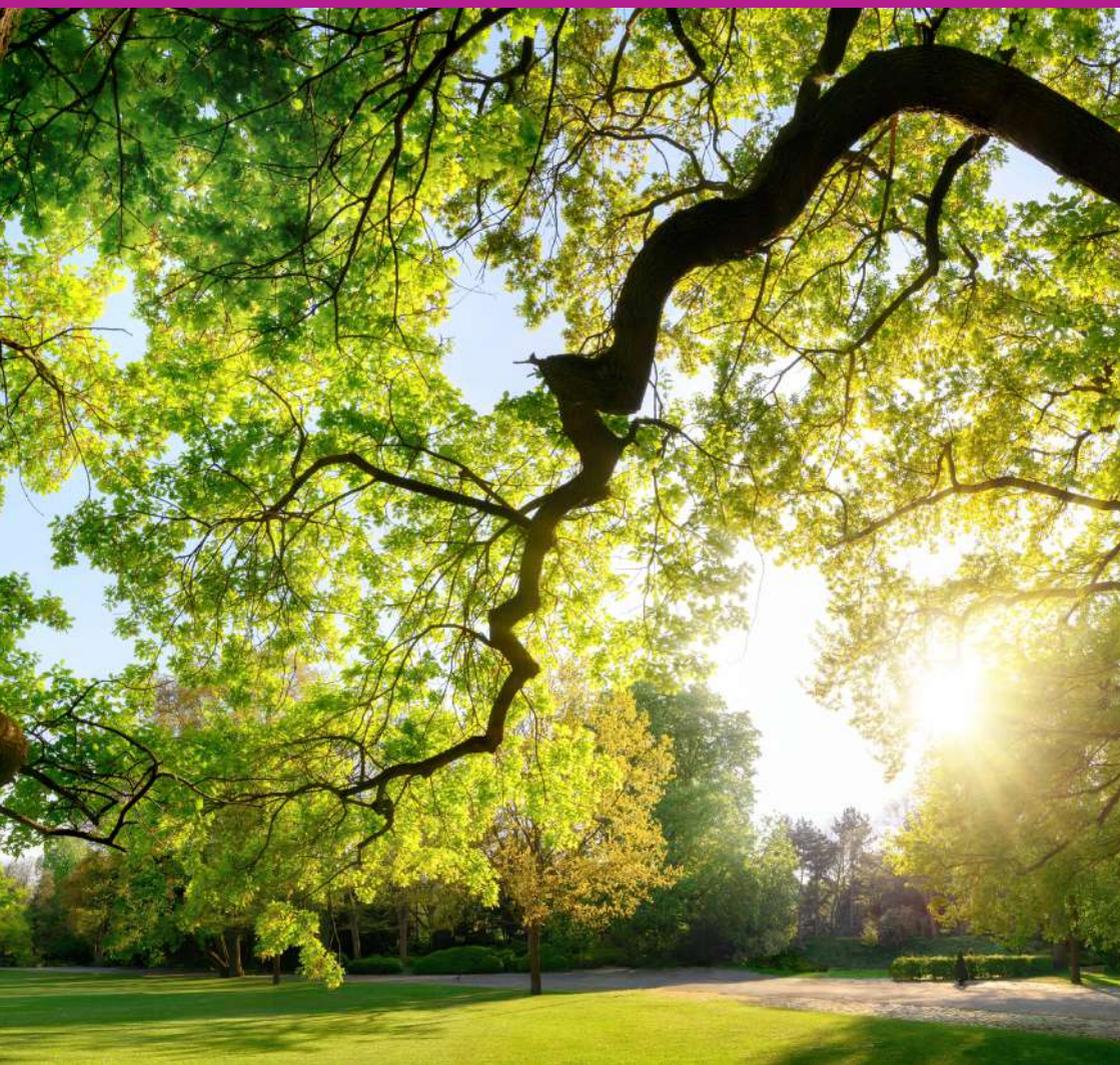




Parks and open spaces Remobilisation Report



About this report

The restrictions implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are being lifted and local government services are now looking to remobilise, in order to ensure that they are able to safely welcome back staff and serve and protect local residents.

Whilst some council services have virtually ceased to operate, parks and greenspaces services have continued to be provided (albeit with some closures of facilities within parks), in order to meet public need for spaces to exercise, and more recently, meet with friends so long as social distancing is adhered to. Government has requested that parks and greens spaces be open for public access as part of their strategy to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic and avoid the full lock down measures, which were implemented in Spain and Italy, where no such access was allowed.

In producing this report, APSE established a remobilisation working group to highlight the plans that councils are currently implementing and considering to bring services back to the levels required both by legislation, elected members and service users.

This report therefore details the approaches being taken by councils to return normality to the parks and greenspaces services by focusing on four key areas:

- Budget, finance and re-establishing commercial activity
- Operational activity
- Regrouping the workforce
- Technical Considerations

Whilst these reports may only provide a snapshot of the remobilisation issues at any given point in time it will support our member councils to ensure that what they are doing is 'sense-checked' against the actions of others, within their specific service sector.

This report was facilitated by Wayne Priestley, APSE Principal Advisor, working with APSE member councils, and was written by Wayne Priestley following the remobilisation working groups' deliberations and comments made on APSE's WhatsApp Group for parks and greenspaces.

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Introduction

Following the outbreak of coronavirus and the declaration of a pandemic, the government implemented a series of measures to mitigate the impact of the outbreak on the population. As a result of these measures, local authority services have been required to adapt and implement alternative approaches to service delivery, to respond to the restrictions and challenges these have presented.

APSE has established a number of groups from across local authority frontline services to provide overviews, and share information, regarding the plans councils are implementing to remobilise services, now that the COVID-19 restrictions are beginning to be amended and lifted.

The remobilisation meeting for parks and greenspaces therefore allowed parks managers and officers to discuss the current operational impacts of COVID-19 on their services, as well as allowing them to share their remobilisation plans and thoughts for services post lock-down.

The parks and greenspaces remobilisation group had representatives from a number of local authorities across the UK. In addition, data was also gathered from APSE's WhatsApp Group for parks and greenspaces.

The two working group meetings focused on the challenges, solutions and opportunities that have been, and need to be taken into consideration, in order to meet current and future service delivery methodologies.

It was clear from the start of the implementation of the restrictions designed to combat the coronavirus pandemic, that the parks and greenspaces services provided by local authorities would play a major part in relation to meeting both physical and mental health needs, during a time when access to the outdoors would be limited. Research has shown on numerous occasions that parks and green spaces provide multiple benefits to the health and well-being of residents and are a vital component of creating sustainable and healthy communities.

Following the decision to close schools, extra pressure was placed on parks and open spaces to remain open, in order to provide exercise opportunities for children.

However, as the virus took hold and more stringent social distancing regulations had to be enforced, resulting in other sources of leisure and entertainment such as shops, restaurants, theatres and leisure centres having to close, then more visitors flocked to parks, resulting in parks managers having to restrict the numbers of people visiting them, even on rare occasions having to close them as social distancing requirements were breached. In the first few weeks of the lock-down, the demand on some parks, particularly in London, was so great that parks managers had to occasionally request police assistance to disperse gatherings.

Budget, finance and re-establishing commercial activity

COVID-19 and the closures and restrictions it has caused in parks has clearly impacted on the financial state of chargeable services offered in parks which have been a key source of income in the face of continued budget cuts over the last decade. Many parks services rely on the external income they generate from fees and charges, events, cafes, car parks and other activities.

One authority which generates 90% of its parks budget from such income stated it will undoubtedly suffer financial hardships both in the current and next financial year, as most of its opportunities to generate income will now be lost as most of this comes during the spring and summer months. Fortunately, it has retained its own plant nursery and via the introduction of online plant sales, has been able to still generate funds from the sale of plants to local communities and outside bodies. Despite this it is still expecting losses of around £1 million during 2020/2021.

Other authorities mentioned similar issues, particularly losses from events, which will now not be able to take place or will have to be rescheduled into the next finance year.

A common problem was with regards to the ability of holders of franchises or those renting facilities within parks to pay their fees. Councils are looking at various options to address this problem, such as delayed payments or signposting to relevant government grants. Many are looking at such requests for help on a case-by-case basis.

Similarly, comments were made about the future sustainability of sports clubs, such as bowling and football clubs, who use facilities within the parks. Not only may some of these cease to exist, but also re-opening facilities such as changing rooms and pavilions will require careful management to ensuring social distancing and the need to maintain strict cleaning protocols before and after use, and even with these protocols in place this may still

be some way off. Some councils are offering rebates to such clubs in an attempt to keep them viable. However, it is acknowledged that there could well be significantly reduced availability and even a re-consideration of the provision of such facilities if numbers are low or the facility is economically unsustainable, particularly if social distancing is required after the lock-down ceases.

There is some useful guidance on dealing with these issues: [APSE Briefing 20-50 COVID-19: Sport England funding support to local authority leisure](#)

The loss of income is still a concern and although there has been some remobilisation of services in parks, many of the income generating opportunities afforded by fee paying and catering are still closed. However, the re-opening of car parks, and some take away services, is giving some hope of increases in income levels.

As a result of lost income both capital and revenue spend is being closely scrutinised and many non-essential activities are being curtailed or stopped altogether such as spring bulb planting and bedding programmes

In relation to the wider aspects of parks managers being able to manage their service budgets, the problem was highlighted that wider corporate priorities are needing to be taken into account, and as a result some payments for capital projects have been clawed back. The view was that parks managers may expect to lose more future capital funding as the need to balance the authority's books will be the priority. Consequently, the ability to manage future parks revenue budgets could be disproportionately affected as the needs of other services will naturally be part of the overall budget setting in local councils, determined by local needs and priorities.

Operational Activity

As the pandemic took hold and the number of deaths rose and social distancing guidelines became more restrictive, local authority parks and greenspace services had to adapt to the daily changes which were being placed upon them.

What follows is a list of those operational service changes which were implemented:

Closure of parks facilities and reduced horticultural standards as part of an early response

As a result of the spread of the virus and people initially disregarding the need for social distancing, local authorities, in line with UK governments' advice had to restrict the opportunities to allow further large gatherings by closing cafes, rides, seating areas, play grounds, sports facilities and changing rooms and other similar facilities within their parks and open spaces.

In addition, due to key services such as waste collection and bereavement services needing to be maintained, staff from parks and greenspaces were often redeployed to support these services.

As a consequence of staff redeployment, service standards and frequencies of work had to be reduced or ceased. This lack of staff resulted in a variety of different approaches needing to be taken, ranging from the ceasing of all grounds maintenance operations to limited reductions in service levels.

Some of the changes introduced have included:

- Increasing cutting heights of grass
- Reductions in maintenance of fine turf
- Less frequent cuts / maintenance of golf and bowling greens
- Closure of bowling greens and golf courses
- Introduction of differential mowing regimes
- Reductions in the maintenance of highway verges

- Changes to working rotas and the move towards single working to achieve social distancing
- Reduced maintenance or closure of car parks in greenspaces
- Reduced provision of services in country parks

By adopting these and other changes parks managers and their staff have managed to keep parks open and safe for members of the public to access and enjoy.

It was noted that there was a general concern that when lock down ends, the public may expect the same standards of parks as before. Some things may be less well manicured and, if social distancing is still in place, facilities such as playgrounds and the like may not be able to be opened. However, most commented that they were still carrying out safety checks as illegal access is still being gained to these facilities and as such the council still has a legal duty to keep them safe. The need to keep certain facilities closed, may vary from council to council dependant on the resources they have available to manage such issues.

Light at the end of the tunnel?

As the pandemic has seemingly begun to ease a little, a few authorities have begun to re-open car parks due to the Governments' announcement that people can exercise more than once a day, in England, and travel to anywhere within England, noting that there are differences of approaches within Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This approach has been taken to prevent visitors indiscriminately parking in and around parks rather than in car parks themselves. Even those English authorities who had not opened car parks at the present time, had plans in place to re-open them in the coming weeks. The issue of how to ensure car park pay and display machines were kept clean received varying responses including; ensuring strict cleansing regimes are in place; making sure contactless payment is available; the use of annual car park passes, which prevents the need to use parking machines; or not charging at the moment, in order to prevent customers having to touch machines.

Some sports facilities are now being opened including tennis and golf, but the general consensus was that playgrounds, some multi use games areas (MUGAs) and skate parks will remain closed due to difficulties in maintaining social distancing.

Cafés and toilets are still mainly closed although several authorities did mention they had opened toilet facilities as a result of increasing numbers of parks users and the fact more take-aways are now opening in parks cafes. Again, both with cafés and toilets there are social distancing measures being put in place (e.g. queueing systems, attendants and 2 metre markers). Ice cream vendors are being allowed to operate on the proviso that they have agreed risk assessment statements and social distancing measures are in place.

Visitors centres and commercial franchises such as water parks and adventure play such as Go-Ape, are still in the main closed.

Regarding horticulture, most authorities seem to have managed standards fairly well, although the one area where there have clearly been difficulties is the ability to plant annual bedding schemes, either through a lack of availability of plants from nurseries or simply not having the staff available to carry out the task. Those who have had plant stocks but have been unable to plant, have donated them to hospitals and community groups. Those who are managing to plant are concentrating on key civic areas and Green Flag parks. In one notable response an authority has turned over its planting regime to vegetable growing which will be then freely available for the community to pick and use.

The 'Biodiversity bonus'

One positive note raised was that because of the reduction in high maintenance levels, the ability to introduce more naturalised and biodiversity-friendly landscapes within parks will be possible. This 'biodiversity bonus' will be something that will need to be explained to park users but is likely to find favour with many who may well see the benefits of such actions in light of the plight of pollinators, reducing climate change impacts, and promoting

cleaner air, as well as the benefits being in greenspaces brings to both physical and mental well-being.

There are already examples of authorities 'naturalising' their areas as a response to increased biodiversity levels which have occurred and have importantly, found favour with the public. Reduced mowing regimes have seen increases in wildflowers and wildlife species which may have struggled to establish themselves in the past due to high maintenance mowing regimes.

This is not to say all high maintenance areas can be converted in this way, core grass cutting services on sports pitches and general weed control will be largely unaffected, but certainly a more environmentally-friendly approach may now be more acceptable to the public.

Remobilising Staff

Despite the loss of income and concerns over the inability to manage budgets because of other corporate priorities taking precedence, parks managers and officers have been having to manage day to day operations during this period in the face of staff being redeployed to other services such as refuse collection, and cemeteries, and being absent through self-isolation and sickness.

A recent APSE survey included results showing how parks services were managing the safety of their staff.

- 90% of respondents stated they had issued hand sanitisers and enhanced access to hand washing facilities
- 82% reported they had reduced numbers in vehicles
- 42% had enhanced the information being given to staff regards the need for social distancing
- 18% had issued face masks
- Spreading staff more widely across parks when working
- Introducing week on week off rotas
- Staggering finishing times to prevent staff congregating at depots
- Single operative working across parks

It should also be remembered that as well as local authority staff, friends of parks groups and volunteers play a significant contribution to the up-keep of parks and green spaces. Currently most friends groups and volunteers are not working on physical projects within parks, although protocols and guidelines are being developed by a number of authorities whereby volunteers can be re-introduced, initially as single operators or two people from different households, but as more guidance comes in, then consideration will be given to smaller groups being established. It was certainly felt that guidance on the use of volunteers was an area where more clarity was needed.

One area which was still causing staff concern was the ability to effectively enforce social distancing and anti-social behaviour. The main problem was not the threat of violence to staff but rather controlling and dispersing gatherings, which seems to be increasing as a result of some degree of easing of lockdown regulations recently announced by government. Due to the size of parks it is difficult to monitor all areas and police support is not always available to assist. It was felt one of the main reasons there needs to be an ability to control numbers was that if there was a second wave of infection, then it may be difficult to re-enforce the stricter social distancing measures used at the start of the lockdown period.

Technical Considerations

Regarding the need to consider whether there would be any technical issues with remobilising services back to the pre-lockdown levels, it was felt that as most parks and greenspace services had been operating in one form or another, then there should not be too many problems other than bringing horticultural features, sports pitches etc, back to the required standards. Most facilities requiring safety inspections had continued to receive them, mainly because some were still being illegally used despite notices and temporary fencing trying to prevent this.

The biggest concern was that there may be time lags in bringing the standards of parks back to where they were pre-pandemic alongside safely re-opening sports and other physical facilities.

A further concern is that with the lifting of restrictions on people being able to meet other people outside of their own household within parks, and ability to travel to parks for exercise, initiated first within England, the opening or otherwise of public conveniences is a concern. Having regard to the public sector equalities duty, and on-going guidance as to frequent hand-washing this has created a dilemma for parks managers. Many parks toilets do not have an attendant on duty which raises concerns as to enforcing social distancing and the cleaning specifications that would need to be in place alongside removing any payment slots or taping off sinks / cubicles to ensure social distancing.

In addition to this, playground areas remain closed but managers will need to address any stricter cleaning measures for outdoor areas once it is permitted to re-open playgrounds.

Conclusions

Despite continuous budget pressures and threats from new developments, the UK has some of the best parks and greenspaces in the world. During the pandemic they have been a daily lifeline in supporting people to cope with the isolation from friends and families.

Parks have become a life-line for many offering exercise opportunities, leisure time and generally making the rigours of lock-down more bearable. Echoing the words of Robert Jenrick MP, the Local Government Secretary 'people need parks'.

The Government have placed a great reliance on parks and greenspaces during the COVID-19 pandemic and people will continue to use them long after the pandemic fades.

However, it should be remembered that some scientists are predicting COVID-19 could be a reoccurring problem, even if vaccines are found, and that future lock downs may be necessary. Therefore, from what we have seen, and the importance of parks and greenspaces to the health of the nation, the issue regarding the loss of income caused by the closure of many of our parks facilities and cancellation of events, demonstrates that the reliance upon generating income to plug gaps in the funding of the nations' parks is unsustainable. This is also true for many of the alternative models being touted as the future for funding parks, as many of these examples are heavily reliant upon external income sources also.

If the Government is to continue to offer parks and greenspaces as community 'go-to places' in times such as these, when most other public spaces are closed, then it needs to ensure adequate funding is available to deliver the services required. By having adequate and guaranteed levels of funding, local authorities can still bring additionality to their services through their income generating activities rather than such income being used to meet core funding requirements.

APSE is currently assisting in a piece of research work which aims to identify the impact of COVID-19 on the parks sector and also develop a framework which identifies how parks, through the adoption of a phased approach, can return their services back to the pre-lockdown position which will include information on protocols and necessary guidance parks professionals may need to remobilise their services.

Therefore APSE will continue its ongoing campaign to promote parks through its own media platforms and within the broader national and trade press about the value of parks and greenspaces; in particular the need for parks professionals to be recognised for their actions. This includes the ability for parks professionals to change land management in parks at short notice, to help both the public observe social distancing measures and encourage the necessary behaviour changes, but to also ensure the maximisation of reinstatement works post-COVID. This ability to instigate longer term outcomes such the enhanced use of green spaces in local areas and the promotion of internationally recognised use of parks to address issues such as biodiversity, climate change and improved air quality must be accredited to the many parks professionals who have supported these important assets throughout the health pandemic to the benefit of local communities.

This task is something all of us will need to be involved in, including: governments, national agencies, friends of parks groups and the public in general. But whilst there is a recognition of the value of volunteers as additionality to parks, it has been the dedicated and innovative approaches and working methods of parks professionals which has 'saved the day' and in recognition of this fact then the future of our parks and the benefits they bring, should be a national priority, not just an after-thought.

APSE Comments

APSE would like to thank all the authorities that participated in the remobilisation group for parks and greenspaces services as well as those officers and authorities who contributed to the WhatsApp group for parks and greenspaces thereby contributing to the information contained in this report.

APSE has a range of services that are designed to support Member authorities through this challenging time. These include the following: -

[APSE COVID – 19 Information Hub and WhatsApp groups](#) – The hub has been set up to deal with frontline service issues as they arise; ensuring greater resilience and learning between each other during this difficult time.

[APSE Online Training](#) - APSE Training is designed to help local authorities invest in their greatest asset – their staff. With staff working at home, or remotely, APSE Training can assist staff with developing new skills during this time to help maximise opportunities.

[Performance Networks](#) – The Performance Network teams have developed a variety of ways to support Councils with data collection. This includes a new suite of indicators which will explore the impact of COVID-19 on service cost, quality and productivity. The reports will be produced in June but APSE strongly recommends ensuring the collection of data is on-going so changes in service performance are explicable during budget setting processes or when revising business plans.

[APSE Solutions](#) - Providing in-house consultancy and interim management services, available to both APSE members and non-member authorities and organisations.

[APSE Energy](#) - Working on greening frontline councils' services including energy management issues, which may be critical to saving money in services where budgets have been impacted by COVID-19.

[APSE membership resources](#) remain committed to supporting our member local councils with the ongoing briefings service, network queries, access to Principal Advisor advice and online meetings, advisory groups and events.

There are opportunities for councils to share best practice and learning through virtual advisory groups and thematic sessions. Details of these sessions will be communicated to APSE Members as the sessions are arranged.

For further information on the services that are available, please contact

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