

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Report to: Community Safety and Environment Committee

Date: 20/07/2020

Subject: Response to Covid pandemic in Parks and Open Spaces

Report of: Steve Hollingworth Assistant Director Leisure, Sport & Culture

Responsible Director: Sharon Lea – Strategic Director for the Environment

Summary

This is a report giving an overview of actions taken in Parks and Open Spaces in response to the Covid pandemic.

Recommendations

1. For the Committee to note and comment on the report.
-

Wards Affected: All

H&F Priorities

Our Priorities	Summary of how this report aligns to the H&F Priorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating a compassionate council	Providing parks and open spaces to support community needs during the Covid pandemic.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being ruthlessly financially efficient	Exploring how a new grounds maintenance contract can accommodate extraordinary pressures and events.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Doing things with local residents, not to them	Community engagement to understand how volunteers, groups and sports clubs can operate during the Covid pandemic.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Taking pride in H&F	Continued investment in parks including improving biodiversity, enhancing social value and mitigating climate change.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Building shared prosperity	To allow safe access to high quality public open spaces for exercise, interaction and mental wellbeing.

Contact Officer(s):

Name: Richard Gill

Position: Senior Parks Manager

Background Papers Used in Preparing This Report

None

1. Decision to Close parks and subsequent re-opening

- 1.1 Due the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, a decision was taken by the Leader of the Council on Sunday 22nd March to close all parks due to the lack of social distancing and the health risk from the spread of Covid.
- 1.2 Only a half of our 62 parks, open spaces and cemeteries are locked daily. Many of our open spaces such as Wormwood Scrubs, Eel Brook Common, Parsons Green and Brook Green have only a low post and rail fence and cannot be closed to public access. Where parks could be closed and locked, this was implemented.
- 1.3 Many complaints were received from the public while the parks were closed. Most people understood why this action had been taken, but also placed a high value on green spaces for exercise, walking dogs and for mental wellbeing.
- 1.4 In order to re-open the parks, it was important to put measures in place to help maintain social distancing. These measures included the use of appropriate signage and staff resources to engage with residents.
- 1.5 The signage consisted of a combination of large banners, placed around the edges of every park and public open space, to reinforce the social distancing message and information in the parks that all facilities including playgrounds, toilets, cafes and sports buildings were closed. *See Appendix 1 Illustrations 1 and 2.*
- 1.6 By Friday 27th March all signage was in place and enough staffing was secured, to enable parks to re-open in a managed way and provide access for residents to exercise.

2. Effectiveness of patrolling and enforcement of restrictions in the parks

- 2.1 The council worked alongside the Metropolitan Police, using their guidance of engagement first, to encourage people to social distance, leave or disperse. A mixture of council officers including Parks Police, volunteer council officers and contractor staff, together with Park Guard, were deployed to patrol all parks and greenspaces. Key parks with higher footfall had additional patrols.

- 2.2 New powers to enforce social distancing were available to the Metropolitan Police to issue fixed penalty notices (FPN's) to people not complying with the Governments guidelines on social distancing. However due to the engagement first approach, up to the end of June the Police in H&F had not issued any FPN's.
- 2.3 Park Guard are a security contractor recruited temporarily to reinforce the Parks Police presence and ensure that the staffing complement was enough. The Parks Police were the intelligence lead during the pandemic. All the front-line engagement staff were tasked and co-ordinated through the Community Safety Management Team, to ensure that communication lines and actions were clear and that assets were deployed into areas of most need at the optimum times.
- 2.4 The Parks Police worked closely with CCTV to ascertain which parks had immediate need for response. They worked with the police to share, and receive, intelligence where challenges were being identified.
- 2.5 The Parks Police and Community Safety Management also worked closely with teams of wardens and marshals during the pandemic, including teams of volunteers to provide additional support at weekends. The increase in visitors to parks and open spaces during lockdown was estimated at 200%-300% above normal. In some areas such as along the riverside path, this caused congestion. In order to mitigate this, temporary restrictions were introduced on cycling and jogging between 10am and 6pm, to allow pedestrians to use the path more freely. To help enforce these restrictions, signage was designed and installed along the river path and Park Guard and Community Safety Wardens were deployed to engage with path users, to ensure that they adhered to these new rules. These patrols have continued, albeit without Park Guard who have been stood down. There are also several marshals from Conway's (the council's highway contractor) encouraging social distancing on Hammersmith Bridge.
- 2.6 In the early stages of the pandemic when Government advice was that parks were for exercise only; some park benches were taped off in very busy areas to avoid congestion. Parks Police were used to engage and remind people to move on from benches for this reason.

3. Cemetery operations during the pandemic

- 3.1 A decision was taken not to close cemeteries during the pandemic. However, chapels were closed to funeral attendees on the 18th March, and recommendations put in place to limit the number attending and the length of the service in line with Government guidance. The Cemeteries office was closed to the public for face to face meetings, to protect staff. Safe working procedures were put in place to reduce risk of virus transfer during burials.
- 3.2 During April-June the number of burials increased from the seasonal average of 2-3 per week to an average of 12 per week. This increase in the number of

burials was anticipated and additional graves were dug in advance, using additional contractors trained by the gravedigging staff. Office tasks not associated with burials, such as grave searches, permits and cremated remains, were put on hold so that the number of funerals could be accommodated.

4. Park Operations during the pandemic

- 4.1 The council's grounds maintenance (GM) contractor introduced safe working practices for staff on the 25th March to maintain social distancing. This included only one person per vehicle. Since most GM operations require the team to be mobile, 9 staff had to be temporarily furloughed. Consideration was also given to staff not using public transport as requested by the Government and the vulnerability of some workers or their families. This led to a further 9 workers being temporarily furloughed. Despite this and the additional work required to keep playgrounds and outdoor gyms closed, the contractor has performed well, providing much needed added capacity.
- 4.2 Signage in playgrounds and outdoor gyms with no enclosing fence was insufficient to prevent access. Heras fencing was brought in to enclose some problem areas. Outdoor gym equipment proved particularly hard to stop people accessing, with fencing having to be repaired or replaced daily.
- 4.3 Litter has been a significant problem during lockdown. With restaurants and cafes offering only a takeaway service, many people have used the parks as a convenient picnic spot and neglected to take their litter with them. As lockdown has eased this appears to be getting worse and some parks such as Wormholt Park and Wormwood Scrubs being targeted for illegal parties. The riverside walk including Bishops Park and Furnivall Gardens have experienced a lot of litter and as several pubs started to offer a takeaway drink service, this has caused a problem with public urination.
- 4.4 During this period, consultation has been ongoing with Friends groups and the Parks Commission to establish the framework of a new grounds maintenance contract and Parks Strategy. Although these are extraordinary times, this engagement has reinforced the value people place on parks and open spaces and the many different activities that take place within them. The key themes that have emerged from this consultation include enhancing social value, improved community engagement, protecting green spaces, improving quality standards, increasing biodiversity and more investment in infrastructure. A report from the Parks Commission will be presented to the council later this year.

5. Reopening of facilities and measures put in place

- 5.1 Following the first easing of lockdown and the announcement that tennis and basketball could take place in parks, the service has followed each national governing body (NGB) of sport's guidelines. The Lawn Tennis Association provided guidance once it was announced that you could meet one person

from another household for exercise. Tennis courts are booked through an online system with a code allowing access to the court. This reduces the risk of overcrowding. Tennis courts with this booking system were reopened in mid-May with appropriate signage in place. *Appendix 1 Illustration 3.*

- 5.2 Basketball courts and other multi use games areas (MUGA's) were not opened at the same time as tennis. Without a booking system it would be difficult to stop more than two people from different households meeting up. Once further easing allowed the meeting of a group of up to 6 people for exercise, MUGA's were opened on the 10th June. This also allowed sport coaching of small groups to resume.
- 5.3 Easing of restrictions has also allowed the opening of other parks facilities such as cricket nets, bowls clubs, cafes, markets and toilets. These have been considered on a case by case basis with a written risk assessment required from each operator.
- 5.4 Toilets in Ravenscourt Park and Bishops park were re-opened on 18th June. A formal risk assessment was approved by the Health and Safety and Insurance teams with additional signage and cleaning operations in place. The toilets are currently only open between 9:00am and 3:00pm to ensure that there are enough staff available to keep them clean. All other toilets in parks are either within sports changing rooms or managed by cafes (Normand Park, South Park and Brook Green) and are not yet open to the public.
- 5.5 Following guidance from the England Cricket Board (ECB) allowing the use of cricket nets, these were reopened on 24th June. The ECB have also introduced recreational cricket matches from 4th July.
- 5.6 Following the announcement that play areas and outdoor gyms could re-open from the 4th July, risk assessments and signage have been agreed. Heras fencing needed to be removed and all play areas and outdoor gyms re-opened on the 7th July. Signage, in line with other London Boroughs for play areas is in place, which encourages users to act on social distancing and take personal hygiene measures. *See Appendix 1 Illustration 4.*
- 5.7 All sports changing rooms remain closed on Government advice and no bookings are being taken for team sport matches (except for cricket). Limited training sessions for 6 participants are being taken at Linford Christie Stadium for the Thames Valley Harriers (Athletics) and other sports on parks pitches.

6. Any challenges and potential mitigations

- 6.1 Council services, including the parks team, are reviewing their performance during the lockdown, ready to respond to a potential second lockdown if required.

List of Appendices:

Appendix 1 Illustrations

Appendix 1



PRACTISE
SAFE
DISTANCING



Keep a car
length away
to keep Coronavirus
at bay



www.gov.uk/coronavirus



Illustration 1: Banner to reinforce social distancing message
Information sign that facility is closed

Illustration 2:



PLAYING TENNIS DURING LOCKDOWN



Max 2 people per court (unless players are all from the same household)



Only handle your own racket and personal (marked) tennis balls



Only one to one coaching permitted



Avoid changing ends or change at opposite sides of net



No shaking hands or physical contact with other players



Allow others to leave before you enter the court - wait away from the gates



Maintain social distancing (2m rule) at all times



Follow public health guidelines for hygiene



Do not play if you are self-isolating



For details on how to book a court in H&F, visit: www.lbhf.gov.uk/tennis

Full guidelines for players, coaches and venues at lta.org.uk/coronavirus

STAY SAFE

in playgrounds and outdoor gyms



www.lbhf.gov.uk/coronavirus

h&f
hammersmith & fulham

18.11.2020

Illustration 3: Tennis signage during first easing of lockdown
Play signage to simplify the message

Illustration 4: