

Scottish Health and Inequality Impact Assessment Network (SHIAN)

Report

HEALTH IMPACT SCOPING OF MANAGING SCOTLAND'S
PARKS AND GREENSPACES DURING COVID-19

JULY 2020

Background

This is a report of a Scoping Exercise held on 14th July 2020 to review the draft publication 'Managing Scotland's parks and greenspaces during Covid-19', which has been prepared by greenspace scotland. The exercise involved members of the Public Health Scotland Social and System Recovery: Environments and Spaces Group. Group members used a health impact checklist¹ to identify populations and health determinants likely to be affected by the advice in the document.

This report considers how different groups of people may be affected by the advice contained in the document, and potential wider impacts on health determinants.

Present

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Avril Mackenzie – Public Health Scotland
Russell Jones – Glasgow Centre for Population Health
Audrey Birt – Mobility and Access Committee Scotland (MACS)
Ian Findlay – Paths for All
Elaine Young – NHS Ayrshire and Arran
Julie Procter – greenspace scotland
Yasmine Benylles – Edinburgh University (notes)
Margaret Douglas – Edinburgh University/SHIAN (facilitator)

'Managing Scotland's parks and greenspaces during Covid-19'

The document aims to provide advice for managers of parks and greenspaces to plan for the managed adaptations required as restrictions are eased. Although the main focus is urban managed greenspaces, it is likely to be relevant more broadly. It is not official statutory guidance but brings together existing guidance from a range of sources. The document will be updated and includes case studies.

Affected Populations

The advice in the document will affect a range of users of parks and greenspaces. These include people using them for leisure and recreation, or travelling through them to get to work or other places. They may be dog walkers, people who use community gardens or allotments, small retailers in parks, people who host classes or other activities in parks, walking groups and social prescribing activities. Park managers, staff and volunteers, senior managers and decision makers will use, and be affected by, the advice. There may also be impacts for people who live near parks and greenspaces, for example related to on street parking. There could be impacts for people who do not currently make use of parks and greenspace but could if they

¹ Checklist available in guidance at: <https://www.scotphn.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Health-Impact-Assessment-Guidance-for-Practitioners-SHIAN-updated-2019.pdf>

were enabled to do so. There could also be impacts for police and other emergency services.

The group identified the following populations that would be differentially affected:

- Older people: Could benefit from walking in parks and greenspace but may need benches to allow them to rest, and access to toilets. Are at higher risk from Covid19 and may be unwilling to use parks and greenspaces if they think they will be crowded and noisy. May make less use of internet so be less able to access pre-arrival information.
- Children and young people: Children benefit from spaces for play – both structured and free play - to support child development. There could be opportunities for outdoor learning. Noise from children may impact on other people.
- Pregnant women may need to be able to sit down, and access to toilets.
- Women may have more concerns about personal safety – overgrown hedges, trees and bushes would reduce the perception of safety but if parks are busier with increased passive surveillance this would be positive.
- Disabled people have lost independence during the pandemic, welcoming access to greenspace can help them regain this but it is important for the environment to be suitable and for staff and other users to respect, understand and meet, their needs.
- Disabled people have been subjected to hate crime and abuse during the pandemic, when they have asked for sufficient space for distancing, or from people suggesting they should be shielding inside.
- Disabled people may have greater need of access to toilets.
- People in wheelchairs need sufficient space (well cut grass could be ok). Also need to be able to access all areas of the park or they are left out when in a group. Waste left on pathways can lead to their hands being contaminated.
- People with mobility issues may need to access parks by car and need priority parking provision.
- People with sight loss may be disadvantaged as they cannot read signs and assistance dogs are not trained to physically distance from others. It is important to reduce clutter that would form an obstruction to them.
- People with hearing loss may be disadvantaged as hearing aids do not work beyond 1m – it is important for staff and other users to recognise this.
- People with learning disabilities, dementia and other cognitive impairment may find signage difficult to understand, so symbols may be better than text

heavy signs. Also may not understand the rationale for and be anxious about the changes.

- People with mental health issues may benefit as exposure to high quality greenspace has positive impacts on mental health, but changes or messaging may provoke anxiety.
- People with autism and other disabilities may benefit from quiet times/spaces/areas in parks.
- People who are shielding or have underlying health problems may be anxious about transmission.
- Carers – may benefit from respite in greenspace; if the greenspace is appropriate for the person cared for it will alleviate stress and improve accessibility for the carer.
- People in some minority ethnic groups have been more impacted by Covid19, and health benefits from greenspace may be particularly important for them.
- People whose first language is not English may find text heavy signage difficult to understand.
- People in communities with larger family groups may be discriminated against by people who think they are breaking the restrictions.
- Gypsy/Travellers – there may be some conflicts relating to sites.
- Refugees and Asylum Seekers may have less knowledge of local greenspaces and may not have reliable internet access to see pre-arrival information.
- People on low incomes are less likely to have private gardens and so benefit more from high quality public greenspace, but are less likely to live in areas with high quality provision. They are likely to be more reliant on public transport, may have less internet access, so less access to pre-arrival information, and are more likely to be reliant on cash, which is a disadvantage when card payments are mandated or encouraged.
- There may be territorial issues in some areas that mean people are unwilling to go into some local greenspaces.
- Homeless people – some may be sleeping rough in parks. People in temporary accommodation can benefit from access to greenspace. Greenspace may be particularly important for homeless people with dogs.
- People in the Criminal Justice System - Parks may be used for some criminal activities, and be a site for antisocial behaviour. Enforcement actions may reduce use of the park for other users and increase inequalities. Community

Payback Schemes stopped during the restrictions, but people in the criminal justice system may benefit from volunteering activities in greenspace.

- People with literacy issues may find signage difficult to understand.
- People in rural areas may paradoxically have less public greenspace available for them to use. People in rural areas may also be affected if there is displacement of people to rural parks and greenspaces, eg as fewer people take holidays abroad, which could cause traffic, parking, littering and other issues.
- Workers may have opportunities to use parks and greenspace for distanced walking meetings, or over lunch breaks eg when working from home. There is potential for outdoor 'wobble rooms' to manage stressful situations. This could benefit workers' health but could increase inequalities in working environments as people in better paid roles may be more able to make use of these opportunities.
- As more businesses find ways to operate in greenspaces there could be conflict between uses.
- Staff are likely to need training and support to communicate the changes, manage anxiety and reduce/manage potential conflicts between different groups of users. Staff may be exposed directly or indirectly to infection for example from discarded masks or human waste. They may be lone working more, with a negative impact on social interaction with colleagues.
- There could be more opportunities for apprenticeships.
- Volunteers could benefit from volunteering opportunities in greenspace. They may have been shielding and need support. The document states that volunteers should not share equipment but this may not be practical.
- Many communities have developed voluntary activities such as community growing during lockdown and may be disempowered as officials take more control of the space. Community organisations that lease or own greenspaces may be concerned about their liabilities.

Impacts

The group then used the checklist to identify the range of health determinants that the guidance could affect.

Exposure to greenspace – There is strong evidence of the mental and physical health benefits of greenspace exposure. The document highlights these benefits. To realise them it is important that people feel safe and welcomed in the parks and greenspaces, and that they meet the needs of the range of users.

Physical activity – There are opportunities to encourage and support outdoor physical activity, including recreational, active travel and active play. More greenspaces could become active commuting corridors. Open unstructured outdoor play is important for child development.

Food and nutrition – There are opportunities for community food growing, but also the potential for greater exposure to less healthy fast foods from pop up food vendors, with increased littering and potential for pressure to buy impacting on low income families.

Health risk behaviours – There is potential for more outdoor alcohol consumption and smoking. This could lead to antisocial behaviour, litter and exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. There is also potential for risky sexual behaviours to be displaced to outdoor spaces.

Learning – Greater use of greenspaces for outdoor learning and nurseries would benefit skills development, mental and physical wellbeing. There is also potential for increased learning about the natural environment.

Social prescribing – greater use of greenspace resources in social prescribing could benefit people with mental and physical health conditions.

Antisocial behaviour - There is potential for territorial gang behaviour, and other antisocial behaviour. Some people visiting larger greenspaces for the first time may lack knowledge of how to care for the green environment. A small minority may disproportionately affect enjoyment and use of greenspace in the wider population.

Personal safety – Perceived safety requires greenspaces and parks to be well used, well lit (where appropriate) and well maintained.

Social support and community assets – There should be positive effects if parks and greenspaces are welcoming, as families spend more time outdoors and are able to meet people outside safely. There are opportunities for social connection, intergenerational connection, and connection with nature, which improves resilience and reduces stress. There are opportunities to foster community identity and sense of belonging through involvement of community organisations, but conversely if more people use parks for a diversity of uses some people may feel they have lost ownership. Some physical changes could involve a loss of heritage so it is important to preserve the features that communities value.

Conflict – There could be conflict between different users of the space, due to overcrowding, lack of walkable/wheeling space, greater diversity of commercial and other uses, noise and fear of transmission. There could also be stigma and discrimination against some users including children and young people who are seen to be noisy and not distancing, and their parents, or people with a disability who require more space.

Promoting positive attitudes – There is potential to promote positive attitudes and increase awareness of the needs of different users of greenspace.

Waste – Increased use of parks and greenspaces, lack of bins, reduced frequency of bin emptying and restricted toilet provision are likely to lead to increased waste and litter including human waste.

Injuries – There is potential for injuries where is pedestrian/cyclist conflict, or from sports or play injuries.

Allergens – People with hay fever may suffer greater symptoms from longer grass.

Shelter – Weather conditions are a barrier to use of outdoor space including greenspaces, which may be mitigated with appropriate shelter and shade, preferably natural shelter and shade.

Transmission – Overcrowded spaces and touchpoints continue to be a risk of transmission. The document draws on current guidance to minimise this.

Greenspace availability and access - There could be potential to open up other greenspaces for more uses to maximise the public benefits, including green pockets in places that are currently built up. Conversely, there is a risk that pressure on finances leads public bodies to sell off green spaces, which would have negative impacts on public access to greenspace. There is also potential for community asset transfer but it is important to ensure spaces remain publicly owned and accessible for public benefit.

Inequalities – Inequalities in availability, access or quality of greenspaces will increase inequalities in health. People without access to private greenspace benefit more from public greenspace, and transport costs may be a greater barrier if they do not have good provision locally.

Recommendations

The group made the following recommendations based on the discussion.

The document should continue to reinforce the benefits of greenspace and the important of all groups in the population being able to access and use high quality greenspaces.

Parks and greenspaces should be recognised, and invested in, as an important resource for health and wellbeing. Parks and greenspaces in low income areas should be prioritised for investment, to improve their availability, accessibility and quality. This includes the potential to open up other greenspaces for more uses to maximise the public benefits, including green pockets in spaces that are currently built up and repurposing of other spaces, including vacant and derelict land.

The document should stress the need to consider groups of people who have high levels of need and are likely to particularly benefit from greenspace, and ensure their needs are met. These include older people, children and young people, disabled people, people on low incomes and ethnic minority communities. Specific needs may include ensuring sufficient space for different uses, avoiding obstructions on

walkways, information, pictorial signage, quiet times, providing seating, toilets, supporting public transport access.

Communities should be involved in plans for their local parks and greenspaces, be encouraged to identify the features that are most important to local people and supported to help maintain them where they wish to do so. Initiatives that communities have developed during the restrictions should be kept where there is widespread support for them. The Place Standard may be a useful tool to use with communities to identify the provision, quality, accessibility, connectedness and potential uses of the park or greenspace in the context of their wider place.

Plans should consider the range of users that could benefit from using the greenspace, and work with communities to identify and prioritise potential uses, including new uses of community benefit like outdoor learning, inter-generational activity, walking meetings, community food growing. They should also identify potential environmental benefits such as flood management and biodiversity.

Plans should consider travel to and through the park or greenspace, contribute to green networks with other greenspaces, prioritise active travel, where possible place entrances close to public transport stops and protect car parking for disabled people.

Plans should aim to ensure there is sufficient space to prevent conflict between user groups.

Plans should identify potential antisocial behaviour and work with partners to address this in a way that does not restrict other users.

Local authorities should consider powers² they could use to address licensing of unhealthy food outlets and other health harming uses within parks and greenspaces.

Signage should be welcoming, framed positively, avoid creating anxiety and be pictorial rather than text heavy.

Real time information about usage, and information about less busy greenspaces, should be provided through different media.

Pathways should be wide enough for wheelchairs, walkers and others to pass, and avoid clutter that would impede wheelchairs or people using a cane or assistance dog.

Pathways, particularly through routes, should be well lit and allow passive surveillance to increase perceived safety.

There should be provision of adequate seating to allow physical distancing, and natural shelter and shade.

There should be adequate waste management including bins that are emptied frequently and messaging about taking litter home.

² <https://www.scotphn.net/projects/local-authority-powers/introduction/>

Toilets should be opened as soon as the guidance allows, and be kept clean and well maintained.

Communications should recognise that everyone should have the right to access greenspace, and stress the need for consideration of people whose needs may be different. This could usefully use the Active Travel Delivery Partner themes of:

- Be safe – Look after yourself and those in your care
- Be smart – Stay in your local area and plan ahead
- Be kind – Look out for others, particularly more vulnerable groups

Communications should also educate people about greenspace, including its benefits, how to use it respectfully without causing damage, and encourage use of parks and greenspaces that are local rather than further away.

Communications about parks and greenspace, including pre-arrival information, should use a range of media to avoid disadvantaging people without internet access.

Staff and volunteers should receive training and support to understand the needs of different groups of people, including how to reduce anxiety and conflict, and to protect themselves from the risk of transmission of disease.

The document, and findings from this scoping, should be used to inform National Planning Framework 4, Local Development Plans, Open Space Strategies, Active Travel Plans, Local Place Plans, the Local Governance Review, the ALLIANCE and the work of Community Planning Partnerships including locality plans.

There should be monitoring and evaluation to enable sharing of good practice and learning about what does and doesn't work.

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