

## **Parks fit for the future: Financial impact of COVID-19 on park services 2020-21**

### **Purpose of report**

For information

### **Summary**

The Local Government Association and the National Lottery Heritage Fund co-funded the production of a set of case studies demonstrating the financial impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on council park services. [The case studies which are available as a web resource, capture financial data that each of the six case studies made available between 23 March and 29 May 2020.](#)

The case studies highlight the challenges and opportunities facing council park services and how councils responded to the pandemic.

The research found a large variation in loss of external income between the six case studies ranging between £87,000 and £8.8 million with a return to pre-COVID-19 levels of income expected to take some time. There was a loss of in-kind volunteer contributions ranging between £12,000 and £1.56 million across the six case studies. All parks remained open where social distancing measures could be put in place, park service staff were redeployed to support the councils' COVID-19 response efforts, additional costs due to implementing social distancing measures and a backlog of maintenance issues has been incurred. Significant opportunities exist with regards to increasing biodiversity, tackling climate change and active travel.

#### Recommendations:

- Board members are asked to note the content of the case studies
- Share comments and thoughts on this policy area with officers

Officers to action as directed

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## **Parks fit for the future: Financial impact of COVID-19 on park services 2020-21**

### **Background**

1. In April 2020, the LGA and the National Lottery Heritage Fund co-funded the production of [guidance to support parks managers through the first lockdown period](#). This was well received, and remains the most popular LGA covid-19 related tweet, out of 768, with over 1 million views.
2. To support our lobbying work with Government, a set of case studies was also commissioned, demonstrating the financial impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on council park services. The case studies capture financial data that each of the six case studies made available between 23 March and 29 May 2020.
3. The case studies highlight the challenges and opportunities facing council park services and how councils responded to the pandemic.

### **Key findings**

4. [The top 10 key findings found:](#)
  - 4.1. A large variation in loss of external income between the six case studies ranging between £87,000 and £8.8 million across the six case studies.
  - 4.2. Impact of the loss of in-kind volunteer contributions has been significant, ranging between £12,000 and £1.56 million across the six case studies.
  - 4.3. All parks and green spaces remained open throughout the pandemic, with social distancing measures in place, except in those parks constrained by design and where social distancing measures could not be implemented. Play areas and skate parks were particularly difficult to manage during the initial lockdown period.
  - 4.4. The majority of parks service staff were redeployed to support their council's local effort in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They played an invaluable role supporting the vulnerable and shielding residents through for example distributing food parcels and personal protective equipment (PPE), supporting children and adult social care services and lent their skills to bereavement teams and crematoria.
  - 4.5. The first national lockdown has resulted in a maintenance backlog due to the phased return of staff. Some councils have used this opportunity to progress their plans for biodiversity or trial new approaches to service delivery. However, despite the positives, additional staff and / or volunteers will be required to return to pre-COVID-19 levels of service. Additionally, capital projects have been impacted with many stopping during this period.

- 4.6. Commercial income has been impacted the most, council parks services who are more reliant on commercial opportunities have been affected the most with losses ranging between £87,000 - £8.8 million. Key sources of loss of external income included sponsorship opportunities, outdoor events, car parking charges, sports bookings and visitor attractions which ceased or were closed during the lockdown period.
  - 4.7. There is an ongoing loss of income despite many facilities reopening it is anticipated that there will be a continued loss of income as a direct result of the need to employ more staff or reduce visitor numbers in order to comply with social distancing guidelines.
  - 4.8. Additional operational costs have been incurred because of the provision of signage, PPE, enhanced cleansing regimes and the purchase of new equipment.
  - 4.9. Lack of timely and clear guidance in response to COVID-19 and national lockdown rules regarding the closure of facilities and the phased reopening following the lifting of lockdown restrictions; particularly with regard to play areas, toilets and volunteers has had a negative impact on the service's ability to return to normal operations.
  - 4.10. Opportunities for parks to contribute to healthier communities and a greener future through increased biodiversity, an enhanced awareness at national and local level of the importance of parks and green spaces to communities, people's health and mental wellbeing have been identified; as well as a movement towards making the recovery a green one through active travel, climate change mitigation measures and through councils' COVID-19 recovery plans, many of which featured parks.
5. A summary of the key findings from each of the six councils participating in the research can be found below:
    - 5.1. [Leeds City Council](#) has forecast a total annual loss of income of £8.8 million and a loss of up to 126,282 volunteer hours. However, the council has received high levels of public support and support from elected members. Parks features highly in the council's COVID-19 recovery plans and will be a key part of supporting plans around active travel for which the Parks Service will play a key role in maintaining active travel routes. Parks service managers have felt the benefits of being part of the council making them less vulnerable as they are seen as an integral part of the council.
    - 5.2. [Nottingham City Council](#) has forecast that the total annual loss of external income of £295,000 and up to 6,640 lost volunteer hours will be lost. However, the benefits include new online services and new ways to consider how the council communicates both internally and with external partners. The service have also

used the lockdown period to rethink how they maintain parks and whilst the council are keen to recover, they will ensure that the biodiversity bonus provided throughout the lockdown enables the opportunity to accelerate the Nottingham carbon neutral 2028 climate mitigation and ecological targets.

- 5.3. [Plymouth City Council](#) has forecast a total annual loss of external income of £200,000 and up to 966 lost volunteer hours. It has however, presented opportunities to trial new approaches including a more relaxed mowing regime, explore the idea of increasing the number of staff in parks similar to the previous Park Ranger role, to ensure increased monitoring of infrastructure, grounds maintenance and interaction with the local community and focus on carbon reduction, climate emergency and building on the value of parks.
- 5.4. [Rugby Borough Council](#) has forecast a total annual loss of external income of £97,000 and up to 9,459 lost volunteer hours. Although work on capital projects stopped, the council found a way to progress work with the contractor, on the design and build of a skatepark project through the development of an online consultation system with 3D models to engage with local users on the plans. If it proves to be successful the council will adopt similar processes in the future.
- 5.5. [Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council](#) has forecast a total annual loss of external income of £120,500 and up to 13,440 volunteer hours will be lost, Despite the challenges the council trialled new approaches to electronic tennis booking systems, active travel routes and alfresco dining. Visitor counter data available through public health intelligence has been used to assess visitor numbers during lockdown which saw a 40 per cent increase in use. The service plans to understand the demographics and intentions of these visitors in relation to using open spaces after lockdown. As many as 40 per cent of Walsall residents in the town centre do not have access to a garden so the data presents an opportunity to do further work in this area.
- 5.6. [Watford Borough Council](#) has forecast a loss of external income of £86,000 and a loss of in-kind volunteer contributions is estimated between 21 and 40 per cent. However, the situation has resulted in a significant difference in the way the service now communicates and operates and greater awareness and interest from elected members.

### **Implications for Wales**

6. The guidance and best practice are relevant to Welsh councils, although the case studies were drawn from English councils.

### **Financial Implications**

7. The LGA contributed £6 350 from its policy budget, which helped unlock £10 000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The project has been completed within budget.

### Impact and next steps

8. The final publication was launched on 28 November 2020. We used the opportunity to issue a [press release calling for parks to be explicitly included in the eligibility criteria for the Levelling Up Fund and UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#), following details about these funds announced in the Spending Review on 25 November 2020.
9. The press release performed well on twitter and LinkedIn, outperforming all other tweets/posts during the week of 23-29 November, despite being published on the penultimate day. It received 46,517 impressions, 888 engagements, 226 likes and 145 retweets on twitter; and over 5,297 impressions, 75 clicks, 132 engagements and over 1,142 video views on LinkedIn.
10. We are in the process of sharing the findings with key Government departments, including MHCLG, Natural England, and Sport England. This work will form the basis of our lobbying work and media work on parks.