Mass events and parkrun

Purpose of report
For information.

Summary
This paper provides feedback from members about the restart of events with large numbers of visitors, including parkrun.

Recommendation/s
For discussion. Members are invited to provide views on the recommendations in paragraph 22.

Action/s
Officers will continue to support parkrun and other event organisers to engage constructively with councils, and support councils by sharing the latest information and guidance to enable large events to take place safely in a Covid-secure fashion.

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Background

1. Large scale events have been postponed during the pandemic and have raised concerns about the risk they pose to transmission. However, the increased roll out of vaccines and a better understand of transmission methods has enabled new approaches to be developed, and Government announced a pilot research programme to help them return.

2. Since April, the government’s Events Research Programme (ERP) (Paras 132-4) has analysed the Covid risk of various large-scale indoor and outdoor events, including the Brit Awards (4,000 indoor attendees), the FA Cup Final (21,000 seated outdoor spectators) and a Liverpool club night (3,000 people dancing inside).

3. Several councils have been involved in the organisation of these events, most notably Liverpool City Council and the London Borough of Brent. The LGA has not been directly involved but has sought engagement with DCMS.

4. International research is also taking place. A randomised controlled trial held in Barcelona, Spain, to assess the impact of comprehensive COVID-19 safety measures at a live indoor concert has reported no cases of virus transmission. The trial, held in December last year with 1,000 people, has raised hopes that indoor music events can take place without increasing the risk of spreading the virus. Attendees had to take same-day lateral flow tests before entry and wear a mask but there was no requirement for social distancing.

5. Parkrun UK is an organisation that supports free weekly five and two kilometre runs across the country, many of which take place in council parks or open spaces. By convention, landowners do not charge parkrun organisers for use of their space. Parkruns are very popular community events, with more than three million people registered, and 300,000 people taking part on a typical weekend, and play an important role in supporting physical and mental wellbeing.

6. The LGA and parkrun have been in communication throughout the duration of the pandemic, either directly or through Sport England’s event group. The LGA’s approach has been to provide advice and support to parkrun on how to demonstrate their events are following the latest guidance on safe operation, including what information to communicate with councils.

7. The LGA has also been providing advice and support to councils, primarily through the daily or bi-weekly bulletins to senior leaders. However, supplementary engagement has also taken place through a variety of channels, including the MHCLG-convened beaches
and events group, and engagement with officials in MHCLG and DCMS on specific pieces of guidance, although this has been less consistent.

8. The popularity of parkrun means its return has been a high-profile issue and there has been ongoing interest from Ministers. parkrun planned to return in England on 5 June. In mid-May, media coverage and parliamentary questions emerged alleging that councils have been refusing applications for parkrun to resume, or requiring specific measures be put in place. This attracted significant media coverage. Proactive work by the LGA’s media meant that the LGA’s lines were often included.

Issues

9. This section sets out some of the issues raised with the LGA, both by councils and by events organisers. A particular focus is given on parkrun, as one of the earliest mass events to return across the country, with one or more events taking place in virtually every council area.

10. Following discussions with Sport England’s events group and the Events Industry Forum, the LGA is in the process of establishing a webinar for councils on the Mass Event Pilots, and supporting guidance to Safety Advisory Groups.

11. Communication between the LGA and parkrun has been open and constructive up to and including the restart of Junior parkruns in late March. At the time of writing, more than 372 parkrun events have now been approved to return, with only 21 refusals mainly from private landowners (3 from councils). However, 194 parkrun events have yet to be approved.

12. There has not been time for a full assessment of claims in the media and by MPs, but feedback from council contacts, including the Chair of the Local Authority Events Organisers Group (LAEOG) has provided the information in paragraphs 13 and 14.

13. Mass events

13.1. There is currently no information available on learning from the DCMS Mass Events Pilots, which councils could then apply to their assessment of applications for large events

13.2. Councils report that engagement and guidance from DCMS on events has been patchy, limited and on occasion conflicting. Similar feedback has been shared by other councils groups.

13.3. Parliament did not introduce a waiver or relaxation for these events in the way that they did for erection of marquees and some other activities, meaning that standard approval processes must be followed.

13.4. Councils are experiencing significant increases in workload due to events organisers waiting until the next step of the roadmap was confirmed by submitting
applications. This has led to a significant temporary spike in complex events that must be checked for Covid-secure arrangements.

14. Parkrun

14.1. All responding councils were supportive of parkrun and seeking to help it resume – for example all Surrey councils have given approval

14.2. Applications from parkrun were received by local authorities between 3 and 11 working days before media coverage of the issue began

14.3. Other major landowners such as the National Trust have also indicated that their proposed restart date was too soon.

14.4. Parkrun are applying a national risk assessment framework that does not factor in local context

14.5. The Minister for Sport had provided a letter to parkrun endorsing the view that parkrun’s national framework would be sufficient to permit events, which, while supportive of parkrun, has been viewed as misleading given that local authorities are responsible for approving events applications

15. From conversations with councils and stakeholders, it is clear that there is both a lack of clear, comprehensive guidance on running events, and a varying appetite for risk among councils.

16. In late March, the LGA, Public Health England, Sport England, and Association of Directors of Public Health convened in advance of the restart of organised sport events to discuss how to manage risk. A joint statement was agreed and published, advising organisers of the need to engage with councils as early as possible before the event.

17. In April, Ian Leete, LGA Senior Adviser for Culture, Tourism, and Sport, and Rupert Suckling, Director for Public Health at Doncaster Council, met with Sport England’s event group to discuss barriers to resumption of event and ways to streamline the process. It was agreed that Sport England would work on guidance for Safety Advisory Groups, and the LGA provided contact details for the network. ADPH agreed to provide information to Directors of Public Health to support proportionate risk management; and the LGA agreed to share best practice with councils. All these actions are in progress.

18. More recently, the LGA has presented at the Events Industry Forum and supported clarification of guidance for issues raised by the Forum members. These clarifications have been shared through LGA bulletins. The LGA has also met with the Local Authority Events Organisers Group and is communicating information for regulatory officers on events.

19. On 25 May, the LGA met with parkrun’s Chief Operating Officer and supported the redesign of communications material being sent to councils. Additional information on
the restart has also been shared through LGA bulletins, with details for councils to contact the LGA or parkrun directly.

20. The LGA is also running a webinar to share learning from the Mass Events Pilots on 4 June and help councils understand what safeguards are appropriate, and what science has shown to be unnecessary – 658 delegates are currently registered. Parkrun’s Chief Operating Officer will present at this. However, DCMS have refused an invitation to speak, claiming it is too soon to share findings. They have also turned down invitations to smaller events, where they were asked to outline the context and objectives for the pilots.

21. This lack of communication from DCMS is significantly hampering the ability of councils to work with events organisers to ensure a safe operation. Many events are planned for July and August and safety measures must be put in place now. Doing so without the learning from the Mass Events Pilots risks the events taking place either without necessary safety measures, or with overly restrictive and burdensome safety measures, or being cancelled completely. This poses a significant risk to the reputation and survival of the industry.

22. We propose that lead members raise this challenge and lack of communication with Secretary of State for DCMS at the meeting on 22 June. We also suggest that we endorse the idea of a Government-backed insurance scheme for events, similar to that offered to homeowners following flooding, to enable the events industry to proceed with some confidence.

Implications for Wales

23. Wales is working to a different roadmap and the WLGA is leading on the return of events in Wales, in partnership with CLOW.

Implications for inclusion, diversity and equality

24. The return of events, particularly free events like parkrun, offers an opportunity for those on lower incomes who have struggled to access digital forms of entertainment or activity; we also know that many people report that mental health issues have become more challenging during enforced isolation of the pandemic and events may help them improve wellbeing.

25. However, there are also indications that some of the requirements for the layout of events are impacting on those with limited mobility; and mask requirements are affecting those experiencing hearing loss.

26. There is also the potential for increased conflict between users of public spaces, which continue to show higher general use than in previous years. Large events and crowds
can be intimidating for some, particularly as they adapt to a return to social environments.

27. As yet, there is very limited research, guidance or advice on this. We will share findings and recommendations on approaches as and when they become available.

Financial Implications

28. None.

Next steps

29. Officers will continue to engage closely with the Institute of Licensing, Local Authority Events Organisers Group, Events Industry Forum, parkrun and Sport England events group.