

## **Housing and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee**

**25 June 2020**

### **Briefing on actions taken by Parks and Grounds Maintenance during the Coronavirus pandemic**

As a council, we know that for many residents in our city, the local park is their only access to green space, so it has been very important that we keep our parks open for visitors.

Throughout the lockdown period daily checks, safety inspections and essential works have been carried out and parks patrolled to ensure social distancing. Car parks at the major parks have remained open throughout and whilst the vast majority of residents/park visitors are observing social distancing guidelines there have been a few issues reported to parks management. Apart from a few isolated incidents which required police attendance, these were resolved by parks staff engaging with visitors.

Ten additional mobile crews (sourced from our gardening staff) have been deployed to work with park users and encourage social distancing. 25 large vinyl banners were placed at the entrances of popular parks to promote the lockdown message and highlight what could and couldn't be done through the main period of lockdown.

The Council's street advertising displays have been used to reinforce the messaging about social distancing and an ongoing ban on group activities in parks. This messaging around social distancing has recently been backed up by the introduction of mowing 2-metre-wide strips in all our parks, something that has been welcomed and recognised nationally as good practice.

In the interest of the safety of road users, grass cutting on highways re-commenced in mid-April to ensure clear sight lines at junctions as did grass cutting at sheltered housing schemes and cemeteries. Mowing in parks re-started on the 11<sup>th</sup> May with the approach described above to reiterate the importance of maintaining social distance following the updated guidance published by Government. Other grass cutting is now taking place using ride on mowers only, as no follow up or pedestrian mowing is being carried out at present due to the need to put social distancing measures in place. There are restrictions to the number of operatives that can share vans to travel around the city and there are additional issues of safe manual handling for the teams using pedestrian mowing machines. Spraying continues to be undertaken taking advantage of reduced number of members of the general public being out and about.

At the outset of lockdown all the Council's playgrounds and courts were closed and locked with notices displayed explaining the reason. Unfortunately, many of the laminated information posters are being removed by persons unknown and some

courts and playgrounds have been accessed despite closure and notices being in place. The MUGA at Chamberlain Gardens was repeatedly being broken into by adults playing basketball despite closure notices being in place. Parks staff attended to advise but were verbally abused and local police had to be informed. BCC Parks management are in regular communication with WM Police about instances of antisocial behaviour in some parks across the city. Car parks at Holders Lane, Ackers Trust and Lifford Reservoir were closed for this reason and more recently the gates to Cannon Hill Park, Sutton Park and Lickey Hills are now being closed and locked at 10:00pm on advice from the police to combat antisocial behaviour late at night. Additional sites will recommence locking from Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June, prioritising those where anti-social behaviour has been reported. Further sites will be added as staffing allows.

The decision was taken locally for the Council's tennis and ball courts to remain closed beyond the Government's announcement that they could reopen as they remained the focus of large gatherings and problems with a lack of social distancing. However, with further relaxation of the lockdown restrictions tennis courts were opened during week commencing 1<sup>st</sup> June. Notices have been displayed advising users to only use their own sports equipment, in line with government advice and that from the Lawn Tennis Association.

Litter has been a huge problem across the country throughout the lockdown period with parks and beaches suffering the worst. In respect of parks Birmingham was no exception and several press releases and social media posts highlighted local problems. Additional staff and visits to sites were deployed to address the huge increase in litter. An additional three static crews were sent to focus on Sutton Park, Lickey Hills and Cannon Hill Park to help in this regard. On a positive note, local residents at several locations have carried out their own clean ups to help keep their local parks clean and litter free – for which we are very grateful.

Throughout lockdown parks managers have liaised with local friends' groups and Birmingham Open Spaces Forum (BOSF) to keep them updated on park issues and plan for their return to being able to be out and about volunteering on site. The partial relaxation of lockdown now allows family groups or groups of up to six individuals to meet in parks. Some friends' groups are making use of this opportunity to recommence litter picking and other simple tasks on sites. Managers are working with BOSF to draw up Covid Secure guidance and risk assessments in this regard.

Visitor centres and public toilets are still closed. Some cafes have re-opened to serve takeaway drinks and simple food only. Bowls, fishing, tennis, sailing and rowing have all started again with Covid Secure operational procedures in place. All large events on parks have been cancelled. All other events have been cancelled up to the end of July at present but will probably be extended into August, depending on government guidance).

Some physical training sessions have re-started in some locations, again limited to six people and Covid Secure RA and operating procedures in place.

In positive news, Birmingham is one of 8 UK locations to be awarded Future Parks Accelerator grants. Birmingham's bid - 'Naturally Birmingham' is unusual amongst this cohort as it is the only one that seeks a council wide transformation and systems change approach to move the thinking and the approach to parks from a financial liability to one where the natural environment becomes central to long-term decision-making for the city. The programme will introduce new measures and visions to facilitate and enable a new governance model for the city. This is being funded by the Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust and reports directly to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

This new Birmingham model for parks has potential as a national exemplar for all major cities in the UK. Birmingham's new model directly addresses the climate emergency and the austerity agenda- as it is preparing the way for new sustainable funding models too. The project is being led by a Public Health Consultant and involves colleagues from several Divisions across the Council (Housing, Children's, Skills and Jobs, Planning) working with Park's officers and representatives from a range of 3rd sector and community organisations.

A key part of the Future Parks Accelerator programme for Birmingham is wider community engagement. This is being led by our principle community partner- BOSF- Birmingham Open Spaces Forum. The planned face to face programme has had to be substituted with a digital one, due to COVID-19. A copy of the material has been circulated for comment to relevant parties. It is planned to launch in mid-May. It outlines the key principles of the FPA and seeks views back on the outline proposals from the 4 community pilots; each led by a division of the council.

Our national funders have also been working with each of the cohort cities explaining and outlining how they could support each location to develop a Parks Foundation. This is something new to Birmingham, so contact has been made with other cohort cities where ones have been or are being established in order to better understand the opportunities or risks for Birmingham.

Managing and operating our parks and open spaces throughout the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic has been immensely challenging. The whole team has ensured that maintenance regimes have continued albeit in a reduced way. We have also informed our users and volunteers as to the best and safest ways to keep using our parks. I would like to place on record my thanks to our dedicated staff for their efforts in helping to maintain this vital service.

Councillor John O'Shea  
Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks