

Briefing 20-94 December 2020

Results of APSE's second resilience survey on how local authorities are dealing with the on-going impacts of COVID-19 and further / ongoing restrictions placed on services such as parks and greenspace.

Key Issues

APSE has carried out several surveys on how parks and greenspace professionals and their services have been affected by the current pandemic. This recent survey highlights how services have been affected since May 2020.

It is clear from the findings increased costs are a serious issue for many and the associated loss of income streams as a result of closed parks facilities is only adding to the pressure.

Full-time staffing is returning to pre-pandemic levels, although there are still some areas which have significant numbers of staff self-isolating or unable to work. Budgetary pressures have meant vacant or seasonal posts are not being filled which is increasing the workload of existing staff and this is being further exacerbated by the loss of volunteers although some volunteers do seem to be being re-introduced in limited circumstances and numbers.

Overall, there does appear to be some progress in returning parks to pre-pandemic levels although much of the income generation opportunities are still greatly reduced.

Introduction

This briefing provides the most up-to-date information via a second survey carried out by APSE, at the end November 2020 the first survey taking place in April / May 2020 ([which can be found here](#)), as to how parks and greenspaces managers are dealing with the on-going impacts of COVID-19.

The briefing will be of particular interest to those officers and elected members responsible for parks, grounds maintenance and greenspace services.

Background

In light of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, local authorities across the UK have had to adapt and make changes to the way they are delivering front-line services.

APSE is committed to sharing best practice and at this time it is felt it would be useful to look at any further changes to services councils have had to make in order to deal with the ongoing pandemic.

Therefore, APSE is collecting information regarding the changes being implemented in response to the new or ongoing restrictions in different local authority frontline services across the UK.

With regards to parks and greenspace services, APSE asked parks and greenspace professionals to provide information about any additional changes, which may have been made to services, following further restrictions placed on their services since our original survey in March / April 2020.

Findings of the survey

This short-life survey was issued to APSE members during the last week of November 2020 and received over 50 local authority responses in just over a week. What follows are the main findings of the survey.

What has been the impact of the additional COVID-19 restrictions in your service area since the Autumn?

- **83%** have felt further cost pressures on their service
- **15%** have not noticed any real difference.
- **2%** of respondents felt that their service would be unsustainable as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions imposed upon local authorities and their effects.

Further comments received stated that the major problem was the loss of income from franchises, cafes, sports pitches and so forth whilst increased costs have been encountered through measures such as social distancing measures, additional fencing etc. However, many did comment income from car parking has remained strong following the re-opening of car parks after the first lockdown where many were closed or fees suspended.

The loss of public engagement and volunteer activity has also had a major impact, as has the loss of income from events. Perhaps the most worrying aspect of these replies was the view of one respondent that they felt their parks were becoming financially unsustainable as a result of these losses.

What have been the ongoing impacts on staffing levels due to COVID-19?

- **61%** of respondents stated that staff numbers have remained at a reasonable and manageable level.
- **17%** stated that they now had more staff self-isolating or unable to work
- **11%** said they had noticed an increase in staff absence levels.
- **30%** stated that staff are being redeployed differently to cope with the impacts of further restrictions and the pandemic across other council services

It should be noted that some respondents answered more than one question. Comments identified that many staff were home working and this had caused some on the ground service delivery difficulties, however redeployment to other services had had the most impact, particularly as footfall in parks has remained high, putting additional pressure on remaining staff. Linked to this has been the fact some parks departments had not been able to fill vacant posts due to financial pressures or recruitment restrictions and this has also meant additional pressures on remaining staff.

Have services recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels?

- **14%** stated that their service had not been impacted severely by either the first or second wave of the pandemic
- **27%** reported that they had recovered their service to pre-pandemic levels and the further restrictions have had no impact on this recovery.
- **52%** replied that they were still to recover their service levels and that the further restrictions had hindered their recovery.

The main comments received again referred to the impact of the loss of income and the increased costs of meeting government guidance requirements on social distancing and closure of facilities and events. Despite the closure of many of the facilities within parks, visitor numbers had remained high, one respondent noting a 30% increase in footfall. Many respondents reported they had now returned to pre-pandemic staffing numbers but the concern was they had not been able to recruit seasonal staff, which has placed additional workloads on existing staff and lengthened the time to complete normal workloads.

Are there any other comments you would like to make regarding the further restrictions the ongoing impacts COVID-19 has made on your service area?

Again, the issue of home working was raised and, as a consequence, the loss of community links, particularly with regards to volunteers.

Where there were instances of higher levels of self-isolation during the second wave of the pandemic, respondents said the impact had actually been less than the first wave as processes and procedures had been in place to deal with the absences. An example of this has been the use of staff bubbles and shift patterns being created to reduce contact with too many others, thus reducing the risk of transmission of infection.

A further problem has been the redeployment of parks staff to support other services whilst numbers of visitors to parks has remained high, and in many cases increased during the pandemic. Added to this has been the inability to fill vacant posts and take on seasonal staff which has further added to the problems facing managers.

APSE Comment.

It is quite clear from the results that many Parks and Greenspace Managers have been working very successfully to combat the effects of the pandemic; in doing so they have supported the delivery of both the Government's public health requirements and, at the same time, continued to offer recreational and leisure facilities during a time when most other such outlets have been closed or access severely restricted.

The pandemic has shown the value of Parks and Greenspaces as a key service to the public's mental and physical health and well-being. This has been despite the fact parks staff have been deployed to support other services and income has been severely depleted. Some areas have clearly been harder hit than others but it does appear that many services have managed to bring themselves back to a level of relative 'normality'.

However, what is clear throughout the survey returns is the commitment of staff in very challenging times and, parks professionals have been keen to make this point where ever the opportunity has presented itself.

It is hoped that the worst of the pandemic is now past and with the roll out of vaccines there will be a clear light at the end of the tunnel.

APSE will continue to monitor how Parks and Greenspaces as a service is faring over the coming months and report on any issues which are relevant to member authorities.

As a final note, APSE will ensure that the vital role Parks and Greenspaces have played during the pandemic will not be lost on Government, and that any monies forthcoming to help rebuild the economy and by association local authorities' services, remembers and reflects the importance of these services to community well-being.

APSE members can continue to access the [APSE COVID-19 information and support hub](#) and the services to our member councils which includes our dedicated WhatsApp groups, rapid response network query service and specific briefings and surveys service. All other APSE services remain online for members to access including our advisory groups which are free for APSE members to attend. You can sign up to the APSE Parks group as a member [using this link](#).

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