

Parks in a pandemic: what have we learned?

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic thrust urban parks into the public spotlight. Government ministers repeated a welcome message that these green spaces were essential for exercise and mental wellbeing.

Less welcome were the media images of crowded parks awash with sunbathers, complaints about littering and over-zealous policing, and the closure in March of important urban spaces such as Victoria Park in Tower Hamlets, east London, and Albert Park in Middlesbrough. But it did mean that suddenly everyone was talking about parks.

The continuing importance of parks as spaces for stress relief and relaxation during a national emergency highlights the relevance of what researchers have been telling us for many years. Parks matter because they enable us to stay healthy, to socialise and build community, and to connect with nature.

The National Trust recently [commissioned a study](#) from consultants Vivid Economics and Barton Wilmore arguing that a £5.5 billion capital investment in new and refurbished parks, focusing on the most disadvantaged areas, could generate physical and mental health benefits worth £200 billion over 30 years. Research for the National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Lottery Community Fund supports this case for capital investment, but stresses that investment in places needs to be accompanied by investment in people to succeed.

Our report¹, [Space to Thrive](#), published in January 2020, showed how hundreds of academic studies have revealed the value of public parks. Analysing 385 studies from the last decade, we found parks generate six types of benefit:

- They enhance physical health and mental wellbeing
- They create opportunities for social integration
- They provide opportunities for residents to get involved in their locality
- They highlight, and can mitigate, inequalities in society
- They enable people to connect with nature, which supports human and ecological wellbeing
- They can support local economies

Covid-19 created new opportunities to show the benefits of parks, but it also removed some of them. Not everyone enjoyed parks to the same extent, as [recent data from Natural England's People and Nature](#) survey show. We asked users of three parks that have been funded through the Parks for People programme to tell us what difference the lockdown made to them.

How Covid-19 has affected park use

¹ Research for the report was led by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University, supported by colleagues at Urban Pollinators Ltd and the University of Sheffield.

In the early days of the lockdown in March and April, people were permitted to use parks for exercise but not to sit or sunbathe. Cafes and public toilets were closed, and in some cases car parks were also shut and benches taped up to prevent sitting. Play areas and sports facilities were locked or taped off.

As restrictions were eased, people were permitted to gather in households, or groups of up to six from several households if they were two metres or more apart. Picnics were allowed. By July cafes and public toilets began to reopen, but community facilities mainly remained shut. So people could use parks, but not exactly as before.

For many people this was not a problem. Maxine², who was homeschooling two children aged 8 and 10, described Grosvenor and Hilbert Park in Tunbridge Wells as a 'godsend' during the lockdown:

'We go out for a walk every afternoon after [we've] sort of done our school stuff and we went every day to that park. It was like a godsend ... I was just so grateful that we had it. I was so, so grateful.'

Maxine valued the opportunity to observe wildlife and connect with the natural world: *'It was such a, you know, unnerving and stressful time. Just to be able to actually have somewhere to go and ... there were ducklings and baby moorhens on the pond ... it just was so nice. Again, that whole nature thing, to get out and to actually be able to breathe and just de-stress really by having somewhere that's nice to walk around.'*

In Quorn, Leicestershire, Ellen, who is retired and lives alone, enjoyed seeing more families use Stafford Orchard, her local park: *'I think what's been the most noticeable thing is families, including dad, you know [...] mum, dad and the children. Either all taking the dog for a walk, or they've got their bike, you know, little trikes and bikes going round that path, round the edge.'*

The importance of parks as natural spaces was especially noticeable during the lockdown. David, a member of the Friends of Saughton Park in Edinburgh and a local resident for 30 years, commented: *'We have otters in the Water of Leith that runs through the park, there's kingfishers there as well, they've had walks around the park identifying birdsong and the birds themselves, they've recognised 27 species of birds going round the park.'*

At a time when communities were under stress and nobody knew how serious the pandemic was going to become, parks provided a lifeline and a breathing space. A long period of good weather in the spring helped.

But not everyone benefited, and in some cases parks became a focus for tension. David spoke of 'gatherings in the evening fuelled by alcohol'. In Quorn, three park users reported issues with teenagers using the playground for smoking cannabis, drinking

² All names have been changed to protect interviewees' identity.

alcohol, and possible drug dealing. Their comments highlight that without careful management parks can swiftly move from being viewed as essential public assets to being perceived as problems.

Invisible people in crowded parks

Images of crowded parks and carefree picnickers show the very real benefits parks have provided in the lockdown, but they can also paint a misleadingly idyllic picture. For people who were vulnerable because of ill-health, anxious, or who used parks for organised activities, the experience of lockdown was less happy. While problems of over-use or inappropriate use are highly visible, the effects of being excluded from parks are largely invisible.

Callum, a volunteer with the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society at Saughton Park, described the closure of the walled garden inside the park as 'a shock to the system': he had to rethink the routines he had established to support his mental health. Nadine, an active member of Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, said she was using the park less and trying to avoid busy times.

At Saughton Park the disabled cyclists who attend regular all-ability cycling sessions were no longer there during the lockdown. Neither were the older people who gather for regular health walks, or the people with learning difficulties who volunteer alongside the parks staff. At Grosvenor and Hilbert Park the Mindwell art classes for people with mental health problems stopped. At Stafford Orchard the temporary closure of the Old School Teahouse by the park removed an important and affordable community meeting place.

These gathering places and regular meetings provide a vital function within communities where isolation, loneliness or disability can lead to more severe mental and physical health problems. While some facilities in parks are now open again, this social infrastructure often remains suspended because of the risks of infection, or has closed again after new restrictions have been imposed.

What kind of parks do we need now?

The challenges of over-use on the one hand and exclusion on the other raise important questions for future investment in parks and green spaces.

Covid-19 has emphasised the many functions parks serve within a community, and all of them are important – from providing a space for nature to offering opportunities to play or sit quietly, or take part in social or therapeutic activities.

Some of these functions require the right sort of space. The importance of nature and wildlife for people during the lockdown highlights the need for parks that are biodiverse and offer a range of habitats. Equally, parks need to offer spaces for sport and picnics. In London especially, the crowding of many parks shows the need for a wider range of

green spaces in densely populated areas, including pocket parks and greener, traffic-free streets.

There is also a need for parks to be managed and facilitated to enable community activities to resume safely, from volunteering groups to therapeutic sessions for people with mental health problems or disabilities. This may require more investment in parks staff and in the voluntary organisations that provide activities within a community, and more support to enable ‘friends of’ groups to assess risks and operate safely to minimise risks of infection. Popular parks may also require more on-site management to deter antisocial behaviour.

What we need to do

Covid-19 has flagged some important issues about the value of urban parks and the risks if they are not looked after well. As and the government considers spending for the coming year and beyond, and prepares to introduce far-reaching [planning legislation](#), we must make the most of the opportunity and avoid potential pitfalls.

First, we must appreciate the value of the many urban parks and green spaces we already have. They have proved vital in preserving mental and physical health during the most severe phase of the lockdown and will continue to do so in areas where restrictions are in place. Local government funding must recognise the essential public health role of parks. At local level, parks and public health departments need to work closely together to maximise the wellbeing parks can provide and ensure funds are applied in ways that support health and social integration. Parks also need to be integrated into current plans to [boost active travel](#) by supporting walking and cycling.

Second, we must recognise that providing a park is not enough on its own. Parks need to be positively managed and looked after – to encourage wildlife and support people’s connections with nature; to manage crowding and deter antisocial behaviour; to support imaginative play and child development; and to support the community organisations whose activities enable marginalised and isolated people to enjoy parks as much as those who are younger, fitter or more mobile.

The recent [Kruger Review](#), ‘Levelling up our communities’, proposes a new ‘social covenant’ to build on the upsurge in mutual aid during the pandemic. The community greenspace groups that help to care for and activate parks across the country are an essential part of this social infrastructure, and their work will be needed more as outdoor public spaces become increasingly important. Popular parks will also need ongoing investment so that they can offer facilities such as toilets, cafes and community hubs that enable them to be inclusive and equitable.

Third, we need to ensure that new developments and communities include well-managed, diverse and appropriate green spaces to serve all the people who will live in them. The urge to ‘build, build, build’ and relax planning restrictions should not compromise the extent or the quality of green spaces. Covid-19 – and the developing

climate and biodiversity crisis, which continues to unfold even though media attention has lessened – have shown that urban green spaces will be needed more in the future, not less.