Parks and green spaces have been thrust into the spotlight during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a strange way, academics like us were initially cheered by the national calls for parks to remain open. Parks and green spaces were highlighted as one of only a few destinations that people in lockdown in the UK were allowed to visit.

That sounded to us like a description of an essential service. Academia and policy makers have long known about the social benefits of parks and green spaces. A recent review of nearly 400 papers (Dobson et al., 2020) highlighted six ways in which they support a healthy society. They enhance physical health, mental well-being and life satisfaction; create opportunities for social integration; support community engagement; highlight, and can address, inequalities; enable deeper connections with nature; and support healthy local economies. The first of these themes has rarely been demonstrated so clearly.

For parks to remain open, fiscal as well as political support is crucial. It therefore seemed that we were leaping to conclusions. Our initial excitement was probably misplaced. However, we have been watching how the unfolding events challenge how we plan and manage our parks and green spaces as sociable places. In this Viewpoint, we explore what the pandemic has shown us and what must be done to ensure that our parks and green spaces remain the vibrant social places that we depend on in our neighbourhoods.

What has COVID-19 shown us?

As pubs, shops, libraries and other services were being closed, outdoor public spaces remained open. This, however, became problematic where people were not following rules of social distancing. Some parks closed, including Victoria Park in Hackney and Albert Park in Middlesbrough. The National Trust shut its sites and car parks to deter large numbers of visitors. Across the country, Midlands Parks Forum and CFP (2020) reported at the end of April that 25 per cent of local-authority respondents in England had closed some parks and green spaces. However, there was a clear message from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary, Robert Jenrick, that parks must remain open (Walawalkar, 2020). A follow-up survey in early
May (APSE and Midlands Parks Forum, 2020) suggested that the message had been heeded, and the proportion of local-authority respondents reporting green-space closures fell to 13 per cent.

The government has explicitly highlighted the importance of access to green space for health and well-being throughout the pandemic. However, this raises several issues. First, provision of green space is highly unequal. Whitten (2020) notes how the pandemic has highlighted how residents in some parts of London do not have nature nearby. We have long known that access is unequal (Public Health England, 2014), but this problem of not having green space within walking distance is acutely felt as people have been unable to travel. In normal times, people are prepared to travel long distances to reach parks and green spaces (White et al., 2013), but when they are limited to what is within walking distance, it becomes obvious what you are missing.

The pandemic has also shown how the use of green spaces matters as much as provision. Usage is highly unequal. More vulnerable people are less able to use parks and green space in the lockdown, having been told to self-isolate. Current research by the authors as part of the national evaluation of the Lottery-funded Parks for People programme is beginning to show who is now being excluded: in Saughton Park, Edinburgh, this includes people with disabilities who can no longer access

![Figure 1](source: Julian Dobson)
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an all-ability cycling group, people with mental-health challenges who take part in therapeutic horticulture, and community members whose use of the park involves volunteering with the local Friends group. One health worker told us of the last time before lockdown that a group of older people got together for a health walk. ‘On my way back I was crying’, she said. ‘They were much more scared of the loneliness’.

For someone who cannot get outside because they are already vulnerable, the choice is often between two unpalatable risks: infection and isolation. For those who can get outdoors, the closure of facilities that make the park a place for lingering – car parks, playgrounds, cafes and toilets – may mean that green spaces are simply not an attractive option. The COVID-19 park is a site of enforced mobility, a conveyor belt of citizens engaged in mutual policing of unwritten ‘no-loitering’ regulations. At the time of writing, the government had just extended the single daily excursion for exercise to unlimited exercise (13 May), but as the facilities are not currently reopened, will people stay in parks for longer? The likelihood is that those who are already able to enjoy green spaces will do so more; those currently excluded will remain excluded.

The increased emphasis on active exercise during the pandemic shows the importance of green networks of routes, not just destinations. If people are not able to reach urban nature because there is no park or green space within walking distance,

Figure 2  Pavement chalking has been appearing on our streets during the pandemic, which draws urban residents’ attention to wildflowers and plants
Source: Sophie Leguil
people can still get health benefits from walking routes which are tree-lined and/or vegetated. This has been beautifully captured in the pavement chalking to help pedestrians notice what wild flowers and plants there are in urban areas (Figure 1; Morss, 2020).

The pandemic has shown how austerity measures applied to local authorities in the UK since 2008 have diminished capacity to maintain green spaces effectively. In 2017 the House of Common communities committee declared that parks were at ‘a tipping point’ of decline. Newcastle upon Tyne’s funding for municipal parks/green spaces was cut by 90 per cent. Bristol cut its parks budget to zero last year. In response, some cities have adopted strategies for generating income from parks and green spaces. In London, large-scale ticketed events mean that a large area of Hyde Park is closed to the public for approximately 12 weeks of the year (Smith, 2019). COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus how an emphasis on generating income from events, concessions, parking charges and facility hire is vulnerable to unforeseen circumstances. The income many authorities were relying on as essential contributions to the upkeep of their green spaces has ceased since March.

Figure 3 Events in and around parks and green spaces around the UK (such as this Student Colour Run in Sheffield) have been cancelled until further notice
Source: Nicola Dempsey
Under austerity, parks departments have lost expertise, skills and knowledge as staff numbers have been cut or less-skilled contractors employed to deliver grounds maintenance (Dempsey et al., 2016). The pandemic has put pressure on the small numbers of skilled staff as parks staff have been diverted into other critical roles such as cemeteries and crematoria, refuse collection and social care (Baggott and Hughes, 2020). Parks maintenance has become less frequent and less consistent. In Sheffield, work has been restricted to essentials such as litter picking, emptying bins, tree inspections and safety work. Grass cutting did not resume until 16 April.

Informal discussions with colleagues around the country suggest that users generally accept these reductions in green-space maintenance because they know that the workforce is being diverted to other essential functions. This harks back to Hoyle et al.’s work (2017) which found that changes in public values can lead to acceptance of a different (messier) urban aesthetic (Figure 4). However, it remains to be seen how long such acceptance will last.

Finally, the pandemic has shown how already stretched local authorities may accelerate the diminishment of their civic role into providers of life-or-death services such as cemeteries and crematoria, refuse collection and social care (Baggott and Hughes, 2020). Parks maintenance has become less frequent and less consistent. In Sheffield, work has been restricted to essentials such as litter picking, emptying bins, tree inspections and safety work. Grass cutting did not resume until 16 April.

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as social care and child protection, which are governed by statutory duties. Citizens may be expected to accept a lower, or less formal, level of management in their parks, and a reduction in the facilities and community-based gatherings that serve more vulnerable groups and more deprived communities. This may prove to be a false economy: previous studies suggest that perceptions of the quality and safety of green space matter as much as provision and access.

What needs to be done?

Research continues to emphasise the importance of sociable green spaces. The recently completed IWUN (Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature) project highlighted how ‘green infrastructure is social infrastructure’ which requires ongoing investment and better ways for people to access it (IWUN, 2019). Planning for sociable green spaces must be integrated with work to address long-standing inequalities of access, including health inequalities. The unequal and inequitable access that poorer residents have to green space across cities worldwide can no longer be ignored. We also know that places which are richer in biodiversity are better for our mental health (Mears et al., 2019). This means that we must secure biodiversity net gains throughout our existing urban infrastructure, not just in new developments.

The lockdown has shown that it is not enough to simply provide green spaces – they have to be activated, brought to life to attract new users, and (something that is often forgotten) they must be maintained and looked after. We hope this means that the new pedestrian and cycling infrastructure being retrofitted in some cities will indeed become the new normal, not just a temporary fix.

This means joining up the planning processes of place making, place shaping and place keeping, to ensure that our urban green spaces can be adapted, retrofitted and managed for a range of scenarios, which now includes the current pandemic and potential future ones. COVID-19 has underlined a need to wean ourselves off fossil-fuel transport – not least for the improvements in air and noise quality. This means acting on the empirical evidence from our pandemic perspective: we have seen first-hand how our urban green spaces are crucial in addressing public-health objectives on isolation and mental well-being. It is clear for all to see: parks are a public-health resource. We need to treat them as an essential part of our health infrastructure.

How can it be done?

We need to link planning, public health and parks at an executive level in local government.

This requires a rethink of how our urban green spaces are funded, designed and managed. We know that this is easier said than done. There are often logics of action
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Logics of inaction offer plausible reasons for not implementing research-informed recommendations. During the IWUN project, we heard practitioners cite a range of these reasons for failing to invest in green space for well-being. Here are just three: the lack of perceived economic benefit from investment; the absence of a legal duty to provide green spaces, resulting in a focus on statutory obligations; and the fact that biodiversity is not valued. The pandemic fundamentally challenges these rationales, providing a natural experiment in how citizens perceive and value public green spaces. People are taking their exercise in green spaces, thereby conducting their own personal trials over a sustained period of time! The lack of traffic on our roads – at least, for the first few weeks of lockdown – has provided new opportunities to hear and notice nature that have been taken up enthusiastically on social media, another sign of the value the public places on biodiversity. If national government wants parks and green spaces to remain open, they have to be well managed and properly funded.

We are not naive. We are pretty sure that logics of inaction will continue to drive decision-making, particularly where resources are constrained. To start changing the narrative, decision-makers should recognise the different ways green spaces matter to different communities and involve them in planning and adaptation. Saughton Park, mentioned above, is pioneering a ‘ParkPower’ project to generate electricity from a micro-hydro plant and ground-source heat pumps. Manor Fields Park in Sheffield has been designed and managed to accommodate stormwater runoff from 300 homes recently built nearby. These both examples of thinking differently about how green spaces function, including but expanding on the traditional idea of a recreational park. We need to look beyond play, active recreation (and income generation), to address issues of climate-change mitigation, biodiversity and ecology enhancement.

National policy must build on local innovation but push local laggards. The National Planning Policy Framework needs to be reviewed and revised to make provision and care of green space a high-level objective in all development (not just designated green and open spaces), linking closely with climate adaptation and biodiversity net gain as well as housing provision. The pandemic has shown that if we want to make room for people rather than cars, we can. By transforming some of our grey infrastructure into green we can bring urban nature to more people around our cities, as a first step to improving urban residents’ unequal access to nature.

The crisis has exacerbated long-standing problems that urban dwellers face in accessing healthy, safe and sociable green spaces. This is an opportune moment to consider parks differently – as the public-health resource, the climate resource and biodiversity reserves that they have always been. Our common spaces offer uncommon value: let’s put them at the heart of our city making.
References


