

Written evidence submitted by Dr. Andrew Smith, University of Westminster

I am a Reader in the School of Architecture and Cities at the University of Westminster and a lot of my teaching and scholarly work covers issues associated with events. Over the past five years my research has addressed the proliferation of urban music festivals, looking in particular at the way they affect host spaces. I am particularly interested in festivals staged in London parks and am currently involved in an EU funded project [FESTSPACE](#) which examines how festivals affects the inclusivity of public spaces. My research has involved intensive observations of festival sites, attendance at various meetings / hearings, interviews with key stakeholders and a London wide qualitative survey conducted in 2019. With this research in mind, I am in a position to respond to some of the questions posed by this inquiry. I feel that the current pause in activity is a good chance to think through some of the issues associated with urban music festivals, with a view to *building back better*.

What has been the impact of cancellations on local economies and those who derive income from festivals during 2020?

The impact has been very significant. The cancellation of multiple park-based festivals across London and other UK cities has not only impacted local businesses and employees who earn income from festivals, it has severely affected the budgets of the organisations tasked with managing parks. These are mainly local authorities but also a range of charitable trusts, social enterprises and community interest companies that have recently been handed responsibility for managing parks. In the past ten years, parks in London have become increasingly reliant on the hire fees earned from hosting music festivals. The most obvious examples are Hyde Park, Victoria Park and Finsbury Park, but multiple, multi-day music festivals are now also held in various other London parks - such as Gunnersbury Park and Brockwell Park. Other parks and green spaces hosted multi-day music festivals in 2019 too - such as Trent Country Park, Clapham Common, Boston Manor Park, Blackheath, Streatham Common, Tooting Common, Morden Park, Peckham Rye Park and Lloyd Park.

In some instances, such as Finsbury Park (Haringey), the income earned from staging music festivals (over £1million a year in this case) is enough to fund the annual budget for maintaining the park. Effectively this park is now financially self-sufficient because of the music festivals it stages. Multiple park authorities across London now earn six figure sums from hiring their green spaces out to festival promoters. This may sound like a good way of addressing the funding shortfalls affecting UK local authorities, but the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how precarious this new reliance on festival funding is. The absence of music festivals in 2020 has affected local authority budgets, but it has also undermined the business models of new social enterprises established to manage parks, such as Gunnersbury Estate CIC. This recently established company had planned to stage several music festivals in 2020 (Lovebox, Citadel and Gunnersville) to help sustain Gunnersbury Park but is now having to deal with a significant reduction in its external income.

If and when music festivals are allowed to resume in 2021, there is a danger that cash strapped park authorities will be pressured to programme their green spaces even more intensively with music festivals the most obvious events to stage. Crystal Palace Park (Bromley) and Brockwell Park (Lambeth) have already announced plans for more and larger music festivals in 2021 than had been staged prior to the pandemic. In this context, we need to ensure that park authorities are sufficiently compensated when they sign contracts with festival organisers, and we need to avoid a race to the bottom where public authorities are competing to hire out precious green spaces at the most competitive rates. There is a case for implementing stronger regulations to prevent the over-exploitation of public parks as

festival venues or, at the very least, requiring park authorities to co-produce policies stipulating the maximum amount of park space and time that ticketed festivals can occupy. There also needs to be better management of situations where festivals are staged on Borough boundaries – in these instances, one local authority earns considerable fees, even though many of the residents affected live in an adjacent Borough. This is a problem with festivals staged in Victoria Park, Finsbury Park, Clapham Common and several other prominent examples. There are also issues with licensing arrangements – although local authority processes should be robust, there is an incentive for councils to sanction music festivals which they will benefit from financially even if those festivals are too large, too noisy or otherwise inappropriate for park settings. Finally, there is a need to rethink how money earned from music festivals is spent. Surplus revenues earned from hiring out spaces should be spent on parks and park amenities (including free to access festivals) – rather than being subsumed into wider budgets.

How has the structure of the UK festivals market evolved over recent years, and what has this meant for consumers, artists and the wider industry? What further changes might be anticipated?

There are two significant changes highlighted by my research. First the growth of urban music festivals, which are more convenient for city dwellers and cater for different audiences than rural festivals. Second, the consolidation of the industry. Global entertainment companies - particularly Live Nation and AEG, and to a lesser extent Broadwick Live and Superstruct - now dominate the market.

The first trend – the growth of urban music festivals - is a consequence of the general proliferation and popularity of festivals. The success of many pioneering urban festivals (e.g. Field Day, Lovebox) has led to others being established. The provision of festivals in urban locations has the potential to supplement the cultural offer in peripheral parts of cities, and provides a way of engaging audiences that do not normally use cultural amenities (including host parks). However, there are considerable issues too. Festivals are often very expensive (£50-£100 for a day ticket; £100+ for a weekend pass) and tend to appeal to a regional or national audience, meaning the proportion of local attendees is usually quite low. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that a new breed of corporate events now dominates the UK music festival scene. These have emerged at the expense of the free music festivals that used to be a common feature of many London parks. There are still one or two major free music festivals staged each year (e.g. Walthamstow Garden Party in Lloyd Park, E17) but these are now the exception rather than the norm. In an era when budgets to maintain parks and other public amenities are tight, there is an incentive to stage the music festivals that bring in the most lucrative hire fees. In this context, there is a need to think carefully about how inclusive music festivals are, how they could be made more inclusive, and how they might be supplemented with more accessible festivals.

The second trend – industry consolidation - is mainly a negative phenomenon, and the dominance of a small number of global entertainment corporations means these companies have considerable bargaining power when negotiating terms with site owners. In instances where public parks are used, there is a need for transparency about how much money is earned from hire fees to ensure that local stakeholders can understand whether these are sufficient to justify the disruption and negative impacts. Some local authorities have claimed that working with large, consolidated, and highly experienced festival companies lessens worries about safety, [lack of] community engagement and environmental damage, but the research I have done suggests problems are just as likely to emerge when festivals are produced by a global entertainment corporation as when organised by an independent festival company. Indeed, some of my interviewees suggested that large companies are likely to be more careless as they rely on economies of scale, operate ruthlessly to protect narrow margins, have a low stake in local contexts, and can move elsewhere if problems

arise. My research has recommended better communication and engagement with local communities about music festivals (AEG's work in Victoria Park deserves a mention here). When partnerships are forged between local authorities and global entertainment corporations, they can railroad through festival proposals that may not be welcomed by large sections of the community. Local residents and other relevant groups need to be actively involved in decisions about whether to stage festivals, and how they are staged.

I think we can expect both of these trends to continue: particularly as many smaller festival companies will have been more vulnerable to the COVID-19 crisis, and because additional pressures on local authority budgets mean that more councils will be seeking to hire municipal parks out to festival organisers.

How can festivals be supported to reduce their environmental impact and tackle the dangers of illegal drug use?

It is important to recognise that using a park regularly for music festivals comes with considerable social and environmental costs as well as financial and cultural benefits. Large parts of parks can be fenced off and rendered inaccessible to the public for extended periods, not just over festival weekends, but during festival assembly and derig (which can take 2-3 weeks). This problem is exacerbated by the damage to turf caused by installations and attendees, which extends interrupted access, and by the fact that disruption tends to come at times - late spring and midsummer - when demand for park use is at its highest. A survey we conducted earlier this year highlighted that parts of several London parks were rendered inaccessible for 6-7 months following major music festivals staged in 2019. There is often significant opposition from local residents, and whilst it is easy to dismiss these people as perennial complainers moaning about noise, anti-social behaviour and personal inconvenience, many opponents have legitimate concerns about whether staging a series of music festivals is compatible with providing publicly accessible parks. And whilst we need to be aware of unjustified moral panics about alcohol and drug abuse at festivals, some of the local groups I spoke to said they had fought for years to rid their local park of problems associated with drinking and drug taking and regarded the recent introduction of music festivals as something that undermined their work. In this sense the two issues addressed in this question are linked – anti-social and illegal behaviours can affect host environments.

The damage to host sites caused by music festivals is the main environmental impact my research has focused on. In many instances, these impacts are manageable and temporary with park environments restored relatively quickly following their use as festival venues. However, in certain instances, when the weather conditions are poor (too wet, or even too dry) or where sites have been used multiple times, park venues can be severely damaged and rendered inaccessible whilst they recover. In many parks, a specific site is earmarked as the festival grounds (e.g. Bandstand Field in Finsbury Park or The Parade Ground in Hyde Park). Although this makes sense from a practical point of view, it means that these sites suffer intense ecological damage, and their general environmental quality is poor as a result. In these instances, there is little incentive for authorities to fully restore sites - as they know that in a few weeks or months they will be damaged again. I think there is scope to think about design interventions that could increase the resilience of these sites and make them more suitable festival venues. I also think festival scheduling can minimise disruption and damage: clustering events at one particular point in the year allows environments enough time to recover before they are used again. This model has been adopted successfully by AEG in Hyde Park and Victoria Park. If venues had their own power, water and other key infrastructure, this might lessen the considerable number of vehicle movements and polluting generators that tend to accompany most major festivals. There is also scope to think more imaginatively about where urban festivals are held. The relocation of the Field Day festival from Brockwell Park to an industrial site, Meridian Water in Enfield, is a good example. Successful festivals can be staged in brownfield sites, private estates or stadium venues:

they don't have to be staged in green spaces or public parks. In 2020, the public have greatly appreciated the availability of city parks and urban green spaces and there may now be more push back if sites are too heavily programmed with ticketed festivals.

This year, given the unusual the absence of events, seems like an ideal time to work out how much some parks and green spaces have benefited from **not** hosting music festivals; and related research could be undertaken to try and understand this 'without case' before the festival sector resumes operations. The various ways festivals disturb wildlife is not well understood, although we can assume that the associated noise, lighting, vehicle movements, litter and physical pressure mean the effects are very significant.

Links to my work on this theme (open access)

Smith, A. (2020). Sustaining municipal parks in an era of neoliberal austerity. The contested commercialisation of Gunnersbury Park. *Environment and Planning A*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X20951814>

Smith, A. (2019) Event Takeover? The Commercialisation of London's Parks. In Smith, A. and Graham, A Eds. *Destination London*. University of Westminster Press.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvhrd0t9.13?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Smith, A., & Vodicka, G. (2020). Events in London's parks: the friends' perspective. Report for Festspace. <https://zenodo.org/record/3878727#.X0OtO8hKg2w>

Links to my work on this theme (restricted access)

Smith, A. (2018). Paying for parks. Ticketed events and the commercialisation of public space. *Leisure Studies* 37(5), pp. 533-546

Smith, A. (2017). Animation or denigration? Using urban public spaces as event venues. *Event Management* 21(5), 609-619.

Smith, A. (2016) *Events in the City: Using Public Space as Event Venues*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Links to relevant media items on this theme

Hancox, D. (2019) [Guardian piece](#) featuring my research into music festivals in public parks.

Hunt, E. (2018) [Guardian article](#) covering my paper on music festivals at the 2018 RGS-IBG Annual Conference.

Smith, A. (2016) Is it right to use public parks for commercial events? [The Conversation](#), 1st July 2016.