

Written evidence submitted by Milton Keynes Parks Trust

The impact of coronavirus – our experience as a charity and a major parks provider

1. Background

Milton Keynes Parks Trust provides over 6,000 acres of public open space in Milton Keynes. This represents about 25% of the area of the new city. We are a registered charity and self-financing. The bulk of our income comes from our investments (commercial property and financial) but around £1m is earned from our parkland. We receive no income from the local authority although we work closely with them.

2. Financial impact on income

The most serious impact on the Trust has been the loss of rental income from our commercial properties – probably around £2m of rent will be lost or delayed this financial year. This has been exacerbated by the government's all too swift announcement that tenants would not be taken to court for unpaid rent, which sent a signal to tenants that paying rent was now optional. Some of our tenants genuinely cannot pay – others such as Travelodge (we have two such hotels) have simply chosen to use the Trust (and other landlords) as an extension of their banking arrangements. Our local tenants mostly try and make at least a minimal payment as they recognise we are not an anonymous landlord but an integral part of the community and their rent is needed to be able to look after the parks.

The loss of income from cancelled and postponed activities in the parks and facilities that could not operate (cafes, high ropes courses, watersports, ice cream concessions etc) has been significant too. All told, this probably totals around £1m this year. There have been some commensurate savings here – casual staff not being employed, costs of performers and equipment saved etc.

3. Financial impact on expenditure

The lockdown has resulted in significant additional expenditure for us. This has included closing play areas, bird hides, outdoor learning centres and outdoor gyms and undertaking frequent patrols to reinstate fencing and signs and discourage those who insist they should be able to use these facilities. There has been an increase in fly-tipping, so a lot of additional cleansing is required. We have stepped up routine patrols to discourage people more generally who won't follow the social distancing rules and have had good support in this from Thames Valley Police.

We have also had to find ways of cutting or postponing expenditure in other areas of maintenance, capital projects and the work of functions across the Trust such as marketing and communications as well as postponing the recruitment of new roles.

4. Impact on parks maintenance

Maintenance of the parks to keep them open and safe to use has not been considered essential work and the workers are not deemed as key workers, although the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government confirmed in his speech on 18 April that all parks must remain open. This is the same speech when additional funding was pledged to local authorities (and quite right too) but none to those other organisations that provide parks and green spaces, which the Secretary of State highlighted are so important to the health of the nation by providing opportunities for people to safely enjoy fresh air and green space. A further consequence of parks maintenance staff not being classed as key workers is that they cannot send their children to school or get tested for COVID-19.

Keeping on top of basic maintenance is essential if parks are to remain attractive and fit for purpose. In many of our parks we have mown extra wide paths so people can easily pass one another and keep 2m apart, see picture, right.

Maintenance staff have had to make adjustments in order to work safely, within the government's guidelines. The additional guidance on working safely outdoors was helpful in this respect. The big issues are that for some jobs people have to be close together and travelling between work sites where a limited number of vehicles are available. Also the provision of hand sanitiser and additional washing facilities has been difficult at times.



5. **Impact on use of parks and public attitudes**

The coincidence of the lockdown with a spell of prolonged good weather has resulted in a significant increase in parks usage as people in the main have followed advice to use their local parks. More people are using the parks and more often. The parks have been busy every day of the week whereas previously only weekends were the busier days. There's been a very noticeable increase in non-dog walkers in the parks. Previously lightly used areas are now becoming well used and honey pot areas and destination parks that people tend to travel to visit are much less used. There has been much debate over whether it is considered acceptable to drive to a park to take exercise as guidance has been a little unclear on this point.

We have dealt with a significant increase in direct communications with the public about all manner of issues including the observance of social distancing. A good proportion of this comes through social media and this has been vital for being able to get messages out to the public at this time. And has come to be expected from local residents. Our park rangers then pick up issues on the ground and we have had many supportive comments about their presence.

There's been a groundswell of support and affection for our parks (and I think all parks nationally) and much greater public recognition of the vital role parks and greenspaces play in the physical and mental well being of the nation.

6. Government support

The Job Retention Scheme has been a lifeline for our charity. We are reasonably sound financially but without the scheme we would have had to make around 30 permanent staff and a similar number of casual staff redundant.

The support for leisure businesses (interruption grant) has been very welcome too at our major leisure destinations park.

However, we have had no other government or local authority support.

7. Likely long-term impacts

For a self-financing organisation such as ours the priority is going to be about rebuilding the financial strength of the charity. It is far too early to tell how long this may take but only when we have confidence that the Trust's investment income will resume will we be able to fully return to maintaining the parks to a high standard, recommence our outdoor learning programmes and community engagement, support the organisation of community events in the parks and start to think again about making improvements and investments in facilities. We will need to bolster our support for our volunteers too – not only do we need them going forward but they need us too – volunteering for the Parks Trust is a big part of some people's lives.

For as long as the social distancing rules continue, we will have to keep around 30 – 40 staff furloughed on the Job Retention Scheme or make redundancies. This will also threaten the viability of our leisure businesses (cafes, high ropes, watersports) and without further leisure business grants some of those operations may be forced to close permanently.

8. Lessons for the sector

The response to the pandemic has highlighted how vitally important parks are to individuals' and communities' wellbeing and indeed the whole nation's health, yet the government knows very little about parks in this country. Apparently simple questions such as the extent of the park resource, who owns them, how are they funded and managed, cannot be answered. The government needs to know the answers to these questions and more about the nation's parks and who runs them, especially if it needs park managers to keep parks open and to act in a coordinated way, as they were expected to during the coronavirus lockdown. Public parks, or perhaps more correctly, public open space should be registered and mapped, including assessment of its condition and fitness for purpose

There is no doubt that were this registration and mapping to be done thoroughly, the extent to which parks ownership is fragmented (and becoming more so) will become clear. This fragmentation has been driven by years of public under-investment in the sector, where local authorities have struggled to maintain parks as budgets were cut and they have increasingly

looked to other organisations, including parish councils and charities, to take on and provide this essential service to the public.

In saying this, we are not critical at all of parks being maintained by organisations such as charities or parish councils. In fact, as just such a charity ourselves, we are supportive of this because it can bring many benefits where those organisations are best placed to operate parks for the benefit of the community. This is provided those organisations are adequately resourced and properly empowered to enable them to operate sustainably and effectively. However, many of these organisations are small and many are newly-established. As such, they have limited resources and little, if anything, to fall back on during times of crisis.

During the coronavirus crisis, the government has had no ability to communicate with the wider parks sector and where it has attempted to do that it has only had a dialogue with local authorities, even though they represent only part of the sector.

In 'normal' times what government support there is for the sector is focused almost entirely on local authorities and is not distributed using any scientific analysis of need or where it can do the most good. During the coronavirus crisis I am not aware there has been any specific government support for the parks sector.

If parks are as important as this pandemic has shown then the government needs to really understand and engage with the wide diversity of organisations, including local authorities and many others, that operate public parks and open spaces across the country today. It needs to understand, the problems and opportunities these organisations face, and to shape policy to work in support of them and to make them more robust and able to deliver their work in maintaining the nation's parks.

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