

## Notes on traffic in parks and green spaces

Parks have always been popular and were known to add value to nearby property prices, but they proved their true worth in 2020 with an increase in footfall and a rise in popularity.

Covid-19 laws meant people had nowhere else to go so it's no surprise that green spaces became busier than usual. With gyms, pubs, cafes, restaurants, galleries, museums and libraries closed the public took to the outdoors for escape from their homes and workplaces. There were some issues around overcrowding, anti-social behaviour and littering. People largely respected each other, respected the spaces they visited and respected the guidelines slowing the spread of the virus.

Getting to and moving around or through parks has always been an issue with long-running potential conflicts between different users from dog-walkers to cyclists, sports kickabouts and families. In the past, park managers have tried zoning or dedicated pathways to segregate different users, or have preferred educational strategies. With increased footfall, the issue can often come to a head.

Having access to parks is essential for both physical and mental wellbeing, so some vehicle access is essential. Fear of contracting Covid-19 has put many people off using public transport with a subsequent rise in the use of private vehicles. There has also been a dramatic rise in active travel with people walking, cycling and scooting (sometimes e-scooters). The trick is to bring all appropriate uses together in a managed way to reduce any conflict of space while maintaining the integrity of parks.

While there are options outside of parks, such as safe, dedicated running or cycling routes, this paper is all about what happens in parks, public gardens and other accessible green spaces.

### **Parking.**

Car Parks encourage people to drive. You can charge for parking to supplement income strands, but enforcement can be expensive and a cause of conflict. If you have the luxury of an existing car park, why not make the space work harder for you by introducing more environmentally-friendly surfacing, solar canopies to generate power, or a ground source heat pump to warm nearby buildings? Perhaps solar canopies can offer local residents overnight charging points for electric cars?

Would your car park offer you greater value if it were converted into a brownfield nature reserve? Wetlands are excellent value for biodiversity, water retention and pollution absorption; capturing oil and micro-plastics in the run-off from busy roads.

A few years ago, the RSPB used to have car parking facilities at the top of its list of facilities in its handbooks and online pages for nature reserves. Simply switching the order of ways to visit to start with walking, cycling and public transport encouraged a drop in visits by car but not of visitor numbers.

Replacing two car parking spaces with two dozen cycle racks sends a big signal to visitors and can encourage behaviour change where people have a choice on how to travel.

### **Park Entrances**

Points of entry tell you a lot about the place you are visiting. If it is covered in signs listing things you cannot do, the visitor intuitively expects a negative experience brought on by micro-management and what some may perceive to be petty-minded rules.

Having said that, you must be clear about what is permissible and encouraged. This can be achieved through landscaping and design, positive affirmation signage and peer pressure.

- Landscape and design involves physical park furniture which deters or prevents access for wheeled vehicles, but this then creates issues for people with buggies, wheelchairs or people walking their bikes through non-cycling areas. While this approach is suitable in some locations, it is not practical in many others.
- Positive affirmation is where you have signs welcoming people and listing activities allowed on site along with a polite request to respect other visitors by not running/cycling in some areas or by sticking to the designated running and cycling routes.
- Peer pressure works extremely well. Invite a cycling or running club to partner with you to create set areas and times for different activities, on the understanding participants help "police" others to ensure compliance.

Every park and green space is unique and none of this is foolproof. You may need to experiment before getting the mix right in your park. Even then, some rogue elements will arise. However, you should find an overall improvement.

### **Pathways and zoning**

Different path surfaces or colours encourage visitors to choose which part of the path to walk on, or use arrows to indicate general rules such as “keeping left”. On cycle routes you can even adopt road style markings to indicate “stop” and “give way” areas on busy cycle paths. Or “joint path, pedestrians take precedence”.

Zoning is where you set aside parts of your park for different activities to reduce conflict between users, and conflict between users and wildlife.

Separating joggers and walkers helps avoid conflict between users. Dedicated running routes can have low level lighting for evening or night running, measured distances and clear stop and start points. Drinking fountains are welcome additions.

### **Through traffic**

Parks were created and designed for people and wildlife to enjoy. Every park is different and must work with its surrounding communities to ensure it meets their needs. But ask yourself how traffic passing through a park adds to its enjoyment? If you can't deliver a positive answer, then there really is no argument for allowing traffic to pass through your park. Cut throughs and rat runs for cars are not good for the environment.

There is strong evidence that birds, especially house sparrows, avoid nest sites alongside roads. It's not clear whether this is linked to noise pollution, emissions or vibrations. Roads bisect habitats and act as barriers for wildlife moving around. Bats are also known to avoid roads (and lighting) for nesting or feeding. Water birds, such as swans, ducks and geese have been recorded mistaking the smooth surface of roads for waterways and streams, with a mixture of hilarious or tragic consequences. Death of wildlife by collision is one of the most common causes of wildlife deaths in urban spaces bisected by roads.

A lot of Londoners visit parks for exercise or health reasons, yet cars are considerable contributors to poor air quality. Many parks are impacted by noise and air pollution from adjacent roads, inhibiting access and usage. A study by scientists from Oxford and Bath universities estimates every car in London costs £8,000 a year in health and social costs from air pollution. Yet the majority of Londoners do not drive or own a car.

### **15 Minute Cities**

Our lifestyles have and will undergo major change forced upon us by the Covid virus. One of the likely outcomes will be an investment in creating the notion of a fifteen minute city. This is where you can fulfil all your needs within a fifteen minute walk of your home, whether that's work, food, plumbing supplies, cycle repairs, white goods, green spaces, clothes and grocery shopping, education, Doctors and Dentists surgeries, playgrounds, and maybe even tattoo and wool shops.

The idea is that it reduces unnecessary travel and therefore emissions, and it's a much more resilient structure in the event of climate or viral crises. Both the Covid pandemic and research into the creation of 15 minute cities shows we need more parks and green spaces to meet demand. In an ideal world, new parks would be carefully planned and integrated into existing green infrastructure with the help, support and input of local communities. These new spaces should incorporate Nature Based Solutions in and between parks and public gardens, creating a grid of green corridors enhancing active travel options.

Our town and city centres are likely to become less busy as high street shops shut and companies reconsider the notion of large HQ offices where staff have to commute in to work. Instead we're seeing the rise of home working or office hubs where staff from different companies can find desk space and the facilities they need for their jobs. In this scenario, large office blocks and department stores could be converted into housing or repurposed for other roles. This could hugely reduce the development pressure on councils seeking land to meet their housing quotas. Pocket parks and new public gardens will form part of that new approach.

However life changes post-Covid, parks should be at the centre of the green recovery promised and promoted by all political parties. None of it will succeed without the proper investment and ongoing management of parks and public green space to ensure standards remain high and protection is enforced. This will include the provision of good public transport links and new infrastructure to support active and green travel.